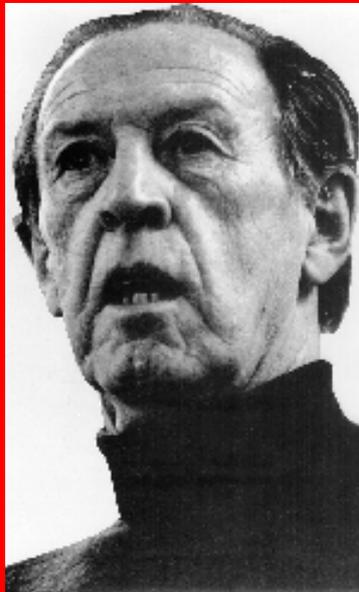


**RAYMOND WILLIAMS:**  
*Hope and Defeat in the  
Struggle for Socialism*

**Don Milligan**



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Hope and Defeat in the Struggle for Socialism**

**By Don Milligan**

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> Very quickly, however, in 1952 or 1953<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup>

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-

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<sup>3</sup> 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 in 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 hope<sup>4</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup> *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, descendants 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 rigid 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

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

I arrived at this procedure as a result of attempting to eschew perspectives and theories that are foreign to the work. I have avoided modes of analysis that employ theories only widely available in English-language translations, and fully developed in English-language debates and publications in Britain after the late 'sixties of the last century. Yet, Williams must be read now, in the present, for what he might tell us today. This is, of course, a complex historical demand. It is not a search for evidence of clairvoyance in his texts, but it is a recognition that any assessment of the quality and success of his work must focus upon the capacity which it had to understand the art and cultural processes of his own time, and their gestation in the preceding century and a half, not in some fixed or stationary manner, but, more dynamically, in its capacity to reflect accurately the pace, tempo, and trajectory of social development in Britain, during the forty years of his critical activity from 1947 to 1987.

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.

## Chapter 1: Defending the Soviet Experience

### Solzhenitsyn's Witness

Throughout Williams's life Soviet reality stood in opposition to his aspirations for socialism. It was an apparently immovable obstacle. Insofar as the Soviet experiment had proved to be a bloody disaster, Williams could attribute this to the difficult conditions in which it had been carried out, to Western insurgency, to the faltering of the revolutionary impulse on the part of its leaders, and to the inadequacy of its 'theory of culture'. But at no stage did Williams allow the Soviet experience to undermine his faith in socialism: revolutionary societies were indeed 'tragic societies' but they were also 'successful societies', societies capable of much constructive activity (1966a: 74). Even when he is discussing *Cancer Ward* he discovers an affirmation of socialism in Solzhenitsyn's humanism:

To have constructed them *Ivan Denisovich* and *Cancer Ward* differently would have been - it is what bourgeois form now is - to exclude. A documentary fiction, a fiction of sketches and encounters, tales passed from mouth to mouth, interrupted yet always urgent histories, is in this radical sense a fidelity: a basis for humanism and for realism, neither self-centred nor exclusive, holding to that reality of the human person - that socialist reality - that we are indeed individuals and suffer (as bourgeois art can record) but also that we are many individuals, and that the man next to us who irritates or comforts us is also a centre and has beyond him innumerable centres: all subjects, all objects; a recognition that forbids any formal emphasis which would reserve centrality or significance, by some principle of selection, to the more human among humans. (1972a: 249)

That Williams was able to talk about the reality of the human person, as 'that socialist reality', without reference to Christ is perhaps unsurprising, that he did it when talking about

Solzhenitsyn's regard for mutuality and the human person is surely an evasion. In fact, it is more than an evasion, it is an attempt to subsume the Russian writer's profound hatred of communism into Williams's kind of socialist outlook that sought to employ the recognition of the need to turn away from a socialism based upon a 'productivist' idea of progress towards the advocacy of the need for a Cultural Revolution in both East and West.<sup>6</sup> He briefly attempted to enlist Solzhenitsyn and his fiction - as an advocate of what Williams elsewhere called 'common sharing' (1979b: 71). He did this by using Shulubin's belief, expressed in *Cancer Ward*, in the power of sharing to assert the case for a 'continuing human emphasis' as a position from which to criticise the actually existing socialist institutions of production (1972a: 244-5). But Williams is not one-sided. He also acknowledges that Solzhenitsyn is not Shulubin and that another character in the novel, Kostoglotov, has a harder, more sceptical response:

Through this detailed development of both responses, Solzhenitsyn shows something more than a debate; he shows a historical process: a widespread demoralisation; a glimpse of alternative values; the stress of actual relationships, from and towards both positions. The humanist writer is undoubtedly there, but so is the realist. The two modes of vision, the two processes, are continually active. (1972a: 246)

By this procedure Williams was able to imply an affinity with Solzhenitsyn, presenting him in an apparently rounded manner, without having to deal, in any solid political or historical sense, with Solzhenitsyn's profound critique of Tsarism, the Bolshevik seizure of power and the institutionalisation of terror as a means of economic and political management. More important is 'the endless and selfless work of the doctors and nurses, the goodness of ordinary life and experience against the obsession with social position and material success' (1972a: 250). In fact, Williams argues that to attempt to understand *Cancer Ward* or *One Day in*

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<sup>6</sup> For the full development of this argument see Williams's article, 'Beyond Actually Existing Socialism', published in *New Left Review* in Spring 1980 (1980b: 252-273).

*the Life of Ivan Denisovich* as symbolic of the Soviet body politic 'is radically irrelevant':

Cancer won't work as a symbol of a specific social disorder, when it is described as Solzhenitsyn describes it: a general and terrible human fact. Again, in real prisons there is more to do, as again Solzhenitsyn shows, than to project a victimisation as an abstract condition. The familiar starting points of modern bourgeois art are then in a real sense not only irrelevant but damaging to Solzhenitsyn. (1972a: 247)

It is striking that Williams found it difficult to comprehend that life for many millions in the Soviet Union was 'a general and terrible human fact'. The phrase he uses to challenge *cancer*, as a symbol for Soviet society — a specific social disorder — is an odd one. Because, of course, it refuses recognition to the fact that the disorder, moral, political, and economic, which Solzhenitsyn is writing about, is not some *specific* feature of the Soviet body politic or some *particular aspect* of Soviet society but is the disorder and abnormality represented by the entire social fabric of the Soviet Union.

Consequently, as the general character of Solzhenitsyn's critique of communism and his attack upon the degradation of the social relationships that arose as a consequence of the October Revolution became inescapable Williams felt constrained to modify his earlier assessment of Solzhenitsyn's humanism. In his 1973 article in *The Listener* Williams remembered:

I remember writing, four or five years ago, a preliminary analysis, based on *Cancer Ward* and *The First Circle*, in which I saw him as a radical humanist, belonging to a late 19<sup>th</sup>-century tradition of religious and ethical socialism. Against the deformations of an alternative socialist tradition and system, those values seemed to hold, or were in that society, after that experience, necessary. I do not now withdraw the description, but increasingly I question it. (1973a: 750-1)

Williams sought to distinguish the 'isolation of the repressed writer' from the 'repressed but active humanism of the prisoner'

(1973a: 751). There emerges here an idea that with the publication of *August 1914* Solzhenitsyn is moving beyond a critique of Stalinism towards a reactionary account in which Tsarism is held responsible for the unmitigated ‘disaster’ of October 1917.<sup>7</sup> Williams says of *August 1914*:

Czarist Russia, in a decisive military conflict, is breaking up through its inefficiency, and that a new technical elite, which might save Russia, is waiting in the wings, but is doomed to frustration in the general breakdown. We can’t yet be sure. The later volumes, through 1916 and 1917, may show different patterns. But whatever they may be, there is very little in *August 1914* which connects with the earlier strong figure of the political prisoner and the exile. (1973a: 750)

Solzhenitsyn’s growing stature in the West, not merely as an opponent of Stalinism but as an enemy of communism, moves Williams to make an interesting parallel between Orwell and Solzhenitsyn. The ‘early’ Solzhenitsyn was apparently being demoted in favour of concentration on the ‘later’ more anti-communist works:

This happened to Orwell with *Animal Farm* and *1984*, where the earlier revolutionary socialist of *Homage to Catalonia* was for different reasons not wanted, not identified: he could at best be admitted as a case of error to be followed by truth, or as a case of comradeship to be followed by betrayal. (1973a: 750)

Evidently, Williams regarded the careers of both these writers as moving from ‘comradeship to betrayal’; they had both travelled a hard road mediated, to be sure, by suffering, discouragement and personal defeat, but it was a journey that had led them towards the betrayal of socialism nonetheless.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Williams’s *Guardian* review of *August 1914* (1972b: 14).

<sup>8</sup> See Williams’s interesting discussion in his book, *Orwell*, of Orwell’s journey from ‘revolutionary socialist’ to someone who, despite his best intentions, projected a reactionary outlook (1971b: 54-68). In 1971, Williams thought of Orwell as a ‘democratic socialist’ misled and discouraged by defeat (1971b: 68). Eight years later, however, Williams said, ‘I would not

Consequently, Williams could not abide the anti-communism of either Orwell or Solzhenitsyn or the *lionising* of either man by the literary and political establishment in the West.

This political posture strengthened the critical division that was to be established between the progressive impulse of Solzhenitsyn's work before the late sixties and what Francis Barker called his 'mystical Russian nationalism, moral and technical elitism, and right-wing politics' after 1967 (Barker 1977: 6). Francis Barker recognised the difficulties that such a division posited, but rejected them in favour of a 'critical' rather than a 'chronological' sequence:

The complexity of the relationship between Solzhenitsyn's personal views and the ideology of his fiction is a case in point here. The novels in the early period of his work could be seen as corresponding to the 'purified Leninism' that Solzhenitsyn espoused before his imprisonment. He abandoned this position as a personal viewpoint in 1946: it only disappears from his fiction in the mid-sixties. (Barker 1977: end note 7: 102)

Barker's development of this argument evidently sits very easily with the position advocated by Williams. And, his book, *Solzhenitsyn: Politics and Form*, does appear to be an extrapolation and development of the position outlined three years earlier by Williams in the article 'Images of Solzhenitsyn' in *The Listener*.<sup>9</sup> From the early seventies onwards Williams along with other left-wing critics felt the need to distinguish clearly between the radical content of Solzhenitsyn's struggle against Stalinism and what they saw as the anti-communist content of his later work.<sup>10</sup>

However, it is important to note that Williams's rejection of Solzhenitsyn's critique of Soviet communism is by no means

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write about Orwell in the same way now' (1979b: 392). Indeed he now thought that Orwell's later works 'had to be written by an ex-socialist', not an enthusiast for capitalism it is true, but by an 'ex-socialist' nonetheless (1979b: 390).

<sup>9</sup> For similar left-wing accounts of Solzhenitsyn's development see Medvedev 1973: 25-36 and Mandel 1974: 51-61.

<sup>10</sup> Williams makes this distinction boldly explicit in 1976 in a *Guardian* review of Solzhenitsyn's *Lenin in Zurich* entitled 'The Anger of Exile' (1976c: 9).

blunt or without nuance. In writing about *The First Circle* Williams says, ‘Knowledge, kindness, loyalty, self-interest, fear, ambition: all feed, in this serial system, into mutual and collective betrayal’ (1972a: 252). Was this Soviet society or merely ‘a special prison for intellectuals’? Williams is not clear. But he had always been clear about the need to find ways of distancing himself from anti-communism while exploring every avenue for strengthening socialist commitment.

### The ‘Soviet Literary Controversy in Retrospect’

The limitations of Williams’s approach to Soviet reality was revealed very early in his career by the article, ‘Soviet Literary Controversy in Retrospect’ written in 1947. In writing the article he had to clear a space for himself between the anti-Soviet position of *Horizon* and the frankly Stalinist outlook of the British Communist Party’s *Modern Quarterly*. And, in order to deny the relevance of Cyril Connolly’s attack upon placing any reliance upon state patronage Williams was drawn into a comparison of the ills of commercialisation of the arts in the West with the apparently *equally reprehensible* repression of critical writers by the Soviet state:

It would, I think, be easy to show (though this is not the place for it) that a review like *Horizon*, which may show the antithesis of commercialism, is in fact its passive ally; certainly, when art is reduced to a social pleasure consonant with travel, gossip, or a long-range interest in delinquency, it has left none of the vitality with which mass-produced existence can alone be successfully combated. But the relevance here of this general point is that it invalidates Mr Connolly’s criticism of the recent events in Russia. It is no use saying that state interference with art, or the suppression of nonconforming writers which may be involved in state patronage, is worse than the effects of commercialism or of advertising manipulation. Both are bad; neither is admissible. (1947b: 46)

Williams goes on to assert the similarity between the outlook of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet

Union and the advice given to writers from the Anglo-American Manuscript Service on the importance of avoiding morbid and lewd treatments in favour of a positive and optimistic tone and a reverential approach towards sex.<sup>11</sup>

He also makes clear, his lack of concern for the Russian writers at the centre of this controversy. Mme Akhmatova, Williams reports, is an ‘elderly’ writer of verse.<sup>12</sup> We hear no more about her or her work in his article. On the other hand Zoschenko’s story:

‘. . . Adventures of an Ape’, which was at least the occasion for the disturbance we are considering, is a very slight affair. Even in the rather arbitrary literary situation of this country it would find its natural level in the commercial fiction packet. In the December issue of *Lilliput*, where it appears in translation between one of Mr David Langdon’s cartoons and an artistic nude, it seemed completely in place. (1947b: 46)

Williams’s delicate position necessitates this wild vacillation between the idea that this controversy is a storm in a teacup got up by *Horizon* on the one hand, and a serious problem on the other, in which the Soviet Union has discredited itself yet again by allowing the Central Committee or the Presidium of the Union of Soviet Writers to short-circuit the critical process:

It is no good saying that the initiative is to the Central Committee’s credit, and that the party’s closeness to the masses is proved by the width of popular response. To most people the order of events is bound to appear suspect. Criticism from below is the essence of the democratic safeguard in Soviet society. The way this business has gone does nothing, in itself, to disprove allegations that Soviet government is based on decision from the top, followed by organized and manipulated public approval. (1947b: 43)

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<sup>11</sup> See ‘Soviet Literary Controversy in Retrospect’ (1947b: 48).

<sup>12</sup> See (1947b: 41), see also (A. A. Zhadanov 1947: 19-51).

Williams was clear that the policy of the Soviet State in seeing the role of literature as being the reflection of a positive and heroic image of soviet man and of assisting the Party in the task of Communist education could only condemn Soviet literature to superficiality. Yet, even here, his criticism is rendered diffuse by comparison with the West:

So mechanical a figure as ‘Soviet Man’ is as far from any kind of realism as the ‘Average Man’, the ‘Little Man’, the ‘Successful Man’ which have been created by the press-peers and advertisers of the West. And the substance of this shadow — a decline in the quality of social living (the comparison made above to the American commercial ethos is relevant here) — is certain also under such conditions. Only a writer like Mr Priestly, whose literary productions display the same qualities, and who, significantly, appears to be highly esteemed in Russia, can feel happy about that.<sup>13</sup> (1947b: 52)

Soviet civilisation was, Williams insisted, *emergent* and its successes were in the width or the breadth of its cultural development rather than in its depth. However, this distortion in its development was understandable in view of Russia’s immense difficulties: the legacy of Tsarism, the struggle against armed Western intervention, and the devastation wreaked by the fascist invasion of 1941-5. Williams is inflexible on this point: ‘Any assessment which ignores these factors cannot be tolerated’ (1947b: 52).

His first reaction was to apologise for the Soviet Union and when he could not sustain this he employed attacks upon Soviet cultural policy as a means of revealing similar life-denying tendencies in the West. In England and America,

Fiction has largely developed into a business (at least two writers are factories and several more are incorporated), and its distribution is handled in the same mechanical way as many other consumer goods. Popular literature has

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<sup>13</sup> This sort of comparison, of course, may be found elsewhere in Williams’s work. For example: “Much Western popular literature is in fact ‘bourgeois realism’, with its own versions of *ideinost* and *partiinost*, and with its ordinary adherence to *narodnost*.” in (Williams 1961a: 302).

become the stale copy, instead of the mentor, of popular journalism and entertainment. Consumer demand has been surveyed and manipulated by book societies, fiction guilds and readers' unions, which, devised as a commercial enterprise, have led to a depressing standardisation of taste. (1950: 104)

It is certainly an odd view that the Soviet distortion of literature resulted from 'a failure of reading' (1950: 104) rather than from something intrinsic to the nature of that state.

### **A Commitment Undiminished by Defeat**

**N**othing that happened in the Soviet Union or anywhere else for that matter shook Williams's faith in Socialism. He gave us some insight into the nature of this commitment when he was talking in 1979 about the importance of his work on Ibsen in the forties and early fifties:

The reason for the intense significance that Ibsen possessed for me then was that he was the author who spoke nearest to my sense of my own condition at the time. Hence the particular emphasis I gave to the motif of coming 'to a tight place where you stick fast. There is no going forward or backward'. That was exactly my sensation. The theme of my analysis of Ibsen is that although everybody is defeated in his work, the defeat never cancels the validity of the impulse that moved him; yet that the defeat has occurred is also crucial. The specific blockage does not involve — this was my dispute with other interpretations — renunciation of the original impulse. I think this was how I saw the fate of the impulse of the late thirties — an impulse that was not just personal but general. It had been right, but it had been defeated; yet the defeat did not cancel it.

Williams observes further on in the same discussion:

Ibsen reflected my situation. That protected me from the rapid retreat from the thirties which so many former comrades from the [Communist] Party were conducting:

that our whole outlook had been wrong, that we were not aware of original sin. This is why it was very important to argue in the analysis of Ibsen that he was not a dramatist of original sin or disenchantment, which was the conventional interpretation. In his plays, the experience of defeat does not diminish the value of the fight. (1979b: 62-3)

This belief that defeat does not diminish the value of the fight goes some way towards illustrating Williams's aesthetic predicament. Defeat did not cancel the legitimacy of his political impulse in the late thirties. Defeat certainly results in realignments and rethinking about political and literary processes, but the value of the aspiration for a socialist future was neither diminished nor analysed.

The cultural and political assumptions united in Williams's aesthetic made it possible to see the limitations of the Soviet experience and to criticise Soviet cultural policy, however, they did not make it possible for him to question his desire for socialism.

It was axiomatic that the self-management of production by workers would represent, not simply a better option for the working class, but the only alternative for society as a whole from the life-denying and crisis-ridden reality of capitalism.

For Williams socialism was always potentially relevant, it always had the potential of being up-to-date. Socialism meant the provision of meaningful work for all and the democratic administration and direction of large-scale economic activity. Williams believed that such self-management would be capable of exploring, negotiating, and directing the affairs of society in a manner that acknowledged the diverse, overlapping, and even conflicting interests and identities of the individuals concerned.

How this might actually work or the specific steps required to bring such a state of affairs into existence was not his concern. And, in this respect, Williams was conforming broadly to the Marxist tradition.<sup>14</sup> For example, in 1918 Max Weber felt that he had to explain to the officers of the Austro-Hungarian army that:

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<sup>14</sup> During the late 1970s and the 1980s 'market socialism' was debated in Marxist circles. Specific ideas concerning the configuration that a socialist society might take were discussed. However the debate occurred very late in Williams's life and work and his engagement was slight. See 'Towards Many

The *Communist Manifesto* is silent about what this association of individuals in socialist society will look like, as are all the manifestos of all socialist parties. We are informed that this is something one cannot know. It is only possible to say that our present society is doomed, that it will fall by a law of nature, and that it will be replaced in the first instance by the dictatorship of the proletariat. But of what comes after that, nothing can yet be foretold, except that there will be no rule by man over man. (Weber 1918: 288)

Williams would have been hostile to this gloss, particularly to the sneering tone concerning inevitability and ‘a law of nature’. However, in common with most communist students of his generation he had cut his theoretical teeth as a Marxist (in the years 1939 to 1941) on Engels’s books *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* and *Anti-Dühring*, Marx’s *Capital* and the Soviet Central Committee’s *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) Short Course*.<sup>15</sup> The standard view was that the utopian schemes elaborated during the early phase of capitalist development which sought to describe what socialist society would actually be like, or even to create model socialist communities, were the consequence of the undeveloped character of class relations during the first three decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Whereas by 1878:

Modern socialism is, in its content, primarily the product of the perception on the one hand of the class antagonisms existing in modern society, between possessors and non-possessors, wage workers and bourgeois; and on the other hand, of the anarchy ruling in production. (Engels 1878: 23)

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Socialisms’ (1985d). See *Features of a Viable Socialism* (Breitenbach 1990) and Alec Nove, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism* (Nove 1983). See also Ernest Mandel, ‘The myth of market socialism’ (Mandel 1988) and Chris Harman’s article published under the same title in *International Socialism* (Harman 1989).

<sup>15</sup> Williams gives this account of his early Marxist reading in *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 40-1).

<sup>16</sup> See *Anti-During* (Engels 1878: 292)

As capitalism developed both the need for socialism, and its specific configuration, would arise out of the concrete conditions then prevailing. Explanations given by Fourier or Owen as to how socialism might work were no longer merely naïve they were futile and misleading.<sup>17</sup> As a Communist Party primer put it in 1939:

Perhaps the most striking, although in a sense the most obvious, point made by Marx was that the organisation of the new society would not begin, so to speak, on a clear field. Therefore it was futile to think in terms of a socialist society “which has developed on its own foundations.” It was not a question of thinking out the highest possible number of good features and mixing them together to get the conception of a socialist society, which we would then create out of nothing. Such an approach was totally unscientific, and the result could not possibly conform to reality. (Burns 1939: 56)

Williams broadly supported this view. He never attempted to demonstrate how socialism might work, nor did he describe the economic and political arrangements that would be necessary to usher in the final age of self-management, economic democracy and communitarian government.<sup>18</sup> It was a strikingly vague and indeterminate vision of socialism that rejected utopian schemes but valued what he called ‘the utopian impulse’:

No contrast has been more influential, in modern thought, than Engels’s distinction between ‘utopian’ and ‘scientific’ socialism. If it is now more critically regarded,

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<sup>17</sup> For a useful selection of Fourier’s work in translation see *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier* (Beecher and Bienvenu 1972); for Owen’s ‘An address to the inhabitants of New Lanark’ and other writings see *A New View of Society* (Owen 1927).

<sup>18</sup> It is striking that when Williams notes Robert Owen’s ‘practical disappointments’ in *Culture and Society* (1958a: 20-9) he does not discuss the failure of Owen’s socialistic ventures but dwells instead upon the capacity of Owen’s ideas on education to inspire subsequent generations of English industrial working people. In an analysis that tidily confirms his own outlook Williams concludes that Owen’s significance in this tradition resided in his view that ‘. . . human nature itself is the product of a ‘whole way of life’, of a ‘culture’.’ (1958a: 29)

this is not only because the scientific character of the 'laws of historical development' is cautiously questioned or sceptically rejected; to the point, indeed, where the notion of such a science can be regarded as utopian. It is also because the importance of utopian thought is itself being revalued, so that some now see it as the crucial vector of desire, without which even the laws are, in one version, imperfect, and, in another version, mechanical, needing desire to give them direction and substance. This reaction is understandable but it makes the utopian impulse more simple, more singular, than in the history of utopias it is. (1978b: 199)

Consequently, Williams valued the utopian impulse when it represented a desire for socialism tempered by what he regarded as reality. Only through struggle, through a move 'towards an unimaginably greater complexity' (1979b: 129), through long and uneven development of new social relations and human feelings could we expect to 'get pleasure into our work' (1978b: 205). Writing of William Morris's novel, *News from Nowhere*, Williams made clear that his preference was for socialist utopias that grew from civil war and revolutionary struggle:

But what is emergent in Morris's work, and what seems to me increasingly the strongest part of *News from Nowhere*, is the crucial insertion of the *transition* to utopia, which is not discovered, come across, or projected – not even, except at the simplest conventional level, dreamed – but fought for. Between writer and reader and this new condition is chaos, civil war, painful and slow reconstruction. The sweet little world at the end of all this is at once a result and a promise; an offered assurance of 'days of peace and rest', after the battle has been won. (1978b: 204)

The utopian impulse in order to be supportable must be ratified by the understanding that the mutuality and co-operative values of the socialist future could only be wrested from the old world by a long period of struggle.

This was consonant with the general use of the term 'crisis' throughout his work to refer to social tensions arising from

difficulties experienced in the economic or political management of British society by governments, industrialists, and trade unionists, from the forties to the eighties; his use of the word ‘crisis’ reveals a blunt inability to identify with any precision what exactly the problems and the resulting tensions at any given moment might be.<sup>19</sup> There was a tendency for the problems of fuel shortages, slum clearance, exchange rates, cuts in social spending, balancing budgets, raising international loans, trade union laws, colonial wars, nuclear armaments, international competition, the restructuring or closure of entire industries, and the ‘normal operation of the business cycle’ to be homogenised in the single word ‘crisis’ in a manner that tended to downplay the fact that living standards for most British people rose through the fifties, sixties, seventies and eighties, and to keep the systemic dangers of unemployment, poverty and war which are indeed inherent in capitalist social relations firmly to the fore.

Of course, this strategy did not demonstrate, except in the most abstract and ideal terms, that socialism would be able to inaugurate an era of stable, secure and peaceful development. The binary opposition of the aspirational virtues of socialism to the truly appalling competitive violence of capitalism does little to dissolve the material and imaginative gains made possible by existing economic, political and social arrangements. That capitalist relations could never guarantee peace, prosperity, and full employment was known (and continues to be known) by most working people.<sup>20</sup> And, this knowledge did not at any moment during Williams’s working life in any sense *make the case for socialism* or demonstrate the historical exhaustion of capitalism in the fields of technological or artistic creativity.

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<sup>19</sup> See Colin Leys’ interesting discussion of ‘crisis’ and ‘crises’ in his book, *Politics in Britain* (Leys 1983:17-37). See also (Hutton 1986) and (Hutton 1995 1996). For an interesting discussion of the post-war years from the perspective of the late 1990s see *Literature Culture and Politics in Postwar Britain* (Sinfield 1997).

<sup>20</sup> See Sheila Cohen and Kim Moody’s 1998 discussion of modern class-consciousness in *Socialist Register* (Cohen and Moody 1998: 102-123).

### Early Enthusiasms and the Popular Front

It is not possible to understand the defensive posture which Williams's adopted towards any questioning of socialism or any thoroughgoing criticism of the Soviet Union without reference to his view of the creative possibilities of the kind of Marxism and the kind of cultural and political alliances which had arisen during the nineteen thirties. For Williams these potentialities plainly grew out of the same complex of struggles that produced the stultifying and disfigured modes of Marxist thinking associated with the period. Williams knew that the productive and creative kinds of writing and artistic work were intimately engaged, and perhaps, directly implicated, in the development of the negative and the destructive tendencies within the dominant sections of the Communist movement: no simple severance of the one from the other was conceivable.

In the late 1930s, during the first stage of his intellectual development Williams did not encounter Soviet cultural policy as a set of fixed cultural obligations. Socialist realist critics, although capable of the utmost vulgarity and prejudice, did insist upon regarding the fate of contemporary writing as a matter of political urgency. As Ralph Fox, a leading communist intellectual of the thirties<sup>21</sup>, explained:

Psycho-analysis, for all its brilliant and courageous probing into the secret depths of the personality, has never understood that the individual is only a part of the social whole, and that the laws of this whole, decomposed and refracted in the apparatus of the individual psyche like rays of light passing through a prism, change and control the nature of each individual. Man to-day is compelled to fight against the objective, external horrors accompanying the collapse of our social system, against Fascism, against

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<sup>21</sup> Ralph Fox joined the Communist Party in the mid-twenties and was elected to the Central Committee in 1932. In 1934 he helped establish the British section of the Writers' International and served on its Executive Committee, and during the same year he worked with Montagu Slater, Edgell Rickword and Tom Wintringham in establishing the *Left Review*. In 1935 he was a member of the British delegation to the International Writers' Congress in Paris. He was killed in December 1936 fighting with the XIV International Brigade near Andújar in Spain.

war, unemployment, the decay of agriculture, against the domination of the machine, but he has to fight also against the subjective reflection of all these things in his own mind. He must fight to change the world, to rescue civilization, and he must fight also against the anarchy of capitalism in the human spirit.

It is in this dual struggle, each side of which in turn influences and is influenced by the other, that the end of the old and artificial division between subjective and objective realism will come. We shall no longer have the old naturalistic realism, no longer have the novel of endless analysis and intuition, but a new realism in which the two find their proper relationship to one another. (Fox 1937: 104-5)

It is in this vein that socialist realism appeared to Raymond Williams and his fellow communist students to be a lively and pertinent, if somewhat limited, response to the world crises. And, in Cambridge, it did not stunt their enthusiasm for Joyce, Jazz and surrealism.<sup>22</sup>

The explanation for the ease with which Williams and his contemporaries could adopt such a fluid approach towards socialist realism was that its promotion in the thirties coincided with the establishment of the popular front against fascism. In June 1935, less than a year after the sectarian strictures of the Soviet Writers' Congress, the International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture sponsored, among others, by André Malraux and Louis Aragon, was calling for maximum unity against fascism. The Seventh World Congress of the Comintern endorsed this position a few weeks later. Despite the ruthless imposition of a single standpoint in the Soviet Union, Communist Parties throughout the capitalist world were henceforth prepared to live with a wide range of diverse opinions in the interests of forging maximum unity in the struggle against fascism.

The two most influential literary journals on the left in England during the thirties, *Left Review* (1934-1938) and *New Writing* (1935-1941) were able, perhaps paradoxically, to promote a de facto accommodation with Soviet cultural policy because they had the freedom to encourage the participation of writers who

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<sup>22</sup> See the reminiscence in *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 45-6).

disagreed with Soviet literary criticism or were even hostile to socialist realism.<sup>23</sup> The Communist Party's practice of exercising influence and control, apparently loosely and often indirectly, encouraged large numbers of intellectuals to associate themselves generally with the outlook of the party. This form of association did not imply formal acceptance of the party's cultural policy but strengthened a broadly favourable engagement with it. As Margo Heinemann said of *Left Review*, it was:

... under mainly Communist and Marxist editorship, and was a sixpenny monthly review of all the arts, as well as a popular campaigning magazine. During its four years of life it did much to define the beginnings of a more, open, historically-minded kind of Marxism — what we might now call 'Gramscian'. This was concerned with ideas as an active force in history rather than simply a reflection of economic conditions, and with culture as a central aspect of social change. (Heinemann 1988: 118)<sup>24</sup>

This is, of course, a retrospective judgement and it may also overstate the openness of British Communist Party circles at the time, but it is certainly not at variance with Williams's mature view of his own encounter with socialist realism or *Left Review*. Williams believed that English Marxists in the thirties had a wider view of the relationship between morality, literature and the arts than they possessed in the early years of the Cold War. In late

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<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that:

“Other periodicals gave little or no time either to the 1934 Moscow Congress or to the dictates of Socialist Realism. The *New English Weekly*, a self-styled ‘Review of Public Affairs, Literature and the Arts’, made no mention of the Moscow gathering ... Nor did the specific arguments which animated *Left Review* readers and writers greatly disturb those connected with such periodicals as *The Adelphi*, *Time and Tide*, *New Verse*, or *Twentieth Century Verse*. Though these journals were interested in the interplay of politics and literature, they maintained different concerns and emphases. Surprisingly, T. S. Eliot's patrician journal, *Criterion*, did afford the Moscow Congress space, in John Cournos's article, ‘Russian Chronicle: Soviet Russia and the Literature of Ideas’.” (Marks 1997: 31-2)

<sup>24</sup> See also the Andy Croft's excellent discussion of the cultural life of the Communist Party in ‘Authors Take Sides: Writers and the Communist Party 1920-56’ (Croft 1995).

forties he supported the case for a balanced view in the following manner:

On the one hand, the ‘moralists’ too often rest their case on a parade of abstract values which they rarely seem concerned to relate to any detailed experience of living. Morality, in such cases, is merely a theoretical, at times a personal, indulgence. Yet, on the other hand, the ‘political’ group, which centres around the English Marxists, rarely misses an opportunity to attack, often gratuitously, a position (under the heading of ‘literary decadence’, ‘idealism’, ‘absolutism’, etc.) of the real nature of which they are demonstrably unaware.

The case which those whose concern is for morals might have made, and which the Marxists throughout the thirties tried to find room for, seems to us to rest upon experience of literature and the arts. For in these the values which we must be concerned to preserve find their most actual and complete expression. (1947a: 31)<sup>25</sup>

From the bleak perspective of 1947 Williams and his co-editors on *Politics and Letters* evidently looked back to the days of the Popular Front as a period of greater flexibility and cooperation on the left. In a 1968 *Guardian* review of *Left Review* he criticised the “acrid” sectarianism and the “florid publicity” promoted by socialist realist propagandists but went on to say:

I began by saying intellectual history is a bloody business, and I feel this, especially, with “The Left Review,” because the errors are repeatable, as the urgency mounts, and because I can feel connections with some of those men and women: not indeed with Day Lewis, Spender, Calder-Marshall, Hopkinson; but with Rickword and Garman; with Storm Jameson (Whose fine letter “To a

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<sup>25</sup> In this argument Williams was anticipating the eventual defence of morality by the CPSU: ‘Formerly the idea of morality had been thought (like law) to be a fetish, the mere expression of contemporary material forces; but now there arose the ideal of ‘socialist morality’, the morality which is obedience to the inner voice of social obligation; this morality, said the Programme of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Party Congress in 1961, would under communism remain permanent even when the state had eventually withered away.’ (Kelly 1992: 400)

Labour Party Official” could in effect be written today), with Lewis Grassic Gibbon (for his “Scots Quair” and for his revolutionary scepticism of the orthodox line); with the conferences and discussion-groups; with a worker-writer such as B. L. Coombes. This important and unfashionable body of work must not be lost, as the orthodox formula recedes into history, or as the fashionable names move on to other fashions. (1968c)

Valentine Cunningham, from a different perspective and perhaps more forcefully, also draws attention to the complexity of points of view that were to be found in and around the British Communist Party during the 1930s. In his 1997 discussion of James Barke’s book, *Major Operation: A Novel*, which was published in 1936, Cunningham had this to say:

But for all this barrage of anti-Joycean feeling, this wide campaign against modernist devices and assumptions that was coming from the heart of the Communist aesthetic movement, Barke’s Joycean endeavour found much support, a good deal of it from circles close to the Party, and indeed from deep within the Party itself. Jack Lindsay praised Barke’s ‘organic vitality’. The *Daily Worker*, official newspaper of the Party, claimed that *Major Operation* was ‘Certainly one of the greatest novels of working-class struggle yet written’. (Cunningham 1997: 14)

Cunningham goes on to point out that the Scottish communist novelist, Grassic Gibbon, was as Raymond Williams indicates, even more explicit in his rejection of the socialist realist perspective when he described as ‘bolshevik blah’ the Soviet view that capitalist literature had been decaying since 1913 (Cunningham 1997: 15).

### **Socialist Realism and ‘the utopian impulse’**

**I**t is this desire to defend the work done during the 1930s by Communist writers and critics in Britain, as much as to defend the efforts of working people in the Soviet Union engaged in building socialism, which resulted in the rather

striking absence in Williams's work of any sustained or serious criticism and analysis of Socialist Realism. And, the failure of what little criticism there is in Williams's writing on Socialist Realism is clearly brought about by his attempt to discuss the phenomena without a thoroughgoing discussion of the Soviet Union and the difficulties which might be inherent in the realisation of a new and more just dispensation in the world.

When discussing socialist realism Williams did not embed his criticism in an analysis of the 'whole way of life';<sup>26</sup> he did not analyse the historically specific dynamic presented by Soviet society and Soviet history for the development of Soviet literature and art. He was not capable of Katerina Clark's insight when she wrote in 1981:

For anyone seeking causes for the shift in the dominant Soviet literary mode from proletarian realism's lust for verisimilitude to "romanticization" and exaggeration, it is best to look not in the narrow context of literary politics but at Soviet society as a whole . . . . The shift in literature legislated in 1932 – a shift from emphasis on the "real" to emphasis on the "heroic," not to say the mythic – represents a systematization of major cultural changes that encompassed literature as well. Politics were a major factor in the institution of Socialist Realism, but they cannot provide a sufficient answer to the question posed earlier: Why was that particular type of literature chosen, and not any of the other varieties of writing proposed from the platform by loyalist and zealous groups?<sup>27</sup> (Clark 1981: 34-5)

Williams could not situate his critical approach to socialist realism in this manner. Consequently, he could not pose the kind of questions essential to the development of a thoroughgoing analysis of literature in the leading post-capitalist society. This was because he had to defend the Soviet Union, not the Soviet

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<sup>26</sup> The brief discussion in *Culture and Society* of Socialist Realism is subsumed in a discussion of 'structure' and 'superstructure' (1958a: 279-284).

<sup>27</sup> For an earlier discussion of the 'Worker' as 'mythical cult-figure' see William Empson's essay, 'Proletarian Literature' in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Empson 1935: 11-25).

Union of Stalin but the Soviet Union of the October Revolution; he had to defend the land of perpetually emergent possibilities. An approach that situated criticism of socialist realism firmly within an analysis of post-revolutionary literary trends would evidently demand a critical approach to 'October' and the conditions it created, and this is precisely what Williams was unwilling to do.

This defensive posture appears to have barred the way to any sustained analysis of the relationship between the figure of the future in art, the aspiration for socialism, and the development of materialist criticism. Instead of developing a sustained critical analysis of the Soviet Union or of Socialist Realism Williams sought 'the desired, the possible' in emergent social forces already active and conscious in the social process and he discussed this in relation to Marxist criticism during the course of discussion of the problem of 'structure' and 'superstructure' which I will discuss below.

However, this broadly uncharacteristic removal of attention from concern with assessment of 'a whole way of life' into the realm of Marxist theory meant that Williams was able to talk about a future socialist society rather than discuss the one he had in front of him. And, insofar as he does discuss the existing socialist society he attributes its cultural flaws loosely to an 'inadequacy in the theory of culture':

My own view is that if, in a socialist society, the basic cultural skills are made widely available, and the channels of communication widened and cleared, as much as possible has been done in the way of preparation, and what then emerges will be an actual response to the whole reality, and so valuable. The other way can be seen in these words of Lenin:

Every artist . . . has a right to create freely according to his ideals, independent of anything. Only, of course, we communists cannot stand with our hands folded and let chaos develop in any direction it may. We must guide this process according to a plan and form its results.

There is no ‘of course’ about it, and the growth of consciousness is cheapened (as in the mechanical descriptions of the past) by being foreseen as ‘chaos’. Here, it is not ultimately a question of wise or unwise, free or totalitarian, policy; it is, rather, a question of inadequacy in the theory of culture. (1958a: p.283)

Williams was not alone in adopting this kind of approach to the inadequacy of Soviet Marxism’s theory of culture. As late as 1979 the Marxist critic, Arnold Kettle could write about Communist shortcomings in the field of culture in following vein:

Some of the responsibility for the difficulties the poets found in reconciling their vocation with their politics must no doubt rest with the Marxist left, including its most serious and effective organisation, the Communist Party. Philistinism is a persistent and difficult problem in the British labour movement. And there was also undoubtedly a tendency (not discouraged by Soviet example) to oversimplify the relation between literature and politics and to want poetry to be ‘political’ in a rather narrow ‘tactical’ or propagandist way, which was not much help to artists who needed to develop their *art* as well as (indeed as part and parcel of) their political understanding.

But it won’t do to blame the whole business on sectarian attitudes within the Communist Party or the weakness of the Marxist literary criticism of the day. As a matter of fact most of the critical pages of *Left Review*, which it is now fashionable to dismiss as ‘Stalinist’, compare favourably with much of the left literary criticism of the seventies. (Kettle 1979: 103-104)

Kettle’s belief that what was being alluded to in the charge of ‘Stalinism’ was a ‘tendency’ towards philistinism or sectarian attitudes within the Communist Party or the wider labour movement represents a striking evasion of the nature and extent of theoretical challenges being mounted against the record of Marxist criticism in England and the Soviet Union. And, although Williams did not share Kettle’s political affiliation with the Communist Party, he certainly shared his evasiveness.

### Beyond Soviet Experience

It may be argued that in selecting scattered texts drawn from across Williams's oeuvre, associating texts dating from 1947 and 1950 with those of 1968 and 1979, one is not paying due regard for changes or development in Williams's outlook regarding actually existing socialism. The explanation, however, is simple: there is an overwhelming consistency in Williams's work in this regard. His attitude does not develop or shift significantly during the course of the forty years of his activity as a writer and critic. If anything, his preparedness to defend the tyranny inherent in revolutionary violence strengthened over time (1979b: 393-405). This was because of his observation that those who trembled before the necessity for the imposition of the harshest revolutionary discipline in Russia quit the revolutionary movement: 'Those who withdrew from the notion of a hard line — hard yet flexible — did stop believing in the revolution.' (1979b: 395).

Williams's distrust of liberalism and what he might have called the 'Bloomsbury agenda' reached a particular crisis in the nineteen sixties. 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>28</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, following the failure of the initiatives surrounding the publication of the *May Day Manifesto*<sup>29</sup>, that Williams sharpened his analysis of capitalist society and posited a future for agriculture that would at last be free of the 'pitiless crew' of landlords and exploiters. He was able to legitimate and sustain a new tone of bitterness and class anger in his 'knowable community' writings<sup>30</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>31</sup>

To this new 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

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<sup>28</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>29</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the *May Day Manifesto* see 'Marxism Reasserted' in Chapter Two below.

<sup>30</sup> 'The Knowable Community in George Eliot's Novels' (1969f), *The English Novel* (1970a), and *The Country and the City* (1973c).

<sup>31</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 statistics.' In Europe the number of students tripled between 1960 and 1980 (Hobsbawm 1994: 296).

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 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>32</sup> Instead, it referred to China and Cuba (and perhaps to Tanzania), where apparently the development of agriculture without the dislocation and immiseration 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

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<sup>32</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)

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, of course, 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>33</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

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<sup>33</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*).

grew on average by six percent per annum.<sup>34</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>35</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 the stultifying memory of 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 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,

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<sup>34</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>35</sup> See Penny Kane's *Famine in China* (Kane 1988: *passim*), and Dali L. Yang's *Calamity and Reform in China* (Yang 1996: *passim*).

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<sup>36</sup> at the work in which Williams interested himself in the fate of literature under ‘actually existing socialism’ the resources of materialist criticism appear to have failed to provide him with a thoroughgoing and plausible account of the possibilities and difficulties inherent in associating aesthetic judgments with the project of emancipation.

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<sup>36</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).

## Chapter Two: Marxist Literary Criticism

### Marxism and Marxism(s)

Williams's Marxism was not a product of systematic theoretical analysis. It cannot be adequately approached through any presumption of serious *theoretical* engagement with Stalin's *Problems of Leninism*, with Lukács, with the work of Adorno or Althusser. For Williams Marxism was a set of political ideas.<sup>37</sup> His Marxism was not the product of theoretical enquiry, nor did it produce key conceptual tools with which to erect his criticism. Instead, it had a doctrinal status. For him Marxism was a set of axioms resting upon the belief that being determined consciousness. The veracity of these axioms was, he thought, being perpetually tested in the class struggle and could be discerned in the complex manner in which this struggle had been instantiated in cultural relations and artistic production. Consequently, the reference is not Hegel's *Aesthetics* or even Marx's *Capital*, his *Theories of Surplus Value*, or the *Grundrisse*, nor is it Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution*, but to the writings of Marx and Engels's prefaces and Plekhanov's *Fundamental Problems of Marxism*.

At Cambridge in 1939 and 1940 Williams became familiar with Marxist criticism through the work of Alick West and Ralph Fox and consequently with the kind of speculation on psychology and history that Plekanov had pioneered among Marxists in the opening decades of the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup> An analysis had been developed in which the bourgeoisie at the height of their revolutionary insurgency were said to be able to produce great art, but paradoxically, as their grip on social and state power strengthened, and they were faced with the rise of the proletariat, their capacity for successful artistic production began to wane. In short, as the bourgeoisie became defenders rather than critics of prevailing social, economic and political arrangements their culture experienced attenuation of its creative powers and the decay of its arts and letters.

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<sup>37</sup> See Isaac Deutscher's 'Three Currents in Communism' for a discussion about the relationship between political developments and the proliferation of theoretical engagements. (Deutscher 1964: 3-18).

<sup>38</sup> See Williams's recollection in *Politics and Letters* (1979b 44).

This state of affairs set up a perpetual tension among artists who, though disgusted by the money-grubbing banality and decadence of bourgeois daily life, were unable to opt for the overthrow of bourgeois society. By the middle of the nineteenth century (1848, to be precise) fear of the proletariat was sufficiently lively to ensure that the ‘haters of the bourgeoisie’ among artists and writers, despite their social hostilities and the stylistic radicalism of the *demimondes* in which they lived, remained loyal to bourgeois society.<sup>39</sup>

This analysis, lacking the forensic venom of Radek’s 1934 address on the tasks of proletarian literature, or the virulence of Zhadanov’s strictures against ‘petty-bourgeois dissoluteness and individualism’, had considerable appeal to English Marxists.<sup>40</sup> It was framed in the calm tones of the Second International and imbued with an easy familiarity with the vicissitudes of the unfolding historical process. It appeared to have greater historical depth, richer cultural sources, and, of course, it had evidently not been produced to meet the exigencies of Soviet rule. Indeed, its author, ‘the father of Russian Marxism’, was a contemplative man of letters rather than a Jacobin, a man not fitted for the struggle for power, but capable of great theoretical insight nevertheless.

Plekhanov’s analysis saturates Caudwell’s *Studies in a Dying Culture* and West’s *Crisis and Criticism*. For example, in West’s discussion of the ‘romantic theory of literature’ in 1937 he noted that:

The resemblance between its romantic theory’s achievement and the problems of criticism today is a reason of the attraction felt towards romantic theory now. But the interest is not in the romantic idea of the connection between social and literary activity. It is rather in the philosophical and psychological aspects of the theory, and through them it is especially the idealistic and religious spirit of romanticism which is kept alive. (West 1937a: 31)

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<sup>39</sup> This analysis was most fully developed by G. V. Plekhanov (Plekhanov 1896: *passim*; 1908: *passim*; 1908 and 1912: *passim*).

<sup>40</sup> It must also be acknowledged, of course, that Christopher Caudwell was prepared to adopt the tone and outlook of Zhadanov. See Caudwell 1937: 270-298.

T. S. Eliot and others were, amid the ‘decay of the bourgeois social order’, trapped between their desire to acknowledge *the social* and their hostility towards the political commitments that this would entail. This impasse, despite the strength of their anti-capitalist impulse, could only lead into naked reaction:

The appeal to a supposedly homogeneous mind prior to capitalism may spring from a hatred of capitalism, which is too confused to see that the way to realise what it values in feudalism is not back, but forward. When, however, this appeal is accompanied, as in Mr Eliot’s case, by an attack on romanticism and particularly on Shelley, who saw most clearly the necessity of a workers’ revolution, and on communism as the devil incarnate, then it does not spring from a hatred of capitalism, but from the desire to defend it against revolution by investing it with more absolute authority. (West 1937b: 46)

This mode of criticism, resting upon analysis of the class position and the social and political attitudes of artists as much as, and in many instances, more than upon close analysis of their books and paintings, consigned Marxist criticism in England to the sidelines. When Williams returned to Cambridge after the war in Autumn 1945 he could not but dissociate himself from this kind of Marxist criticism. However, this dissociation was from a style of Marxist criticism, not from the broader political sympathies associated with it. He continued to support the impulse, if not the settled conclusions, behind the critical work of British communist intellectuals during the thirties.

This *impulse* was the popular and democratic impulse that English Marxist criticism had apparently represented in the thirties. This was remembered as being more important than the almost routine denunciation of writers as desperate members of the petit bourgeoisie who were simply bored and vacuous, like James Joyce, or out and out reactionaries: D. H. Lawrence was a fascist, H. G. Wells a crusader for ‘liberal Fascism’.<sup>41</sup> More important than the Plekhanovite certainties that disfigured and

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<sup>41</sup> See West’s ‘James Joyce: *Ulysses*’ (West 1937c: 104-127), and Caudwell’s *Studies in a Dying Culture* (Caudwell 1938: 44-95)

misdirected their criticism was their closeness to the millions of working class people in the labour movement, their direct language to which it was thought working-class people could respond, and finally, their consciousness of the progressive aspects of the English literary heritage found in the works of Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, the Romantic poets and the nineteenth-century novelists.<sup>42</sup>

Raymond Williams shared this view of the thirties Marxist critics with Arnold Kettle. He valued their work and he would have been in sympathy with Kettle when he wrote:

. . . the impulses that draw students of literature towards Marxism, and lead Marxists to value literature, are essentially the same: a desire to make their lives whole; a desire to identify with the organised working class in the great political and social conflicts of our time; a desire to rescue literature from the pedants and dilettantes; a desire to replace class-divided society by a communist one in which men and women can begin to enjoy in their own lives the fruits of that heightening of consciousness experienced through art. (Kettle 1975: 3)

It was the political aspirations, the class stamp of their outlook and the popular-democratic tone of their intention that Williams shared with this generation of English Marxist critics.

### L. C. Knights's Challenge to Marxism

It had been during the dying days of the Popular Front, in a climate of apparently diverse and free debate, idealism, muddle and accommodation with Stalin's tyranny, that Raymond Williams, at the age of twenty, encountered 'bourgeois' scholarly discipline:

. . . in my second year I was transferred to Tillyard. . . . We started doing the novel and I promptly produced the Party orientation — that it was necessary to see any

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<sup>42</sup> For a brief but sympathetic description of this outlook among English Marxist critics before the Second World War see Arnold Kettle's 1975 'Foreword' to Alick West, *Crisis and Criticism & Selected Literary Essays* (Kettle 1975: 3).

bourgeois novel of the past from the perspective of the kind of novel that must now be written, in the present. Tillyard told me this was not a tenable procedure; it was a fantasy. How could you judge something that had been written from the perspective of something that hadn't? (1979b: 50-1)

Williams goes on to report the real intellectual and emotional distress he experienced in the course of May and June 1941, which was to some extent resolved, by the outbreak of war between Germany and the Soviet Union. The unilateral termination of the German-Soviet partition of Poland by the Nazis, and Hitler's invasion of Russia, changed the character of the war for Williams and the Communist Party from an indefensible conflict between German and Anglo-French imperialism to a necessary and legitimate anti-fascist crusade. Although he had decided early in 1940 that he would join up he was now able to enter the army without major political misgivings.<sup>43</sup>

However, the academic hiatus provided by his military training, his role in the war and the occupation of Germany, came to an end in Autumn 1945 when he returned to Cambridge. He was confronted again by the intellectual crisis he had left in 1941:

The whole crisis had an important bearing on my attitude when I returned to academic work in 1945. People often ask me now why I didn't carry on then from the Marxist arguments of the thirties. The reason is that I felt they had led me into an impasse. I had become convinced that their answers did not meet the questions, and that I had got to be prepared to meet the professional objections. I was damned well going to do it properly this time. (1979b: 52)

In the course of completing his undergraduate work he was able to begin to discern the outlines of what he regarded as a viable alternative both to the Marxist arguments of the thirties and to the forms of critical analysis represented by T. S. Eliot or F. R. Leavis.

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<sup>43</sup> See *Politics and Letters* (1979b: p.53).

In this he was no doubt helped by his growing familiarity with the range and sophistication of *liberal* or *bourgeois* sociological and historical scholarship. This tradition, he learned, was broader than Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture*. It included Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. Williams encountered the full force of this tradition of scholarly engagement with capitalism and culture in L. C. Knights's *Drama & Society in the Age of Johnson*. This book, first published in 1937, reprinted in 1951, 1957 and 1962 was 'read and reread' by Williams during the late forties and early fifties. In 1979 Williams remembered it as:

... a sustained attempt to understand a particular period of literature in terms of a specific epoch in the emergence of capitalism. I read and reread it throughout that period. I was dissatisfied with it, but it seemed much nearer to my focus of interest than what Leavis himself was writing. (1979b: 92)

Indeed, it was very close to Williams's interests. Significantly, Knights challenged the utility of the word 'economic' in discussions of the cultural complexity of particular modes of life in the past. In suggesting that the category 'economic' could be a 'misleading abstraction' Knights was making a point that Williams would subsequently recast in his identification of culture as 'a whole way of life'. In 1937 Knights explained it thus:

... to say that the qualities embodied in Shakespeare's English had an economic base, is to remind ourselves that making a living was not merely a *means*, and that the 'economic' activities which helped to mould that supremely expressive medium fostered qualities (perceptions and general habits of response) that were not 'economic' at all. We remind ourselves, in short, of the dangerous facility with which the word 'economic' tempts us to beg the essential questions. (Knights 1937: 12)

Confronted by the swift and very large generalisations that characterised Marxist criticism in the 1930s Knights stressed the importance of narrowing the field of enquiry in order to facilitate attempts to demonstrate precise relations between particular ideas, genres and forms, and the prevailing economic arrangements. He did not believe that sufficient work had been done to verify the proposition in Marx's 'Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*' that 'the methods of production in material life determine the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life.' Knights was dismayed by the vagueness of Marxist argument:

The exasperating haziness of all those who have attempted to make some correlation between economic activities and culture is not due merely to the lack of a satisfactory definition of the latter term. Perhaps it is due (at any rate one may suggest it provisionally) to the fact that 'the materialist interpretation of history' has not yet been pushed far enough. It is one thing to say that 'in every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, *and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch*', and another to attempt to substantiate the phrase which I have italicised in detail. Methods of production and cultural superstructure may be related in the realm of abstract dialectic, but no one (anthropologists dealing with primitive peoples apart) has yet established the relation in terms of fact and experience.<sup>44</sup> (Knights 1937: 4-5)

By quoting Engels's 'Preface to the English translation of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*'<sup>45</sup> in this way Knights was identifying the range of problems that Williams would later

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<sup>44</sup> Incidentally, the idea that anthropologists had perhaps succeeded in delineating the relations between methods of production and the cultural superstructure appears to arise from colonial assumptions concerning the relative 'simplicity' of 'primitive' peoples and their societies.

<sup>45</sup> On p.4 n.3 Knights cites page 6 of the preface to the English translation of the *Manifesto* — the edition is not given. However, the preface that Knights used may be found in *The Communist Manifesto, A Modern Edition* (Engels 1888: 79-87).

attempt to solve by unfolding the distinction between the economic ‘base’ and cultural and ideological ‘superstructure’. Furthermore, it is evident that Knights’s ironical suggestion that historical materialism had perhaps not been pushed far enough had to be taken seriously by Williams given the manifest failure of Marxist criticism to meet the challenge mounted by *Scrutiny*.

Williams had an unequal but guarded respect for both traditions and this was reflected in his regard for the scholarly discipline and emotional insight made available by close reading and practical criticism, and the social outlook, class credentials and political discipline of those committed to the defence of the Soviet Union and its cultural policy.<sup>46</sup>

In the late forties it is evident that Williams veered much more towards mainstream English criticism than he did towards any mode of criticism affiliated to the working class movement or committed to the progress of proletarian politics. In October 1948 he boldly acknowledged his debts to T. S. Eliot, Middleton Murry, I. A. Richards, William Empson, L. C. Knights, and F. R. Leavis, explaining that

As an independent student I have found the work of these critics valuable because it insisted on “the text as the starting-point of criticism”.

. . . And in general the kind of reading which they offer is the kind of reading which, in my view, ought to be the ideal of the ordinary reader. (1950: ix-x)

This privileging of the text as the starting point of criticism enabled Williams to be explicit in his opposition to the critical practice that had become associated with Marxism. All criticism, Williams insisted,

[. . .] all attempts at correlation, must begin from the fact of the work. It is perfectly possible to believe that *Wuthering Heights* is a statement on emergent class-consciousness and that Heathcliff represents the proletariat (as I have seen recently publicly argued). But it is not possible to believe this if one reads Emily Brontë’s novel. (1950: 103)

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<sup>46</sup> See ‘Culture is Ordinary’ (1958b: 7).

Williams goes on to point out that what he calls the ‘cruder psycho-analytical’ theories of literature, together with certain other political and historical theories represent a failure of reading. He attempts to place what he regards as the outrages and failures of Soviet Marxist literary criticism in a wider context:

On one side can be seen the material distortion which one theory has caused. The Soviet authorities have defined the purpose of literature as being

to aid in the education of the people, especially the youth, to answer their questions, inspire people with courage, faith in their cause, and the determination to overcome all obstacles . . . to reflect the image of Soviet man, brought up by the Bolshevik party, tempered in the fire of patriotic war . . . to represent the finest aspects and qualities of Soviet humanity.

Various works, including most of modern Western literature, have been dismissed as

morbid introspection; sickly admiration of suffering and misery; pessimism and decadence, superficiality and mysticism; tastes inclined towards allegory . . . inflated complexity . . . petty personal feelings; rummagings in little souls.

It is very easy to dismiss this as “totalitarian” and to murmur complacent things about the “creative spirit”. The Soviet attitude, which is certainly deplorable, is far from being the only material distortion of literature which has resulted from a failure of reading. In Western civilisation, and particularly in England and America, the whole situation of literature has been transformed by the institutions of mass reading, and of related forms of false or limited response. (1950: 103-4)

There then follows a brief reflection on commercialisation and mass advertising that it is said “employs its techniques of exploitation of human irrationality and weakness” to sell books.

This apparently intermediate position between *bourgeois* or ‘high’ literary scholarship on the one hand and proletarian commitments on the other faced Williams with the necessity of creating more than a left-leaning form of practical criticism. The form of criticism promoted by Leavis and others was radical in its hostility to many aspects of capitalist culture, particularly to what Carlyle would have called ‘THE CASH NEXUS’. But it contemplated these elements of modern capitalist society – advertising, journalism, the reading ‘habit’, and commercialised popular entertainments – from the point of view of a cultivated intelligentsia living encircled upon a gradually sinking island perpetually threatened with inundation by a sea of ignorance and vulgarity.

Williams could not accommodate the elitism, wretched snobbery and even racism of the literary milieu around T. S. Eliot and some of those associated with *Scrutiny*.<sup>47</sup> The tone and class assumptions of much of this writing were profoundly foreign and even hostile to the realities of working class life during the thirties, forties and fifties. For example, to the question, ‘Why cannot literature be just enjoyed?’, Deny Thompson replied:

It must be agreed at once that there is a great deal of literature, from limericks to light fiction, which can be consumed with as much ease and enjoyment as oysters and champagne; but on the whole it is not that literature which will give lasting satisfaction. (Thompson 1934: 13)

The refusal of L. C. Knights and others to recognise what Williams regarded as the full import of class and class conflict in English culture made it inevitable that he should seek a way beyond what he regarded as the socially isolated and elitist pessimism represented by the dominant trends in English criticism.

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<sup>47</sup> For T. S. Eliot’s views on race, religion and tradition see *After Strange Gods* (Eliot 1933: *passim*); for a brief discussion of T. S. Eliot’s social views see (Kettle 1979: 95-113).

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Williams had to find an alternative to the impasse offered by this form of criticism; he had to find the route towards a new synthesis in which the ‘masses’ were not figured as a threat to ‘minority’ culture. A new synthesis of critical practices in which serious cultural criticism equipped with the technical sophistication and classical learning available at Cambridge and elsewhere in the academy was held to be inseparable from criticism of (and, *critical engagement with*) the whole way of life and work of the great majority of the people. Williams and his associates made this clear in the editorial of the first issue of *Politics and Letters*:

In short, we must ensure that critical activity continually draws attention to ‘the best that is thought and known in the world’, while at the same time we must recognise that the mechanisms of society, acting by their own laws, must also be examined and reckoned with. No backwater social group can hope to preserve the human values of the arts merely by concentrating on personal cultivation and personal communication. But, on the other hand, the usual ‘progressive, scientific’ assessment leaves no room for anything but the satisfaction of routine appetites in group activity. It is not sufficient to label the significance attached to inwardness as ‘morbid introspection’. Nor, on the other hand, can active social participation be dismissed as a mere escape from the deeper problems of personality and tradition. There is a ‘self’ to be reckoned with at the level at which it finally comes to rest, a level which can have the sanction of our main literary tradition. But at the same time this self remains not only impotent but unexpressed unless it continually interacts with the group. For the survival of the group, diagnosis at every level is needed. (1947a: 32)

The perspective outlined here is not simply a matter of taking Leavis and the protocols of a disciplined and professional mode of criticism to the left. It is a new position in which literature and criticism were seen as inextricably engaged with society through

reflexive interaction between the individual and the group. Earlier Marxist attempts to posit the relative autonomy of culture from a particular mode of production were sidestepped by Williams in the forties.<sup>48</sup> He insisted, instead, on the virtues of avoiding abstraction by a determined focus upon the concrete experience of the individual. It was a political point of view in which the values of introspection — what Williams called ‘inwardness’ — were not counterposed to those of collective life or struggle, but were seen, on the contrary, as essential to it.

There can be little doubt that this point of view was explicitly socialist from the outset. Despite the tact deployed by Williams during the forties in the use of political labels or in the acknowledgement of definite affiliations his position was avowedly hostile to capitalism and actively in favour of the progress of society in a collectivist direction. In 1947 Williams put it thus:

Our precept is clear: we must, negatively, by the application of the strictest critical standards, ensure that inwardness is neither abused (becoming ‘profitable introspection’) nor set up for sale in the commercial market; and positively, we must attempt, however often we fail, to ensure that in our own inevitable development towards a planned, rational, society, the distinctive values of living embodied in our literary tradition are preserved, re-created, expanded, so that ultimately with material may grow human richness. (1947b: 53)

The ‘planned, rational, society’ was, both in the Communist phraseology of the day and in the Labour tradition, socialist society; a society freed from the anarchy of the market and the pursuit of profit.

### **The Caudwell Controversy**

**D**espite his continued commitment to socialism Williams had to turn firmly away from pre-war Marxist practice, yet there was still much in the work of West and

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<sup>48</sup> See the discussion of the debate between A. L. Morton and F. R. Leavis in (Mulhern 1979: 65-9).

Caudwell that Williams found useful in constructing an alternative to the readily available positions commanded by *Modern Quarterly*, *Scrutiny* and *Horizon*.

Indeed, it has been argued that it had been Williams's task in the forties and fifties to end the apparent externality of the debate between *Scrutiny* and Marxism. According to this account *Scrutiny* had been founded to struggle against a form of Marxism that it had created in its own image, 'as that image's negative: its scientific concepts were taken to be the categories of a cultural theory which had capitulated to the dominance of economic values in contemporary civilization.' (Pechey 1985: 65-76) Whatever the merits of this argument it is certainly true that given his politics and his interests in criticism Williams had to do something about Marxism. Williams had to tackle what Leavis had called 'the dogma of the priority of economic conditions' (Leavis 1932: 167), the dogma which had been so concretely addressed in 1937 in Knights's *Drama & Society in the Age of Jonson*. Williams had to find some way of challenging the idea that there were direct causal relationships between modes of production, relations of production, the resulting cultural matrices and particular works of art. Moreover, he had to do this without surrendering to the idea that class relations and material circumstance were anything other than essential in the processes of cultural formation. And, he had to set about this task with the comparatively meagre resources at his disposal.

It is not surprising therefore that his early works eschew explicit association with Marxism. However, it is clear that during the forties and early fifties Williams worked hard at trying to approach many of the difficulties inherent in the Marxist analysis of literary and artistic production in a new way. And, in this work some of the insights, if not the conclusions, of the pre-war Marxist critics suggest a consciousness of the range of difficulties that Williams had to address. For example, Caudwell wrote of the relations between the 'base' and 'superstructure' in the following manner:

Social consciousness is not a mirror-image of social being. If it were, it would be useless, a mere fantasy. It is material, possessed of mass and inertia, composed of real things – philosophies, language habits, churches, judiciaries, police. If social consciousness were but a

mirror-image, it could change like an image without the expenditure of energy when the object which it mirrored changed. But it is more than that. It is a functional superstructure which interacts with the foundations, each altering the other. There is a coming-and-going between them. So, life, arising from dead matter, turns back on it and changes it. The process is evident in the simplest use of language. The word is social, representing existing conscious formulations. But to wish to speak, we wish to say something new, arising from our life experience, from our being. And, therefore, we use the Word, with a metaphor or in a sentence, in such a way that it has a slightly fresh significance nearer to our own new experience. (Caudwell 1938: 25-26)

This process of interaction between the base and superstructure in which Caudwell attributes a dynamic material role to consciousness and the products of culture is suggestive of a position lying some way beyond simple economic determinism in which it might be supposed that economic relations are always prior. Flowing from this kind of observation it is clear Caudwell could conclude that:

Man himself is composed like society of current active being and inherited conscious formulations. He is somatic and psychic, instinctive and conscious, and these opposites interpenetrate. He is formed, half rigid, in the shape of the culture he was born in, half fluid and new and insurgent, sucking reality through his instinctive roots. Thus he feels, right in the heart of him, this tension between being and thinking, between new being and old thought, a tension which will give rise by synthesis to new thought. He feels as if the deepest instinctive part of him and the most valuable is being dragged away from his consciousness by events. The incomplete future is dragging at him, but because instinctive components of the psyche are the oldest, he often feels this to be the past dragging at him. (Caudwell 1938: 26-27)

Caudwell wrote in a similar vein about art. All art he believed was the product of the tension between changing social relations

and outmoded consciousness. This perpetual conflict perpetually gave rise to new art, expressive of the new consciousness of the newly emergent 'system of social relations', in a process that perpetually absorbed and resituated the art of the past (Caudwell 1938: 54).

Now, whether intended or not, Caudwell's position was a challenge to the idea of materialism that had arisen within the official communist movement. This view held that thought and consciousness was merely a reflection of the material world and of material circumstances. As Stalin put it:

Further, if nature, being, the material world, is primary, and mind, thought, is secondary, derivative; if the material world represents objective reality existing independently of the mind of men, while the mind is a reflection of this objective reality, it follows that the material life of society, its being, is also primary, and its spiritual life secondary, derivative, and that the material life of society is an objective reality existing independently of the will of men, while the spiritual life of society is a reflection of this object reality, a reflection of being.

Hence the source of formation of the spiritual life of society, the origin of social ideas, social theories, political views and political institutions, should not be sought for in the ideas, theories, views and political institutions themselves, but in the conditions of the material life of society, in social being, of which these ideas, theories, views, etc., are the reflection. (Stalin 1938: 15)

Stalin, of course, did not deny a degree of 'reciprocity' between ideas and the material conditions of social life but it was pretty clear that the emphasis lay with the priority and primacy of material and economic conditions.<sup>49</sup>

The tension between Caudwell's understanding of these issues and the official line came to a head during 1950-1 in the pages of the Communist Party's literary journal *Modern Quarterly*.

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<sup>49</sup> For Joseph Stalin's thoughts on reciprocity see *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (Stalin 1938: 16)

Curiously, Williams implied in 1979 that he had not known of this dispute within the Communist Party at the time:

I have just read Edward Thompson's paper on Caudwell, in which he describes the inner party arguments about Caudwell in the late forties. My most immediate response was: 'Why weren't you writing about this at the time in *Politics and Letters*?' (1979b: 77)

The journal *Politics and Letters* had gone out of existence two years before the Caudwell Discussion in the pages of *Modern Quarterly*.<sup>50</sup> Although Williams remembers withdrawing from political and social engagement for a time after the collapse of *Politics and Letters* in 1948, it is unlikely that he was unaware of this debate at the time, both because during the early fifties he had many informal and professional associations with leftist and communist critics, adult educators, historians, and activists, and because the 'Caudwell controversy' had, as E. P. Thompson put it, broken 'the surface of the British Communist Party's normally monolithic press': it was, despite being trimmed by editorial caution and dishonesty, a *public* debate.<sup>51</sup> It was a public debate about literary criticism and would have been of interest to Williams and to most of his professional associates at the time.<sup>52</sup>

Raymond Williams was also aware of other useful questions arising from the work of pre-war Marxist criticism. For example, the chapter 'Form and Content' in Alick West's *Crisis and Criticism* reveals West striving towards a materialist approach to culture and criticism that, like Caudwell's, was expressive of a move beyond the confines set by Lenin's *Materialism and*

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<sup>50</sup> The 'Caudwell Discussion' ran through an entire year's issues of *Modern Quarterly* with contributions from fourteen critics: Maurice Cornforth (Winter 1950-1); George Thomson (Spring 1951); Alan Bush, Montagu Slater, Alick West, G. M. Mathews, Jack Beeching, Peter Cronin (Summer 1951); Margot Heinemann, Edward York, Werner Thierry, G. Robb, J. D. Bernal, Edwin S. Smith, Maurice Cornforth (Autumn 1951). See also Hynes 1970: 20-23.

<sup>51</sup> (Thompson 1977: 232). For Williams's informal associations with Communist Party members at the time see Williams (1979b: 92). See also (Inglis 1995: 107-135).

<sup>52</sup> Certainly, Williams knew of this debate by the completion of *Culture and Society* in March 1956. Issue numbers 3 and 4 of *Modern Quarterly*, 1951, are cited in connection with an evaluation of Caudwell in *Culture and Society*, in endnotes to pages 277; 279 and 282 (1958a: 353-4).

*Empirio-Criticism* (Lenin 1908), and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's dogmatic reading of it.<sup>53</sup> In 'Form and Content' West discussed the role of art in a dynamic way and the role of formal changes in both indicating and instantiating the actual process of social change. It was an impressive position straining at the boundaries of contemporary Marxist 'reflection' theory:

The artist not only feels the social energy producing man and his world, as we tried to show in the examination of the sonnet, as far as we took it. He also feels the change in the form of its organisation. Literature gives us not only the sense of the social organism, but of the changing social organism.

Just as in general literature does not use words as given things to describe objects as given things, but expresses through them the life which has made them, so literature does not merely assert the fact or the desirability of the change from one social form to another. That kind of statement necessarily assumes the existence of what is changing. But literature conveys a sense of the subject of the change by showing different phases of the movement of the change. As idiom appeals directly to the bodily activity and not only to reason, so literature gives not the abstract, general formulation of the change, but the actual process of its achievement. (West 1937d: 95)

Alick West believed that in the expression of social change literature 'employs the contrast between the change and the continuity of what changes, the end of the old and its permanence in the new'. This position is considerably more than a pious reiteration of 'the dialectic' and the 'reciprocity' that Stalin was prepared to endorse, it is an attempt to work out the significance of the creative process in a manner that does justice to the complexity and difficulty of the enterprise.

While it is, of course, true that Williams was very unhappy about the employment of notions like instinct and, in the case of Caudwell, of 'genotypes',<sup>54</sup> there is much in these pre-war books

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<sup>53</sup> See the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)* (CPSU 1938: 105-131).

<sup>54</sup> See *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 183).

that is familiar. In their tone, and in their striving to articulate difficult, and almost untheorised relationships, they anticipate some of the concerns of Williams in *Preface to Film, Drama in Performance* and *Culture and Society*. Consequently, it is difficult to believe that they played no part in the development and introduction of ideas like *the structure of feeling* and the *'materiality of culture'* in Williams's oeuvre and in his sustained rejection of the distinction between 'base' and 'superstructure'.

### Constructing An Alternative Tradition

It is evident that Williams could not simply employ the insights of Caudwell or West without an enormous amount of new work and rigorous analysis. Their confusion at times led to a kind of self-contained circularity and to 'idealism' in their conception of an economy of energy, activity and feeling which they thought gave rise to the power to create and recreate the world. For example, West argued:

The energy attached to our basic social experiences is available for the perception – which is an act, not a passive event – of the particular content. It comes alive for us, because for the moment we see, like the writer, with our full social being. The resulting sense of beauty makes us feel the power to create a human world.

The basis of this interpretation of the value of literature is, as already said, Marx's development of romanticism. It attempts to use Marx's work to give material meaning to the ideas of Shelley and Coleridge that a poem and a society are organic in the same way, that relations in society constitute beauty in art.

The relation of literature as art, distinguishable from other literary matter, to the social and economic development that determines all literary production, good, bad and indifferent, is through the fact that the economic basis is not an automatic machine, but living men and women, whose energy has to be organised. Good literature contributes to that organisation and to the changing of it; bad literature consumes its products, and debases them. (West 1937d: 99)

Indeed, this kind of speculation led Williams to observe sourly that it was ‘saying much less than it seems’ (1958a: 276). In *Culture and Society* by citing short passages from the chapter, ‘Form and Content’, and the following chapter, ‘The Relativity of Literary Value’, Williams decided to focus upon the dangers of direct intrusion of political affiliations into criticism arising from West’s position:

From this it is only a step (although West, to do him justice, does not take it, insisting on the reality of aesthetic judgement) to the kind of literary criticism which has made Marxism notorious: ‘Is this work socialist or not in tendency? is it helping forward the most creative movement in society?’ where literature is defined solely in terms of its political affiliations. Marxists, more than anyone else, need to repudiate this kind of end-product, in practice as firmly as in theory. But one can see how a potentially valuable argument is distorted, throughout, by an assumed need to arrive at this kind of conclusion, or at one resembling it. It is a conclusion, moreover, with which there seems no need for Marx to be saddled. (1958a: 276)

It is understandable that Williams emphasised these political dangers at the time and chose to reiterate and underline them in the conclusion to his discussion of Marxism in *Culture and Society*. However, he also chose to inflect his criticisms of the aspirational bent of pre-war Marxist writers in a way that attempted to open a debate on the nature of Marxism:

It is still Marxist to find this ‘the desired, the possible’ in emergent social forces, which are already active and conscious in the social process. But there has been a distinct tendency, in English writers, to find ‘the desired, the possible’ in terms of the ‘inner energy’ of the individual, of which Caudwell wrote. This, while it may be an improvement of Marx, would seem to deny his basic proposition about ‘existence’ and ‘consciousness’. In fact, as we look at the English attempt at a Marxist theory of culture, what we see is an interaction between

Romanticism and Marx, between the idea of culture which is the major English tradition and Marx's brilliant revaluation of it. We have to conclude that the interaction is as yet far from complete. (1958a: 279-280)

In making this point regarding *interaction* Williams is also referring back to a discussion of interaction earlier in the chapter where, by quoting Plekhanov, he was able to emphasise that *by itself* interaction explains nothing. The important matter was to 'ascertain the attributes of the interacting forces' (1958a: 268). Indeed, Williams had set out in 1953 to develop a thorough understanding of one of these interacting elements with his essay, 'The Idea of Culture',<sup>55</sup> and with the publication of his chapter, 'Marxism and Culture', in *Culture and Society* in 1958 he opened work on another of these interacting elements. Despite the deft manner in which he placed distance between himself and Marxism he was able to identify and foreground the important issues concerning the employment of the binary opposition 'base' and 'superstructure' arising from Marx's 'Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* (1859)'. It was a debate that was to continue for many years and Williams sustained its principal terms and the concerns upon which it centred throughout the shifting political circumstances and affiliations in the decades that followed. In 1956 he explained it thus:

In all these points there would seem to be a general inadequacy, among Marxists, in the use of 'culture' as a term. It normally indicates, in their writings, the intellectual and imaginative products of a society; this corresponds with the weak use of 'superstructure'. But it would seem that from their emphasis on the interdependence of all elements of social reality, and from their analytic emphasis on movement and change, Marxists should logically use 'culture' in the sense of a whole way of life, a general social process. The point is not merely verbal, for the emphasis in this latter use would make impossible the mechanical procedures which I have

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<sup>55</sup> Williams (1953a: 239-266). See also (Eliot 1948: 227-243) and Williams's discussion of Eliot's conception of culture as 'a whole way of life' in Williams (1958a: 227-243).

criticized, and would offer a basis for more substantial understanding. The difficulty lies, however, in the terms of Marx's original formulation: if one accepts 'structure' and 'superstructure', not as terms of a suggestive analogy, but as descriptions of reality, the errors naturally follow. Even if the terms are seen as those of an analogy, they need, as I have tried to suggest, amendment. (1958a: 282)

He continued to put distance between himself and what he called, variously, pseudo-Marxists and Party-Marxists and he was prepared to express solidarity with those who had been in the Communist Party and to explain and defend their tardiness in leaving it.<sup>56</sup> Despite considerable pressures in that direction Williams did not become an anti-communist, least of all an anti-Marxist. He was prepared to attack and to defend as he thought occasion and argument demanded. In 1961, for example, he approvingly quotes Caudwell in discussion of the manner in which the body and the environment are in perpetually determining relations; he associated Caudwell's ideas with those of Coleridge when he wrote of 'the primary imagination' as 'the living Power and prime Agent of all human perception . . . a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation' (1961a: 36-37).<sup>57</sup>

### Theory: Williams's Independent Course

The nature and texture of Williams's socialism saturated every aspect of his criticism. It resulted in a set of ideas concerning literature, artistic production in general, and the future of society that I have called the 'aesthetic of

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<sup>56</sup> Williams, because of his high regard for loyalty, continued to be sympathetic to those who valued their membership of the Communist Party. He made this explicit in his essay 'The New Party Line?' for *Essays in Criticism* (1957: 68-76). He repeated these sentiments two years later in 'The New British Left' for *Partisan Review* (1960b: 341-347), and does not appear to have expressed views to the contrary in subsequent years. For an interesting discussion of the complex relationships between the Communist Party and its former members during the nineteen-fifties and sixties see Michael Kenny's essay 'Communism and the New Left' (Kenny: 1995b).

<sup>57</sup> See also (1979b: 127). For an interesting valuation of Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality* against the Caudwell texts favoured by Williams, *Studies in a Dying Culture* and *Further Studies in a Dying Culture*, see (Mulhern 1974: 37-58).

emancipation'. This is not a name that Raymond Williams used to characterise the intention of his work. In Williams's writing the words 'aesthetic' and 'emancipation', and their conjunction, would probably have been the occasion for a storm of qualifying clauses that would have swept away the utility of the phrase. However, it is a phrase that gives coherence to the critical strategies that Williams developed. It has the virtue of not loading them down with theoretical perspectives foreign to their composition, it indicates the inextricable unity he proposed between sensibility and politics, and by combining the word *aesthetic* with the word *emancipation* it perhaps echoes the distinctive conjuncture he staged between *structure* and *feeling*.

Apart from a passing reference in *Keywords* in the entry on 'Aesthetic' Williams does not discuss the work of Alexander Baumgarten or Immanuel Kant. His aesthetic ideas were not concerned with the transcendental. Similarly, references to Adorno, Benjamin and Marcuse are sprinkled lightly across his oeuvre after the mid-sixties never amounting to sustained engagement or serious studies; a less well-known figure like R. G. Collingwood escapes his notice altogether. Karl Marx, Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Bertolt Brecht, Lucien Goldmann and Rudolf Bahro fare somewhat better but recourse to these thinkers is also eclectic. In Williams's work reference to these writers is broadly determined by the need for augmentation, intellectual lustre, or illustration that arose directly within his own analysis rather than in thorough or sustained attempts at explication, critique or even polemic. Terry Eagleton made a similar point when he noted that Williams's deep rootedness in the literary and political heritage of Britain had 'partly closed him to intellectual evolutions elsewhere' (Eagleton 1976: 35).

To put it bluntly, Williams ploughed his own furrow, developed his own analysis and arrived at his own provisional and settled conclusions without much regard to wider intellectual currents.<sup>58</sup>

Consequently, there is in Williams's work no equivalent to *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, (Eagleton 1990) no serious engagement with the European discourse on aesthetic. Indeed,

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<sup>58</sup> For a critical but affirmative discussion of the singularity of Williams's voice see David Simpson's essay, 'Raymond Williams: Feeling for Structures, Voicing "History"' (Simpson 1992: 29-50).

there was at times an almost irascible tone (or perhaps it was an attitude of proletarian *ressentiment*) in his thoughts about European luminaries:

The argument will continue, and in some areas – most notably, I think, his sustained critique of ‘objectified’ capitalism – Lukács will remain an important point of reference. But in another sense that whole phase is ended, or ought to be ended: that movement of high intellectuals, with their own curriculum and preoccupations, towards the labour and democratic movements. Their memory can be honoured as a way of understanding and beginning to reverse the relationship, until ‘the return to everyday life’ is not a categorical conclusion but a hard and contested starting-point. (1983c: 273-4)

Despite this grumpiness he could, however, be open and generous concerning European intellectual influences. In the introduction to *Marxism and Literature* he enthusiastically described his encounter with the work of French, German and Italian communist and radical intellectuals, with Marx’s *Grundrisse* and other newly translated works, during the sixties and early seventies. However, he also made clear that his work, founded on his own detailed practical research and writing, was to be viewed as an integrated whole from the mid-fifties to the early seventies:

To sustain analysis, discussion, and the presentation of new or modified theoretical positions, I have had to keep the book in a primarily theoretical dimension. In many quarters this will be well enough understood, and even welcomed. But I ought to say, knowing the strength of other styles of work, and in relation especially to many of my English readers, that while this book is almost wholly theoretical, *every position in it was developed from the detailed practical work that I have previously undertaken*, and from the consequent interaction with other, including implicit, modes of theoretical assumption and argument. I am perhaps more conscious than anyone of the need to give detailed examples to clarify some of the less familiar concepts, but, on the one hand, this book is intended as in

some respects a starting-point for new work, and, on the other hand, some of the examples I would offer are already written in earlier books. Thus anyone who wants to know what I ‘really, practically’ mean by certain concepts can look, to take some leading instances at the exemplification of signs and notations in *Drama in Performance*; of conventions in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*; of structures of feeling in *Modern Tragedy*, *The Country and the City*, and *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*; of traditions, institutions and formations, and of the dominant, the residual, and the emergent in parts of *Culture and Society* and in the second part of *The Long Revolution*; and of material cultural production in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. I would now write some of these examples differently, from a more developed theoretical position and with the advantage of a more extended and a more consistent vocabulary (the latter itself exemplified in *Keywords*). But the examples need to be mentioned, as a reminder that this book is not a separated work of theory; it is an argument based on what I have learned from all that previous work, set into a new and conscious relation with Marxism. [My Emphasis] (1977a: 6)

The turbulent decade, 1965-1975, certainly resulted in an encounter between Williams and European theoretical writing and with currents of Marxism with which he had hitherto been unfamiliar.<sup>59</sup> John Higgins in his book, *Raymond Williams, Literature, Marxism and cultural materialism*, echoed Eagleton’s

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<sup>59</sup> For reference to his discovery of Lukács and Goldmann during the sixties see (Williams 1971a: 20). Antonio Gramsci is not mentioned in this essay of 1971 as Williams does not engage with Gramsci’s work until later in the 1970s. Although six volumes of his works were published in Italian in Turin between 1948 and 1951, an English translation of some of his works, *The Modern Prince and other Essays*, translated and edited by Louis Marks, (London: Lawrence and Wishart) was not published until 1957. It took several more years for discussion of Gramsci’s writing to become widespread among new left intellectuals. The influential, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London: Lawrence and Wishart, was not published until 1971.

observation when he described Williams's imperturbable response to European influence in the following manner:

Though he is now able to refer to a European-wide range of work in what he termed 'Marxism's alternative tradition', what is most notable is the way the arguments of this tradition are seen as supporting Williams's own emphases on the importance of culture to social and political reproduction, with all the strengths and weakness of that emphasis. (Higgins 1999: 122)

These foreign influences did not disturb Williams's empirical procedure of doing the practical work and then deriving his theories and theoretical modifications from it. He was sanguine about the relationship between his work and those of people who might be regarded as having a more precisely articulated mode of inquiry or argument, or indeed a more theoretically sophisticated outlook. He adopted a kind of *balance of respective weaknesses* view, generously seeing the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of work. Comparing his style of work with that of Lucien Goldmann he said:

Looking at our work it could be said that we lacked a centre, in any developed philosophy or sociology. Looking at his work— and for all his differences he was representative of the whole other tradition – it could be said that he had a received centre, at the level of reasoning, before the full contact with substance began. (1971a: 22)

Williams could sustain this relaxed empiricism because a more dynamic interaction between highly articulated theoretical positions and the modalities and assumptions of his practical enquiries were not, given his fixed aesthetic commitments, deemed necessary. Williams certainly did not share Perry Anderson's angry dismay at 'The Absent Centre': the 'mediocrity and wizened provincialism' of intellectual life in England (Anderson 1968: 3-57). He evidently felt at home within the

intellectual habits and assumptions, if not the institutional structures, of ‘our’ national tradition.<sup>60</sup>

### Marxism Reasserted

Williams had not ‘broken from Marxism’ in the years 1941-1945. He had left the Communist Party some time in 1941 and thereafter refused the Party’s guidance in literary and political matters.<sup>61</sup> Neither did he respect the apostolic succession from Marx running through Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin, and Stalin to the Communist Party’s official literary and cultural journals. Consequently, it is unsurprising that he should react with indifference to those new claimants of Marxist orthodoxy in the sixties and seventies who, incidentally, with little or no connection with working class organisations in Britain, had a less secure grasp on the mantle of orthodoxy than their predecessors. He made his attitude clear in 1971 when he explained his development in the sixties in the following manner:

This being so, it is easy to imagine my feelings when I discovered an active and developed Marxist theory, in the work of Lukács and Goldmann, which was exploring many of the same areas with many of the same concepts, but also with others in a quite different range. The fact that

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<sup>60</sup> See ‘The Peculiarities of the English’, (Thompson 1965) and ‘The Poverty of Theory: or An Orrery of Errors’, (Thompson, 1978). This relaxed approach towards empiricism and a general suspicion of theory was shared from the left to the right. Roger Scruton remarked in 1985: ‘Every reader of *The Poverty of Theory* must feel grateful for the existence of a left-wing thinker who is determined to retain both common sense and intellectual honesty.’ (Scruton 1985: 15) Williams shared Thompson’s hostility to what he always called ‘abstraction’ and, although always less irate than Thompson on the matter, he did not value the theoretical procedures of continental Marxists. Williams’s ease with the garden variety of English empiricism (rather than the coherent philosophical outlook) can be extended to his sanguine approach to matters of race and gender and sexuality, and to his quietism on the war in Ireland (1972e: 163-167; 1972f: 168; 1983b: 194-5). These issues did not in any active sense inform his view of socialism or influence his cultural or political agenda.

<sup>61</sup> Williams did not recollect ‘leaving’ the Communist Party. However, he was an active member during 1939 and 1940 and continued to think of himself as a Communist throughout the War. But his membership did not survive his entry into the army in 1941 — it was apparently never explained to him that it was possible to maintain active Party membership in the army (1979b: 53-54).

I learned simultaneously that it had been denounced as heretical, that it was a return to Left Hegelianism, left-bourgeois idealism, and so on, did not, I am afraid, detain me. If you're not in a church you're not worried about heresies; it is only (but it is often) the most routinized Marxism, or the most idealist revolutionism, which projects that kind of authoritative, believing, formation. The only serious criterion was actual theory and practice. (1971a: 20)<sup>62</sup>

The political shifts indicated by the dismay and disappointment at the character of Harold Wilson's government led to the formation of the May Day Manifesto Committee in 1966. The following year the *New Left May Day Manifesto* was published by 'a group of socialist workers, writers and teachers' and was endorsed by 66 named individuals from the new left. It was a list crowded with the names of professional writers and academics in which 'workers' were, perhaps inevitably, inconspicuous. Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams and Edward Thompson edited it. This was followed by an expanded version edited by Raymond Williams and published as a Penguin Special under the title, *May Day Manifesto 1968*. In both documents the most damning analysis of Labour policy was followed by a reticence characteristic of the British left actually to endorse a serious break from the old Labour Party. They threw down the gauntlet:

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<sup>62</sup> These assertions concerning the nature of Williams's uncertain and tenuous relationship with Marxism were to continue for some years. Terry Eagleton argued that 'experience' had a special role in Williams's thinking; that it supplied 'at once' its formidable power' and its 'drastic limitation', leading to 'Left-Leavisism' and much else that undermined the development of 'a Marxist aesthetics' (Eagleton 1976: 22-44). In 1991 Francis Mulhern was more subtle when he said of Williams: 'Expressly at odds with the perceived positivism of historical-materialist tradition and unconcerned to claim the title of Marxist, deeply attentive to Romantic and other ethical lineages of social criticism and particularly engaged with the positions of F. R. Leavis, Williams's earlier writings are indeed a part of this mid-century constellation Adorno, Sartre, Goldmann, et.al.. But the ulterior logic of his work led beyond its common terms, as was to become apparent in the new phase, whose opening may be marked by the symbolic date of 1968.' (Mulhern 1992: 11-12)

The purpose of any new Left must be to end this compromise. We therefore declare our intention to end the system of consensus politics, by drawing the political line where it actually is, rather than where it might be thought convenient for elections or traditional descriptions. (Hall 1967:41)

However, the line was not drawn all that clearly, plenty of room was left for compromise and fudge:

In this necessary process, we mean, like our opponents, to keep our options open. The existing party structure is under great strain, and the pressures can be expected to increase. We do not intend to make any premature move, which would isolate the Left, or confuse its actual and potential supporters. At the same time, we mean what we say when we declare an end to tactics and to allegiances which are wholly enclosed within traditional organisational forms. If our analysis is right, then socialists must make their voices heard, again and again, not only in committee rooms and in conference halls, but among the growing majority of the people who feel no commitment to these forms. (Hall 1967: 43)

The attitude towards the Labour Party became ever more indistinct and elliptical in the 1968 edition edited by Williams.<sup>63</sup> The Labour Party represented compromise between left and right; it was figured as an ersatz kind of coalition between the 'traditional power structure' and those committed to 'working class objectives' (1968b: 156). It was argued that the resulting consensus was 'built around the policies of the leadership', and:

At some critical points, as the consensus forms, the influence of the Left can be felt; assurances, at least, have to be given. But a consensus of that kind, with a bureaucratic machine behind the leadership, is very much easier to run than any real coalition. The final power, in negotiation, would be of withdrawing from the coalition, and thus affecting its strength. But when the machine,

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<sup>63</sup> See §45 entitled 'The Labour Party' (1968b: 155-161).

effectively, is the whole party, there is nowhere to go but out of the party, even if the policy you stick on is that approved by the majority in a constituency or at conference. Within the system, that kind of threat, which in a real coalition would be effective, can seem a kind of suicide; indeed it is much more often offered as an option by opponents than by friends . . . .

In so intractable a problem, with so much at stake, there is of course no easy answer. But the only possibility of an answer comes from telling the truth: describing the incorporation, in terms of policy and of procedures; refusing those spurts of temporary confidence which would show it other than it is; and then, in that mood, following the argument through, taking the necessary action, wherever it leads. (1968b: 161)

This cautious truth telling was overtaken by the imaginative impact among the British left of events in Paris, Prague, Saigon, Hue, and Da Nang. Yet, the recoil from what Williams had dubbed, revolutionism, inherent in the perspective outlined by both the manifestos was accompanied among large numbers of young people on the left by a corresponding adoption of revolutionary phraseology and a commitment to the reworking of communist theory. It is in these circumstances that Williams, genuinely appalled and angered by mainstream Labour politicians and the return of the Tories to government in 1970, moves to associate himself more firmly with Marxism. In 1972 he explained the tension between the new popularity of Marxism and his own student memory of it thus:

In the student generation of the last ten years there has been an active rediscovery of Marxism, but this has been little understood by their elders: for many reasons, social and political, but in part at least because most of their interested elders already know, or think they know, what Marxism is, from memories of the thirties. (1972c: 375)<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> For discussion of Williams's phrase 'Marxism's Alternative Tradition' see, *Raymond Williams*, (Higgins 1999: 110-112).

This was not ‘political opportunism’ in its corrupt or venal sense. However, Williams did take the opportunity provided by the emergence of Marxism among students and others on the new left to engage more directly with Marxist theory. This Marxism had an entirely different register from the Marxism defined by Stalin’s network of communist parties and it enabled Williams to develop his attitude to Marxism in a more sustained manner throughout the seventies. At the close of the decade he remembered:

I notice it so clearly looking back – that when I referred to this or that Marxist position, sometimes fairly and sometimes unfairly, sometimes adequately and sometimes inadequately, I was talking about the people and ideas I first focussed as Marxism when I was a student. That specific kind of Marxist milieu, which among other things did dismiss rural life, no longer exists today. It was a deficiency of my own generation that the amount of classical Marxism it actually knew was relatively small; it was also, as it happened, selected from what to me are now often the least important parts of the tradition. This is no excuse, but it is an explanation. The modifications in the intellectual milieu in England over the last ten years have been of decisive importance to me. For now I wouldn’t want to write on any question without tracing the history of it in Marxist thought and seeing where I stood in relation to that. (1979b: 316)

With this characteristic belief in his own powers Williams reiterated and developed the ideas that he had first raised in the mid-fifties. In the essays ‘Literature and Sociology’ (1971a) and ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’ (1973b), and in his book, *Marxism and Literature* (1977a), he once again stressed the need for totality and was able to deploy his arguments with great confidence against those who favoured forms of Marxism in which linguistic and economic structures were held to be determining, confining cultural possibilities and circumscribing the range of conscious social action available to individual men and women and to the communities in which they lived:

As with ‘determination’, so ‘overdetermination’ can be abstracted to a *structure* (symptom), which then, in complex ways, ‘develops’ (forms, holds, breaks down) by the laws of its internal structural relations. As a form of analysis this is often effective, but in its isolation of the structure it can shift attention from the real location of all practice and practical consciousness: ‘the practical activity. . . the practical process of development of men’. Any categorical objectification of determined or overdetermined structures is a repetition of the basic error of ‘economism’ at a more serious level, since it now offers to subsume (at times with a certain arrogance) all lived, practical and unevenly formed and formative experience. (1977a: 88-89)

The rebarbative prose employed in *Marxism and Literature* is not the product of uncertainty or confusion; it is used in the interests of both completeness and brevity. This can be seen from the tight structure of the book, which has barely 200 pages. It is divided into three parts: Basic Concepts, Cultural Theory, Literary Theory and the reader is forced-marched through the relevant concepts, theories, forms and practices section by section. The distinction between ‘Base’ and ‘Superstructure’ is effaced in the declaration of their indissoluble unity in the process of production, political and cultural activity, and in consciousness. The ‘productive forces’ are restored to their fullness: not only the piano is *produced*, so also is the music. Williams’s entire project is codified in terms he thought suitable for the theory-addicted young in a way that boldly challenged what he regarded as the more pessimistic aspects of structuralism. At the end of the process we are left in no doubt that the self-activity of mankind and the capacity of men and women to make and remake their world lies at the centre of Williams’s view of socialism and his view of Marxism. The two, if not synonymous, are never allowed to breathe separately:

Creative practice is thus of many kinds. It is already, and actively, our practical consciousness. When it becomes struggle – the active struggle for new consciousness through new relationships that is the ineradicable emphasis of the Marxist sense of self-

creation – it can take many forms. It can be the long and difficult remaking of an inherited (determined) practical consciousness: a process often described as development but in practice a struggle at the roots of the mind – not casting off an ideology, or learning phrases about it, but confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self and in the hard practical substance of effective and continuing relationships. It can be more evident practice: the reproduction and illustration of hitherto excluded and subordinated models; the embodiment and performance of known but excluded and subordinated experiences and relationships; the articulation and formation of latent, momentary, and newly possible consciousness. (1977a: 212)<sup>65</sup>

Williams did not employ Marxist theory to analyse the existing or prevailing relations in society and he was not concerned if a particular insight or innovation threatened the theoretical coherence of Marxism in any systemic sense. His approach to Marxist theory was entirely practical. If the offerings of Althusser or Lukács or Goldmann did not assist in the creation of a clear view of the potential of people for positive social action then their arguments had to be discarded or reworked and re-interpreted in a manner more congenial to expressions of hope regarding the capacity for agency residing in the people and their communities. In 1972 he explained his procedure thus:

I have put these ideas in my own words. At some point, I know, Goldmann would have wanted to put them differently – has already put them differently, in *The Hidden God*, in *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, in another tradition and language. But this difference is less important than the ideas themselves. Goldmann's emphasis on form goes along with an emphasis on what he called 'the transindividual subject': a way of describing what I see as the social process of creation, in many

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<sup>65</sup> See John Higgins's interesting discussion of *Marxism and Literature*, in Chapter 6 of his *Raymond Williams*, 'Towards a cultural materialism 1977-81', (Higgins 1999:125-144). For a succinct expression of the meaning and reach of Williams's cultural materialism see Francis Mulhern's 'Introducing Raymond Williams' (Mulhern 1989: 3-9).

activities from art to institutions, in which we can't properly speak of individual and society, individual and class, in separate ways, as if these were two abstractions confront each other: Individual and Society; Individual or Society.

In most things that matter the process of our living is beyond these abstractions. We are true subjects, bearers of consciousness, making as well as reflecting our society, and we can act together, as ourselves, or as groups against other groups, in decisive ways: often most deeply in ourselves when we are acting, thinking, feeling with others. What we can make is ours and yet goes beyond us, as indeed it often preceded us: a form we have made, often not knowing we were making it, often in temporary isolation, until others see what we have done. (1972c: 376)

By translating the translations into his own prose, identifying their essential meaning, and supplying his preferred emphasis, Williams was able to employ much contemporary Marxist thought for the promotion of his own critical and political enterprise. And, he remained ambivalent in his attitude towards the words 'Marx' and 'Marxism' as a flag or badge of affiliation (1975a: 65-6).<sup>66</sup>

As always Williams preferred his own solution to the problems presented by political affiliation and identification. However, he never settled for the anodyne vagaries and hopes of more recent socialists;<sup>67</sup> hopes which looked forward to developments 'through which the working classes will

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<sup>66</sup> See also Dennis Dworkin's discussion of Williams's development in relation to Marxism and to the work of Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson and Stuart Hall from the perspective of cultural studies in his essay 'Cultural Studies and the Crisis in British Radical Thought' (Dworkin: 1993).

<sup>67</sup> For example, the writers of the Preface to the *Socialist Register 1998*, figure the appeal of communism as an appeal for the necessity of a 'democratic and egalitarian social order' without reference to the struggle for working class power: 'The fact that this 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the Communist Manifesto falls within less than a decade of the collapse of Communism with a capital 'C', and of the parties associated with it, in no way diminishes the appeal and necessity of a cooperative, democratic and egalitarian social order. This is what might be called communism with a small 'c', and it poses and will always pose a threat to capitalism.' (Panitch/Leys 1998: vii)

increasingly acquire a broad emancipatory outlook' enabling them to 'fully realise' their 'potential power' (Panitch/Leys 1998: 42).<sup>68</sup> Williams was more explicit: the working class retained its central, even its determining, role. Indeed, he had his own creed in which the principal tenets of twentieth century communism concerning the role of the working class in the struggle for socialism were reshaped and reinserted into the revolutionary process in a way that radically effaced orthodox distinctions between 'gradualism' and 'revolutionism'.

I believe in the necessary economic struggle of the organized working class. I believe that this is still the most creative activity in our society, as I indicated years ago in calling the great working-class institutions creative cultural achievements, as well as the indispensable first means of political struggle. I believe that it is not necessary to abandon a parliamentary perspective as a matter of principle, but as a matter of practice I am quite sure that we have to begin to look beyond it. For reasons that I described in *The Long Revolution* and again in *The May Day Manifesto* I think that no foreseeable parliamentary majority will inaugurate socialism unless there is a quite different kind of political activity supporting it, activity which is quite outside the scope or the perspective of the British Labour Party or of any other likely candidate for that kind of office. Such activity involves the most active elements of community politics, local campaigning, specialized interest campaigning: all the things that were the real achievements of the politics

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<sup>68</sup> It is interesting to note the limited and anachronistic conception of culture with which Panitch and Leys sentimentally conclude their essay, 'The Political Legacy of the Manifesto'. Here they recommend emulation of the course taken by the German Workers' Educational Society founded in London during the 1840s: "We could do worse today than emulate their efforts, as advertised in one of the Society's posters:

The main principle of the Society is that men can only come to liberty and self-consciousness by cultivating their intellectual faculties. Consequently, all the evening meetings are devoted to instruction. One evening English is taught, on another, geography, on a third history, on the fourth drawing and physics, on a fifth, singing, on a sixth, dancing and on the seventh communist politics." (Panitch/Leys 1998: 43)

of the sixties and that are still notably active. But finally, for it is the sphere in which I am most closely involved, I know that there is a profoundly necessary job to do in relation to the processes of the cultural hegemony itself. I believe that the system of meanings and values which a capitalist society has generated has to be defeated in general and in detail by the most sustained kinds of intellectual and educational work. This is a cultural process which I called 'the long revolution' and in calling it 'the long revolution' I meant that it was a genuine struggle which was part of the necessary battles of democracy and of economic victory for the organized working class. (1975a: 75-6)

By conceiving of the *long revolution* as a process in which the sustained struggle against the ideological hegemony of capital took place Williams was able to situate cultural struggle at the heart of the striving for proletarian power.

## Chapter Three: Drama, Context and History

### The Time of Leavis & Bateson

The importance of social environment and of historical conditions in the formation of literature and in other aspects of cultural production had been widely recognised during the twenties and thirties by a range of different non-Marxist critics, including Middleton Murry, L. C. Knights, and M. C. Bradbrook. However, during the late forties and early fifties ‘the retreat from politics’, and most importantly a retreat from historicising literary texts, and the focus upon formal and technical concerns at the expense of judgement and evaluation created unpromising conditions for a man of Williams’s background, interests and commitments. He was acutely aware of working in a critical context and milieu that distrusted focus upon the ‘social dimension of art’; he knew that it was often feared that evaluation of poetry or drama or fiction would come to rest upon extra-literary factors. Consequently, he had a lively appreciation of the difficulties inherent in deploying critical terms in a way that would not violate the complexity and specificity of a work under consideration and yet would facilitate evaluation of it with due regard to its social timbre and the political and historical conditions of its production.

In 1979 Francis Mulhern described the critical period in which Williams was developing the structure of feeling, and the ideas figured by the phrase, in a manner which gives some indication of the scale of the difficulties with which Williams was faced:

The precepts embodied in *Scrutiny’s* critical practice had as a rule been affirmed in polemical disagreement with two complementary deformations of ‘genuine’ literary criticism: one, the positivist concern with literary-historical ‘fact’, in which the question of value was either disregarded or spuriously deferred; the other, the imposition of aprioristic ‘systems’ of analysis and judgment whereby ‘first-hand response’ was stifled by ‘abstraction’. This pattern of argument persisted into the later forties and early fifties, but with largely altered

contents. The old antagonists of the thirties were no longer significant presences in English criticism: all but the most conservative exponents of traditional literary scholarship had reached some kind of accommodation with the ‘critical revolution’, which was now a full generation in the past; and interest in Marxist criticism was now confined to a dwindling and increasingly isolated minority of intellectuals. Their successors in the post-war period were the unwontedly technical forms of theory and ‘explication’ made current by the American New Critics, and the doctrinally-motivated criticism of Christian Discrimination. (Mulhern 1979: 251)<sup>69</sup>

It was in this context that any use of the notion of ‘social context’ provoked exhaustive attention from F. R. Leavis who observed in 1953 ‘that ‘social’ is an insidious word’ (Leavis 1953a: 295); ‘context’ did not fare any better. This was during the course of an attack upon F. W. Bateson’s article, ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’. Leavis made his case with considerable clarity:

The seriousness with which he takes his ‘social context’ as a fact, determinate and determining, is complete. ‘It is to be noted’, he tells us, ‘that the culminating desideratum, the final criterion of correctness, is the awareness of the appropriate social context.’ He goes on:

The discipline of contextual reading, as defined and illustrated in the preceding paragraphs, should result in the reconstruction of a human situation that is demonstrably implicit in the particular literary work under discussion. Within the limits of human fallibility, the interpretation will be *right*. But the process provides no guarantee, of course, that the reader’s response to the essential

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<sup>69</sup> Mulhern also notes: “‘The return of religion as a grouping-force of novelists and critics’ was mentioned by a reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* as one of the defining features of English literary culture in the later forties; others were a retreat from politics and ‘the assimilation and forgetting of Freud’ (‘Review of Reviews,’ January 8, 1949, p. 32).” (Mulhern 1979: 251 n.2)

drama, however correctly that is reconstructed, will be equally correct.

I confess that I don't know what this means; but Mr Bateson would seem to be suggesting that one may reconstruct the 'essential drama' of a poem correctly without responding to it correctly; that the taking possession of it is independent of valuing. That is an error of Mr Bateson's which I remember to have corrected some eighteen years ago. He insists, however, that 'the question of values must not be excluded'. (Leavis 1953a: 294)

Leavis triumphantly notes, that despite Bateson's imperfect grasp of Leavis's point and the resulting danger of backsliding, Bateson has had to comply with his master's injunctions:

I am glad that Mr Bateson took the point. He sums up a discussion thus (*Essays in Criticism*, April 1953, p. 235):

'And the moral? It is, I suppose, that a poem cannot in fact be discussed at any level – above the bibliographical at any rate – unless it has first been read critically. Other people's criticism won't do instead.'

This is what I told him. I regret to have to say that it is wholly characteristic of his work, in its relation to what has appeared in *Scrutiny*, that his grasp of a point he has in a way taken should be so imperfect. (Leavis 1953a: 294 f.n.1)

The temper of these times is further revealed by the tone of Bateson's reply, which he opens with an explanation of the difficulties under which he wrote his offending piece during his stay 'in a public ward while recovering from an operation' which he suggested accounted for the 'passages in it that are ill considered or clumsily expressed' (Bateson 1953: 303).<sup>70</sup> This acknowledgement of difficulty and error, which he reiterates at

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<sup>70</sup> For a detailed account of the milieu in which Bateson worked through the thirties, forties, and fifties, see Brian Doyle's *English & Englishness* (Doyle 1989: 68-111).

the close of his reply, was evidently part of an elaborate courtesy in which Bateson sought to smooth ruffled feathers rather than concede any ground that he considered vital to his argument:

My mistake, according to Dr Leavis, is that by introducing this notion of context I am abandoning ‘something determinate – something indubitably *there*’ for something indeterminate. ‘The poem’, he says, ‘is a determinate thing; it is *there*’, whereas ‘there is nothing to correspond – nothing answering to Mr Bateson’s “social context” that can be set over against the poem, or induced to establish itself round it as a kind of framework’. Dr Leavis does not explain, however, in what sense the poem is *there* (wherever *there* is). I imagine he must mean that the poem, as we meet it on the printed page, consists of certain specific words arranged in a certain determinate order. But strictly speaking, of course, there is nothing *there*, nothing objectively apprehensible, except a number of conventional black marks. The meanings of the words, and therefore *a fortiori* the meaning of the whole poem, are emphatically not *there*. To discover their meaning we have to ask what they meant to their author and his original readers, and if we are to recover their full meaning, the connotations as well as the denotations, we shall often find ourselves committed to precisely those stylistic, intellectual and social explorations that Dr Leavis now deplors. There is no alternative – *except to invent the meanings ourselves*. Dr Leavis is in fact opening the door to sheer subjectivism. The degree and intensity of the exploration will naturally depend upon the remoteness of the particular poem from ourselves, but some contextual readjustment is inevitable all the time, even in reading a contemporary. I was trying in my article to analyse this process of adjustment. (Bateson 1953: 307)

Leavis’s response was simply to assert the correctness of his original argument, albeit in meticulous detail, and to firmly reject Bateson’s elaborate courtesies:

The apologies with which he incongruously ends his rejoinder are wholly out of place. There is no danger, I

assure him, of my being hurt, and if I have found his criticisms deplorable, it is not because they are 'unfair', or damaging to *me*. (Leavis 1953b: 311)

### The Structure of Feeling

It was in this critical climate that Williams had to find a means of expressing the significance of social relationships in the constitution of the experience of a work of art, and in the experience that the successful artist reproduces, in a richer, more rounded manner, than 'context' or 'social context' could convey. He was, in fact, striving for a figure that could do service for the word *sensibility* and, simultaneously, reposition it so as to be able to encapsulate a total response to a historically specific matrix of social experiences, ideas, thoughts and feelings. He thought that the use of the word *sensibility* had become 'equivalent to the formation of a particular mind: a whole activity, a whole way of perceiving and responding' which could not 'be reduced to either 'thought' or feeling' (1976a: 282-3).

However, *sensibility* had retained its associations with *taste* and *cultivation* and the assertion of the personal qualities of cultural and emotional refinement as evident and unexamined social facts. But he needed the other dimensions of the word including the sense of an *organised* response to experience. It is this that necessitates the pairing of 'structure' with 'feeling', because in linking structure with feeling he was able to employ the sense of an elusive, yet discoverable, organisation of feeling, which extended beyond the merely personal aspect of feeling. This was a use of structure that, Williams thought, arose in the shift in linguistics from historical and comparative studies to work focused upon internal analysis of languages. This use of structure and structural presented difficulties and presaged confusions. However, the word structure, he noted, could be applied to 'deep internal relations, discoverable only by special kinds of observation and analysis.' He explained the problem thus:

Structure was preferred to *process* because it emphasized a particular and complex organization of relations, often at very deep levels. But what were being studied were nevertheless living processes, while structure, characteristically, from its uses in building and

engineering, and in anatomy, physiology and botany, expressed something relatively fixed and permanent, even hard.

However,

The intensive development of notions of structure in physics, though in themselves demonstrating the difference between *static* and *dynamic* structures, added to the sense of deep internal relations, discoverable only by special kinds of observation and analysis. (1976a: 303)

It was this sense of structure – as a *dynamic form of organisation* – that Williams wanted to link with feeling to produce a figure capable of taking sensibility beyond its associations with the refinement of individuals possessed of superior kinds of emotional responses.

In 1954 when Williams first introduced the phrase structure of feeling in *Preface to Film*<sup>71</sup> he was precise about the meaning he attached to the term. He did not, at this time, associate it with the stance of particular individuals, except insofar as their work or outlook could be said to realise some major change in the way human beings understood themselves and their fundamental relationships with each other, with nature, the firmament, and with God. He argued that the shift from the pattern of early miracle plays, in which individual character is said to barely exist to ‘the wholly different and more complex pattern of an Elizabethan tragedy, in which individual character, in a particular sense, can be the primary stress’, were shifts in conventions which revealed radical changes in the structure of feeling (1954b: 22). Similarly, in the course of a brief discussion in which he contrasted the conventions of the religious drama of the ancient Greeks with those of modern naturalism Williams detected the beginnings of analytical awareness of changes in dramatic conventions which exposed a major shift concerning the gods, God, and the secular, in the writings of Ibsen and Strindberg, which he thought were of fundamental importance because, ‘All changes in the methods of an art like the drama are related,

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<sup>71</sup> Williams refers to the ‘fundamental pattern’ of artworks in *Reading and Criticism* (1950: 74), although it is a moot point whether this is an embryonic form of ‘structure of feeling’. See John Higgins’s discussion of Williams’s early use of ‘structure or pattern’ as the forerunner of ‘structure of feeling’ (Higgins 1999: 19).

essentially, to changes in man's radical structure of feeling.' (1954b: 23)

Such changes of course did not have to be fully conscious or general. They might take root initially only among a small minority, they might be attributed to purely personal originality on the part of the artist or artists involved, but if they genuinely registered real changes in the structure of feeling, they would eventually displace existing conventions and would themselves become the new standard for new conventions.

Consequently, Williams did not believe that words like 'ideas' or phrases like 'general life' were adequate to the task of grasping the role and force of the *relatedness* or consonance of all the products and practices of a given period. He wanted to be able to refer to that element of a culture for which there is no external counterpart. The element, which after everything else has been analysed and accounted for in a particular period, remains ungraspable and unrealisable except through the experience of the work of art as a whole.

This ambition was undermined by the attempt to employ this figure in a manner in which it was detached from a precise enquiry into the nature of what exactly it was that he was seeking to realise: the sensibility of a well-defined historical period. Although, as he had understandably said, it was outside the function of his short essay in *Preface to Film* to chart the detailed changes in convention that revealed profound shifts in the structure of feeling he had not succeeded in doing this in *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, and he did not establish the configuration of the structure of feeling or register the changes realised in the works discussed in subsequent editions, or in *Drama in Performance*.

In 1968 in the introduction to *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* Williams acknowledged the difficulty caused by the instability of terms and expressions in his writing on drama over the preceding twenty years. He explained that he had 'become more aware of the theoretical problems', and of the 'changing definitions' associated with the ideas and the vocabulary with which he had developed the studies that made up the book (1968a: 2). He did not, however, discuss in any detail how terms had changed or how his use of them had altered, but he did clarify what he now meant by them. Of structure of feeling he said:

In pointing to what a particular man has done, in a particular style, we are often in the position of learning what that style is, what it is capable of doing. The individual dramatist has done this, yet what he has done is part of what we then know about a general period or style.

It is to explore this essential relationship that I use the term 'structure of feeling'. What I am seeking to describe is the continuity of experience from a particular work, through its particular form, to its recognition as a general form, and then the relation of this general form to a period. (1968a: 9)

This passage is then followed by a lengthy paragraph, which is for the most part, culled from *Preface to Film*. However, he adds some new comments explaining that the element left after close analysis of a work – for which there is no external counterpart – is the structure of feeling and that:

It is as firm and definite as 'structure' suggests, yet it is based in the deepest and often least tangible elements of our experience. It is a way of responding to a particular world which in practice is not felt as one way among others – a conscious 'way' – but is, in experience, the only way possible. Its means, its elements, are not propositions or techniques; they are embodied, related feelings. In the same sense, it is accessible to others – not by formal argument or by professional skills, on their own, but by direct experience – a form and a meaning, a feeling and a rhythm – in the work of art, the play, as a whole. (1968a: 10)

Williams goes on to explain that it is easier to see this structure in the drama of the past than it is to distinguish it while it is still being lived. However:

It is even possible, though very difficult even by comparison with the analysis of past structures, to begin to see this contemporary structure directly, rather than only in the power of particular works. Many such expositions are too early, too superficial or too rigid, but it remains true that discovery of actual contemporary structures of

feeling (usually masked by their immediate and better recognized predecessors) is the most important kind of attention to the art and society of one's own time.

The artist's importance, in relation to the structure of feeling, has to do above all with the fact that it is a *structure*: not an unformed flux of new responses, interests and perceptions, but a formation of these into a new way of seeing ourselves and our world. Such a formation is the purpose of all authentic contemporary activity, and its successes occur in fields other than art. But the artist, by the character of his work, is directly involved with just this process, from the beginning. He can only work at all as such formations become available, usually as a personal discovery and then a scatter of personal discoveries and then the manner of work of a generation. What this means, in practice, is the making of new conventions, new forms. (1968a: 11)

So, the structure of feeling can be apprehended both in particular works and more generally. Williams continues:

It is in this respect, finally, that I see the usefulness of 'structure of feeling' as a critical term. For it directs our attention, in practical ways, to a kind of analysis which is at once concerned with particular forms and the elements of general forms. (1968a: 11)

He also acknowledged the dimension added to this idea of the relationship of the particular to the general by the proliferation of different structures of feeling in the twentieth century. These Williams referred to as 'alternative structures'. Identification of these alternative structures was rendered necessary because of the ways in which the works of numerous influential dramatists disrupted Williams's observation of 'a general historical development, from Ibsen to Brecht, from dramatic naturalism to dramatic expressionism' (1968a: 13-14).

From Yeats's 'failure to understand the real history of Ibsen's dramatic development' (1968a: 124) to Sean O'Casey's 'structure of feeling of the self-exile' (1968a: 166); and, from Eliot's regard for God to Harold Pinter's 'familiar' structure of feeling with its 'precarious hold on reality' (1968a: 371),

Williams was certain that important choices had to be made between these 'alternative structures'. Because, although it was the case that despair, contempt, illusion, alienation and rejection had become an orthodoxy along with the preoccupation with violence and degradation that had permeated the theatre and commercial entertainment there was always, in this history of crisis, a possibility for humane values and the passion for truth which inspired great naturalist drama to assume new forms. Indeed:

It is then necessary to emphasize the difficult relation between what are not only historical but socially alternative structures of feeling, and the consequently complex relations between conventions, theatrical methods and audiences. My essential argument is on the relations between a structure of feeling and a convention: the first critical task is always that necessary analysis. This brings to our attention, as the first kind of fact, problems of form and method *which reveal themselves, ultimately, as problems of content and viewpoint*. To clarify these relations is a main critical purpose, for it is then possible to see the choice between structures of feeling, and the consequent choice of conventions, as a substantial and still active history and experience, rather than a random variation of viewpoints and styles. [My Emphasis] (1968a: 396)

### **A Kaleidoscope for Feeling**

**T**he structure of feeling continued to function for Williams in four different ways: firstly, as a means of registering epochal shifts in sensibility, secondly, as a way of identifying and naming the sensibility of a particular period that could not be encompassed by the sum of its constituent elements, thirdly, as a means of recognising the contention between different values and emotional responses within the development of modern drama, and finally, as a means of detecting and synthesising the social texture of the biography, views and aspirations which informed the work of particular artists.

The four aspects of the structure of feeling were discerned in two different ways: firstly through changes in convention

registered by formal innovation, secondly, through analysis of the problems presented by the content and viewpoint of particular works.

Williams attempted to use the structure of feeling as a kaleidoscope for registering the shifting patterns of feeling, which he thought, were uniquely revealed by close analysis of works of art. Consequently, his use of the figure cannot be properly understood by reference to any one of its aspects or to either of the means by which he sought to detect the metamorphosis of the structure of feeling from one period or sensibility to another.

The structure of feeling retained its role of figuring large epochal changes between Medieval Mystery plays and Elizabethan tragedy, or, for example, the change between renaissance and modern drama. It was also used to trace movements within modern drama, and to figure both the outlook of individual dramatists, and the work of those associated in particular trends or movements.

The structure of feeling could also stand for that element left after close analysis of a work for which there was no external counterpart. Simultaneously, the structure of feeling could be seen, through an analysis of convention that was capable of bringing to the fore problems of form and method, which in turn revealed problems of content and viewpoint. And, despite Williams's manifest desire to refuse priority to any one of the aspects of the structure the feeling, it was these 'problems of content of viewpoint' that always provided Williams with a ground upon which to assess drama, poems and novels 'ultimately' by how they stood in relation to the positive values of social solidarity and progress and perhaps, more subtly, how they stood in relation to exposing, in a positive manner, the contradictions between realisable aspirations and a thwarting bourgeois environment.<sup>72</sup>

Consequently, structure of feeling could be employed as a way of associating an ideology, a social outlook or a political opinion with a particular artist, as in the case of

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<sup>72</sup> 'If we see, in its detail, the environment men have created, we shall learn the truth about them. That is one way of putting it, and it is deeply relevant to Ibsen and Chekhov, where the dramatic tension, again and again, is between what men feel themselves capable of becoming, and a thwarting, directly present environment.' (1968a: 386)

T. S. Eliot, the phrase ‘personal structure of feeling’ was employed to refer to the political and social sensibilities of an individual writer:

The power of *Murder in the Cathedral* is that it succeeds in communicating a personal structure of feeling as if it were traditional and even conventional. (1968a: 204)

This personal structure of feeling could then be held to have been a permanent or even a perpetual and determining aspect of an artist’s work:

What Eliot does, in *The Cocktail Party*, is to bring to the level of recognizable action the structure of feeling *by which he had always been determined*, but which had been mainly expressed, elsewhere, as a rhythm or as an image. [My emphasis] (1968a: 216)

What emerges from these difficulties is that the figure structure of feeling became less coherent and more diffuse as the purposes to which Williams felt compelled to put it multiplied. But always, he was striving for specificity and precision.

### Encounter with T. S. Eliot

An example of this attempt at a critical realisation of a specific structure of feeling can be found in his assessment of T. S. Eliot in *Modern Tragedy*. In this book, published between the last revised edition of *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1964a) and the hostile revisions of the chapter on Eliot for *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1968a), Williams engaged in a very interesting discussion of martyrdom in which he argued that Eliot’s move beyond the Christian tradition of sacrifice and redemption could be revealed by comparison of *Murder in the Cathedral* with *The Cocktail Party*.

Williams thought that Eliot’s move beyond the Christian tradition consisted in the belief that tragedy does not reside in the destiny of the martyr but in the unconscious life of the many for whom the martyr dies. And, through a process of attenuation, sacrifice no longer redeems, but is relegated to an act by which

resignation towards a trivial and meretricious existence is ratified. That this grows out of the Christian tradition is clearly seen by Williams in *Murder in the Cathedral*:

The blood of the martyr not only fertilises the world, but also cleanses the world of its ordinary filth, and marks the heads of the believers, as a permanent reminder of the sin of their normal condition:

*The sin of the world is upon our heads. . .the  
blood of the martyrs  
and the agony of the saints  
Is upon our heads.*

It is in this movement that we notice the special character of this rhythm of sacrifice, in the Christian tradition. It is not the act of the body of men, convinced of the need of sacrificial blood for the renewal of their common life. On the contrary, this need has to be brought to the people, by the exceptional man. The need for blood has to be shown by the man who is offering his life. The sacrifice is not only redemption, but conversion. It is in this particular rhythm that the sacrificial victim becomes the redeemer or the martyr. (1966a: 162)

Through an anti-popular inflection of this tradition Eliot was said to have established his own sense of a 'pattern of sacrifice' by concentrating on the division between those capable of authentic experience and those for whom experience of life is inevitably shallow and unfulfilled if not exactly bestial. Williams's account of Eliot's 'pattern of sacrifice' was that:

It rests on a division of humanity into the many unconscious and the few conscious, in terms similar to the division between unauthentic and authentic man. Yet the pattern is such that it is the role of the conscious not to save themselves but to save the world. Tragedy rests not in the individual destiny, of the man who must live this sacrifice, but in the general condition, of a people reducing or destroying itself because it is not conscious of

its true condition. The tragedy is not in the death, but in the life. (1966a: 162)

Although this pattern is said to be clear in *Murder in the Cathedral* Williams, employing one of his ubiquitous wireless reception metaphors, argued that: ‘The essential pattern comes through more clearly, though with a marked lessening of dramatic force, in *The Cocktail Party*.’ (1966a: 163) Here, without the formal support of liturgical rhythms or the emphasis upon the martyrdom of Becket, Celia Copplestone’s sacrifice reveals the necessity of looking very critically at the idea of sacrifice:

For sacrifice now does not redeem the world, or bring new life to the waste land. Rather, in an obscure way, it ratifies the world as it is. Eliot’s Christian action is not tragic redemption, but tragic resignation.

Indeed:

Eliot, in *The Cocktail Party*, abandons the Christian tradition of sacrifice and redemption. He removes its action elsewhere, and to a minority. He replaces it, as the controlling structure of feeling, with a socially modulated resignation. Yet perhaps he does not altogether abandon sacrifice, in one of its senses. It looks to me very much as if Celia had to die, for the needs of this group. Elsewhere, naturally. Terribly, of course. But in such a way that the blood does not stain or shame, or at least not for long. In such a way that redemption, in any whole sense, is fine but is for others. In such a way that a gesture can be made to her blood, but what will be drunk at the party is the same old cocktail. The darker wine, of an involving crucifixion, is richer and stronger, but we are not in its class. We’ll put up with the cocktails, making the best of a bad job. (1966a: 166)

Without, for the moment, considering whether this is a useful analysis of T. S. Eliot’s plays or the texture of his Christian faith, it is evident that Williams’s account of the poet’s conservatism and even the suggestion of his surrender to nihilism did not arise distinctively from an analysis of the artworks discussed, or from

any deep consideration of the challenges presented to Anglo-Catholic witness in the middle of the twentieth century. The structure of feeling Williams discovered in these works was a structure of feeling anticipated by what Williams already felt about Eliot's critical, spiritual, and social commitments. This can be seen in the lengthy and courteous discussion of Eliot's ideas in *Culture and Society*. Here, Eliot is viewed as a somewhat inferior descendent of the political tradition exemplified by Coleridge and Burke:

For what is quite clear in the new conservatism (and this makes it very different from, and much inferior to, the conservatism of a Coleridge or a Burke) is that a genuine theoretical objection to the principle and the effects of an 'atomized', individualist society is combined, and has to be combined, with adherence to the principles of an economic system which is based on just this 'atomized', individualist view. (1958a: 242)

Eliot was trapped in a contradictory commitment to the 'free economy' and hostile to the cultural products and social circumstances created by the more or less unregulated economic relations of capitalist society.<sup>73</sup> This rendered his outlook inevitably bleak:

The triumphant liberalism of contemporary society, which the practice of conservatives now so notably sustains, will, as anyone who thinks about a 'whole way of life' must realize, colour every traditional value. The progress which Eliot deplores is in fact the product of all that is actively left of the traditional society from which his values were drawn. This is the root, surely, of that bleakness which Eliot's social writings so powerfully convey. (1958a: 242-3)

Williams's hostility towards Eliot's political and spiritual ideas naturally informed his criticism of the poet's social writings and, despite fluctuations in tone, provided a firm platform upon which

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<sup>73</sup> There is some inconsistency here because Williams, of course, upbraids Burke in *Culture and Society* (1958a: 12) in very similar terms in relation to his support for enclosure of common land while defending the 'organic society'.

his criticism of the poetry and drama rested. Eliot's 'personal structure of feeling' was clearly identified before Williams moved beyond discussion of Eliot's formal innovations to a more fully developed criticism of the plays.

Williams expressed something of what he felt about Eliot as early as 1946 and 1947 when he said in the interviews with *New Left Review*:

The *Four Quartets* completely dominated reading and discussion in Cambridge at the time. I did not succeed in articulating my rejection of the way in which they were being treated. But I recall coming out of one of these discussions, not with enemies but with friends who considered themselves active socialists and yet were endorsing Eliot's work. There must have been some radical lack of confidence in me that I didn't have the argument fully through with them. Instead I said to myself – a ridiculous expression that must have been some echo of an Eliot rhythm – 'here also the class struggle occurs'. Looking across at the university church and doing nothing about it. But my perception was itself a perfectly correct one. There was a class struggle occurring around those poems and that criticism. Because if you were to move into the world not just of Leavis's criticism, which contained radical, positive, energetic elements, but into the universe of the *Four Quartets*, then you were finished. You were then in the totally conventional post-war posture of the inevitability of failure, the absurdity of effort, the necessity of resignation – (1979b: 67-8)

It is interesting that Eliot is arraigned not simply for anti-working class sentiments like resignation, and belief in the absurdity of effort, but also for the rhythm of the 'ridiculous expression' with which Williams framed his own thoughts on Eliot's poetry. In an echo of Socialist Realism the implication is clear: hope, optimism and positive action are required in the struggle against the dismal and certain ending predicted for those who fall into universe of the *Four Quartets*.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> However, although Williams could frame his criticisms of negative or dismal presentations of society with demands for positive thinking, when

### Religion as a Whole Way of Life

It is doubtful that Eliot's resignation in the *Four Quartets* can be fully experienced without giving time to the time of The Book of Daniel or The Revelation of St John the Divine.<sup>75</sup> It is also true that an encounter with *The Divine Comedy* and the miracle of the mass would provide further means of access into the faithful world of Eliot's poetry and to the nature of Christian resignation and preparation for death. Williams's disregard of these aides in favour of an attempt to keep the discussion of Christianity firmly within the historical realm of policy, sociological speculation and class relations dulled the edge of his criticism and led him towards a position in which optimism, social solidarity, and progress were pitted against the inevitability of death and the revelation of the promise of life everlasting in the world to come. An aesthetic in which emancipation was figured as emancipation from an earthly life that could be achieved only through divine intervention and death had no appeal to Williams.

He seems to have had profound difficulty in accepting the fullness of Christian belief and this appears to have narrowed his understanding. For example, in the discussion of sacrifice in *Modern Tragedy* he wrote:

The simplest form of sacrifice, in which a man is killed so that the body of men may live or live more fully, we have almost abandoned. We know the idea, from other cultures

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talking about the decay of the labour movement in the early eighties he presented the need for film makers to produce positive images of working class resistance in a much more careful and tentative vein. He cautioned against vanguardism and against those who simply reiterated the traditional verities of the labour movement as if nothing had changed, and concluded: 'Often, as I say, they are a block to this much sadder recognition of what the real shape of the problem is. Maybe then you need different figures who are not only the people suffering at the end of this process, but the people — however small a minority — who are reactive and fighting about it. Maybe you need that, if you were to tell the whole story.' (Aspinall 1982:152) For the full context of this discussion see Jane Clarke's "'So that you can live", I' (Clarke 1982) and "'So that you can live", II' (Aspinall and Merck 1982).<sup>75</sup> 'And he shall speak *great* words against the most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws: and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and the dividing of time.' *The Holy Bible*, Authorised King James Version, Daniel 7:25.

and periods, but it retains emotional significance in one case only: at the centre of Christian belief. There, the manner of its retention proves the distance we have moved away from the idea as such, since the man Jesus is also, for believers, the Son of God, and the action, if it is to be significant, must be seen as part of a divine rather than a merely human history. Other apparently comparable cases, deprived of this sanction, are seen as essentially primitive – the scattering of the body for fertility, the sharing of the blood of the man who died. If it is not a divine action, it is a primitive magical action, and flat comparison of one with the other is even offensive. Here the decisive importance of context is most ironically proved.  
(1966a: 156-7)

Evidently, Williams wanted to set the question of sacrifice into a historical context and to challenge the priority of Christian belief. In the course of this exercise he actually counterposed the divine history of the death of Christ against a ‘merely human history’. This is a formulation which tends to obscure the fully human person and nature of Christ within which the full significance of his suffering and abandonment by God can alone be understood. For, of course, if Christ had not been fully human his suffering would be incommunicable and incomprehensible. In his perfectly reasonable desire to establish the historical specificity of particular forms of sacrifice Williams unravelled the sacrifice at the root of Eliot’s belief.<sup>76</sup>

Williams’s deployment of *context* as the figure both for circum-stance within a plot and for historical specificity also effaces Eliot’s particular understanding of historical time when he notes that:

The action of *Murder in the Cathedral* is based on an historical martyrdom, but in all essentials is taken out of its particular context and made part of an ‘eternal design’:

*Even now, in sordid particulars  
The eternal design may appear.*  
(1966a: 159-160)

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<sup>76</sup> For an example of where historical specificity is sought without unravelling its object see the discussion of eschatological predictions in Frank Kermode’s essay, ‘The End’ (Kermode 1965: 3-31).

This insistence that the ‘particular context’ of *Murder in the Cathedral* was the murder of Thomas Becket at Canterbury in 1170 AD, and that this context was ‘in all essentials’ removed by Eliot’s situation of Becket’s death within the timeless law of the eternal design reveals Williams’s disregard for the importance that Eliot attached to history and of the manner in which he understood the nature of his or any other writer’s specific insertion into it. Eliot had a sense of the timeless, as well as the temporal, and of the timeless and of the temporal together:

. . . the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. (Eliot 1919: 49)

Evidently, discussion, in the course of criticism of an artist who wrote and thought like Eliot, of the changes wrought by history in forms of human experience required a much more carefully modulated employment of historical specificity than Williams was prepared to countenance.

It is in this spirit that Williams encountered Eliot’s phrase ‘a whole way of life’ in his discussion of culture. It is a phrase that Williams welcomed and was to make great use of in his own path-breaking analysis of culture. However, the manner in which he appropriated it from Eliot was accompanied by a shearing away of religion. In *Culture and Society* this is done without acknowledgement of the excision:

Eliot’s emphasis of culture as a whole way of life is useful and significant. It is also significant that, having taken the emphasis, he plays with it. For example:

Culture . . . includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches, and the music of Elgar.

This pleasant miscellany is evidently narrower in kind than the general description which precedes it. The ‘characteristic activities and interests’ would also include steelmaking, touring in motor-cars, mixed farming, the Stock Exchange, coalmining and London Transport. Any list would be incomplete, but Eliot’s categories are sport, food and a little art – a characteristic observation of English leisure. (1958a: 233-4)

Part of the ‘general description which precedes it’ is in fact the sentence in which Eliot first introduced the phrase *whole way of life* into his discussion of culture:

Yet there is an aspect in which we can see a religion as the *whole way of life* of a people, from birth to the grave, from morning to night and even in sleep, and that way of life is also its culture. (Eliot 1948: 31)

This view sprung from Eliot’s rejection of a ‘relation’ between religion and culture; he thought that they were both aspects of the same thing.<sup>77</sup> However, Williams wanted the idea of the ‘whole way of life’ as his own term for culture. This can be seen more clearly if we compare the ‘pleasant miscellany’ cited by Williams with what T. S. Eliot wrote:

Taking now the point of view of identification, the reader must remind himself as the author has constantly to do, of how much is here embraced by the term *culture*. It includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into

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<sup>77</sup> See *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (Eliot 1948: 29, 33).

sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar. The reader can make his own list. And then we have to face the strange idea that what is part of our culture is also part of our *lived* religion. [My Emphasis] (Eliot 1948: 31)

By omitting the final two sentences of the paragraph Williams was able to cite Eliot's categories as 'sport, food and a little art' without becoming entangled in the *lived* religion that had led Eliot to figure culture as well as religion as a *whole way of life*. It is also curious that Williams feels able to upbraid Eliot for not including, among other things in his list, the Stock Exchange and London Transport when he knew well of the presence of the Stock Exchange Gazette, the Directory of Directors and a journey on London Underground in *Four Quartets*.<sup>78</sup> This is consistent with the procedure by which Williams sought always to dispense with ideas that threatened to disrupt the progress of his analysis towards assessments congenial to his endorsement of collective endeavour, progress and social solidarity; he was able to appropriate a partial account of the whole way of life from Eliot and developed a habit of ascribing a particular structure of feeling to particular points of view.<sup>79</sup>

In arriving at the figure *structure of feeling* Williams was working broadly within an established critical tradition which apart from employing technical methods like practical criticism also sought ways of figuring informed generalisations that would

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<sup>78</sup> (Eliot 1939-42: 199-201). This attempt by Williams to ignore the efforts made by other critics to see aspects of culture not normally recognised by the literary elite is seen again in his failure, apart from the briefest of comments in *Culture and Society* (1958a: 286) and in 'Cinema and Socialism' (Britton 1991: 126), to acknowledge Orwell's attempts to view English society through a broader understanding of culture in essays like 'Boys' Weeklies' (Orwell 1940a), 'Charles Dickens' (1940b) and 'The art of Donald McGill' (1941b). See also Marshall McLuhan's comments concerning the study of the 'language' of popular culture at Cambridge in the thirties. McLuhan acknowledges that Wyndham Lewis did various studies in popular culture, and notes the interest in popular speech idioms in the work of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (McLuhan 1967: 303). For a more recent and interesting engagement with Williams's work see Jon Thompson's essay 'Realisms and Modernisms: Raymond Williams and Popular Fiction' (Thompson: 1993).

<sup>79</sup> This habit of attributing a particular mode of feeling because of a combination of biographical and political factors in the life of the artist can be seen in Williams's treatment of, for example, Gissing, Orwell, Solzhenitsyn or Virginia Woolf.

function independently of facile applications of psychology or, more traditionally, of expressions of emotions by emotional people. T. S. Eliot explained the problem thus:

Appreciation in popular psychology is one faculty, and criticism another, an arid cleverness building theoretical scaffolds upon one's own perceptions or those of others. On the contrary, the true generalization is not something superposed sic upon an accumulation of perceptions; the perceptions do not, in a really appreciative mind, accumulate as a mass, but form themselves as a structure; and criticism is the statement in language of this structure; it is a development of sensibility. The bad criticism, on the other hand, is that which is nothing but an expression of emotion. (Eliot 1920: 15)

In this essay, 'The Perfect Critic', Eliot was rejecting both the kind of criticism which described poetry 'as the most highly organized form of intellectual activity' and also its antithesis, 'aesthetic' or 'impressionistic criticism', represented by Arthur Symons. He was striving for modes of criticism that could assess works in ways that would mobilise precise facts about a work and as a principal means of avoiding what he regarded as ill-informed 'interpretation' disrupting the task of evaluation. Eliot cited his experience of adult education in this respect:

We must ourselves decide what is useful to us and what is not; and it is quite likely that we are not competent to decide. But it is fairly certain that 'interpretation' (I am not touching upon the acrostic element in literature) is only legitimate when it is not interpretation at all, but merely putting the reader in possession of facts which he would otherwise have missed. I have had some experience of Extension lecturing, and I have found only two ways of leading pupils to like anything with right liking: to present them with a selection of the simpler kind of facts about a work – its conditions, its setting, its genesis – or else to spring the work on them in such a way that they were not prejudiced against it. There were many facts to help them with Elizabethan drama: the poems of

T. E. Hulme only needed to be read aloud to have immediate effect. (Eliot 1923: 32)

Eliot argued that comparison and analysis of literary facts were the chief tools of the critic and he believed that ‘opinion or fancy’ were the real corrupters of the critical process. However, he deftly avoided utilitarian certainties by arguing that it was no part of his purpose to define truth, fact, or reality.<sup>80</sup>

### Middleton Murry’s Modes of Feeling

Despite Eliot’s perhaps necessary evasions critics had to find ways of figuring elusive and difficult thoughts concerning feelings and their organisation in ways which went beyond the organisation, or the structuring, assumed with the use of words like sensibility or style. Critics had to avoid failing because, as Middleton Murry put it,

... when they are failing, their invariable gesture is to use general terms as a prop to their own defective achievement. Instead of giving their general terms a full and particular content, they use them rather to give an appearance of weight and authority to misty and undecided perceptions. (Middleton Murry 1921a: 8)

In striving to avoid this effect of failure, Middleton Murry, like Williams, sought to specify exactly what he meant. Citing Buffon, Chekov, Gorky, and above all, Flaubert, Middleton Murry explained, for example, what he meant by ‘a true style’:

Perhaps we may use this vague notion to turn the flank of the general confusion on the subject of style, which was manifested in the three different meanings of the words which are current. By accepting the view that the source of style is to be found in a strong and decisive original emotion we can get a closer grasp of the intention that lies under the use of the word as meaning a writer’s personal idiosyncrasy. An individual way of feeling and seeing will compel an individual way of using language. A true style

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<sup>80</sup> See ‘The Function of Criticism’ (Eliot 1923: 34)

must, therefore, be unique, if we understand by the phrase 'a true style' a completely adequate expression in language of a writer's mode of feeling. (Middleton Murry 1921a: 13)

The quality of this idiosyncrasy was entirely dependent upon whether or not it was the expression of 'genuine individual feeling' or not:

We may put the whole question briefly in this way. A style must be individual, because it is the expression of an individual mode of feeling. Some styles will appear more peculiar than others, either because the writer's mode of feeling is unusually remote from the normal mode, or because the particular emotional experiences he is seeking to convey are outside the ordinary range of human experience, or, finally, because the writer, inspired by some impure motive such as vanity or the desire to astonish the bourgeois, has deliberately made his language *outré* and bizarre.

Consequently,

The test of a true idiosyncrasy of style is that we should feel it to be necessary and inevitable; in it we should be able to catch an immediate reference back to a whole mode of feeling that is consistent with itself. (Middleton Murry 1921a: 14)

Middleton Murry in his essay 'The Psychology of Style' goes on to deploy the figure mode of experience in order to attempt to grasp the full potentiality alluded to by *mode of feeling*. This mode of experience was a kind of condensation of feeling made available to the artist by the nature of his activity:

From them all emerges, at least in the case of an artist destined to mature achievement, a coherent emotional nucleus. This is often consolidated by a kind of speculative thought, which differs from the speculative thought of the philosopher by its working from particular to particular. The creative literary artist does not

generalize; or rather, his generalization is not abstract. However much he may think, his attitude to life is predominantly emotional; his thoughts partake much more of the nature of residual emotions, which are symbolized in the objects which aroused them, than of discursive reasoning. Out of the multitude of his vivid perceptions, with their emotional accompaniments, emerges a sense of the quality of life as a whole. (Middleton Murry 1921b: 24)

For Middleton Murry, a writer's emotional bias or predisposition was his 'mode of experience'. This mode of experience was determined by the writer's philosophy or his 'attitude', which gave unity to his work as a whole, providing the ground upon which to erect an emotional structure:

Lucretius used the philosophy of Epicurus, Dante the mediaeval conception of the Aristotelian cosmogony; but both those great poets used those intellectual systems as a scaffolding upon which to build an emotional structure. A great satirist like Swift uses the intellect, not to reach rational conclusions, but to expound and convey in detail a complex of very violent emotional reactions; and I would even say that Plato used a tremendous logical apparatus in order to impart to posterity an attitude towards the universe that was not logical at all. (Middleton Murry 1921b: 27)

It is evident that by using the figures *mode of feeling*, *mode of experience*, and *emotional structure* Middleton Murry was attempting to grasp the relationship of artists to their ideas and their emotions, and to their capacity to reproduce or provoke authentic experience.

Consequently, these figures are not being set the same range of tasks as Williams set the structure of feeling. Williams's usages cannot be assimilated into those of Middleton Murry's, or Eliot's, or Q. D. and F. R. Leavis's, or William Empson's. The leading critics between the world wars and during the post war period figure a variety of different literary qualities and achievements in similar ways. However, their arguments and differences were often complex and frequently not unimportant. For this reason it

is necessary to avoid the sort of sentimental synthesis proposed by Fred Inglis between the works of T. H. Green, the Leavises, and Richard Hoggart.<sup>81</sup>

It is true that Williams wanted to do something similar to that argued for by Middleton Murry, but for him emphasis upon the social nature of the processes at work within these ideas, emotions and experiences, was imperative because these dynamic processes and relationships, did not merely furnish the impulse for artistic activity, nor merely provide the context in which the artwork was created, but were in a myriad of complex ways constitutive of the artwork, both of its structure of feeling, and of the social practices employed to produce the artwork. Indeed, society is neither complete, nor fully present, Williams argued, until the distinctive artwork of a period has been created. Of prose Williams said:

In its most general sense, the writing of prose is a transaction between discoverable numbers of writers and readers, organized in certain changing social relations which include education, class habits, distribution and publishing costs. At the same time, in its most important sense, the writing of prose is a sharing of experience which, in its human qualities, is both affected by *and can transcend the received social relations*. *It is always so, in the relation between literature and society: that society determines, much more than we realize and at deeper levels than we ordinarily admit, the writing of literature; but also that the society is not complete, not fully and immediately present, until the literature has been written,* and that this literature, in prose as often as in any other form, can come through to stand as if on its own, with an intrinsic and permanent importance, so that we see the rest of our living though it as well as through the rest of our living. [My Emphasis] (1969a: 24-5)

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<sup>81</sup> (Inglis 1993: 48-9) Inglis's practice of finding the common thread between strikingly different writers can become even more positive and emphatic than that cited above: "Leavis, Adorno; Williams, Debord; Geertz, Irigaray; Naipaul, Said: another queer gang, in camouflage if not in motley. But they have in common an absolute resistance to the transfiguration of life into money, of culture into commodity, or happiness into buying, and of the vague milling of people in their patterns into ordering by numbers." (Inglis 1993: 242)

It was because Williams believed this that he was bound to stress the historical formation of the individual's experience.

### Muriel Bradbrook's Historical Criticism

Williams's different uses of the structure of feeling do not form a settled pattern, nor do they indicate a line of development in his thinking apart from, perhaps, an attempt to multiply the registers and determinations that had accompanied his introduction of the phrase in *Preface to Film* (1954).

In proposing a relationship between dramatic conventions and the structure of feeling of a particular historical period Williams was working broadly within a well-established tradition of historical criticism. He acknowledged this in a general way in the introduction that he wrote for the *Festschrift* for Muriel Bradbrook in 1976. Here, he identified three features, which along with practical criticism informed the work of the Cambridge English Faculty. They were: the correlation of literature with social history, enquiry into the relation between imaginative literature and moral and philosophical ideas, and work in the study of dramatic forms and their conditions of performance. He then went on to note the contribution made by Bradbrook:

In one of these kinds, the history and analysis of dramatic forms and their conditions of performance, the work of Muriel Bradbrook has been defining and pre-eminent. Over her whole working life she has contributed very generally to the work of the Faculty, but the most significant thread is the work which began with *Elizabethan Stage Conditions* in 1931 and was continued with the remarkable *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* in 1935. The titles of these early works sufficiently indicate the position and interests from which her work on drama was begun. They have influenced successive generations of students and scholars, and beyond this properly academic influence have provoked and helped in defining and sometimes

solving more general questions of dramatic form and performance. (1977b: p.ix)

Despite the generosity of this piece Williams does not acknowledge engagement with Bradbrook's work in his own writing apart from passing references to her *Ibsen The Norwegian, A Revaluation* (Bradbrook 1946) in his *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*,<sup>82</sup> and in the listing of a number of her works in the 'Select List of Books for Reference and Further Reading' at the end of the 1968 edition of *Drama in Performance*. However, the coincidence of their interests over a number of years in the field of drama generally and, more specifically, in the relationship of conventions to particular historical conditions is evident.<sup>83</sup> The coincidence of interests between Bradbrook's field of work and Williams's is similar to that between his interests and those discussed by L. C. Knights's *Drama & Society in the Age of Johnson*, and even to those expressed by Middleton Murry's call for an 'Economic History of English Literature' (Middleton Murry 1921c: 62-63).<sup>84</sup> However, Bradbrook's notion of historic criticism had a much more direct bearing on Williams's field of interest. In her 1931 essay she argued that:

The value of the study of Elizabethan stage conditions lies in this elucidation of the author's methods. It will largely be negative; it will prevent the interference of the unconscious preconceptions of our own age, the most fruitful source of irrelevant criticism. (The absorption of

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<sup>82</sup> The passing references to Muriel Bradbrook in the chapter on Ibsen in the 1964 edition of Williams's *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* are reduced to one short illustrative quotation grouped with other quotations in order to facilitate his discussion of symbols and symbolism in the 1968 edition of *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*. There is also a passing acknowledgement of Bradbrook's 'generic analysis' in *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 191). For an interesting discussion of the relationship between *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, *Modern Tragedy*, and *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, see (Sharratt 1989).

<sup>83</sup> I am not insinuating any element of plagiarism here with regard to any coincidence between aspects of Williams's work and that of Bradbrook. Fred Inglis regarded these similarities as 'a bit rum . . .'. The ellipses are Inglis's. (Inglis 1995: 139) This allusion to plagiarism tends to narrow and obscure the complex influences at work in Williams's writing.

<sup>84</sup> Indeed, the entire essay, 'Poetry and Prose', is relevant to the discussion of the relationship between literary, social, and economic forms (Middleton Murry 1921c).

Elizabethan materials is bound to be conscious, but the learning of Shakespeare's technique, since it is primarily a poetic one, i.e. dependent on his use of words, will usually be unconscious.) A study of his age will also discourage the purely personal and appreciative criticism which consists of the creation of an inferior kind of private poem.

Historic criticism is a reversal of the synthetic creative process; its duty is to disentangle and unravel all the knit-up feelings, to split the compound into its elements. What is left is not the play; but it tells us a great deal about the play. This kind of work is not appreciative criticism; the two studies are complementary, and therefore necessary to everyone who would approach Shakespeare, but they must be kept apart, or a bastard criticism like the scientific-stylistic efforts of Robertson<sup>85</sup> result. The critic must know something of the history of the *Hamlet* as a play to understand it, but he must not use his knowledge in his final judgment, though it may have limited the field over which his judgment is extended. (Bradbrook 1931: 148-9)

From this work it is clear that she was a pioneer in the field of considering precisely what stage conditions, conventions, and formal innovation could tell us about both the intellectual milieu of the artist and the relationship of this to their society and time.<sup>86</sup> However, this early study includes a good review of the changing nature of Shakespeare criticism and an account of the shift in Shakespeare studies during the early years of the twentieth century towards consideration of the different elements of the historical conditions that produced Shakespeare's stage.<sup>87</sup> She was concerned to recover what she called the Elizabethan point of view:

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<sup>85</sup> Bradbrook is probably referring to, *The Problems of the Shakespeare Sonnets* (Robertson 1926).

<sup>86</sup> See also Muriel Bradbrook's discussion of the relationship of an intellectual and artistic circle to its society and time in her book, *The School of Night: A study of the literary relationships of Sir Walter Raleigh* (Bradbrook 1936: *passim*).

<sup>87</sup> (Bradbrook 1936: 19-28) Incidentally, Bradbrook also cites the work of numerous predecessors.

It is very necessary to approach the Elizabethan drama without any of the preconceptions about the nature of drama which are drawn from reading Ibsen, Shaw, Racine, Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* or Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is necessary to regain the particular angle (even the particular limitations) of the Elizabethan point of view. (Bradbrook 1935: 1-2)

Consequently, she studied conventions of presentation, acting, action and speech, and Elizabethan habits of reading, writing and listening before embarking upon specific studies of the work of Marlowe, Tourneur, Webster, Middleton, Massinger and others. Despite the range of her studies of Elizabethan and Caroline poetry and drama her focus was tighter, and in some respects less ambitious than Williams. She did not, like Williams, credit her analysis of any particular work of art with a potentiality for the realisation of a structure of feeling.

This was Williams's ambition, but the range and reach of his analysis was often more limited than he hoped for. For example, in his discussion of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* in *Drama in Performance*, he was able to do much, but he did not succeed in realising the structure of feeling in the precise terms that he struggled to define. However, this chapter-length essay is a very interesting consideration of the structure of the play, the conditions of performance, its language, and the way in which these were related to the 'essential reality which the text embodies' and 'the performance will manifest':

In this play, where the essential action is in the poetry, there can be no ordinary summary. But the form allows us to see the logic of the general action. The dominant element is movement, rather than a simple isolable pattern. The action ranges in space over half the Mediterranean, and has been calculated, in historic time, as covering ten years. But these considerations are wholly external. Space is an element in the play, emphasizing its magnitude, but the primary agent of this is the acted speech, the spoken action, which is the vital pattern. The action which Shakespeare creates, and which his stage could so readily perform, is a movement governed by the tragic experience. The rapid and varied success of scenes

is a true sequence; we shall wholly misunderstand it if we separate the scenes, and think of them as making their effect singly. The construction of the play has often been condemned, on the grounds of its frequent shifts and apparent disintegration. But this is to look for integration in the wrong place: in the realistic representation of time and place which have little to do with this kind of drama. The measure of time in the play is the dramatic verse; the reality of place is the reality of played action on the stage. The dramatic integration – like the movement employed to realize it – rests in the structure of feeling which the dramatic verse, as a whole organization, communicates. This structure of feeling is the essential reality which the text embodies, and which the performance will manifest. (1968e: 61-2)

Williams did not establish in this discussion, except by assertion, the connections between the conditions of performance, the dramatic verse, and the essential reality embodied in the text; it is unclear how he hoped that description of the early seventeenth century conditions of performance would relate to the present tense in which he believed that the text *will manifest* the play's reality.<sup>88</sup> Muriel Bradbrook, who also believed that Shakespeare's technique was primarily a poetic one was perhaps clearer about how the physical and technical restrictions of the stage in 1607 made it possible for the vast canvas of *Antony and Cleopatra* to be realised:

*Antony and Cleopatra* is the most Elizabethan of all Shakespeare's plays from the point of view of construction. Its whole effect depends upon the sense of the world-wide nature of the struggle. (See Miss Spurgeon's pamphlet, which decides that "world" is the characteristic image of the play.) This effect is gained not only by imagery but by the rapid shift of the scenes, the cinematograph method of showing Antony in Rome and

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<sup>88</sup> See Arnold Kettle's discussion concerning the continuing currency and relevance of Shakespeare's play in his article 'Antony and Cleopatra' (Kettle 1983: 125-144), and Cicely Palser Havelly's consideration of Kettle's reading in her article 'Changing critical perspectives' (Palser Havelly 2000: 145-153). See also (Granville-Barker 1930); (Dollimore 1984); (Neill 1994).

Cleopatra in Egypt, as the cinema shows alternate shots of the struggling heroine and the hero galloping to the rescue. Shakespeare's theatre was very near to the cinema in technique: his trick of showing a series of short separate actions, each one cut off before it is finished (e.g. the battle scenes of *Julius Caesar*) which gives a sense of merged and continuous waves of action is a common habit of Eisenstein and Pudovkin. (Bradbrook 1931: 48-9)  
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Despite considerable difference in tone Williams's mode of analysis does not, on the face of it, add anything that could not be achieved by Bradbrook's procedure. Even when presenting the movement of the play, Williams is able to do little more than describe the action. For example:

We have seen how, through the formal arrangement and contrast of the verse, a complex pattern of feeling has been clearly enacted. The verse has enforced this pattern, but there is also something else, which in reading the scene may not be realized but in Elizabethan performance is clear. This is the necessary magnificence of both Antony and Cleopatra, as they appear to us: a magnificence against which the elements of ruin and of baseness are set in the necessary tension which is the dramatic movement of the whole play. There is no doubt that in performance this magnificence is constant, even while the other conflicting elements sound. (1968e: 66-7)

He goes on to demonstrate Cleopatra's magnificence by quoting the play to that effect. But he does not establish how specifically, 'in Elizabethan performance', the necessary magnificence of Antony and Cleopatra is achieved. It was achieved in the text, of course, but this was available to audiences in 1954 and 1968. It was achieved in movement, colour, music, but these elements were similarly available to audiences at the time Williams published his essay.

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<sup>89</sup> Incidentally, Bradbrook's evident enthusiasm for the methods of the cinematograph run counter to the hostility of the *Scrutiny* group towards the cinema noted by Francis Mulhern (Mulhern 1979: 52).

The full significance of what he might have intended is not entirely clear from reading *Drama in Performance* in isolation. It has to be read in relation to the body of his work. Graham Holderness gave some indication of how to read this text in his introduction to the Open University edition. Here he explained how Williams's particular kind of performance analysis differed from the empiricist procedures of traditional scholarly 'theatre history' and from the detailed description of actual productions practiced by modern 'theatre studies'. He argued we could understand Williams's procedure as one that placed emphasis 'on the semiotic value of the physical action required or implied by the text' (Holderness 1991: 5).

While not overcoming the difficulties of reading *Drama in Performance* Holderness was, by distinguishing the arrangement and scope of the book from the tradition represented by Bradbrook and others, able to focus upon what he regarded as the novelty of Williams's approach.

### **Williams: 'a delegate from the future'?<sup>90</sup>**

Williams remained fascinated throughout his life by social sensibilities instantiated within particular cultural patterns that he thought could only be fully realised through works of art. But, although he often sought this realisation in particular artworks, the synthetic unity of his social assumptions and his political aspirations resulted in a procedure confined by his prior commitments; it was a procedure in which he discerned in the work of a particular artist, or group of artists, an outlook or structure of feeling which was evidently available to him through the reading of their criticism or cultural manifestos prior to any serious critical engagement with the poems, novels or plays in question.

Clearly, Williams, was striving for something that could not be realised by obedience to the ordinary protocols of scholarly procedure. Despite, the coincidence of interests revealed by

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<sup>90</sup> Bernard Sharratt uses the phrase, "a delegate from the future", to describe Williams (Sharratt, 1989: 149). This phrase is similar to one used by Sol Funaroff in his poem *The Bellbuoy*: 'I am that exile / from a future time / from shores of freedom / I may never know, / . . .' See Alan M. Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time* (Wald 2002: iv; 204-214).

comparison of Williams with Bradbrook, the encounter is in danger of leading to an impasse in which Williams's manifest inadequacies begin to unravel any sense of his distinctive contribution. What is missing, of course, is Williams's sense of the relationship between his own work and the active striving for a future shaped by the ethos of solidarity and community.

Williams did not possess a blueprint of the future, nor did he believe that one was possible, but he did believe that a positive properly human future would have to be constructed out of emergent sensibilities that needed to be identified, valued, nurtured, and encouraged. This was the purpose of his criticism. Consequently, writers hostile to socialism, or those sceptical about the creation of a new dispensation in which the population at large would actively determine society's cultural and economic priorities, were viewed with suspicion. The detail and nuance of such writers' work could be disregarded or even obscured because their *essential* outlook was already clearly understood. And, it was the *essence* of their work and the experiences that it provoked which needed to be presented by Williams as an *essentially* reactionary structure of feeling in the course of his active opposition to negative views concerning the future of society.

From this point of view Williams was making connections between the capacity of drama to enable us to recover forms of experience – the particular structures of feeling of a specific historical period – and the positing of the emergent structures of feeling of a necessary future. This process of anticipation in which future relationships may be posited in the present and fed by the past is, in principle, little different from that posed by Nikolai Bukharin when he argued that 'socialist realism does not merely register what exists, but, catching up the thread of development in the present leads it into the future'.<sup>91</sup> Of course, the tone, lacking the heroic urgency of 1934 and the ventriloquism in which a party elite speaks on behalf of the

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<sup>91</sup> Nikolai Bukharin explained this more fully: "In our circumstances romanticism is connected above all with heroic themes: its eyes are turned, not on the heaven of metaphysics, but on the earth, in all its senses — on triumph over the enemy and triumph over nature. On the other hand, socialist realism does not merely register what exists, but, catching up the thread of development in the present, it leads it into the future, and leads it actively. Hence an antithesis between romanticism and socialist realism is devoid of all meaning." (Bukharin 1934: 254)

working class, is profoundly different, but in the expression of the desire for the artistic imagination to anticipate forms of feeling appropriate to future social relationships the similarity is striking.

Williams's responsibilities to the future, resulted in a critical strategy in which political contingency often determined the course of his writing and rewriting, from moment to moment. It is 'less a matter of getting the history 'right', in some impossibly positivist sense of scholarship, as of tracing the movement of which he sees himself as part' (Sharratt 1989: 133).

In this active sense Williams's work did not clear a path for new processes of imaginative writing or for new types of imaginative drama. It did, however, immeasurably strengthen the aesthetic of emancipation, ensuring that political modes of criticism were popularised in ways that linked analysis and judgement in the consideration of artworks to their capacity to recover experiences or realise feelings, useful, or in some manner congenial, to a broadly socialist perspective or, more ambitiously, to the structure of feeling regarded as appropriate to the anticipated modes of future social relationships.

## Chapter Four: Language, Film, Television and Advertising

### Structuring Meaning

Discussing Williams's view of meaning and its structures presents particular difficulties. Whereas, in relation to his thoughts about feeling, discussion of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors is profitable, in relation to meaning the benefits of such an approach are less obvious. This is because of the manner in which Williams worked in isolation from many of the intellectual trends in linguistics and semiotics that interested his contemporaries.

Williams's struggle to discern particular structures of meaning commenced during his final year as an undergraduate at Cambridge and continued with the onset of his professional life as a teacher and writer.<sup>92</sup> His concern was semantic and owed nothing to the *Course in general linguistics* (Saussure 1916), to *Structural Anthropology* (Levi-Strauss 1958) or to any work on *Mythologies* (Barthes 1957).<sup>93</sup> His interest in structures of meaning arose in a somewhat haphazard way during ruminations on the words culture, class, art, industry and democracy. He felt that these five words constituted a structure:

I could feel these five words as a kind of structure. The relations between them became more complex the more I considered them. I began reading widely, to try to see more clearly what each was about. Then one day in the basement of the Public Library at Seaford, where we had gone to live, I looked up *culture*, almost casually, in one of the thirteen volumes of what we now usually call the OED: the *Oxford New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. It was like a shock of recognition. The changes of sense I had been trying to understand had begun in English, it seemed, in the early nineteenth century. The

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<sup>92</sup> For an account of this struggle see the Introduction to the second edition of *Keywords* published in 1983 (1976a: 11-26).

<sup>93</sup> See Michael Moriarty's valuable essay "'The Longest Journey': Raymond Williams and French Theory' (Moriarty 1992: 91-116).

connections I had sensed with *class* and *art*, with *industry* and *democracy*, took on, in the language, not only an intellectual but an historical shape. I see these changes today in much more complex ways. *Culture* itself has now a different though related history. But this was the moment at which an inquiry which had begun in trying to understand several urgent contemporary problems — problems quite literally of understanding my immediate world — achieved a particular shape in trying to understand a tradition. This was the work which, completed in 1956, became my book *Culture and Society*. (1976a: 13)

Indeed he opened the Introduction of *Culture and Society* with a discussion of these words and their acquisition of new and important meanings (1958a: xiii).

In taking this step Williams was drawing upon a venerable tradition, not simply one springing from those working on the *OED*, but from an interest in signification and the use and abuse of words stretching back at least to the last third of the seventeenth century.<sup>94</sup> However, by embarking on his sort of historical philology, Williams was developing a novel if not an entirely unique approach. At any rate it was one that led to the attempt to map, historically, changes of the meanings borne by particular words and to assess the significance of these changed meanings. It was the controlling idea in the writing of *Culture and Society* and led to the eventual publication of *Keywords* in 1976.<sup>95</sup>

Williams did not think that he could understand particular words in isolation from their cognates or from words that signified associated practices, relationships and meanings, nor did he recognise any opposition between semantics, formal analysis, and historical study. Some years before he encountered structuralism he was able to develop an outlook in which an historical unity was posited between words and their developing meanings in social practice. He thought that only an approach that

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<sup>94</sup> See Book III of John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. See particularly 'Of the Imperfection of Words' (Locke 1690: 424-436) and 'Of the Abuse of Words' (Locke 1690: 437-452)

<sup>95</sup> See Williams's account of this matter in *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 175-6).

employed all of these strategies in a unified manner could result in a satisfactory engagement of meaning in the flux of semantic and social development.

The significance that Williams discerned in particular words and their changing meanings was always social. Their history was always a social history, a history of the changing practices and relationships that they had come to denote. They could not be isolated from their social activity in communication; he thought of communication as having a lively dialectical relationship with the social production of meanings. Lynn Spigel, in her critical essay of 1992, explained his view of the relationship between language and communication thus:

For Williams, the materiality of language was a bridge to thinking about social change. Indeed, because he believed that communication is not simply determined by other, more basic, political and economic forces, but is part of the more general historical process, he also argued that media can be used to implement positive social change. It all depends on how we imagine using technologies and how our institutions give shape to this social imagination. For, at a fundamental level, the cultural form and function of communications media are determined by decisions of particular social groups in specific historical situations. (Spigel 1992: xiv-xv)

Spigel goes on to criticise Williams's failure to engage explicitly with Leo Marx, Lewis Mumford or Harold Innis. However her description of his view of the role of communications as constitutive of social reality is persuasive. Williams explained his position in his book *Communications* in the following manner:

My own view is that we have been wrong in taking communication as secondary. Many people seem to assume as a matter of course that there is, first, reality, and then, second, communications about it . . . . We need to say what many of us know in experience: that the life of man, and the business of society, cannot be confined to these ends; that the struggle to learn, to describe, to understand, to educate, is a central and necessary part of

our humanity. This struggle is not begun, at second hand, after reality has occurred. It is, in itself, a major way in which reality is continually formed and changed. What we call society is not only a network of political and economic arrangements, but also a process of learning and communication. (1962: 19)

Consequently, in the beginning there was *not* the Word. Williams refused such a beginning. For him the Word could not be said to precede all other activities. He thought of words and language as an indissoluble element of human self-creation. And, he feared that to say that language was merely ‘constitutive’ of humanity contained the danger of the reductionism employed by idealists and positivists alike:

The idea of language as constitutive is always in danger of this kind of reduction. Not only, however, in the direction of the isolated creative word, which becomes idealism, but also as actually happened, in objectivist materialism and positivism, where ‘the world’ or ‘reality’ or ‘social reality’ is categorically projected as the pre-existent formation to which language is simply a response. (1977a: 29)

In adopting this stance Williams was responding directly to the tradition that thought of language as in some sense prior to human meanings and activity and to those in the Marxist tradition that tended to understand human thought and activity as a response or reflection of material reality. He was also, with the publication of *Marxism and Literature* in 1977, responding directly to the challenges posed by structuralism.

While acknowledging the ‘exceptionally productive’ and striking practical results of structural linguistics he was keen to associate what he called ‘the reified understanding of language’ expressed in the work of Saussure with the orthodox Marxism of Plekhanov and Stalin and with those acting under the influence of Althusser. To be sure, the concept of language as a formal system had opened the way to the achievement of a useful body of linguistic studies, but it was apparently an achievement that threatened the proper social understanding of language to which properly constituted historical study gave access:

This achievement has an ironic relation with Marxism. On the one hand it repeats an important and often dominant tendency within Marxism itself, over a range from the comparative analysis and classification of stages of society, through the discovery of certain fundamental laws of change within these systematic stages, to the assertion of a controlling 'social' system which is *a priori* inaccessible to 'individual' acts of will and intelligence. This apparent affinity explains the attempted synthesis of Marxism and structural linguistics which has been so influential a phenomenon of the mid-twentieth century. But Marxists have then to notice, first, that history, in its most specific, active, and connecting senses, has disappeared (in one tendency has been theoretically excluded) from this account of so central a social activity as language; and second, that the categories in which this version of system has been developed are the familiar bourgeois categories in which an abstract separation and distinction between the 'individual' and the 'social' have become so habitual that they are taken as 'natural' starting points. (1977a: 28)

In this way Williams deftly associated structural linguistics with the tendencies and errors of both Plekhanovite and Althusserian Marxism, and the bourgeois opposition of the 'individual' to the 'social' and the 'social' to the 'natural'.<sup>96</sup>

Against what he thought of as closed formal systems which gave credence to closed ideas of 'individual consciousness' or 'inner psyche' Williams counterposed language as activity and practical consciousness engaged in the social production of meaning (1977a: 36). He used the work of Vološinov (1930) to posit an alternative Marxist position in which the relation within the linguistic sign between its formal element and its meaning was, although conventional, neither arbitrary nor fixed:

On the contrary the fusion of formal element and meaning . . . is the result of a real process of social

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<sup>96</sup> For Williams modernist literature, theoretical linguistics and structuralist Marxism could also be united in the ice-cold and estranging general assumption 'that the systems of human signs are generated within the systems themselves' (1983g: 223).

development, in the actual activities of speech and in the continuing development of a language. Indeed signs can exist only when this active social relationship is posited. The usable sign — the fusion of formal element and meaning — is a product of this continuing speech-activity between real individuals who are in some continuing social relationship. The ‘sign’ is in this sense their product, but not simply their past product, as in the reified accounts of an ‘always-given’ language system. The real communicative ‘products’ which are usable signs are, on the contrary, living evidence of a continuing social process, into which individuals are born and within which they are shaped, but to which they then also actively contribute, in a continuing process. This is at once their socialization and their individuation: the connected aspects of a single process which the alternative theories of ‘system’ and ‘expression’ had divided and dissociated. We then find not a reified ‘language’ and ‘society’ but an active *social language*. (1977a: 37)

Similarly, in response to the perceived threat to his view of practical consciousness posed by Chomskyan deep structures of language formation Williams resorted to Vygotskii (1962) whose work on inner speech and consciousness was able to acknowledge both biological determinations and the socio-historical development of speech and intellect. Consequently, Williams quoted Vygotskii at length:

If we compare the early development of speech and of intellect — which, as we have seen, develop along separate lines both in animals and in very young children — with the development of inner speech and of verbal thought, we must conclude that the later stage is not a simple continuation of the earlier. *The nature of the development itself changes*, from biological to socio-historical. Verbal thought is not an innate, natural form of behaviour but is determined by a historical-cultural process and has specific properties and laws that cannot be found in the natural forms of thought and speech. (*Thought and Language*, 51) (1977a: 43)

In this manner and without publishing any detailed encounter or engagement with linguistic theory Williams was able to develop an adequate account of the relationship between his historical philology and the social production of meaning. Consequently, from the late sixties to the end of his career he was able to sustain his distinctive outlook without making any significant concessions to the widespread interest in radical academic circles in structuralism, linguistics, and semiotics. However, on occasions he could make *superficial* concessions to this range of interests. In the 1981 primer, *Culture*, Williams employed phraseology culled from structuralism and semiotics to describe his own view of society and social development — a view that owed nothing to the work of, Saussure, Levi-Strauss or Roland Barthes.<sup>97</sup>

Above all, Williams was concerned to ensure that no theory, Marxist or bourgeois, materialist or idealist, should be allowed to weaken, threaten, or to any degree undermine confidence in human agency; human self-creation was axiomatic to Williams's account of society.<sup>98</sup> It was the keystone that held socialist hope and commitment in place and it saturated every aspect of Williams's work on communications and media.

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<sup>97</sup> See particularly, 'Organization', the last chapter of *Culture*, (1981a: 206-233). See also the manner in which Williams could situate his work in the heart of the semiotic enterprise: 'It was here, perhaps to our mutual surprise, that my work found new points of contact with certain work in more recent semiotics. There were still radical differences, especially in their reliance on structural linguistics and psychoanalysis, in particular forms; but I remember saying that a fully historical semiotics would be very much the same thing as cultural materialism, and I was glad to see certain tendencies in this direction, as distinct from some of the narrower structuralist displacements of history. I could see also that some of the simpler positions of early structural linguistics could be modified by new emphases on the social and historical production of signifying systems, as in Volosinov and the social formalists.' (1981c: 210)

<sup>98</sup> See Perry Anderson's polemic against E. P. Thompson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, particularly Chapter 2, where he concludes 'Strangely, of two unbalanced sets of generalizations, Althusser's inclines better towards history, Thompson's towards politics. The classical equipoise of the founders of historical materialism Marx and Engels is some distance from both.' Williams opted, like Thompson, for politics in flight from what Anderson called 'the overpowering weight of structural necessity in history.' (Anderson 1980: 58)

### Thoughts on Film

Williams was interested in cinema and film from his undergraduate days<sup>99</sup> and this interest was to continue throughout his life. It was a concern that first took professional shape in the late forties and the early fifties when he considered the challenges presented by teaching film in adult education.<sup>100</sup> These were not merely technical and pedagogic problems but also difficulties presented by entrenched resistance to film studies: many people were hostile towards taking film seriously as a focus for criticism and educational work. His approach was bold and combative:

Film appreciation, as it is commonly understood, is certainly not a tutorial subject; but then I would add that the mere appreciation of literature or of painting or of music is not tutorial work either. But the cinema has overtones; for reformers and conservatives alike it is conventional shorthand for depravity and cultural decay. Many fear that if education touches it, the taint will be indelible. It is a pretty fear; but if adult education cannot handle and assess an institution which weekly serves the leisure of twenty-five million British adults, and which deals well or badly, but at least with great emotive power, with the values of man and society, then adult education deserves to fade. The case for film as a tutorial subject is, first, that it provides opportunities for criticism, and that criticism is a major educational discipline; and, second, that the study of the cinema as an institution is an inevitable part of our sociology. (1953b: 186)<sup>101</sup>

With this dual approach: criticism of film and the sociological study of cinema, Williams was making a distinction that he was

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<sup>99</sup> See Williams's reminiscences in *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 46; 232).

<sup>100</sup> This was despite seeing far fewer films in the period 1946 to 1960 than at any previous time because he was living in a small provincial town and teaching in the evenings (1979b: 232).

<sup>101</sup> For a later discussion of Williams's teaching of film criticism in the University as distinct from Adult Education and his collaboration with Stephen Heath and Colin MacCabe on a course on *Police Fiction* see the interview 'Television and Teaching' (1979c: 203-215).

to retain throughout his career.<sup>102</sup> It was a distinction that provided the clarity needed for the development of both adequate teaching methods and effective critical strategies. And, his specific focus was on the difficulties inherent in developing an effective method of criticising film and of teaching film criticism.

In 1950 he launched an experimental preparatory tutorial class in film for the Workers' Education Association branch at Battle.<sup>103</sup> The course focused on training students to describe accurately in their written work what they had seen in specially prepared clips (and later in complete films) and attempted to use this skill in critical attention and recording to enable students to move from discursive comment towards more disciplined forms of integrated criticism. At the end of this experiment, despite a positive assessment of the classes, Williams advised against a full three-year class in film giving as a reason his own need for more experience in this method of teaching film. In the event the Battle WEA tutorial group went on to a tutorial in drama and film in which two-thirds of the time was devoted to drama rather than film.

This focus on the relation of film criticism to drama was of continuing importance to the manner in which Williams approached the criticism of film. While he did not think that the skills of literary critics were simply transferable to film he did believe that insights gained from the study of drama were essential to an integrated understanding of film:

It is fatal to attempt to carry over the substance of literary criticism into an art which is, in its essentials, very different. If we ever succeed in formulating adequate principles of film criticism, we can be sure that they will be different from the principles of literary criticism. The film may increasingly draw on words, and in this aspect we have the experience of good dramatic criticism on which to draw. But the best and most distinctive achievement of the film is essentially visual, and here (although some dramatic work will be relevant) a new critical method is clearly required. I believe, incidentally, that if

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<sup>102</sup> See Williams's late essay 'Film History' where the analytical distinction between 'film' and 'cinema' indicated in 'Film as a Tutorial Subject' in the early fifties is reiterated at some length (1983e: 132-3).

<sup>103</sup> This account is based upon 'Film as a Tutorial Subject' (1953b).

film criticism is to develop in adult education, it will be wrong to regard it as an annexe to the work of literature tutors. We shall need specialists, and a literary training will not always be the best preparation. (1953b: 188-9)

So, integrated criticism and practical criticism were to form the basis of film studies, and experience from work on drama was to lie at the centre of the new enterprise. This was made explicit in 1954 in 'Film and the Dramatic Tradition' in *Preface to Film*:

I hold to the argument that film, in its main uses, is dramatic in terms of its elements of performance and imitation; and that it is capable of producing works in the categories of tragedy, comedy, farce, or in any of the new categories which the variations of dramatic history have produced. This is not of course to deny that film, as a particular dramatic medium, has its own conditions, and can employ, within them, a number of possible conventions. (1954b: 15)<sup>104</sup>

Williams then proceeded to discuss conventions at length and introduced the figure *structure of feeling*: 'All changes in the methods of an art like the drama are related, essentially, to changes in man's radical structure of feeling. The recognition of this truth must be our control in any immediate discussion.' (1954b: 23) In this way, through an analysis which foregrounded the study of dramatic convention in an essay on film he brought drama, film and deep social analysis together. And, he was then able to consider in the role of the script/text/screenplay in the final achievement of a piece of work. In a later discussion of *Preface to Film* he noted that:

It has been the complaint of dramatic authors for the last eighty years that they lose the results of their labour in the next stage of the production process; yet ironically what is lost — the text — survives, while what is achieved — the performance — does not. The real problem then is, how can you find a notation for writing,

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<sup>104</sup> See also the discussion of *Preface to Film* by John Higgins (Higgins 1999: 32-5).

not simply dialogue, but a whole dramatic action? The idea of total form was designed to indicate that all the elements of a dramatic work should be under coherent control, rather than vagaries of the dissociated process typical of capitalist relations of production. The specific interest of film was that it held the technical promise of a total performance, while being as durable as a written text. (1979b: 230)<sup>105</sup>

The *total form* and the potential of film for the delivery of *total performance* was as Williams explained a performance in which the ideal of a wholly conceived drama was achieved: ‘each of the elements being used — speech, music, movement, design — bears a controlled, necessary and direct relation, at the moment of expression, to any other that is then being used’ (1954b: 54). Williams’s interlocutors in 1979 alluded to this with some irony as a ‘Wagnerian’ synthesis, but he understood it as the integration of the artwork under the control of its author. He thought that in Greek or Elizabethan drama this control had been exercised through shared conventions ‘which controlled not just the writing of the dialogue but also the movement and grouping of actors on the stage’ (1979b: 231).

In modern conditions the author might be an individual, a collaborating group, or an ensemble company, but in each case the objective should be to ensure that the performance was not compromised by a separation between the script written by the playwright and the production realised by the director, actors, choreographers, musicians, stage managers and lighting technicians. Williams thought that this separation could be overcome or minimised by forms of notation in which the author wrote directions for the realisation of each scene and movement, and he was attracted by the idea that a film director could do this by controlling every aspect of the finished performance.

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<sup>105</sup> The *total form* referred to here is a phrase from 1979 that Williams substituted for the phrase *total expression* that he had employed in 1954 (1954b: 52; 54). His interlocutors in 1979 had objected to the term ‘expression’: ‘Historically, phrases like this have been associated with aesthetics that have very little to do with realism, given the subjectivist overtones of the term ‘expression’. They evoke rather the symbolist idea of synaesthesia or the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Wagnerian opera. What did you intend by this notion?’ Williams immediately conceded that he should have spoken of *total form* (1979b: 229-230).

This belief was illustrated in the 1968 edition of *Drama in Performance* where Williams included an analysis of Ingmar Bergman's 1957 picture *Wild Strawberries*. Williams was impressed by Bergman's publication of his screenplays and his public discussion of their relationship to the finished films. What Williams thought of as age old problems of the relationship between the conventions of acted speech and the consequent conventions of written speech were amenable to novel solutions during the process of making films:

What is different, here in film making, is the claim of the man who creates the original work to achieve detailed and continuous control over just these vital elements of performance. It appears as a film-making problem but as such it only concentrates certain recurring problems of writing for speaking. What is new is the maker's insistence on their direct solution, by a means available in the conditions of performance. A dramatist directing his own play would have this control, but for a performance which then disappears or at best is remembered or becomes traditional. The condition here in film making is one fixed production or performance, which is then indefinitely repeatable. (1968e: 158)

This was Bergman's achievement. He was a dramatic author who by becoming his own director had achieved the unity of text and performance, and in so doing, had realised all the phases of the work of his own mind.

What is most striking about Williams in relation to film is that although he appears to be irretrievably ensnared in this question of the potential which film had for overcoming the difficulties which arise between writing and performance, almost as an *idée fixe*, he also glimpsed that the achievement of *total performance* by the authors/directors of films might be influenced by the conditions in which the film is viewed by an audience. In an anticipation of his conception of *flow* he was able to observe that over and above the controlling fact of the camera and the exceptional integration of characters, scenes and sequences, the employment of close-ups and the nature of images, determined by the director, the process of 'continuous performance' was

radically different from attendance at a stage performance.<sup>106</sup> The conditions in which people saw a picture or the way in which people chose to see a movie had a bearing on the nature of the achieved performance. This insight was radically developed during his work on television.

### Televsual Flow: One Night in Miami

**A**lthough Williams's projects for making films foundered on lack of funds<sup>107</sup> he was able to participate in television in a more direct manner. He described his relationship to television production in 1987:

Before the end of the 1960s I had taken part in innumerable discussions, live and recorded. For some years the BBC used to send a car to take me from Cambridge and return me in the small hours. I went on location in Wales to film my play *Public Inquiry*. I attended as author the live transmission, still then practised "to give the immediacy of theatre", of another play, *A Letter from the Country*. In the late Sixties I worked for many weeks with Nicholas Garnham on a personal documentary in the series *One Pair of Eyes*. (1987a: ix)

From 1968 to 1972 he also wrote a regular television column for the BBC magazine *The Listener*. He had a more intimate understanding of the conditions of television production than that

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<sup>106</sup> (1968e: 160) The phrase 'continuous performance' refers to the manner of film exhibition common in cinemas until the late seventies (and abandoned in a number of picture houses earlier) where a double bill of two feature films together with a short, advertisements and newsreel would play continuously throughout the afternoon and evening and picture goers might enter the auditorium at any time — often in the middle of a picture — and then watch the programme round until the point 'I think this is where we came in' was reached — the picture goer might then decide to watch the movie again or leave the cinema while the film was continuing to play on the screen.

<sup>107</sup> Williams was at first, disbelieving, and then appalled by Michael Orom's opinion that *Singing in the Rain* was a good example of 'total expression' and wanted to counterpose a scenario of his own based on a reworking of a Welsh legend. However, he conceded, not without humour (perhaps?) that it might not have been an overwhelming alternative to *Singing in the Rain* (1979b: 233).

of film and some of his television writing concerned institutional developments, ownership and control, and were closely related to the analysis of the growth of 'mass' communications which he developed during the early fifties.<sup>108</sup> However, it was in relation to viewing that he was at his most insightful. Factors concerning the modern consumption of media that he had merely glimpsed in relation to film came out much more clearly when Williams set about closely analysing television viewing.

His study in March 1973 of the distribution of types of television programme revealed the weakness of the concept 'distribution' and the need for 'the mobile concept of 'flow'' (1974a 1992: 72). The output of several television companies<sup>109</sup> was studied for a week with the use of conventional categories like 'News and Public Affairs', 'Features and Documentaries' and 'Arts and Music' and this work permitted some comparative conclusions to be drawn. However, the limitation of this kind of textual analysis of the schedules was immediately apparent. Williams thought the results necessarily abstract and static, and he directed attention to what he called the 'particular television experience' (1974a: 80). To grasp this he thought that the concept of *flow* was needed because the real programme that is offered by companies is a sequence or set of alternative sequences of discrete items whose particularity is submerged in the total television offering. Williams's description of flow could be graphic:

One night in Miami, still dazed from a week on an Atlantic liner, I began watching a film and at first had some difficulty in adjusting to a much greater frequency of commercial 'breaks'. Yet this was a minor problem compared to what eventually happened. Two other films, which were due to be shown on the same channel on other nights, began to be inserted as trailers. A crime in San Francisco (the subject of the original film) began to operate in an extraordinary counterpoint not only with the

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<sup>108</sup> See 'Mass and Masses' in the Conclusion of *Culture and Society* (1958a: 297-312), and the for the continuation of this work, see (1962: 91-103); (1973d: 24-9); (1974a: 3-37). Williams also participated with Tony Higgins and Paddy Whannel in the preparation of the evidence submitted by *New Left Review* to the Pilkington Committee on the Future of Broadcasting And Television (Coppard 1961: 33-48).

<sup>109</sup> BBC1 (London), BBC2 (London), IBA (Anglia: Norwich), KQED (Public Television: San Francisco), Channel 7 (ABC: San Francisco), (1974a: 72).

deodorant and cereal commercials but with a romance in Paris and the eruption of a prehistoric monster who laid waste to New York. Moreover, this was sequence in a new sense. Even in commercial British television there is a visual signal — the residual sign of an interval — before and after the commercial sequences, and ‘programme’ trailers only occur between ‘programmes’. Here there was something quite different, since the transitions from film to commercial and from film A to films B and C were in effect unmarked. There is in any case enough similarity between certain kinds of films, and between several kinds of film and the ‘situation’ commercials which often consciously imitate them, to make a sequence of this kind a very difficult experience to interpret. I can still not be sure what I took from the whole flow. I believe I registered some incidents as happening in the wrong film, and some characters in the commercials as involved in the film episodes, in what came to seem — for all the occasional bizarre disparities — a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings. (1974a: 85-6)

However, it is evident that this appreciation of strikingly new developments in the way in which the output of broadcasting could be viewed did not enable Williams to do much more than lament the confusion. Despite his sophisticated understanding of contemporary developments in broadcast, cable and satellite technology, and the range of interactive devices rapidly converging into what we would now call the Internet,<sup>110</sup> he lacked the critical resources to integrate the *flow* into an adequate understanding of the spectacular maelstrom thrown up by modern media.

This difficulty was exacerbated or compounded by his focus upon fighting technological determinism. The rather blunt observation that: ‘communication technology, and specifically television, is at once an intention and an effect of a particular social order’ (1974a: 122), did not deal with how the intentions are related to the effects. It was an observation produced by the

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<sup>110</sup> For an account which demonstrates Williams’s excellent grasp of contemporary technical developments see *Television, Technology and Cultural Form* (1974a: 130-140)

overwhelming desire to brand technological determinism as a mode of formalism and to kill both with a stone hurled at Marshall McLuhan. Going straight to what was for Williams the heart of the matter he noted:

If the effect of the medium is the same, whoever controls or uses it, and whatever apparent content he may try to insert, then we can forget ordinary political and cultural argument and let the technology run itself. It is hardly surprising that this conclusion has been welcomed by the ‘media-men’ of the existing institutions. It gives the gloss of avant-garde theory to the crudest versions of their existing interests and practices, and assigns all their critics to pre-electronic irrelevance. Thus what began as pure formalism, and as speculation on human essence, ends as operative social theory and practice, in the heartland of the most dominative and aggressive communications institutions in the world. (1974a: 122)

Williams was, of course, not wrong about McLuhan’s formalism.<sup>111</sup> McLuhan thought that the computer in education would mean that:

As information movement speeds up, information levels rise in all areas of mind and society, and the result is that any subject of knowledge becomes substitutable for any other subject. That is to say, any and all curricula are obsolete with regard to subject matter. All that remains to study are the media themselves, *as forms*, as modes ever creating new assumptions and hence new objectives. (McLuhan 1960: 181)

Despite this Williams had gone on record as saying that he regarded ‘McLuhan as one of the very few men capable of significant contribution to the problems of advanced communication theory’, and had described McLuhan’s ‘*The Gutenberg Galaxy* as a wholly indispensable book’ (1964c: 219).

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<sup>111</sup> Roland Barthes had expressed the formalism of semiology thus: Semiology is a science of forms, since it studies significations apart from their content. (Barthes 1957: 111)

However, in direct response to a question concerning Williams's extremely polite criticisms of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, and without mentioning Williams by name, McLuhan's response was sharp: 'It is customary in conventional literary circles to feel uneasy about the status of the book and of literacy in our society. Macdonald and others, heaven knows, are nineteenth- not twentieth-century minds' (McLuhan 1967: 318). Williams did not have a 'nineteenth-century mind', but he was incapable of engaging with McLuhan's opinions in any way that might have been productive.

In McLuhan's outlook Williams sensed the cancellation of human history in a purely idealist model of human development realised in some automatic and undirected sense in the evolution of a technology of prosthetic devices.<sup>112</sup> In contrast to this view he saw technology as radically flexible with the potential of meeting needs quite different from those who may have developed it:

In other words, while we have to reject technological determinism, in all its forms, we must be careful not to substitute for it the notion of a determined technology. Technological determinism is an untenable notion because it substitutes for real social, political and economic intentions, either the random autonomy of invention or an abstract human essence. But the notion of a determined technology has a similar one-sided, one-way version of human process. (1974a: 124)

Williams insisted that determination should not be regarded as a single force, but as a contested process in which relations of inheritance, ownership and control are engaged in a complex set of relationships in which other pressures are brought to bear, making the outcome of pressures and conflicts unpredictable.

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<sup>112</sup> Concerning the necessary and fruitful relationship between history and formalism see *Morphology of the Folktale* (Propp 1927: 15; 23). Roland Barthes expressed a similar point of view thus:

Less terrorized by the spectre of 'formalism', historical criticism might have been less sterile; it would have understood that the specific study of forms does not in any way contradict the necessary principles of totality and History. On the contrary: the more a system is specifically defined in its forms, the more amenable it is to historical criticism. (Barthes 1957:112)

Despite the paternalism that characterised the British notion of ‘public responsibility’ in broadcasting, and the ideology of ‘public freedom’ canvassed by the capitalist owners of transmission in America, viewers and listeners were engaged in an irrepressible search for other sources of entertainment and information (1974a 1992: 126). This accounted for the warm welcome given to American culture by many British working-class people. It also explained the popularity among European youth of pirate broadcasters. But, the irony was that this ‘free and easy’, accessible culture was ‘a planned operation by a distant and invisible authority — the American corporations’ (1974a: 127).

In this way, Williams was able to present a complex and contested view of determinations and to focus on issues of ownership and control, which kept open the possibility, if not the prospect of a different trajectory for the development of television technology and television as a cultural form. Subsequently, he had to acknowledge that few of his hopes had come to pass:

I still watch television as often but it is ironic, looking back at the 1960s, to read myself defending television against the complaints of intellectuals all over Europe and North America. What I said then was possible, and in some cases actual, was true, but I have to face the fact that their descriptions of it are now, with only a few exceptions, remarkably accurate about current British television. Nevertheless, because of the way it went, what we have seen is not some essential and inevitable destiny of the medium. The true process is historical. The changes were politically willed and managed. The exciting burst of new work in the Sixties was very consciously and deliberately restrained. (1987a: xi)

Williams’s strategy of focusing upon ownership and control, despite the complexity of his account, did not enable him to employ his conception of flow as a dynamic way of grasping the nature and tempo of modern capitalist relations. His television criticism tended to rest upon the axioms of his political outlook rather than on any new insights provided by the actual development of communications technology and their related cultural forms.

*Monty Python's Flying Circus*

Williams felt that the 'grotesque and exuberant fantasy' of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* was 'playing on strained nerves'; it provoked 'an inevitable and unstoppable laughter somewhere on the far side of a general breakdown of meanings' (1972d: 194). The 'achingly funny' mood created by *Monty Python's* disruption of the conventions of television news and current affairs presentation was in some sense a response to an ungovernable weariness at the problems of the world. And, it was this mood that mattered:

This, I believe, is the mood that matters. Television is now so pervasive that we project onto it many of our feelings about quite other things. Yet in its standard uses in this kind of society it is clearly part of the problem rather than part of the solution. (1972d: 194)

*Monty Python* created a residual mood 'in which virtually nothing' could be 'said or done without becoming absurd'. This, Williams thought, had had a salutary effect (which was, to be sure, deserved) on most of the dominant programming. However, he said:

Perhaps I am too preoccupied with problems of sequence and flow on television, but I keep noticing a sense of devastation of other kind of work and statement around this kind of comedy. (1980d: 111)

Williams thought that the only reasonably constant factor in what had been dubbed 'satire' by Kenneth Tynan was 'a specific conjunction of university revue with popular television' (1980d: 108). *Monty Python*, coming as it did, from the 'dissident comic faction of the governing and administrative class' could point up the absurdity of the ruling circles because the Oxbridge boys responsible for the show were familiar with the world of the upper class. But, they had regrettably also failed to shed their negative attitudes to funny foreigners, funny regional accents, funny housewives, and funny workingmen. However, Williams did not think that 'there was any point in blaming the boys'. What mattered most was not the rudery and cruel jokes and joking

cruelty, but finding ways of restoring the opportunities for *gravitas* destroyed by *Pythonesque* humour and the wild bursts of anarchic energy displayed by these upper class lads:

What is really in question is how we get through, get out of, a state of disbelief and helplessness which is bound, in all its early stages, to seem comic and edgy: demanding the funny face and the paranoiac prance. (1980d: 112)

Williams did not seem to be aware that *Dud and Pete* and the *Dagenham Dialogues* were not simply amusing commentaries on ‘the absurdity of the thinking working-class man’ but could, in the general context of their humour, be thought of as assaults upon the conception of the working class as it was figured in the general class relations of the time. *Monty Python* could be read as an assault upon Britain in the seventies and the manner in which *all* classes were patterned and figured. But Williams saw it as decadent:

It is in some of *Monty Python*, and perhaps at its best in *The Life of Brian*, that this note of shared helplessness is most often struck. Somebody is trying to say something, or to think something through, and every kind of interruption and disability not only intrudes and prevents him, but seems marshalled, systematically, to prevent him. At its best, this has much in common with the more officially recognised art of what is called ‘non-communication’. Indeed often, in its exuberance, it is less decadent than these more prestigious currencies of the official art and theatre world. But still, less *decadent*. (1980d: 111)

This view of decadence<sup>113</sup> prevented Williams from grasping fully that what was decaying were the traditional ways in which class relations had been figured and organised in Britain since the 1880s. To be sure, he knew that the proliferation of ‘consumer

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<sup>113</sup> See also ‘The Decadence Game’ (1970b: 118-121). For the cynical culture of late capitalism and the latent culture of alienation, see ‘Distance’ (1982c: 13-21).

durables', that had begun as early as the mid-twenties, had been responsible for initiating profound changes to the way individuals experienced society.<sup>114</sup> He was aware that gradually widening prosperity and what he called *mobile privatisation* was altering the experience of 'modern urban industrial living' (1974a: 20). Yet he did not doubt the continued existence of the working-class as a readily identifiable economic, political and cultural entity. And, it was precisely the maintenance of this tension between changes that he knew were taking place and his commitment to a political outlook predicated on the view that such changes were epiphenomenal that prevented him, along with John Lennon and many others, from recognising the emergent notion that 'class consciousness' was under severe pressure if not actually outmoded.<sup>115</sup> Consequently, Williams could not properly acknowledge this important aspect of the emergent structure of feeling revealed by the formal innovation and changes in comic conventions initiated by *The Goon Show*, *Beyond The Fringe*, *TW3*, and *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. He could not, of course, easily endorse the idea that class distinctions were ludicrous, or take the view that the intersecting dignities associated with rank, were simply absurd.

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<sup>114</sup> See *Television, Technology and Cultural Form* (1974a: 20).

<sup>115</sup> John Lennon's song *Working Class Hero*, released December 11, 1970, expressed it thus:

Keep you doped with religion, sex and T.V.  
 And you think you're so clever and classless and free  
 But you're still fucking peasants as far as I can see  
 Working Class Hero is something to be  
 Working Class Hero is something to be

*Plastic Ono Band*: Produced by John Lennon, Yoko Ono,  
 Phil Spector.

### Advertising: The Hidden Persuaders<sup>116</sup>

Williams understood advertising as an essentially parasitic practice battenning upon the production and distribution of goods.<sup>117</sup> He attributed its growth to the growth of monopolies and their need to organise the market to their own advantage. In this sense advertising was simply a device of capitalists to cajole and fool people into consuming what they might not, in the absence of the admen's blandishments, need or want. In another, perhaps more profound sense, it represented the conflict between capitalism and socialism:

The fundamental choice that emerges, in the problems set to us by modern industrial production, is between man as consumer and man as user. The system of organized magic which is modern advertising is primarily important as a functional obscuring of this choice. (1961b: 186)<sup>118</sup>

In 1969 he again stressed that advertising was the product of the failure to replace capitalism with socialism: 'Advertising is the consequence of a social failure to find means of public information and decision over a wide range of everyday economic life.' (1969c: 193)

Advertising is indeed a corollary of generalised commodity production. It is not, however, epiphenomenal or parasitic; it is an essential and spontaneous development once capitalist relations have reached a certain stage of density. With improvements in productivity and rising living standards the production of goods

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<sup>116</sup> For a popular analysis from the fifties of advertising as *manipulation* see *The Hidden Persuaders* (Packard 1957)

<sup>117</sup> He also thought of advertising as 'a specific deformation of the capitalist city' (1973c: 295).

<sup>118</sup> "Advertising: the Magic system, originally written as a chapter in *The Long Revolution* (1961), withdrawn from that book for inclusion in a collective book on advertising which in the event was not published, then published in part in *New Left Review*, 4, July-August 1960 (the *Afterword* to this essay was published in *The Listener*, 31 July, 1969)." (1980a: ix) It is also worth noting that Marshall McLuhan had written an article entitled 'Advertising as a Magical Institution', *Commerce Journal*, University of Toronto, January 1952.

for consumption by retail customers came to dominate capitalist production. The market for the producers' goods grew exponentially both in volume and value and the supply of goods to the final consumers, instead of being channelled and mediated through a relatively small number of agents — fellow industrialists, the state, merchants, and other traders — had to be organised across a mass market comprised of tens of thousands (and later millions) of *individual* customers. By 1900 the manufacturer of many commodities had to address as directly as possible these potential retail customers: individuals scattered throughout urban and rural areas in many countries across the world. This trend, despite economic catastrophe, wars and revolutions continued to grow throughout the opening decades of the twentieth century reaching new levels of intensity in the USA during the forties, fifties and sixties, and in Britain during the fifties, sixties and seventies. These societies, together with Japan, Australasia, Canada and Western Europe, constituted the 'affluent society'<sup>119</sup>

The value of commodities is only finally determined and realised by their sale in the market. Therefore it is essential that they be sold. Consequently, with the proliferation of customers, market research and advertising became essential tools in the hands of capitalists to ensure that they could sell the goods (i.e., the 'use values') that they produced. For without a sale, the value and surplus value generated during the production process cannot be realised.

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<sup>119</sup> For discussion of the affluent society see *One Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 1964 *passim*), and for Williams on Marcuse see (1969d: 162-6). For a discussion of 'consumer society' that, in contrast to Marcuse's account *Eros and Civilisation* (Marcuse 1956) and *One Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 1964), is both opposed to Marx and eschews engagement with Freud, see Hannah Arendt's book, *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958: *passim*, but particularly: 79-135). See also Stuart Hall's discussion of the implications for socialists of rising levels of comfort and prosperity among the working class in his essay 'The Supply of Demand' (Hall 1960: 79). For discussion of the conditions and representations of working class life during the late fifties and early sixties see *Representations of Working Class Life 1957-1964* (Laing 1986). For a later discussion of the damage done by rising living standards to the self-confidence and autonomy of working class people see Jeremy Seabrook's *What Went Wrong: Working People and the Ideals of the Labour Movement* (Seabrook 1978: *passim*).

Williams deeply resented this process because he thought that the freedom of people to take their own decisions was undermined by a ‘mimed celebration of other people’s decisions’ (1969c: 193). Williams thought that beer should be enough for us without the promise that drinking it would enhance our manliness, our youth or our neighbourliness. Similarly with washing machines and a myriad of other products. In a tangential allusion to Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism Williams thought that the short description of advertising was *magic*. It is:

. . . a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions, functionally very similar to magical systems in simpler societies, but rather strangely coexistent with a highly developed scientific technology. (1961b: 185)

Whereas Marx thought that the fetishism of commodities lay in the manner in which ‘the social character of labour appears to us to be an objective character of the products themselves’ (Marx 1867: 76-87), Williams thought that the fetishism of commodities lay in the promise made by advertisers that the use or consumption of particular products would enhance the life of the customer in ways that lay beyond the commodity’s simple utility.

Williams’s political objection to capitalism led him to portray the capacity of advertised commodities to enhance self-confidence, freedom of action, social standing, and sexual appeal as a general unreality that obscured the real failures of society because:

If the meanings and values generally operative in the society give no answers to, no means of negotiating, problems of death, loneliness, frustration, the need for identity and respect, then the magical system must come, mixing its charms and expedients with reality in easily available forms, and binding the weakness to the condition which has created it. (1961b: 190)

Without considering the alternative to capitalism promised by actually existing socialism or Williams’s own vision of *common sharing* it is clear that this mode of analysis prevented Williams from either exploring or understanding the degree to which the

development of capitalism resulted in people who could not merely routinely decode the multiple meanings of ads, but could compare their claims, and make sophisticated choices within the capitalist marketplace. And, perhaps more importantly, his was a mode of analysis that precluded the possibility of investigating the reflexive capacity of the ‘consumer’ to consciously acknowledge that they are themselves part of the spectacle of capitalist society.<sup>120</sup> It is striking that the author of ‘Drama in a Dramatised Society’ (1974d 1985) was unable to extend his analysis beyond the *stage* and *screen* to consider the manner in which clear majorities of people in the rich capitalist societies began to play their parts in the drama of bourgeois society.<sup>121</sup>

The commodity form in which all the products of detailed labour become directly comparable and exchangeable in the market does indeed endow material objects with magical or mysterious properties.<sup>122</sup> ‘There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.’ (Marx 1867: 77) It is in the course of the development of mass consumption that the material relations between people intensify, awarding objects the power to signify the social, and producing people who define themselves through the gestures and rhetoric of their consumption.

By the early seventies, these people — ‘consumers’ — seeing themselves as active participants, in what we might call the waking dream or spectacle of bourgeois society, were engaged in social and cultural relationships that could not be adequately described by Williams’s phrases concerning the ‘fantasy’ inherent

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<sup>120</sup> In another radical view of capitalism from one of Williams’s contemporaries:

“The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.” (Debord 1967: I ¶ 4)

<sup>121</sup> See a suggestive article on this aspect of Williams’s work in Lizzie Eldridge’s article, ‘Drama in a Dramaturgical Society’ (Eldridge 1997: 71-88).

<sup>122</sup> In another context Williams was articulate concerning the peculiar relations between persons and things thrown up by capitalist development; when writing about Dickens’s method of personifying objects and objectifying persons he argued: ‘This method is very remarkable. It has its basis, of course, in certain properties of the language: perceptions of relations between persons and things. But in Dickens it is critical. It is a conscious way of seeing and showing. The city is shown as at once a social fact and a human landscape.’ (1970a: 37) This approach represents a move well beyond I. A. Richards who attributed the ‘delusion’ of thingification or reification directly to an effect of grammar (Richards 1924: 13).

in life under ‘late’ capitalism.<sup>123</sup> Hence the structure of feeling revealed by the new forms and conventions of advertising and the promotion of goods and services were not realisable within the parameters of his criticism or in the terms of his sociology of culture.<sup>124</sup>

The failure of Williams’s critical resources in relation to contemporary humour and television was also exhibited in a similar fashion and for similar reasons in his approach to advertising. He described the development of advertising from the earliest periods of mercantilist and capitalist trade and its relationship to the growth of the newspaper press in a fairly comprehensive manner. He was also able to describe adequately the formal changes that occurred in advertising during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and again during the interwar years.<sup>125</sup> However, when he ventured beyond simple description into analysis the weakness of his critical strategies was revealed.

More than anything else this failure to acknowledge the positive success of post-1945 capitalist society in Western Europe, North America, Japan and Australasia in creating economic relations and modes of life that effectively engaged the personalities and aspirations of millions of working class people for more than half a century revealed the absolute limit of Williams’s critical resources.

The activities of artists engaged in painting and the plastic arts, of writers and film makers, the work of graphic designers, workers in shop window display, haute couture, furniture, popular street fashions, photography, architecture, avant-garde and popular music – all eluded the reach of Williams’s aesthetic of emancipation and his sociology of culture. His discussion of television drama, of *Monty Python*, and of televisual flow simply did not address the scale of the problem presented to socialists by a thriving bourgeois cultural life. Neither did Williams engage in any sustained way with the dynamic manner in which capitalist society sought to confront and recuperate the growing cultural

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<sup>123</sup> For consideration of the idea of ‘late’ capitalism see Ernest Mandel’s *Marxist Economic Theory* (Mandel 1962) and *Late Capitalism* (Mandel 1972).

<sup>124</sup> For an outline of his ‘sociology of culture’ see the primer *Culture* issued in 1981 (1981: *passim*).

<sup>125</sup> For Williams’s brief history of advertising see *The Long Revolution* (1961a: 222-236); ‘Advertising: the Magic System’ (1961b: 170-184), and, *Communications* (1962: 22-34).

presence of feminism or the struggles of black people. Although Williams had not, since his teens, subscribed to A. A. Zhadanov's or Christopher Caudwell's *bourgeois decadence* or *dying culture* theses he always looked for vitality in works and relationships that were in some sense hostile to the competitive ethos of market relations. Consequently, the positive fascination with the commodity, the saturation of society with advertising, and the creation of a vast new repertoire of interchangeable modes of self-presentation, could only be approached with disapproval and observations concerning the fetishism of commodities and the *inhuman* character of capitalist relations.

Perhaps most striking is Williams's disregard for his own theoretical positions revealed by his inability to notice cultural developments which positively engaged with capital, or at the very least did not resist it in any meaningful sense, as anything more than epiphenomenon. In other words, as *superficial* or *superstructural* elements that could give little or no insight into the real development of society. His discussion of advertising is seriously limited as was his general purchase on what might be called the spirit of his times. Consequently, he misses the invention of the 'label' by Pierre Cardin in 1959 and its development in the subsequent twenty years.<sup>126</sup> Beyond the discourse of commodification, he would be hard put to account for *Hari Krishna-Hari Rama*, homo-eroticism, Johnny Rotten, Sid Vicious, DIY, flexi-time, package holidays and the plethora of other cultural developments which shaped the way that most people in Britain actually encountered capitalism over the years in which Williams was most active as a cultural critic. Even among the millions of working people dispossessed and impoverished by some of the crises which afflicted British society throughout Williams's life – the elderly and disabled, the poorly educated, the possessors of outmoded skills – the aspiration to participate in the general prosperity appears to have always had much greater appeal than the ideal of socialist common sharing.

During the sixties and seventies Williams's political outlook, and that of the left generally, fore grounded the peace movement, trade union and community activities, colonial and semi-colonial

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<sup>126</sup> Pierre Cardin, emulated the pioneering practice of Coco Chanel and Christian Dior in licensing the use of his name on products produced by others. See (Morais 1991: 90-91).

wars, and internecine struggles both within and on the margins of the Labour Party. Insofar as feminism, gay liberation, or struggles against racism were embraced they were addressed from a distinctively socialist perspective in which considerable energy was expended to insert these concerns into analytical frameworks and theoretical and aspirational perspectives congenial to socialism. Given these preoccupations and the outlook that gave rise to them it was simply not within the reach or capacity of the aesthetic of emancipation to engage with cultural developments which violated the sensibilities of socialists and challenged the account of contemporary social relations believed by Williams to be essential to a proper understanding of capitalist society.

Consequently, Williams's view of the emergent social forces in British society was permanently skewed. He could not acknowledge the ability of pro-capitalist politicians, administrators, businessmen and trade unionists to overcome the difficulties that they encountered and he could not recognise developments he thought of as inimical to socialism as either creative or valuable. The capacity of bourgeois relations to engage the personality could only result in what he figured an 'alien formation'. In 1975 he explained it thus:

Can I put it in this way? I learned the experience of incorporation, I learned the reality of hegemony, I learned the saturating power of the structures of feeling of a given society, as much from my own experience as from observing the lives of others. All through our lives, if we make the effort, we uncover layers of this kind of alien formation in ourselves, and deep in ourselves. So then the recognition of it is a recognition of large elements in *our own* experience, which have to be – shall we say it? – defeated. (1975a: 75)

This belief, redolent with wisdom born of weary experience, is derived from a view of social development that was being erased by wider social experience throughout Williams's life.

## Chapter Five: Literary Representations of Class

### Wordsworth and Clare, Cobbett and Austen

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

It is not that literature is not answerable to extra-literary forces. Bad reading may to some extent be due to the fact that a much lower degree of awareness is manifested in the average reader’s response to literature than in his directly personal or social living. But a work of literature is a precise and conscious organisation of experience, and it must always primarily be treated as such. All criticism, all attempts at correlation, must begin from the fact of the work. It is perfectly possible to believe that *Wuthering Heights* is a statement on emergent class-consciousness and that Heathcliff represents the proletariat (as I have seen recently publicly argued). But it is not possible to believe this if one reads Emily Brontë’s novel. (1950: 102-3)<sup>127</sup>

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

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<sup>127</sup> Although he expresses himself in less brutal terms, Williams makes the same point twenty years later regarding the view that ‘Heathcliff is the proletariat’ (1970a: 65).

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

But we are bound to remember that most, though not all, of these tours to wild places were undertaken by people who were able to travel because ‘nature’ had not left their own lands in an ‘original elemental state’. The picturesque journeys — and the topographical poems, journals, paintings and engravings which promoted and commemorated them — came from the profits of an improving agriculture and from trade. It is not, at this level, an alteration of sensibility; it is strictly an addition of taste. Like the landscaped parks, where every device was employed to produce a natural effect, the wild regions of mountain and forest were for the most part objects of conspicuous aesthetic consumption: to have been to the named places, to exchange and compare the travelling and gazing experiences, was a form of fashionable society. (1973c: 128)

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

by the propertied status of the *consumers*. Differences, acknowledged earlier by Williams, of register, history, social aspiration, and even class circum-stances, instanced by the proprietary sweep of a gardened landscape around a great house or the gaze of a leisured traveller upon the wild terrible beauty of crags and waterfalls were effaced or at least demoted by this approach.<sup>128</sup> Williams's acerbic and cunning observations concerning profits from landed property confer authenticity on the simple assertion that these new artefacts and forms of experience were simply items of consumption; from there the simple assertion that we are in the realm of 'taste' rather than altered 'sensibility' arises quite naturally.<sup>129</sup>

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

Thus to see a class on its own, however closely and intimately, is subject to the same limitations as seeing a region on its own, and then to some further limitations in that certain of the crucial elements of class — that it is formed in and by certain definite relations with other classes — may then be missed altogether. (1982a: 234)

His view of Austen in this respect was compelling:

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

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<sup>128</sup> Peter de Bolla notes that '... similarly motivated forms of seeing were generated throughout the various stratifications of eighteenth-century society, and this included not only landowners and dispossessed laborers but all in between as well. Thus for example, in the massive tour literature of the period the increasingly mobile "middling" sort began to stake a claim for their own structures of seeing and feeling.' (de Bolla 1995: 185)

<sup>129</sup> The distinction between 'taste' and 'sensibility' is set out by Williams in *Keywords* (1976a: 313-315). See also Wordsworth's 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads' (Wordsworth 1802: 594-611).

her discrimination is, understandably, internal and exclusive. She is concerned with the conduct of people who, in the complications of improvement, are repeatedly trying to make themselves into a class. But where only one class is seen, no classes are seen. Her people are selected though typical individuals, living well or badly within a close social dimension. (1973c: 117)

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

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

as a proverb in the vale  
For endless industry

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

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

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

eighteenth-century country writing, is continued in familiar terms. (1973c: 130)

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

Clare goes beyond the external observation of the poems of protest and of melancholy retrospect. What happens in him is that the loss is internal. (1973c: 141)

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

‘Tis thus they live — a picture to the place;  
A quiet, pilfering, unprotected race.  
(Clare 1841: 165)<sup>130</sup>

This last line in *The gypsy camp* — A quiet, pilfering, unprotected race — is admired by both Williams and his daughter for the way it balances the gypsies’ negative qualities — pilfering — with their status as an outcast minority for whom the social order provides no protection. This desire for balance in relation to

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<sup>130</sup> This poem was written circa 1840-1 and shares its name with ‘The Gipseys Camp’, written circa 1819-21 (Clare 1821a: 65-6).

a manifestly oppressed group is not, however, welcomed by Raymond Williams when applied to the wider community of labourers or to the working class as a whole.

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

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

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

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

Nor sabbath-days much better thoughts instill;  
The true-going churchman hears the signal ring,  
And takes his book his homage to fulfil,  
And joins the clerk his amen-task to sing,  
And rarely home forgets the text to bring:  
But soon as service ends, he 'gins again  
'Bout signs in weather, late or forward spring,  
Of prospects good or bad in growing grain;

And if the sermon's long he waits the end with pain.<sup>131</sup>

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

Even in the very early 'Helpstone', we can see that he felt he was searching in vain for a 'better life', and that his beloved village was the home of 'useless ignorance'. So his feelings were highly ambiguous. He became extremely depressed when he moved away from his birthplace, yet he needed to leave it occasionally, to meet other poets and to make contact with educated people. Having left his own class, it was not possible for him to join another; the people who had bought his first book of poems because it was by a Northamptonshire peasant ignored his later and much better work. (1986a: 218)

This seems to be a plausible account. Yet it appears to have embedded within it the idea that it was the process of Clare's deracination, perhaps brought on by his own social ambitions, which provoked his criticism of the stupefying dullness of life among rural labourers. The trope of exile, applied to the writer stranded and cut off from nourishing social roots, was employed on several occasions by Williams to explain what lay behind their views concerning the moral probity or the intellectual and political capacity of labouring people. Williams expressed little sympathy for such observations. He was always more interested in explaining the reasons writers had for making them. It was not that he was incapable of admitting to prejudice and stupidity among the lower orders it was that it either didn't interest him or,

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<sup>131</sup> Extract from 'The Village Minstrel', written circa 1819-21, (Clare 1921b: 69-70).

when it did, he wanted to explain it as a function of the local conditions of class formation.

Consequently, Mugsborough is identified as a town in which the heterogeneous nature of economic activity and employment militated against the development of self-conscious movements aimed at strengthening collectivity among working men and women.<sup>132</sup> Owen's pain, which is as palpable as Clare's, in his struggle with the preoccupations and outlook of his workmates in Mugsborough is attributed by Williams to what he calls Tressell's 'difference'. That difference resided in the fact that he had travelled, lived abroad, and had, 'from the beginning, a different perspective':

I mean also what it was very important to know, as the biography was eventually assembled, that this was, in many ways, a very literate man; that his command of languages was very wide; that he was a man capable of sustained reading and of assessing statistics. And then there was this double situation, that he was coming home day by day, from hard slog to earn his bread, doing his job and yet with a mind which had reached a different perspective, having read and having seen other parts of the world. (1982b: 248)

As with Clare this seems to be a plausible account.<sup>133</sup> Yet the irony of the title, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, and the hatred of ignorance and deference expressed by Tressell were attributed to the peculiarities of his social circumstance. Prejudices that favoured and celebrated an identity of interests between the British Empire and the British Worker — between capital and labour — common throughout the working class

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<sup>132</sup> This point is made by Williams in 'The Ragged-Arsed Philanthropists' (1982b: 246-247).

<sup>133</sup> Alan Sillitoe reported: '... Reading *Tressell of Mugsborough*, by F. C. Ball, I found the following sentence from a letter written by a relation of Tressell's: 'I have told you quite truthfully that Robert was *not* born into the working class. He would have had a very much happier life, no doubt, had he been. It is useless to argue about what 'class' a man was born into, but it is interesting to know that Tressell was a person grafted on to working-class life through family misfortune. Little is known about his early years, but one account says that his father was an Inspector in the Royal Irish Constabulary.' (Sillitoe 1964: 8)

during the early years of the last century are not denied by Williams. However, Tressell's bitter focus upon them apparently resulted in a book that lacked the substance of those that adopted what Williams regarded as a more positive stance:

Then, from this double vision, the bitter irony of the title — Ragged-Arsed and Philanthropists — is the best way of reminding us that the book has advantages which the most positive, realist novels from inside the working-class communities don't usually have. It also (inevitably because it has other things to do) has less of the sustained substance of that other fiction at its best. (1982b: 248-9)

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

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

Indeed there are parts of this book which, taken on their own — which is quite wrong to do, but analytically you can hypothesize it — have such savage things to say about so many working-class people, about the general conditions of ignorance and misunderstanding and cruelty, that there is hardly a line between them and a certain kind of reactionary rendering of the working class

and working people as irredeemably incapable of improving their conditions. (1982b: 249)<sup>134</sup>

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

What Tressell has to say is only tolerable because he had to work for his living as a painter and decorator.<sup>135</sup> And, that other painter and decorator, Sean O’Casey, evoked a remarkably similar though somewhat guarded response from Williams when he encountered moments of intense suffering overridden with the ‘endless, bibulous, blathering talk’ of the Dublin slum:

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

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<sup>134</sup> In this respect another novel, also from the socialist tradition, is of interest: Bernard Shaw’s *An Unsocial Socialist*. It is built around the character of Sydney Trefusis, a wealthy man who early in the novel sets out to proselytise for socialism amongst the benighted labouring class by masquerading as an exceedingly ‘umble’, forelock tugging, ‘common’, working man (Shaw 1884: *passim*).

<sup>135</sup> In this response Williams was ignoring considerable evidence of hostility towards socialism amongst the poor and a reciprocal hostility among working class socialists towards the poor. See the excellent essay by the socialist historian James D. Young, ‘The Labour Movement and “the Poor”, 1883-1914’ (Young 1989:19-35). Young pointed out: ‘In *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, Robert Tressell articulated the anti-working-class prejudices of the SDF with great brilliance. What is frequently overlooked in discussions of the SDF’s Marxism and Tressell’s socialism is their shared belief in the imposition of the socialist revolution from above. The pages of *Justice* were full of observations that socialism would ultimately be imposed on a hostile working-class population by a ‘compact minority’ of revolutionary socialists.’ (Young 1989: 25)

continuously dramatically aware of it. But it is a very difficult emotion to control: an uneasy separation and exile, from within the heart of the talk. And because this is so, this people's dramatist writing for what was said to be a people's theatre at the crisis of this people's history, is in a deep sense mocking it at the very moment when it moves him. (1968a: 163-64)

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

It may be that Williams did not know that P. O Cathasaigh of the Citizen Army was indeed Sean O'Casey,<sup>136</sup> or it may be he was passing some kind of judgement on O'Casey's politics. Whichever it was, his response to O'Casey's writing was more than guarded. He sought to grasp the complexities of the situation in which the working class writer was placed and how this became involved in fashioning the artwork. As with Tressell, direct involvement from within the working class, could make a general view sustainable and even humane:

His strength is in the anonymous, collective, popular idiom through which a working world is strongly, closely, ironically seen. What is then interesting is that despite this vigour the final judgment is ironical: the ragged-trousered philanthropists — those who in the end accept exploitation; the inhabitants of Mugsborough. It is a generous irony, from within the working class, and as such humane. (1970a: 155)

But whether the writer was in Helpstone, Hastings, Hoxton, Clerkenwell, Wigan, or Dublin, if their work touched in any powerful manner upon the *general* failure of working class people to act responsibly towards society, towards themselves or towards each other, the problem appears to have been the deracination of the artist. In such cases Williams resorted to the trope of exile:

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<sup>136</sup> See: O'Casey 1919; Lyons 1971: 285; Boyle 1969: 53-7.

The paradoxical force of the language, endlessly presenting and self-conscious, at once to others and to the audience, drives through the play, but not as richness: as the sound, really, of a long confusion and disintegration. A characteristic and significant action is repeated: while the men are dying, in the Easter rising, the people of the tenements are looting, and lying about themselves. It is an unbearable contrast, and it is the main emotion O'Casey had to show: of nerves ragged by talking which cannot connect with the direct and terrible action. The use of random colour, of flags, of slogans, of rhetoric and comic inflation, of the sentimental song, of reminiscences of theatre (as in Nora repeating the mad Ophelia) is a rush of disintegration, of catching at temporary effects, which is quite unique: in a way, already, the separated consciousness, writing from within a life it cannot accept in its real terms yet finds endlessly engaging and preoccupying: the structure of feeling of the self-exile, still within a collective action, which can be neither avoided nor taken wholly seriously; neither indifferent nor direct. (1968a: 166)

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

The General Strike of 1926 was a high point of working class self-organization and protest. It was strong in many places and indeed present and active in most. But look also at

that less convenient memory of 1926: at that organization for strike-breaking against the organized working class: the OMS, the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, one of those things we've half-forgotten although we may see its like again. Look where that was recruited. It was not, as some of the books tell you, all undergraduates and their debutante friends. It really was not.

In certain parts of the country, where the problems of social self-definition, of class consciousness in that hard, arresting, challenging form, are in fact quite different, there was significant recruiting of poor men against what was objectively their own class. (1982b: 245-6)

However, novelists or dramatists could not safely or accurately present this objective recognition of the widespread existence of what he could only regard as reprehensible conduct among the working class unless they presented it through the experience and feelings of particular participants in the life and the available choices depicted. And this view was, if anything, underlined by Williams's somewhat grudging recognition of the value of statistical modes of analysis which, from the 1830s, facilitated the construction of general views of behaviour and social conditions among the poor.<sup>137</sup>

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

For the sense of the great city was now, in many minds, so overwhelming, that its people were often seen in a single way: as a crowd, as 'masses' or as a 'workforce'. The image could be coloured either way, for

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<sup>137</sup> Williams echoed Dickens and others in thinking of the 'statistical mode' of studying society as 'destructive and hateful'. 'But without it, nevertheless, much that needed to be seen, in a complicated, often opaque and generally divided society, could not, as a basis for common experience and response, be seen at all.' (1973c: 222)

sympathy or for contempt, but its undifferentiating character was persistent and powerful. (1973c: 222)<sup>138</sup>

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

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

'... already, the separated consciousness, writing from within a life it cannot accept in its real terms yet finds endlessly engaging and preoccupying: the structure of feeling of the self-exile, still within a collective action, which can be neither avoided nor taken wholly seriously ...' (1968a: 166)

He is in sympathy with O'Casey and with O'Casey's predicament. This sympathy is sustainable because O'Casey, like Tressell, does not attack socialism or present the fecklessness of the labouring or unemployed poor as a fundamental barrier to their participation in the struggle for the improvement of their own conditions. The presentation of the failure of a Dublin tenement's residents to regard the struggle for national independence as something of relevance to their immediate circumstances, like the presentation of the failure of the painters

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<sup>138</sup> For a discussion of the term 'masses' see: (1958a: 295-312; 1976a: 196-7).

and decorators of Mugsborough to regard the ‘The Oblong’ as a relevant description of their social circumstance, was not regarded by Williams as inimical to the struggle for social improvement.

### **Gissing and Brecht: The Individual Against Society**

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

There are two points here. First, it does not come as news to anyone born into a poor family that the poor are not beautiful, or that a number of them are lying, shiftless and their own worst enemies. Within an actual social experience, these things can be accepted and recognized; we are dealing after all with actual people under severe pressure. A man like Gorki can record the faults of the poor (in his *Autobiography* and elsewhere) with an unflinching and quite unsentimental alertness. But Gorki would not suppose that this was an argument against change, or a reason for dissatisfaction with the popular cause. He was never subject to that kind of illusion because that was not the material of his attachment, which grew within a whole reality. Second, the faults of the poor, as they are seen from within a whole situation, are different — more individualized, and related to different standards — from those seen by the rebel whose identification is merely negative. (1958a: 177)

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

To see the open action of *Mother Courage* or *Galileo* — the sequence of scenes which are ‘for themselves’, sharp and isolated, yet connect in a pattern that defines the action . . . . Put one way, Brecht’s drama is that of isolated and separated individuals, and of their connections, in that capacity, with a total historical process. He is hardly interested at all in intermediate relationships, in that whole complex of experience, at once personal and social between the poles of the separated individual and the totally realized society. His dramatic form, isolating and dialectic, serves this structure of feeling exactly; it is his precise development of an expressionist mode, and the dimension of social realism is absent in his work, both in substance and in any continuing contemporary experience, because the structure is of that kind. Put another way, Brecht’s expressionism is unusually open, is a development of possibilities and even at times a transformation of effective conventions, because he took up the position of explaining rather than exposing an overall critical-objective position, rather than the intensity of special pleading on behalf of an isolated figure. (1968a: 330-1)

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

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

In this valuation Williams made clear that he was not insisting upon positive or optimistic presentations of the capacity of individuals to participate in processes aiming at improving conditions.<sup>139</sup> However, he did require a high level of integration between the formal means used by the artist and the character of the historical and social processes being realised.

### Gissing's Prejudices

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

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

Williams could be sympathetic towards Gissing, but it was sympathy for a divided self. It was sympathy for an artist who, faced with the urban crowd, tried to seek out the individuals who composed it while simultaneously drawing back in fervid recognition of the necessity of his own isolation:

He is the humane observer describing the urban landscape and its social experience, trying to individualise beyond it. He is also the man who enacts in himself the alienation he is witnessing; who sees in the despair of

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<sup>139</sup> See also 'The Achievement of Brecht' (1981c: 153-162), and Chapter 7 of *Modern Tragedy*, 'A Rejection of Tragedy' (1966a: 190-204).

others not only his own despair but the shapes of recoil: the drawing back, do-not-touch-me kind of exile. (1970: 160)

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

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

Clara hated the place from her first hour in it. It seemed to her that the air was poisoned with the odour of an unclean crowd. The yells of children at play in the courtyard tortured her nerves; the regular sounds on the staircase, day after day repeated at the same hours, incidents of the life of poverty, irritated her sick brain and filled her with despair to think that as long as she lived she could never hope to rise again above this world to which she was born.

That is the authentic and powerful note of Gissing: the indignation and despair, but also the ragged nerves, the whine, of the separated frustrated life-carrying individual, not only aware of but against 'the weltering mass'. It is almost contemporary with *Tess* and *Jude* but the voice could hardly be more different. (1970: 161-2)

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

The economy prevailing in to-day's architecture takes good care that no depressing circumstances shall be absent from the dwellings in which the poor find shelter. What terrible barracks, those Farringdon Road Buildings! Vast, sheer walls . . . (Gissing 1889: Ch.30: 273-4)

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

For Engels it was changing:

That immense haunt of misery is no longer the stagnant pool it was six years ago. It has shaken off its torpid despair, has returned to life, and has

become the home of what is called the 'New Unionism'; that is to say, the organization of the great mass of 'unskilled' workers.

These were the days of the organisation of the gasworkers, of the matchgirls' strike, of the great dock strike of 1889. And, as Engels argued, these new unions and struggles were in a different dimension from the craft unionism of an earlier period. (1973c: 231)

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

Gissing would have liked a little more money for himself and some others, but he was not much interested in what we should now call social justice. He did not admire the working class as such, and he did not believe in democracy. He wanted to speak not for the multitude, but for the exceptional man, the sensitive man, isolated among the barbarians. (Orwell 1948a: 487)

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

We do not learn from *Demos* that social reform is hopeless; we learn about Gissing's prejudices and difficulties. The case he sets himself to prove is instructive: that a socialist working man, Richard Mutimer, on inheriting a fortune by what amounts to an accident, will inevitably deteriorate personally, and will end by diluting his principles. This does not surprise me, but it is interesting that Gissing thought this an analogue of social reform — the book is sub-titled *A Story of English Socialism*. Mutimer's destiny is always predictable, down to the point where, poor again, and seeking only to serve the working people, he is, in part through his own carelessness, in part through real error,

stoned to death by those whom he sought to help. We do not need to ask whose martyrdom this is, and in terms of the structure of feeling we return it to *Felix Holt*: if you get involved, you get into trouble.

There remains, finally, a more general line to be drawn. After *New Grub Street*, Gissing returns to his proper study, that of the condition of exile and loneliness; but both before and after the change there is a significant pattern: the disillusion with social reform is transmuted to an attachment to art. (1958a: 178-9)

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

Hubert Eldon, the squire, saves the beautiful Wanley valley from the coarse, industry-spreading Socialist, Richard Mutimer. Within this old order, guaranteed by the Englishman's love of 'Common Sense . . . that Uncommon Sense', and his distrust of abstractions, virtue can reside. It is a matter of opinion, I suppose, whether one finds this a convincing peroration, or, in the world's tumult, the desperate rationalization of a deeply sensitive, deeply lonely man. (1958a: 179)

Here we must now assume the novelist's identification is with Eldon and it seems reasonable to conclude that the 'deeply sensitive, deeply lonely man' is neither Mutimer nor Eldon nor any other of his characters, but Gissing himself.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> No doubt Williams would have agreed with Q D Leavis when she wrote in 1938: "Gissing's life and temperament, with the problems that they raise, are the key to both his many failures and his single success as an artist." (Q D Leavis 1938: 179)

### The Case of Felix Holt

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

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

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

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

*Reform must proceed*

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

George Eliot, in this kind of thinking, is very far from her best. Her position, behind the façade of Felix Holt, is that of a Carlyle without the energy, of an Arnold without the quick practical sense, of an anxiously balancing Mill without the intellectual persistence. (1958a: 107-108)<sup>141</sup>

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

Just as in the case of material wealth and its distribution we are obliged to take the selfishness and weakness of human nature into account, and however we insist that men might act better, are forced, unless we are fanatical simpletons, to consider how they are likely to act; so in this matter of the wealth that is carried in men’s minds, we have to reflect that *the too absolute predominance of a class whose wants have been of a common sort, who are chiefly struggling to get better and more food, clothing, shelter, and bodily recreation, may lead to hasty measures for the sake of having things more fairly shared, which, even if they did not fail of their object, would at last*

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<sup>141</sup> In *Culture and Society* (1958a: 344) Williams gives his source as: ‘*Address to Workingmen, by Felix Holt*, George Eliot; Blackwood’s, 1868; repr. *Essays and Leaves from a Note-book*, Blackwood, 1884; pp. 341-342.’ and ‘pp. 333 and 348.’

*debase the life of the nation.* [Material quoted by Williams is in italics] (Eliot [1868] 1884: 341-2)

This passage belongs to an argument concerning the way in which learning and the accumulated treasury of knowledge is bound up with the prevailing conditions ‘which have much evil in them’. Eliot is arguing that considerable caution is required in the struggle to effect reform in such a way that the classes which at present ‘hold the treasures of knowledge — nay, I may say, the treasure of refined needs’ are not driven from public affairs or even destroyed (Eliot [1868] 1884: 342).<sup>142</sup>

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

Now the only safe way by which society can be steadily improved and our worst evils reduced, is *not by any attempt to do away directly with the actually existing class distinctions and advantages*, as if everybody could have the same sort of work, or lead the same sort of life (which none of my hearers are stupid enough to suppose), *but by the turning of Class Interests into Class Functions or duties*. What I mean is, that each class should be urged by the surrounding conditions to perform its particular work under the strong pressure of responsibility to the nation at large; that our public affairs should be got into a state in which there should be no impunity for foolish or

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<sup>142</sup> This concern was echoed some 25 years later by Oscar Wilde in his essay ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’: ‘It is clear, then, that no authoritarian Socialism will do. For while, under the present system, a very large number of people can lead lives of a certain amount of freedom and expression and happiness, under an industrial-barrack system, or a system of economic tyranny, nobody would be able to have any such freedom at all. It is to be regretted that a portion of our community should be practically in slavery, but to propose to solve the problem by enslaving the entire community is childish.’ (Wilde 1892: 9)

faithless conduct. [Material quoted by Williams is in italics] (Eliot [1868] 1884: 333)

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

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

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

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

Almost any kind of social action is ruled out, and the most that can be hoped for, with a hero like Felix Holt, is that he will in the widest sense keep his hands reasonably clean. It is indeed the mark of a deadlock in society when so fine an intelligence and so quick a sympathy can conceive no more than this. For patience and caution, without detailed intention, are very easily converted into acquiescence, and there is no right to acquiesce if society is known to be ‘vicious’. (1958a: 109)

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

For what else is the meaning of our Trades unions? What else is the meaning of every flag we carry, every procession we make, every crowd we collect for the sake of making some protest on behalf of our body as receivers of wages, if not this: that it is our interest to stand by each other, and that this being the common interest, no one of us will try to make a good bargain for himself without considering what will be good for his fellows? And every

member of a union believes that the wider he can spread his union, the stronger and surer will be the effect of it. So I think I shall be borne out in saying that a working man who can put two and two together, or take three from four and see what will be the remainder, can understand that a society, to be well off, must be made up chiefly of men who consider the general good as well as their own. (Eliot [1868] 1884: 329-330)

### The Working Class: Deadlock or Incorporation?

The historical record shows that no ‘deadlock’ had been reached in January 1868. On the contrary, an extension of the franchise had just taken place, adding almost a million working men to the electorate,<sup>143</sup> and within two years parliament and the state had embarked upon the project of establishing a universal system of elementary education. The institutional and cultural incorporation of the industrial working class into society was seriously under way. Williams surely knew this yet he felt compelled to conclude his discussion of ‘The Industrial Novels’, *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, *Hard Times*, *Sybil*, *Alton Locke*, and *Felix Holt* in the following terms:

These novels, when read together, seem to illustrate clearly enough not only the common criticism of industrialism, which the tradition was establishing, but also the general structure of feeling which was equally determining. Recognition of evil was balanced by fear of becoming involved. Sympathy was transformed, not into action, but into withdrawal. We can all observe the extent to which this structure of feeling has persisted, into both the literature and the social thinking of our own time. (1958a: 109)

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<sup>143</sup> Indeed, it is worth remembering that this extension of the franchise had been the subject of debate and struggle for fifty years. Jeremy Bentham, who Marx described as the ‘pedantic, leather-tongued oracle of the ordinary bourgeois intelligence’, anticipated the Chartists by some three decades in calling for universal suffrage, secret ballots, annual parliaments, and equal electoral districts in his Parliamentary Reform Catechism, 1809 (Hart 1982: 2; 24; 70).

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

Williams's difficulty was compounded by his inability to directly contradict their view of the unreliable and potentially violent poor.<sup>144</sup> He could not believe that the great mass of working people in the middle decades of the nineteenth century were ignorant and intemperate and consequently unfit to engage in any reliable or sustainable manner in their own emancipation. And he could advance no evidence for this belief. Instead, he clung to Cobbett's finer feelings but it was not a dependence that could convince:

Once again Cobbett is a touchstone, and his conduct at his own trial after the labourers' revolts of 1830 is a finer demonstration of real maturity than the fictional compromises here examined. Cobbett, like nearly all men who have worked with their hands, hated any kind of violent destruction of useful things. But he had the experience and the strength to enquire further into violence. He believed, moreover, what George Eliot so obviously could not believe, that the common people were something other than a mob, and had instincts and habits something above drunkenness, gullibility and ignorance. (1958a: 105)

Williams knew something of the shifts of Cobbett's political outlook and his caution in relation to the enfranchisement of

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<sup>144</sup> For a description of mob violence and the retribution to be expected from soldiers and mill owners see *The Autobiography of Samuel Bamford* (Bamford 1848-9: 295-307). Bamford, in a similar vein to Eliot's Felix Holt, tempered his radicalism with due regard to the difficulty of feeding and accommodating big demonstrations, the unpredictable nature of large crowds, and a thoroughgoing respect for the law. He thought ' . . . that *some* of the most prominent leaders of Reform in Manchester, were men whose prudence suffered much from their zeal . . . ' (Bamford 1817: 327). See Williams's consideration of limits, resignation and reconciliation in his 'Forms of English in 1848' (1977c: 287-290). For a reading that to some extent echoes Williams's dismay at the attitudes expressed by Eliot's Felix Holt see Bernard Sharratt's discussion of Samuel Bamford's 'groping in a mental and political twilight' (Sharratt 1982: 241-264).

‘mere menial servants, vagrants, pickpockets and scamps of all sorts’ (1983d: 17). Moreover, his hatred of violent destruction did not result in outright condemnation of rick burnings and of rural riots. As Williams tells us:

Cobbett did not advocate or support the burnings; he wanted to channel the protest towards the parliamentary reform movement. But he was indignant that the military were sent in against these starving and desperate fellow-countrymen. Moreover, with typical bluntness, he recognised what the fires were doing to the cold indifference of the rich and powerful. Even while the labourers were being repressed by military force, the terror of fires had produced attention, and the beginnings of change: ‘Without entering at present into the *motives* of the working people, it is unquestionable that their acts have produced good, and great good too’ (11.12.1830). It was for this dangerously honest recognition that Cobbett was again prosecuted. His trial in July 1831 took place within the continued reform agitation; the jury split, and the prosecution was dropped. (1983d: 26)

However, Cobbett died in 1835 and the process of reform which had begun in earnest in 1832, together with changes in the nature and scale of industrial production, had by 1850, altered the terms of the struggle forever. The social world addressed by the ‘Industrial Novels’ was profoundly different. Reformers and novelists alike were aware that a small minority of the labouring poor were articulate, morally upright, and capable of establishing well directed institutions. And, it is surprising that Williams should have been tempted to assert, against his own proper understanding, that the creator of Adam, Seth, Dinah, Silas Marner, Bob Jakin, Felix, and Mr Lyon ‘so obviously could not believe, that the common people were something other than a mob, and had instincts and habits something above drunkenness, gullibility and ignorance.’ It is evident that in the process of populating the ‘Industrial Novels’ with credible characters Gaskell, Dickens, Disraeli, Kingsley, and Eliot portrayed people and relationships of great complexity. It is true, as Williams indicates, that Sybil or Esther turns out to be of noble birth, that Felix and Jem are wrongly accused, and that plots are resolved by

inheritance or emigration. But it is equally true that the 'structure of feeling' represented by these novels does not dismiss the working class as uniformly benighted or as incapable of reform or development. However, and this was Williams's principal difficulty, this process was seen as a process of reform — institutional, economic, moral — in which well disposed people from the middle and upper middle classes would assist sober and upright workmen in the struggle to bring about reform by raising the moral and cultural level of the entire working class. It was not thought credible that more than a small minority of exceptional individuals from amongst the labouring class would be able to rise above the poverty of their circumstances without radical improvements in working conditions, public hygiene, housing, and education. This was not conceived as a process in which the working class could, in any sense, act in an independent or properly autonomous manner and consequently, was not one that Williams could from any particular critical vantage point endorse.

## Chapter Six: Williams's Novels

‘A specifically Welsh structure of feeling’<sup>145</sup>

Williams attributed many of the difficulties which he thought existed in representations of the lives of working people in English literature to the dominant role of writers drawn from the middle class or the bourgeoisie, or from amongst those who could in some other sense be said to be outside, exiled, or alienated, from the life and formative experiences of working class communities. However, he did not believe that studying writing that originated from *within* the working class offered the prospect of any automatic or simple correction to these problems. The reason for this was the difficulty experienced by working class writers in developing literary forms suitable for the expression of their distinctive experience. Williams explained the problem thus:

From the beginning of the formation of the industrial working class — as indeed earlier, among rural labourers, craftsmen and shepherds — there were always individuals with the zeal and capacity to write, but their characteristic problem was the relation of their intentions and experience to the dominant literary forms, shaped primarily as these were by another dominant class. (1978e: 8)

He identified the situation of working class writers during the nineteenth century as ‘exceptionally difficult’ because of the unsuitability of ‘received conventional plots — the propertied marriage and settlement; the intricacies of inheritance; the exotic adventures; the abstracted romance’ (1978e: 9). In verse the working class writer could perhaps draw support from traditional popular forms, street ballads or work songs, but in prose forms autobiography proved much more accessible than the novel for expressing what was distinctive about their class experience.

Williams was aware of attempts to insert working class experience into conventional novels of high romance,<sup>146</sup> but he

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<sup>145</sup> See ‘The Welsh Industrial Novel’ (1978e: 11).

thought that it was not until the development of the industrial novel, ‘the true industrial novel’, that working class fiction can be said to have emerged. This, perhaps paradoxically, occurred when working class writers embraced other forms issuing from amongst the dominant class; he thought that when working class writers embraced realist and naturalistic prose forms they were able to develop a distinctive, more independent practice:

Both the realist and the naturalist novel, more generally, had been predicated on the distinctive assumption — I say assumption, though if I were not being academic I would say, more shortly, the distinctive truth — that the lives of individuals, however intensely and personally realised, are not just influenced but in certain crucial ways formed by general social relations. Thus industrial work, and its characteristic places and communities, are not just a new background: a new “setting” for a story. In the true industrial novel they are seen as formative.

(1978e: 11)

In this way Williams thought a fiction was created in which work was not something that was observed, or speculated upon from afar, or regarded in a distanced or cold manner. On the contrary work was seen as immediate, pressing and personal: ‘Here, in the world of the industrial novel — as indeed in the best rural fiction; in Hardy for example — work is pressing and formative, and the most general social relations are directly experienced within the most personal.’ (1978e: 12) At its best, the industrial novel gave expression to the formation of individuals and communities within the distinctive pressures and rhythms of industrial manual labour.

This form of writing, resulted in Wales, in a creation of a distinctive kind of industrial novel; a kind of novel that gave expression to a specifically Welsh structure of feeling. Williams thought that it was the defeat of the General Strike in May 1926, and the lockout of miners’ that followed it, which gave particular impetus to Welsh writing. It was, he thought, during the nineteen-

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<sup>146</sup> See Williams’s discussion of Joseph Keating’s *Flower of the Dark* (Keating 1917) in ‘The Welsh Industrial Novel’ (1978e: 9-11).

twenties and thirties, that working class writers produced texts saturated with a pervasive and distinctively Welsh experience of defeat:

The defeat becomes fused with the more general sadness of a ravaged, subordinated and depressed Wales, but also, and from both these sources, there is the intense consciousness of struggle — of militancy and fidelity and of the real human costs these exact; the conflicts within the conflict; the losses and frustrations; the ache of depression and that more local and acute pain which comes only to those who have known the exhilaration of struggle and who know, having given everything, that they have still not given enough; not enough in the terms of this world, which has not been changed, which has only steadily got worse. (1978e: 12)

Williams thought that from this experience of hope and defeat working class writers made some gains and experienced some losses.<sup>147</sup> They were also drawing on the resources offered by the distinctive topography in which Welsh industry was embedded within the life and work of rural landscapes, it was a landscape where not simply the pits, foundries, and mountains of slag provided a record of relentless toil; the ‘fields and hills’ were also ‘soaked with labour’ (1975b: 100-101).

This distinctively Welsh experience of struggle and of what we might call a specific *terrain* of struggle also gave rise to a specific experience of community where a quite definitely parochial rural experience was complicated by the more intense and perhaps more bitterly fought struggles to create meaningful communities, and the institutions that could sustain them, in the industrial districts of South Wales. Williams understood well the important differences that existed between the life of the village in

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<sup>147</sup> See ‘The Social Significance of 1926’ for an interesting discussion of the way in which defeat could also coincide with a ‘remarkable self-realization of the capacity of a class, in its own sufficient social relations and in its potentially positive social and economic power.’ This essay was first published in *Llafur* 2:2, 1977, and was originally an address to the commemorative conference, ‘The General Strike and the Miners’ Lockout of 1926’ organized jointly by *Llafur* and the National Union of Mineworkers at Pontypridd in April 1976. The quotation is taken from p.108 of *Resources of Hope* (1977: 105-110).

which he grew up and that built up amidst the collieries and iron works lying to the south of Pandy:

The connections between these very different kinds of community — rural and industrial — have still not been sufficiently explored: how much of one went into the other, the very complex interlocks inside those struggles, the very complex conflicts inside them, in the earlier stages, between the older tradition and the new. I think probably we are still in the early phase of understanding this. (1977f: 114)

Williams believed that the Welsh experience and particularly the contribution of South Wales to the development of ‘a much more collective community’ was as strongly realised as ‘anywhere in the world’; it was a community in which institutions were cast ‘in collective forms’ giving rise implicitly, if not automatically, to notions of a total society formed in ‘mutuality and brotherhood’. (1977f: 115)

Williams was gripped by the tangle of commitments and possibilities presented by this distinctively Welsh experience. He was gripped by the tension between the maintenance of purely local commitments and those with the wider world; he was gripped by the tension between industrial life and rural and agricultural rhythms, and by the inevitable tension between the collective obligations and solidarities which emerge in the life and labour forged in local communities, and the more private or personal needs of the individuals who compose them. It was to explore the problems presented by these tensions, and perhaps, to explore some of the formal difficulties experienced by working class writers<sup>148</sup> that Williams devoted much of his time and energy to writing novels.

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<sup>148</sup> In ‘The Welsh Industrial Novel’ (1978e) Williams discusses: Gwyn Jones, *Times Like These* (Jones 1936); Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy* (Jones 1937) and *We Live* (1939); Jack Jones, *Rhondda Roundabout* (1934) and *Black Parade* (Jones 1935); Richard Llewellyn, *How Green Was My Valley* (1939); T. Rowland Hughes, *Chwalfa* (Hughes 1946); Gwyn Thomas, *All Things Betray Thee* (Thomas 1949). See also Andy Croft’s essay ‘Authors Take Sides: Writers and the Communist Party 1920-56’ (Croft 1995).

### Future Sadness

Williams expressed his desire for emancipation most intimately in his fiction. In striving towards the articulation of a new social reality he explored the nature of the obstacles that he thought littered the path to the free acceptance and enjoyment of communal loyalties and social obligations. The seriousness of his novels — their engagement with social and moral conscience — together with their ponderous style and uneven quality did not result in wide interest. Consequently, critical engagement has been limited. However, there has been a critical literature and a few useful attempts have been made to indicate illuminating ways of reading his novels.

In writing about the trilogy, *Border Country*, *Second Generation*, and *The Fight for Manod*, J. P. Ward noted a unity of tone in Williams's fiction arising from the seriousness of its concerns and the way in which his characters interact. Ward does not want to speak of people 'sparring' with each other or of 'warily circling' around each other:

It is rather that Williams' characters never meet by chance just to pass the time of day, lose their tempers or gaily order more drinks to the accompaniment of joyful meaningless banter. People meet, quietly though usually with some tension, to think through their positions; sometimes their strong differences. At other times they are sharing a deep, careful brooding about where they stand in the community and the action with which that community is currently involved. (Ward 1981: 38-9)

In phrases redolent of Williams's style, Ward describes the 'disabling limitations' that arise from a 'too even realization of tone, and a strange lack of plurality of human emotions' (Ward 1981: 36). It is a tone of profound moral questioning and absorption that seems to make the smallest action pregnant with inchoate significance. Williams's characters appear to be paralysed by the significance of their own thoughts about their thoughts and their own contemplated actions. It was this tone that prompted Terry Eagleton's wicked lampoon of *Second Generation*:

‘But it isn’t’, said Gwen, moving to the french windows in her blue sweater. ‘It’s the energy you give that breaks you. Don’t you see? You take it this way and you see both ways, but in the end it comes down to the hard thing, that hard loss, the bitterness. And the growth pushes through that, but it isn’t the same, not in the body it isn’t. I fought and fought till it drained me but Dad wouldn’t see it, he wouldn’t make that bridge. It was a hard place to cross, to bridge that crossing, and in the end he couldn’t, it was too much the other, he fell in. He fell in and you fell in with him, Peter, that’s what I’m trying to say, don’t you see it? You took the hard road and he took the soft road but you both came out together where they meet, where history meets. You can push the desire back and it will break you but it’s all you’ve got, all Dad ever had, the hard thing at the crossing, that bitter growth.’

Peter moved quickly to the sideboard.

‘Your growth, Gwen? Your bitterness?’

‘All our growth, Peter. You, Beth, Daffyd, Dai, Jojo, Queenie - all of us.’

‘And if we die, pushing back?’

‘Then we’ll push back, dying, Peter. Why else are our hands empty when that cold stream stirs quickly in the blood? You said it was desire, and so it was - but not that desire, not now, not in this place, in Wales.’

He turned slowly towards her, seeing the thin shoulders beneath the blue sweater, the dark hair sparse on the neck. (Inglis 1995: 191-2)

This passage, cited by Fred Inglis, continues in similar vein for another 25 lines sending up the elliptical intensity of Williams’s dialogue. Inglis describes this parody as not only ‘lovingly hostile’ but as ‘hilariously accurate’. Eagleton has indeed captured, albeit with comic intention, the preternatural seriousness of Williams’s characters which provide the novels with their most distinctive claim to critical attention.

During the 1979 interviews with Williams published as *Politics and Letters* his interlocutors noted that the central figure of *Border Country*, the railwayman Harry Price, appears to be a man without contradictions, a man without conflicting desires, impulses and aspirations. They note that:

In effect, Harry is seen as a figure virtually without contradiction; even the physical descriptions of him emphasize a singleness of being which appears to have a normative force in the novel . . . . Such a moral integristm — character either given as one bloc, or if not, fissure seen as a flaw — is not persuasive novelistically or in real life. (1979b: 280-1)

Williams's response acknowledges the difficulties inherent in the solid undivided personality, but he does not see this as volitional. Harry did not opt for a life without apparent contradiction. It was bequeathed to him:

Harry Price has not set himself a life, he was set into a situation where he goes through a process of adaptation and integration as well as clearing a certain space for living in which he can feel that more of himself is there. The central thrust of the novel is actually that the kind of strength which that apparently integrated view of moral value gives is insufficient. In Harry's case, it fails in the end when death approaches, which sets a term to any perspective. There is a sense of total bewilderment in this otherwise very strong and confident man, when he becomes ill, when he can no longer work, when he's dying. What had seemed like a connection between an integrated view of life and a force of character falters once the conditions which were carrying it really go, his own physical strength, health, and the place to which he's got used. The effect of the scene where his mind is almost disintegrating is that the meanings which had seemed so powerful are losing their power. His son sees not only the physical nearness of death, but also the confusion and withdrawal of interest as it approaches. This is the reason for the son's great difficulty — he is bound to respect his father's example, and yet he is bound to feel that it isn't complete. That is the crisis in his response. (1979b: 281)

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<sup>149</sup> Williams thought that writers were 'set into a situation' too: 'Marxism, more clearly than any other kind of thinking, has shown us that we are in fact

It is possible here to see that we are not only witnessing the final physical deterioration and death of a single man but of a whole way of living in the world. Harry's death in *Border Country*, which could perhaps be taken as the dissolution of an individual in 1960, by the time of the *New Left Review* interviews in 1979, speaks of a wider social disintegration. And, in the years that have followed — through the eighties and nineties of the last century — the conditions that were carrying Harry's integrated view of life have not merely faltered, they have entirely disappeared. It is a disappearance anticipated in the much more restless, uncertain, and perhaps fractured personalities of the second and subsequent generations.

In *Politics and Letters* Williams explained his purpose adequately, but the difficulty which remains is not so much the evident disintegration of the integrated view of life represented by Harry, but the fact that we cannot but mourn its passing. The dominant centre of value, not simply in *Border Country* but throughout Williams's writing, is an aspiration for a life in which people encounter their individual desires, their personal loyalties and social obligations in an integrated and undivided manner. In this sense the son laments that he is not his father and greets the disappearance of the opportunity to be his father with dismay. Although the insufficiency of the kind of strength bestowed by an apparently integrated view of moral value is acknowledged, the hope for it is not supplanted, diminished, or destroyed. Indeed, in Williams's work there is no distinction between mourning and hoping; both traipse around after each other in a dreary pageant that appears to have no end.

In the 1979 interview his interlocutors note that in *The Fight for Manod* the incidents of solidarity and collective action present in *Border Country* and *Second Generation* are absent:

There is no equivalent of the solidarity of the railway-line or the car-factory. A wedding is the only occasion where a significant group of characters comes together.

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aligned long before we realize that we are aligned. For we are born into a social situation, into social relationships, into a family, all of which have formed what we can later abstract as ourselves as individuals. . . . So born into a social situation with all its specific perspectives, and into a language, the writer begins by being aligned.' (1980c: 25)

Was this thinning-out deliberate? It seems to give an undercurrent of sadness to the book that is unlike its predecessors. (1979b: 294)

Yes, the thinning-out was intentional. But the sadness was not retrospective; it was not an expression of nostalgia. On the contrary, it is a 'contemporary sadness' expressive of a 'wholly possible future and the contradictions and blockages of the present' (1979b: 294). Williams is clear that something has gone wrong with the present and this dislocation has implications both for the past and the future, creating a kind of future sadness more profound and much deeper than disappointment:

There's no term for it, as with nostalgia in the case of retrospect. It's the opposite of that, and of course it's distinctively different from the kind of confidence in the future many of us have had, and that I've often written to try to restore, because it is crucial, and yet to get it again means passing through the shadows of the devastating experiences of war and what happened to the best revolutionary societies and then, here, the terrible disintegration of what was once a labour movement with apparently unproblematic perspectives: all the sadness that came when we began to understand reproduction and incorporation, not just as concepts but as the wearying and displacement of flesh and blood. I wanted to seize that moment, when the common actions are latent, indeed quite precisely latent, but through a whole set of contradictions are not actualizing. (1979b: 294-5)

This elliptical account in which future sadness haunts the present and chases the past permeates his characters and the narratives of his novels. Williams was reaching here towards describing the loss of the world 'for which we have fought'. He was struggling to talk about the loss of the future. He continued:

Two other elements decide the later shape of *The Fight for Manod*. First, the quite specific sadness of rural Wales today - the Welsh writers I most respect, Emyr Humphreys especially, have this much more strongly. Then second, the experience of ageing. I don't so much

mean in myself, though I've felt it at times, but in a few people I know very well and deeply respect, who have fought and fought and quite clearly had expected that in their lifetime, their active lifetime even, there would be decisive breaks to the future. I have seen one or two of these men actually crying, from some interfused depth of social and personal sadness, and knowing why and knowing the arguments to be set against such a feeling and still in some physical sense absolutely subject to it. I have known this, as a matter of fact, in two of the finest militant intellectuals in Europe; for obvious reasons I'm not going to name them, but they've shown it to me, of their own generation, where they've often publicly overridden it. (1979b: 295)

This sadness is the expression of disappointment borne of defeat. However, it cannot be stressed enough: this melancholy is not borne of defeat, which is in any sense absolute, because the dissolution of socialism is inadmissible. Defeat, whether tactical or strategic, is transient — it is never final. Hope may falter - some may even lose hope - but ultimate defeat is not to be contemplated:

My writing of Matthew Price, who of course in *Border Country* was quite close to me, was an attempt to understand this specific contemporary sadness in someone who in *The Fight for Manod* has become very unlike me; indeed I feel a coarse hard bastard beside him, but more able, I think or hope, to work and push through. (1979b: 295)

It is hard to find a way beyond this self-referential way of reading these novels. It is difficult not to see in them an exploration of both the difficulty and the necessity of hope in and for a future beyond the experience of isolation, of alienation, and of 'self-exile' that according to Williams was such an important part of the contemporary structure of feeling in the second half of the twentieth century.

### Postmodern Geography and other strategies

Williams did not commence or carry on his work in ideal circumstances – they were certainly not circumstances of his own choosing. And, it is usual, in critical engagements with any of Williams’s texts to employ these difficulties as explanations of the inadequacy of particular analysis or of lacunae in the body of his work. Allowances are often made which obscure the origins of errors that continue to have wide currency. Hindsight is regarded with embarrassment, rather than resorted to as the key advantage of those who come later. Consequently, in much of the literature on Williams, apart from frankly hostile, *reactionary* or anti-communist accounts,<sup>150</sup> his prejudices concerning socialism and the capacities of the working class, the limited nature of his critical engagement with socialist realism, his bias in favour of the Soviet Union, more often than not go unremarked and unexamined.<sup>151</sup> While his assumption of the integrity of the subject, his reliance upon *feeling*, his idiosyncratic use of language, or the poverty of his theoretical apparatus can be generously attributed to his isolation, to his times and circumstances, the commonplaces and beliefs upon which his aesthetic rested are accepted or finessed.<sup>152</sup> This process can achieve considerable levels of sophistication as we can see, for example, in the encounter staged by Steven Connor between Williams’s work and that of Fredric Jameson and Peter Osborne. However, even here the focus is finally upon the fate of the politics of collectivity:

Socialism, or the politics of reaffirmed community, is not to be guaranteed either by the pledge of temporal wholeness promised by Williams, or by the rattled, over-totalizing logic of catastrophe suggested in the politics of time of Jameson or Derrida. Of course, socialism may not

<sup>150</sup> See Gorak 1988, Scruton 1985, and Cowling 1990.

<sup>151</sup> This is not the case with Fred Inglis 1995. However, for an alternative account of Inglis’s efforts see: McGuigan 1996: 101-108, and Samuel 1996: 8-11. For a less hostile account see Radhakrishnan Nayer 1995: 20.

<sup>152</sup> A fine exception to this observation, although still within the context of a discussion concerning the limitations of experience over cognition, is Derek Robbins’s reading of ‘Culture is Ordinary’ in his essay ‘Ways of Knowing Cultures: Williams and Bourdieu’ (Wallace 1997: 40-55).

be guaranteeable by anything at all, let alone the relative sophistication of its politics of time. But I think that, in order to grasp and inhabit the conditions of contemporality that I have attempted to evoke, the politics of collectivity must learn to live within conditions of syncoption rather than synthesis, and to establish a relation to its times, not of knowledge, but rather of acknowledgement. (Connor 1997: 197)<sup>153</sup>

In compounding or complicating the temporal Connor was seeking to evaluate Williams's work in ways in which it was hoped were more capable of meeting the challenge of post modernity without restructuring the feelings or surrendering the ambitions of the aesthetic of emancipation.

Tony Pinkney engaged in a detailed reading of Williams's fiction in 1991 in his monograph, *Raymond Williams*, for the Border Lines Series. Here, Pinkney employed the writing of Edward Soja, Fredric Jameson, Gaston Bachelard and others to develop critical tools capable of taking readings of Williams's fiction beyond historicist engagement with the social, political, and personal difficulties which formed them and to which they directly relate.<sup>154</sup>

However, refusal of the time/space dichotomy did not in any event efface Williams's social concerns, and this was consistent with Pinkney's acknowledgement that his own focus upon the 'textual complexities and perplexities' of Williams's fiction do not, 'in the long run, lead away from the social after all.' (Pinkney 1991: 110). The novels are, *after all*, inseparable from the social and political writings.

Alan O'Connor in his *Raymond Williams: Writing, Culture, Politics* gives us an insight as to why this might be the case when talking about Williams's key terms:

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<sup>153</sup> Here, Connor is not giving full weight or recognition to Williams's attempts to finesse his view of community in *The Long Revolution* and later in *Towards 2000* to take full account of technological, social and intellectual change which resulted in William's account of shifting interests and political and social alignments which in some respects anticipated the outlook, if not the language and analytical strategies, of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their book *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe 1985).

<sup>154</sup> For the full development of this spatial analysis see the section 'Taking the Feel of the Room: *Border Country* and *Second Generation*' in Pinkney's *Raymond Williams* (Pinkney 1991: 18-69).

The over-and-over quality, the sheer density of the key terms of Williams's writing, should be no surprise. The central trope is not making-strange but that of doubling-over or repetition, or an interest in the density of experience along with a determination to return and give it shape. There is an insistence that experience, when examined again, has a kind of structure. (O'Connor 1989a: 2)

It is not simply that the six novels derive their status and interest from their author, the well-known radical critic, it is that these fictions share to a remarkable degree their intensity, their obsessions, their fears, their aspirations and sometimes even their turns of phrase and closely guarded sentences, with the *non-fictions*. Raymond Williams, the novelist, is working with the same materials as Raymond Williams, the socialist literary and cultural critic.

Jan Gorak attempted a more sharply circumscribed engagement with Williams's novels in his thesis, *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams*, published in 1988. Here, in a sustained consideration of writings across the entire range of Williams's work, Gorak seeks to read Williams through the keyword of alienation. He is often perceptive and thoughtful. However, his attempt to use alienation as a determining theme results in a failure to grasp what O'Connor has referred to as Williams's attempt to give shape to the density of experience. Indeed one of the most irritating traits in Williams's writing is the often provisional and conditional character in which clause after clause piles up the qualifications. It is very often difficult to get hold of precisely what is meant. It is a mode of precision in which the overdeterminations not merely blur the edges but dissolve the individual into the social, the personal into the political, the past into the present into the future, rights into obligations and desires into commitments. The difficulty inherent in Gorak's critical strategy is that Williams's writing cannot be adequately approached through tight definitions or by the identification of some single point of view.<sup>155</sup>

In contrast to Gorak's approach John and Lizzie Eldridge seek to complicate our picture of Williams's fiction by showing the

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<sup>155</sup> See the entry on 'alienation' in *Keywords* (1976a: 33-6).

way in which different aspects of his themes and concerns were deposited layer by layer in order to reveal the particularity of experience and the difficulties inherent in its articulation. Frankly hostile to Tony Pinkney's mode of analysis, which they think leaves Williams's fiction 'lying fragmented on the postmodernist bookshelf' (Eldridge and Eldridge 1994: 148), they foreground Williams's concern with the passage of time, the succession of generations, the difficulty of settlement, and the nature of commitment.

Throughout their work Eldridge and Eldridge establish a close and often uncritical affinity with all Williams's purposes. Indeed, in *The Fight for Manod* 'This acknowledgement of the continual difficulty of expressing the inexpressible is in itself its articulation' (Eldridge and Eldridge 1994: 159). Thus, they establish a very close bond with Williams's prose, imbibing his turns of phrase and some of the concepts that these phrases carry without subjecting them to analysis. Clearly the desire of John and Lizzie Eldridge to find in Williams 'resources for a journey of hope' enabled them to establish a critical sympathy with his project. It permitted them to argue for an intimate and unproblematic relationship between Williams's fiction, his literary and social criticism, and his political interventions. Consequently, *Raymond Williams: Making Connections* is excellent as a partisan rehearsal of Williams's socialist commitments in a time of extreme difficulty for such an outlook.

### A Topology of Labour

For Williams the past and the future were interfused with experience of material and social relations that appeared to exist independently of actually existing capitalism. Williams's interest was in what he thought as specific but indissoluble processes. These processes were to be realised in the encounter between the demands and pressures of the experience of capitalist relations and the always elusive and often inchoate and inarticulate aspirations for a mode of life in which the properly human desire for recognition and solidarity within a working community are disfigured and submerged.

The nature of these indissoluble processes is probed in his fiction by the way in which landscapes and people — their relationships with each other and with the land — are forged by

work. Work, being as old as Adam, exists independently of capitalism and is not confined to any particular class<sup>156</sup> or indeed to societies divided into classes. Work exists independently of any mode of exploitation.<sup>157</sup> Since the times before memory work has been creating and recreating human life and with it a kind of topology of labour which defies the idle consumption of views and landscapes engendered by a move away from a working relationship with the land. In *Border Country* Matthew feels this very sharply:

He had felt empty and tired, but the familiar shape of the valley and the mountains held and replaced him. It was one thing to carry its image in his mind, as he did, everywhere, never a day passing but he closed his eyes and saw it again, his only landscape. But it was different to stand and look at the reality. It was not less beautiful; every detail of the land came up with its old excitement. But it was not still, as the image had been. It was no longer a landscape or a view, but a valley that people were using. He realized, as he watched, what had happened in going away. The valley as landscape had been taken, but its work forgotten. The visitor sees beauty; the inhabitant a place where he works and has his friends. Far away, closing his eyes, he had been seeing this valley, but as a visitor sees it, as the guide-book sees it: this valley, in which he had lived more than half his life.

He stopped at a gate and looked down. Lorries were moving along the narrow road to the north. A goods train was stopped at a signal on the down line, just beyond the Tump (a round barrow, tufted with larches, that he had not known was a barrow when he went away). The line-gang were working about a hundred yards from the train, and there was grey smoke from their hut. Around them stretched the fields, bright green under pasture or red with the autumn ploughing. He saw the woods, the treeline of the river, the intricate contours of slope and fall, and these slowly distinguished themselves as farms — Parry's

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<sup>156</sup> See the description of Edwin Parry's farm and of his wife, Olwen, working in her kitchen, in *Border Country* (1960a: 62-68).

<sup>157</sup> See *People of the Black Mountains* (1989; 1990).

Tregarron, James's Cwmhonddu, Probert's Tynewydd, Richards' Alltynyns, Lewis's The Bridge. Then the other houses, away from the farms: grouped, in their patches, along the lines of the roads and lanes. There, in Hendre, people were busy around their houses, and the marks of their work were everywhere: in the untidy sheds, the stark posts of the washing-lines, the piles of red earth beside the unfinished ditch, the sprawl of netting wire and old troughs in the fowl-runs, the dirty lorry parked in a field corner, with black tarpaulins beside it on the grass. In the general loveliness that was so clear across the valley, he found himself narrowing his eyes to blur out this disfiguring debris around the houses. Yet, as he did so, some quality vanished: it was now neither the image nor the actual valley. (1960a: 75-6)

Matthew looks up at the mountains and even here he finds work:

On a low skyline a tractor was moving, in an area that he remembered as wooded but that now had been cleared and fenced. . . . (1960a: 76)

And so on. Dogs chase hares around the fields but labour: the ploughing, the lime spreading goes on:

This was not anybody's valley to make into a landscape. Work had changed and was still changing it, though the main shape held. (1960a: 76)

The mountains themselves are defined as much by labour as they are by the sky:

Not one of his Edwin Parry's fields was anywhere near flat. Those across which Harry walked to the house sloped so steeply that already, though it was meadow and ploughland, he seem to be climbing the mountain itself. Everywhere there were signs of the seizure of this land from the mountain. From every hedge the bracken encroached, the brooks and watercourses, slow declivities of marsh, cut across the steep fields. (1960a: 62-3)

In a manner, which anticipates the tone and outlook of *People of the Black Mountains*, we are aware that the people and the landscape are shaped and bound inextricably together by work.

### The Pleasures of Work

Work was not simply tough, nor was it simply imposed by the demands of natural or social processes, it could also be the site of pride and perhaps even of sensual pleasure:

The digging Jack Price would not let him help with: ‘You can’t dig yet, boy.’ Will watched and thought about it. Harry at least worked quickly, trenching and double-digging, bending for weeds and stones. But Jack Price worked so slowly that nothing seemed to get done. Only if you went away and came back could you see the advance of the beautifully clean ground.

One cold afternoon a strip was being made ready for the first planting of broad beans. When he thought it was done, Will fetched the beans and the line, but his grandfather had started on the strip again, moving incredibly slowly, raking and raking at the earth until it seemed he was trying to change its nature. Already there was nothing larger than a marble, but still, endlessly, the slow raking and fining went on. Though he said nothing, Will doubted whether in the growing this would make much difference. It was less this, he thought, than some ritual of service. And he saw how separate, in these ways, he had already become. For whatever purpose, he would never dig like this. The jobs which satisfied him were those involving an immediate sharp effort — hauling at a grubbed root, heaving a load of leaves to the heap, forcing along a heavy bundle of sticks. Harry worked like this sometimes, but Jack Price never. To him there seemed all the time in the world, though already the blue damp air was thickening, and evening was drawing along the valley. (1960a: 255-6)

In the circle formed by Will’s youthful enthusiasm for quick hard work, Harry’s swift efficiency and the old day labourer’s

ritual of service Williams draws the different modes of enjoyment to be found in hard labour. Reading this one is reminded of Williams on Hardy:

Work enters his novels more decisively than in any English novelist of comparable importance. And it is not merely illustrative; it is seen as it is, as a central kind of learning. Feeling very acutely the long crisis of separation, and in the end coming to more tragically isolated catastrophes than any others within this tradition, he yet created continually the strength and the warmth of people living together: in work and love; in the physical reality of a place.

To stand working slowly in a field, and feel the creep of rainwater, first in legs and shoulders, then on hips and head, then at back, front, and sides, and yet to work on till the leaden light diminishes and marks that the sun is down, demands a distinct modicum of stoicism, even of valour. Yet they did not feel the wetness so much as might be supposed. They were both young, and they were talking of the time when they lived and loved together at Talbothays Dairy, that happy green tract of land where summer had been liberal in her gifts: in substance to all, emotionally to these.

The general structure of feeling in Hardy would be much less convincing if there were only the alienation, the frustration, the separation and isolation, the final catastrophes. What is defeated but not destroyed at the end of *The Woodlanders* or the end of *Tess* or the end of *Jude* is a warmth, a seriousness, an endurance in love and work that are the necessary definition of what Hardy knows and mourns as loss. (1970a: 116-7)

For Williams the intimate sensuality of work in community is carried by its formative role in sustaining heterosexual familial

relations.<sup>158</sup> When a young labourer, a boy of seventeen, strips the better to swing his pick, he does not strip to his skin, as he would have done for George Orwell or D. H. Lawrence. For Williams the boy strips only to a red shirt and heavy black trousers. We are not contemplating the boy's body as that of an isolated or isolatable man. We see him as a son working alongside his father in contrast to Will, who as Matthew, no longer works besides his father and this in some sense is Matthew's loss:

At the turn by the pitch he came on the diggers: a boy of seventeen in front with a pick, a man in his forties working behind with a shovel. He spoke as he walked past. He knew the man well, though the name would not come. the boy in front was still working, stripped to a red shirt and heavy black trousers. He was obviously enjoying the high swing of the pick; his whole life seemed in it.

‘Come to see your Dad, Will?’

‘Yes’

‘You remember my boy? Teddy.’

‘Watkins, Phil Watkins, used to work at Trefedw.’

‘He’s a worker, isn’t he?’

‘Aye, keeping me at it.’

It came through quite suddenly: a father and son in the same line of work. He spoke to Teddy as he passed, and the boy smiled. (1960a: 308-9)

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<sup>158</sup> I. Morgan, Watch Repairer, conducts the Eisteddfod as Illtyd Morgan y Darren, reciting the names of the child performers and remembering the fathers and mothers before them:

‘Will looked round uneasily. He could see Mrs Watkins, in a low brown hat, with a brown square-shouldered coat, not betraying by so much as a movement her intent reception of this memory of herself. He knew how much this ceremony of identification and memory meant to the silent and apparently unresponsive listeners. *This, centrally, was the meaning of life.* And Illtyd Morgan was never out in the smallest detail. Half-ashamed, Will found himself wishing that there could be some extraordinary blunder: the child given to the wrong mother; the parents mixed up; bastardy and confusion flung across the valley by that compelling voice. But always — there it was — he was right, and a stranger coming into the room would learn, in the course of the day, the greater part of the complicated family relationships by which Glynmawr lived.’ [My Emphasis] (1960a: 201)

But Matthew, the academic, is also committed without conflict, ‘to the work that gave meaning to this moving history’ of population in Wales.

But in practice, in a different atmosphere, moving back necessarily into the long struggle with detail, the emphasis had changed, until the Kestrel was no more than an irrelevant memory. The landscape of childhood never disappears, but the waking environment is adult: the street, the committee, the long, quiet library, the file of revised manuscript, the books shifting under the arm as you run for the crowded bus. The personal meaning is evident in every shape in this country, every sound of the loved voices, but the public meaning is elsewhere, in a different negotiation in another voice. (1960a: 307)

### Writing Beyond Class

Williams had a lively sense of the complexity and confusion that accompanied many attempts to identify accurately the nature of class relations in British society. He understood that large numbers of people were unwilling to identify themselves as working class because of the association of the term ‘working class’ with *lower* class. Similarly, he noted among people who clung to the identification, ‘middle class’, widespread hostility towards the implication that they did not *work* because they rejected inclusion in the ‘working class’.<sup>159</sup>

By the early sixties Williams acknowledged a growing feeling that class was thought of as ‘out of date’ and that this feeling was being used to ratify the capitalist social system, but in response he merely recommended a concentration upon the traditional Marxist notion of ‘objective’ (i.e. economic) as opposed to ‘subjective’ (i.e. sociological or psychological) class positions:

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<sup>159</sup> Some of the difficulties concerning the so-called difference between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ class identifications were addressed by G. D. H. Cole in 1955 in ‘The Social Structure of England’, ‘The Conception of the Middle Class’, and ‘British Class Structure in 1951’, Chapters 3, 4, and 6, of his *Studies in Class Structure* (Cole 1955: 43-100; 147-188).

To perpetuate the present confusion is to guarantee a minimal social consciousness. We have instead to concentrate on two general facts: the open differential, and the ownership and control of social capital. (1961a: 362)

Confusion concerning the *real* facts of class relations results in ‘minimal social consciousness’. This is not exactly the ‘false consciousness’ of the Marxist tradition, but it is most assuredly its second cousin. But Williams does not conclude, as adherents to the notion of ‘false consciousness’ would, that we should actively promote identification with the working class. Instead he wants to revise the differentials in the working-class-middle-class distinction:

It is certainly my view that the differential will have to be revised, but the only possible basis for this is a real feeling of community – the true knowledge that we are working for ourselves and for each other – which, though present now as an ideal, is continually confused and in some cases cancelled by the plain fact that most of us do not own or control the means and the product of our work. In an industrial economy, social production will either be owned or controlled by the whole society, or by a part of it which then employs the rest. The decision between these alternatives is the critical decision about class, and if we are serious about ending the class system we must clear away the survivals, the irrelevancies, and the confusion of other kinds of distinction, until we see the hard economic centre which finally sustains them. With that basic inequality isolated we could stop the irrelevant discussion of class, of which most of us are truly sick and tired, and let through the more interesting discussion of human differences, between real people and real communities living in their valuably various ways. (1961a: 362-3)

This attempt to sweep away the nuances of ‘life style’ distinctions, subtle and otherwise, by concentration upon the ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, reveals the deep foundations of Williams’s socialism. The aspirations for individual advancement, the desire to rise in the social scale, the necessity felt by millions of achieving and

maintaining superior social status, and the leisure and well-being that goes with it – all of these things which arise spontaneously from our whole way of life – were to be combated, Williams thought, with real community feeling and the perception that ‘we are all working for each other’. In this way, his apparently no-nonsense materialism and his tough realism when confronting the question of who owned and controlled the social capital was employed in an ideal attempt to efface the real antagonisms and substantial social differences between middle class and working class people.

Williams’s strategy was, of course, to degrade or erode the distinctions between middle class and working class people by winning the middle class over to what he regarded as the distinctively working class virtues of solidarity and community. These values were he thought manifested in the central cultural achievements of the working class: the trades unions, trades councils and co-operative societies. Perry Anderson identified this outlook as ‘proletarian positivity’:

This idea represents a maximum statement of one of the two poles of socialist theories of the working-class: in it, the constitutive nature of the working-class prefigures the society which it is its vocation to create. This is what has been called the concept of ‘proletarian positivity’, in contrast to its opposite: that of the proletariat as the negativity of history, total negation of the existent social order, a subjectivity flung towards absolute suppression of class society and therewith suppression of itself. (Anderson 1964: 44)<sup>160</sup>

Anderson acknowledges the truth of Williams’s account of working class culture but doubts that it can be used as model for society as a whole:

The truth seems to be that the nature of working-class culture is as he Williams describes it, but that *the will to universalise it, to make it the general model of society,*

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<sup>160</sup> Perry Anderson also refers his readers to the debate on negativity and positivity in the work of G. Lukács, J-P Sartre, M. Merleau-Ponty, and L. Magri.

which he tacitly assumes to be a concomitant, has only rarely existed. (Anderson 1964: 45)

However, Williams had confidence in the creativity and achievements of the British working class. Even in difficult times he was undismayed:

Through 1955 and 1959, with a majority of English people (though not necessarily of Scots or Welsh) opting, in politics fairly clearly, in everyday practice more substantially, for consumer capitalism, it was hard to hang on, but it was still not true that the existing resources of the people were so depleted or corrupted that there was no option but to retreat to a residual minority or a futurist vanguard. (1976b: 241)

He did not share Anderson's concern that the achievements of the working class rendered it 'incapable of launching any project of total social change' (Anderson 1964: 44). Consequently, he was not concerned about the deleterious effects of the apparent onset of the process of *embourgeoisement* on the working class;<sup>161</sup> he was much more interested in winning the middle class to the side of the workers. And, in this respect Williams was not at odds with the practice or ideas of the Communist Party during the forties or fifties. The much-feared 'dictatorship of the proletariat' of the twenties and early thirties had by 1950 softened into a belief in 'the leading role of the working class' as the basis for forging a more popular and broadly based struggle against monopoly capital.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> The softening of boundaries between a distinctively middle class walk of life and a resolutely working class life had, of course, been noted since the late 1930s. See (Durbin 1940: 109ff). See also (Orwell 1941a: 96-9) and (Laing 1986: 3-30).

<sup>162</sup> The Communist Party programme, *For Soviet Britain*, 1935, had fallen into disuse after 1941 and the transition of party policy from the frankly revolutionary towards espousing the democratic supremacy of Parliament was well advanced by the time that General Secretary, Harry Pollitt, published *Looking Ahead* in 1947. See particularly Chapter VI, entitled, 'The British Road to Socialism' (Pollitt 1947: 85-97). This trend was consolidated by the publication of the party's new programme, *The British Road to Socialism* (CPGB 1951: 12-17). See also Mahon 1976: 349-357. In its final abandonment of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' the Communist Party of Great Britain was anticipating, by some twenty-five years, the moves made

The ambiguities and contradictions of this outlook, an outlook that wanted the social solidarity born of the class struggle, to take precedence over class differences and antagonisms, was approached in Williams's novels through useful work. What emerges very strongly in Williams's fiction is that work matters and that work is, in all important senses, independent of class. The attitude of Williams's characters to work and their specific relation to institutions that may have some hand in distorting or frustrating work and its proper purposes in shaping and sustaining families, communities and landscapes is much more important in determining Williams's attitude to them than their formal class position.

The working people in Williams's fiction are as likely to be a filling station proprietor as a car worker. They might be a farmer or smallholder, a labourer, an academic, a coal miner or shop assistant.<sup>163</sup> Indeed, from one point of view the world of Williams's fiction could be said to be distinctly 'petit-bourgeois'. Indeed, it is evident that even many of those who do actually work for weekly wages see their wage as only part, albeit an essential part, of their income. Consequently, Harry, like Meredith, runs what amounts to a smallholding producing, among many other things, hundreds of pots of honey.

There was a good flower garden in front on the cottage, but the rent also included a long vegetable garden at the side of the drying green. Harry worked at this, and in the following autumn persuaded Mrs Hybart to rent him for a pound a year a further strip adjoining it, which he put under fruit trees - apple and pear and plum. Also, that same autumn, he was able to rent two strips of garden behind the timber yard at the station, and these he put

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towards 'Eurocommunism' by the French, Spanish and Italian communist parties. See Santiago Carrillo, *'Eurocommunism' and the State* (Carrillo 1977: *passim*). See also Göran Therborn's essay 'The Dictatorship of the Proletariat: The Words and the Concept' (Therborn 1978:23-34).

<sup>163</sup> See Williams's expressions of family feeling for George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and D. H. Lawrence in passages in which the class and social position of the children of nineteenth century bailiffs, and master builders, are implicitly merged with those of twentieth century coal miners and railwaymen as Williams conflates the considerable difference between the class position of Eliot and Hardy on the one hand, and Lawrence and himself on the other (1969f: 259-260; 1970a: 95-7).

down one to gooseberries and currants, the other to potatoes. In the following spring he bought wood and made four hives, which by the end of the summer, buying swarms in the valley, he had stocked with bees. The hives stood among the young fruit trees at the edge of the home vegetable garden. Then, at the end of the strip, he built a poultry run, which would be Ellen's work. (1960a: 58)

The explanation for this form of enterprise is given as Harry's childhood in the family of a poor labourer, but as this background is unfolded it is evident that we are in the presence of something much more akin to peasant life in France during the nineteenth century than anything that could be regarded as typically proletarian in Britain during the nineteen twenties.<sup>164</sup> It is notable that even when Harry's mother escaped the work of a day labourer picking stones (presumably towards the end of the nineteenth century) she did so by getting 'a weekly contract' for doing the laundry for Llangattock Manor. On the whole these workers rent land on their own account and accumulate a small capital in money, tools and equipment. They are doing more than renting allotments to grow vegetables for the direct consumption of their immediate families. Like the local farmers Harry and Meredith aim at the production of surplus produce for sale. They are engaged in commodity production on their own account. Wage labour is an essential part of this world but independent initiative and enterprise creates more than a margin for survival.

### Remote Controls: The Metropolis at Work

It is perhaps because of this outlook and tone that the difficulty inherent in class differentiation receives a peculiarly parochial inflection in Williams's fiction. Middle or upper class characters only assume a class status inimical to the interests of the hard working characters when they put loyalty to some

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<sup>164</sup> This seamless assimilation of all working or labouring people into some general notion of 'the working class' was perhaps more likely in rural communities farming marginal or poor land in early twentieth-century Britain where many working people occupied a kind of hybrid class position somewhere between peasants and workers. See for example, *Sunset Song*, the first book in the trilogy, *A Scots Quair*, where the crofters of Kinraddie occupy just this sort of intermediate social position (Grassie Gibbon 1932-4).

remote institution before the well being of those immediately around them. These remote institutions can range from research and planning committees to the Communist Party, from the directors of railway companies to the national officials of trade unions, and from large commercial concerns to governments. The brooding hostilities turn out to be about betrayal, disloyalty, and fractured personal relationships in family life and in the community of work. Insofar as wider social struggle is depicted it is depicted as the struggle of a single community or group. Even the General Strike is encountered in *Border Country* as a plethora of telegrams issuing, as telegrams would, from far away intruding dilemmas and conflicts into an otherwise homogeneous community.<sup>165</sup> Morgan Rosser is the only person who is enthusiastic about the strike. In contrast, Major Blakely of Brynllwyd House is, like Constable Watkins, merely doing his duty.

In Williams's fiction the enemies, in so far as there are any, are remote metropolitan or international forces that threaten the tangible face-to-face relationships that positively sustain the working people. Characters who function as local agents of these forces rarely do so consistently and are few and far between — Major Blakely, the Reverend Mr Pugh, Norman Broase, Friedmann, Arthur Dean, John Dance — more often the malevolent alien forces are felt by the hard working characters as a general pressure expressed in the logic of existing social arrangements to collaborate with wider changes and purposes in pursuit of their own pressing needs and those of their families.

So, as Morgan Rosser undergoes the transformation from signalman and staunch trade unionist to entrepreneur the tensions between Harry and Morgan do not ever appear to be a consequence of Morgan's changing class position. Morgan for the most part is engaged in a primitive form of capitalist

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<sup>165</sup> There is a brief discussion in *Politics and Letters* (1979b) of the formal difficulties Williams encountered in realising the wider class relations in *Border Country*. However, Williams does not seem to be unduly concerned about what he regards as a *purely* formal matter. Strikingly, neither he nor his interlocutors discuss the need for formal innovations or development capable of overcoming the parochialism of this kind of novel. Williams concludes by saying: 'I found when I was writing *The Fight for Manod* that I had to go back up to Whitehall, where ministry meetings make long-distance decisions. It is a world I now know better, but it still may not be adequately realized.' (1979b: 284)

enterprise akin to the 'putting out system' where he supplies fruit jars, labels and other equipment and transport for the direct producers - small farmers and small-holders. His brand new factory, which is still under construction when we visit it, is bereft of workers. The conflict between capital and labour within this small community is not investigated. It is true that Meredith loses his smallholding to Morgan Rosser's and Major Blakely's desire for profits from the growth of soft fruits, but this is not a struggle between workers and capitalists. The tensions between Harry and Morgan, as inarticulate as they are, seem to be about differing levels of engagement with the verities and solidarities of the local community.

Morgan both as a trade unionist and a capitalist is always striving beyond the confines of the community.<sup>166</sup> He was the kind of man who, engrossed in large ideas, would forget his small commitments:

Harry learned forward, and put the big kettle on to boil. The express came through, and he stood at the open barred window to watch it pass, and then put back the signals. As he was doing this, the lamp that hung in the centre of the box sputtered and faded. He crossed and reached up to it, shaking the bowl. As he had expected, it was empty. His look moved for a moment to the door that Morgan had slammed, and he smiled. It was the afternoon man's job to trim and fill the lamp, but again and again, in taking over from Morgan, he had found it empty. (1960a: 88)

Morgan desires a larger life and in doing so he strives for ideas inimical to the local community from wanting to stop Will Addis planting out the 'snaps' in the station flower beds during the General Strike to moving, eventually, from the supply of

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<sup>166</sup> Williams indicated in 1979 that he thought of the tensions between Harry and Morgan were both different aspects of a tension that was combined in his own father: 'Harry is not my own father, because a lot of him went into Morgan too. It would have been possible to combine his contradictory impulses in the same character; I tried that but in the end decided to separate them out by creating another figure who represented the much more restless, critical and self-critical side of my father's nature.' (1979b: 282)

wholesome fresh food at fair prices to adulteration of the workers' jam:

Morgan had taken over a new building in Gwenton, partly as a depot and partly for bottling and jam making. Janie worked there, in the busy time, with four or five other women. Morgan was sure, in this way, of standard quality. The amount of fruit, the quantities of sugar or other sweetenings — for some things substitutes were better, making a better colour for instances — could now be properly controlled. (1960a: 208)

And, this adulteration expresses his growing contempt for the workers in the valleys to the south of Gwenton and Glynmawr who, as consumers, are his final customers:

‘Yes, if all goes well I’m going to build. I’ve got an option on a site, and now it’s just the finance. What I want, you see, is a small modern jam factory. Nothing on a big scale, not yet. Only it’s in jam, I’ve found, the money really is. It’s the way they eat.’ (1960a: 212)

### Feeling the struggle

In Williams’s novels sharp actions, which might be said to be motivated by class interests, are noted from time to time, but he is usually more interested in feeling. General indignities of tone and attitude in relations between people who occupy broadly different class positions permeate Williams’s fiction. However, these expressions of spite or contempt never reflect or express any direct attempt to prosecute or deepen the class struggle. Instead, they seem to represent Williams’s interest in poking about in the formative modes of *ressentiment* experienced by those who have grown up feeling excluded or disregarded, and, because it cuts both ways, the *ressentiment* of those who feel the loss of being shut out from the camaraderie and ‘authenticity’ of a life in the working class.

This strategy of *feeling* the class struggle, rather than exploring the difficulties inherent in prosecuting it, results in an exploration of tensions between people in their personal relations that seems to cancel interest in the active aspects of class differentiation

within a community. Consequently, in *Border Country*, Mr and Mrs Hybart, jobbing builders and landlords are not regarded as people with interests distinctly different from those of their tenants. And when Mrs Hybart raises the rent for one of her properties from eight shillings and sixpence a week to ten shillings her opportunism is winked at because the victim is the Baptist minister, Joshua Watkins. Furthermore, we learn that Joshua is a man who does not want to pull his weight when it comes to carrying out the unpleasant and perhaps degrading manual task of emptying the lavatory bucket — he wants Harry to do it for him. But even before we discover this about him Harry takes a dim view of Joshua:

So in the spring after Morgan had married, Edie Davies, now Mrs Watkins, moved into Morgan's house. Ellen was pleased, not only because she like Edie but because she could not bear to see the house standing empty any longer. The winter had made it very damp, and she and Mrs Hybart lit fires in it for a week before the new tenants moved in. Harry was less pleased. He'd have preferred, he said, with unusual bitterness, a man to come there. The garden, just watch, would get worse than ever. He had no use for Watkins, even as a minister, and a few weeks' experience of him as a neighbour was more than enough to confirm this. (1960a: 175-6)

In this community, Joshua Watkins's attitude to manual labour, keeping his garden and emptying the lavatory bucket is evidently of much greater importance than the fact that Mrs Hybart is living off rents and raising them when the opportunity presents itself. Bill Hybart and his wife are working people whether they live off rents and small capital or not, on the other hand Joshua Watkins is not a workingman. Consequently, as far as Harry is concerned, Joshua is not even a man.

This acute consciousness of class which specifically ignores or denies its operation in the face-to-face relationships of a community is given explicit voice in the course of Will's meditation prior to his departure to Cambridge and his metamorphosis into Matthew:

They expect you to go up cap in hand perhaps, so they can pat your head. Going to Cambridge: as nice to say really as modern. But honestly, Cambridge, where's that? The only attitude you can take. Go and see.

Go and see, with your clothes in the suitcase Blakely gave you. A good case, green, with the initials on it in black: M. H. P. And that already sounds different. Very good of him to have given the case, wasn't it? Well, he can afford it. Not really though, he hasn't all that money.

One thing at least there's no need to worry about, and that's class. We don't have classes here, sir, except in school. Our place, I suppose, is too poor for that. Or put it the other way round. What it is, see, in Glynmawr, people take themselves seriously. There couldn't, not anywhere, be more important people than them. The men, look, taking themselves seriously. They walk slowly, showing all their layers. Mack open, jacket open, cardigan open, waistcoat open, collar-band open — nothing, you see, to hide. The ruling class. Though, of course, there's accent. Once you cross the river. Still, you can talk as you like: like Pugh certainly; like Billy Devereaux if you put your mind to it. Talking's no trouble, not from here. Just leave it to your voice. (1960a: 295)

This is, perhaps, not a very convincing meditation for a young lad on the verge of the great adventure of leaving home, but it reveals an interesting aspect of Williams's fiction that, irrespective of location, identifies class conflict as a product of alien and essentially remote forces.

This attitude transcends the generations in *Border Country*. At one stage, when responding to the suggestion that somebody has deserted his class Harry says, 'No. What do class matter?' However, in this conversation with his father Matthew is anxious concerning his own changing class position:

'Like I've grown away, though. We both know this.'

'I wanted that, Will. So that you could do what was needed.'

'Needed?'

'I needed it, Will.'

‘But I needed it too. And I’ve gone my own way. I can’t be just a delegate, sent out to do a particular job. I’ve moved into my own life, and that’s taken me away. I can’t just come back, as if the change was water. I can’t come here and pretend I’m Will Price, with nothing altered.’

‘Nobody is asking you that. In any case, leave the work aside, you’ve come back as a man. You saw me and your Grandad: we were different. How many, ever, live just like their fathers? None at all like their grandfathers. If they’re doing the same work, still they’re quite different.’

‘Leaving class out of it, you mean?’

‘Aye, I hope you leave it out of it.’

‘As prejudice, yes. Where it’s real, no.’

‘Where it’s real it’s lived through, it has to be in the end. Only finish this different in kind. You’re my kind, Will, and the men you work with are my kind. Yes, the work is changing, but that isn’t the heart of it. There’s no virtue in work, but that men should stand as they are.’

‘Stand equal?’

‘Stand as they are, with nothing bearing them down. For you that was made quick.’

‘Part of it was made quick.’

‘Only it isn’t solved, when it’s made quick for you. The rest of us need it, remember.’ (1960a: 311-12)

The meaning of Harry’s oracular pronouncements concern independence . . . being your own man . . . this is the aim of all the striving and the struggling. The emancipation sought is emancipation from any relationships which ensnare people in purposes which are not their own or their family’s or their community’s. Solidarity that extends beyond the parochial is extended to defend these intrinsically local aspirations. Something similar can be seen in the sadness that permeates *The Fight for Manod*, a place where the alien forces have already entangled the struggle for independence on the part of most of the characters in a process of collaboration that, although inimical to authentic independence in community, is probably unavoidable.

However, Williams remained committed to an anthropology in which man’s self-creation in the process of meaningful work and in the founding and sustaining of his family and communal life set the parameters for his ideas of alienation and

emancipation. As a consequence of this, freedom flowed from the establishment of autonomy in the sphere of material production in such a way that the concept of 'livelihood' would take over from the concept of 'production' as the motive for economic activity. This is, of course, simply another way of canvassing the move from the production of *exchange values* upon which capitalism is based to a society in which the production of *use values* would take precedence. This point of view, embodying as it does the fundamental socialist aspiration of moving from *production for profit* to *production for need*, was never controversial among Marxists and revolutionary socialists.

The central element is the shift from 'production' to 'livelihood' from an alienated generality to direct and practical ways of life. These are the real bases from which cooperative relationships can grow, and the rooted forms which are wholly compatible with, rather than contradictory to, other major energies and interests. They are also, at just this historical stage, in the very development of the means of production, the shifts that most people will in any case have to make. (1983b: 267)

The importance of the word 'livelihood' here is its philological capacity to move production from an apparently separate economic sphere to a place where all those productions that constitute a rounded life are fully recognised. 'Livelihood' is not one of Williams's key words, but it is certainly one that he hopes will have the magic effect of decisively dividing labour done at the behest of capital from the *necessary* work performed for self, family, and community.

Modes of work, manual, technical, or intellectual, which are meaningful because they create the potential for independence and community were understood by Williams to form the basis of any healthy social development. Evidently, some individuals could accomplish something approaching this within capitalist society, but to make this independence secure and to make it generally available required the transformation of society by the disciplined efforts of those working people deprived of independence and the vital sustenance of meaningful work in community.

*The Volunteers*

For all his aspirations and the tenacity of his hope for the future there was no place for utopia or remote futures of any kind in Williams's fiction.<sup>167</sup> *The Fight for Manod* is only *about the future* insofar as it is about plans for incorporation and 'regeneration'; its location *in the future* is not sharply defined in the course of the narrative, its formal realisation, or in the technology and relationships available to the people depicted, whereas the past is both active and present in all his novels. In *People of the Black Mountains* the past is brought from the last Ice Age but in *The Volunteers*, his most futuristic story, the future is not sought beyond 1989 or 1990.<sup>168</sup> And, even in this future he made few concessions to the idea that it would be radically different from the time of publication in 1978.

Workers occupy a factory in West Bromwich and a power station coal depot in Pontyrihw. Welsh miners and railwaymen take united strike action. The Government activates its Emergency Supplies Committee. The Communist Party in Pontyrihw still has a District Secretary and the Trades Council is fully functioning. Typewriters are still tapped and telephones that are still (figuratively?) 'dialled' continue to be wired to the wall. The police force still has its Special Branch but the Bobbies are not equipped with stab-proof vests or riot shields or baton rounds or guns. And, faxes are, for some reason known only to the author, written in rather bad telegramsese.<sup>169</sup>

We know that it's the future because there is a Welsh Assembly and Senate; the British Government is a coalition government, and people take 'air-taxis' (presumably helicopters) between Cardiff Airport and St Fagins. However, the international economy is inflated by oil and wheat and the par-national companies that dominate society are in oil, fibres and metals. The only other enterprise which features in the novel is

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<sup>167</sup> For discussion by Williams of utopian fiction see 'Utopia and Science Fiction' (1978b). For discussion of temporality in 'imaginative writing' and in his own fiction see 'The Tenses of Imagination' (1978c).

<sup>168</sup> *The Volunteers*: By reference to the date of birth and the movements of the framed 'suspect', the 'young man' Marcus Tiller, and the details of Mark Evans's career it is possible to locate the time of the novel as no earlier than March 1988 and not much later than 1990 or thereabouts (1978a: 63; 67-8).

<sup>169</sup> It may be that Williams thought faxes similar in some way to teleprinter or Telex messages.

satellite broadcasting, Insatel, a company heavily dependent upon the advertising revenue furnished by the para-national companies active in oil, fibres and metals.

Monopoly capital is figured as a conspiracy in which television news organisations, heavily dependent on “oil and wheat; on cars and trucks and washing machines; on fibres, on metals, on food packaging” arrange most of the events on which they report and retain a merely ‘subsidiary facility’ to report on ‘unarranged events’ (1978a: 6-7); our privileged access into this conspiratorial world is provided by Lewis Redfern, a ‘consultant analyst’ (reporter) on the ‘political underground’ for Insatel. He functions as something of a ‘private eye’ investigating an assassination attempt on Edmund Buxton, Secretary of State (Wales), in the course of which he stumbles upon a counter radical conspiracy: ‘the Volunteers’.

The Volunteers, quaintly associated by Redfern with Fabianism, are long-term radical sleepers who are wheedling their way into positions of power and authority; infiltrating the establishment of fifteen countries: the civil service, the army, the police, the banks, so that they can act against the monopolists. The conspiracy is spelled out in a conversation between Lewis Redfern and his boss at Insatel, Friedmann:

‘They’ve been trying for years. Since the Fabians,’ I said.

‘Yes but the Fabians were open about it. Their whole line was gradual persuasion. This is quite different. This is conscious occupation of the critical centres of power. And not for persuasion, Lewis. For takeover.’

‘So you get another State. A volunteer autocracy.’

‘No, no. You must read Pete Jacob’s stuff. These are radicals, Lewis, they mean to change the whole system.’

‘Don’t we all?’ I said, looking away.

‘We all did,’ Friedmann said, and that was a laugh. ‘But it’s so obvious now, once this new way’s been found. All the old stuff is out; the petty demonstrations, the radical playgroups, the polite social criticism, the party games, the manifestos. As if, for God’s sake, this was an open society, like in its own rhetoric. When the reality, always, is this simple control: of the force and of the money.’ (1978a: 145-6)

Lewis Redfern, a former radical activist himself, is confronted with interlocking conspiracies, the Volunteers, the attempted assassination of government minister, Buxton, and Buxton's clear responsibility for the fact that troops fire on the workers occupying the Pontyrhiw coal depot, killing one and injuring eight others. In the event Lewis has to deny all knowledge of the conspiracy to kill the minister and fails to speak out against the Volunteers, but he tells the essential truth that is that the state did plan the armed attack on the workers:

I had indeed presented a necessary truth. I had also, not once but repeatedly and consciously, lied. I knew all the arguments to justify this combination.

I had no good arguments to refute them but I was still left tense and drained . . . (1978a: 206)

Lewis Redfern's meditative narration is written in a voice that is recognisably Williams's, and no formal innovations are attempted in the novel.<sup>170</sup> Redfern is concerned with his relationship, not just to his radical past, but to his father, a man killed fighting for British colonialism in Kenya.<sup>171</sup> He has a sense of the folly of the Volunteer's project, but despite his necessary lies through which he presents the necessary truth, he remains his own man, resigning from Insatel, and refusing offers of protection from the radical conspirators.

*The Volunteers* is a sad book in which the radical energy of the intellectuals is only meagrely connected to the collective resistance of the workers at private and episodic points. For all its flaws the novel does in its mood or structure of feeling anticipate the series of catastrophes for socialist politics that were to unfold in the fifteen years following its publication.

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<sup>170</sup> In an anticipation of *People of the Black Mountains*, disembodied voices from the history of Wales are heard 'speaking of tribute and of taxes and of rents' at the Norman castle, 'a gross building: a fortress', set above the Folk Museum (1978a: 29-30).

<sup>171</sup> Relations between father and son are also critical in the motivations of Mark Evans as he discusses the generational ramifications of historical rather than personal failure with Lewis Redfern (1978a: 176).

## Chapter Seven: Belonging, Exile and George Orwell

### ‘Born and bred among the presumed Welsh’<sup>172</sup>

Williams employed the trope of ‘border’ and ‘border country’ to stress both shared, mixed and perhaps necessarily conflicting commitments. He also used it to imply a certain active and positive distance from the metropolis, which could carry both frank resistance to central authorities, and an emergent independence from established orthodoxies. It was a means both of figuring a position and of clearing a space for himself, as the son of a family of manual workers, living the life of a teacher, professional literary critic, and novelist. It also enabled him to explore more fully the potential, limitations, and responsibilities inherent in such a position.

He could not regard his move into England from Wales, his duty as a captain in one of General Eisenhower’s armies, his academic promotion, or his rise into the upper middle class,<sup>173</sup> as ‘moving on’ or as achieving a new and settled position. Each shift upon which he embarked resulted in the accumulation of commitments and loyalties; no severance was contemplated. Exile from the working class or related cultural and political commitments was inconceivable. He refused none of the resulting contradictions. He held them all together in the border country from which no departure could be sought because to hold this ground was central to his critical enterprise. Williams, whose commitment to Wales is not in dispute, always figured his ground, not as Wales, but as a place *in-between*; it was some intermediate place within the interstices of commitment to nation or territory in which genuine community was sought. Neither in

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<sup>172</sup> See ‘The shadow of the Dragon’ (1985e: 20).

<sup>173</sup> It may be objected that a teaching post at Cambridge or even a chair at that university does not constitute a ‘rise into the upper middle class’ any more than appointment to the Arts Council (1976-8), running a car, owning two homes and accumulating a substantial bank balance would have done. Phrases like upper middle class are indeed notoriously difficult to pin down. Suffice it to say, even today, such appointments have very high status and are well-rewarded; during the sixties and seventies of the last century they were much more valuable than they would be today.

his discussions of Welsh writing<sup>174</sup> nor in his consideration of the historical experience of people in Wales did he permit the exploration of Welsh experience to dissolve or dislodge his sense of the importance of the status and pressures of living and being *in-between*.

One of the central advantages of being born and bred among the presumed Welsh is the profusion of official identities. Wales and Monmouthshire, as it was for me at school, since we lived in the appendage. England-and-Wales: that administrative, legal and even weather-forecasting area. Wales for rugby but All-England for cricket. Welsh Wales and English Wales. Wales and Cymru. To anyone trying to think about communities and societies a blessing: a native gift. (1985e: 20)

So, Williams was not unaware of the importance of tensions — creative tensions — in which a certain distance from the dominant culture could contribute to a greater capacity for insight concerning experiences that might elude those more firmly entrenched within it. In *The Long Revolution* Williams noted the importance of writers drawn from outside the ruling circles in England during the period 1870 to 1950.<sup>175</sup> Here, he cited the contribution of women writers, of male writers who had not been educated at Oxbridge, of Irish poets, novelists and dramatists and of those men, Conrad, Eliot, Thomas, from Poland, America and Wales.<sup>176</sup> And, during the early sixties these observations flowed

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<sup>174</sup> For an interesting discussion of Williams's work from a specifically Welsh perspective see *Who Speaks for Wales?* This is a collection of Williams's essays on Welsh writing, culture, history and politics edited and introduced by Daniel Williams (Williams 2003).

<sup>175</sup> 'In the period between about 1870 and 1950 . . . It has been widely noted that an unusual proportion of the important imaginative literature of these years was written by people outside the majority English pattern.' (1961a: 265)

<sup>176</sup> It is also worth remembering that F. R. Leavis's believed that rootlessness or, at least a sense of rootlessness, was a general condition among those with literary interests: 'Conrad, of course, was a *déraciné*, which no doubt counts for a good deal in the intensity with which he renders his favourite theme of isolation. But then a state of something like deracination is common today among those to whom the question of who the great novelists are is likely to matter.' (Leavis, F. R. 1948: 33)

into a wider discussion on the left of the contributions made to British culture by foreigners.

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

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

If the creative literature of a society is dominated over a specific period by foreigners and expatriates, then it is reasonable to assume that this fact is as revealing of the nature of that society as it is of the writers who approached it from a foreign viewpoint. (Eagleton 1970b: 9)

There was also an older version of this interest in foreigners and expatriates (owing nothing to Williams, Anderson or Eagleton) in which a jaunty idea of exile was presented as an explanation for the bohemianism and obscurity of modern writers and artists.<sup>177</sup> This was a populist explanation akin to the much more recent descriptions and explanations of artistic hauteur given by John Carey (1992) than anything arising on the left in the fifties and sixties.

However, the enlistment of foreigners and expatriates by other critics and observers to explain the peculiarities of literary developments in England should not be conflated with Williams's deployment of the trope of exile. This is because Williams was much more concerned with affirmation of the

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<sup>177</sup> For a flavour of this view of the bohemian and the arcane character of modernist works see Chapter One entitled 'Exile' in *Forces in Modern British Literature 1885-1956* (Tindall 1947: 3-26).

importance of belonging to a society, and of sharing in its most important relationships. Consequently, his struggle to avoid purely individualistic responses is to some degree corroborated by the conventional manner in which women are figured in his novels. They are, on the whole — even Kate Owen — steadfast and reliable, balancing their aspirations and lapses, and their need for life, with the deep-grained commitments into which they have entered with their men folk.<sup>178</sup>

And, of course, in this regard his assumptions about the relations between men and women and about sexuality were those of a conventional heterosexual male socialist who had grown to maturity during the middle of the twentieth century. He thought that Modernist and avant-garde opposition to the ‘bourgeois family’ was rooted in the belief that obligation to spouses and children imposed unacceptable constraints upon the expression of individuality and genius. He noted a ‘rejection of all social forms of human reproduction’, and a new valuation in artistic circles of homosexuality associated with ‘great resentment and hatred of women’. (1988: 57).

Williams sought no encounter with Freud or Lacan: sexuality did not present any problems, questions or answers, which lay beyond the capacity of artistic expression or conscious, negotiable, social relations and relationships. He believed in the equality of women and in the exercise of tact and consideration in relation to intimate personal relationships. In this respect he remained within the broadly liberal tradition adopted by socialists on gender and sexuality during the preceding hundred years.<sup>179</sup>

And for these reasons, insinuations of what we would now call ‘sexism’ are anachronistic and inappropriate.<sup>180</sup> The domestic division of labour between Joy and Raymond in which Joy looked after the children and ran the home and Raymond, ‘the breadwinner’, taught and wrote books, would have seemed more

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<sup>178</sup> See the conversation between Kate and her son Peter in *Second Generation* (1964b: 340-3).

<sup>179</sup> See my discussion of the socialist tradition on gender and sexuality in *Sex-Life* (Milligan 1993: 46-62). See also Williams’s insightful comments on the situation of nineteenth century women novelists in *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970a: 62-3), and John Hutchinson’s criticism in his ‘Subdued Feminism: Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot’ (Hutcheson 1983).

<sup>180</sup> See Fred Inglis’s comments on the Raymond and Joy’s domestic arrangements (Inglis 1995: 129-130; 274).

or less rational to most people on the left in the forties and fifties. Women with careers at the time could not, by and large, combine them with motherhood. (The exceptions like Doris Lessing, for example, were all the more remarkable.) And, profound changes in technology and in economic arrangements were required before the feminist struggle to change conditions, relationships and attitudes was able to re-launch on the new waves of radicalism during the sixties and seventies.<sup>181</sup>

In his fiction, family commitments were his focus and Wales, particularly rural Wales, functioned as a site for the exploration of loyalty and community in the lives of individuals. Changing social status and circumstances and the way that origins continue to make visceral claims upon both those who remain and those who leave are his focus. Living in the 'Border Country' rather than 'in exile' is the way that he figured his own experience.<sup>182</sup>

This outlook and its historical circumstance probably contributed to the fact that Williams's critical senses were not particularly acute when it came to considering the reasons why some artists may indeed have felt (or actually had been) exiled from their society. The fact that Virginia Woolf would not have been admitted, in any capacity other than that of a guest, to Williams's Cambridge college, is relevant here.<sup>183</sup>

Consequently, the metaphorical exile of Virginia Woolf or George Orwell or the literal exile of Solzhenitsyn or James Joyce was something quite different from his own relationship to the dominant culture. Williams knew that Joyce was alienated by the Gaelic Revival and by the banning of his major works by a Free State that derived its authority directly from God via London and

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<sup>181</sup> For a critical feminist engagement with Williams's work see Jenny Bourne Taylor's article 'Raymond Williams: Gender and Generation' (Bourne Taylor: 1990).

<sup>182</sup> For examples of this see 'Decentralism and the Politics of Place' (1984: 238-244), and 'The Politics of Hope: An Interview' (1987b: 176-183).

<sup>183</sup> Although women started studying at Cambridge during the 1860s it was not until 1921 that they could attend or give lectures. The archaeologist, Dorothy Garrod, became the first woman professor in 1938 though she could not vote in University gatherings. Women were allowed to graduate from 1948 onwards but a quota restricting women to 20% of the undergraduate body was imposed and remained in force until 1961. In 1954, in addition to Girton and Newnham, two new women's colleges, New Hall and Lucy Cavendish, were founded. Women began to be admitted to the 'men's' colleges from 1972 onwards. However, women undergraduates did not number 20% of the student body until 1977.

Dublin.<sup>184</sup> He knew in some detail of Solzhenitsyn and Woolf's predicament, but it did not in any active sense exercise or particularly interest him except insofar as their deracination could be used to explain their failure to engage more fully and more positively with the whole way of life of their own societies. Similarly, in the course of an attack on Cyril Connolly and Edward Upward, he could say:

Not to speak of intellectuals like Auden who had found more convenient ways of being poets, by going to California. I had intense hostility to that sort of self-regarding literary culture. (1979b: 73)

Clearly, the alienation of Isherwood, Auden, and many other prominent homosexual intellectuals who found life safer as well-to-do foreigners in Europe and then America than at home in England was not a factor worthy of Williams's consideration during the forties, fifties or in any subsequent decade.

Williams's inability to come to grips with repressive attitudes towards homosexuality was echoed by Alan O'Connor in 1989 when he responded to Williams's weakness with the splendidly evasive opinion that

'. . . issues of sexuality have no easy answer in socialism. What is important is to keep the questions and the discussions open' (O'Connor 1989a: 31).

Something more of the depth of Williams's ignorance concerning the ambiguous position of the outcaste and criminalized can be detected in the tone of his response to the *Threepenny Opera*:

'People buy and sell each other, in the *Threepenny Opera*, with cold hearts and with only occasional covering sentiments. But yes *of course*, the audience comments; that's life. Never "that shouldn't be life"; never even "that needn't be life"; but the old cold-hearted muck about the warm-hearted crooks and whores who at least are *honest*, who have seen through this

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<sup>184</sup> See the preamble to the Constitution of the Irish Free State (*Saorstát Eireann*) signed at London on 6 December, 1921.

nonsense about society and all that earnest moralizing.’  
(1961c: 155-6)<sup>185</sup>

For Williams, ‘exile’ was a trope he applied to those whom he thought lacked proper engagement with the positive obligations of community: he did not engage in sustained discussion of what it means to be exiled, or outcaste, or reviled by the bearers of normative values. Consequently, Williams displayed little interest in the work of the Oscar Wilde as a nineteenth century cultural figure, as a socialist critic, as a playwright (or as an Irishman). Williams uses Wilde’s work as material for brief asides when discussing Christopher Fry; beyond that Williams thought Wilde was a person lacking moral stability: he was an intelligent and humane figure who repeated the positions of Arnold ‘without the Victorian ballast’ which was ‘Arnold’s moral stability’ (1958a: 170-2).<sup>186</sup>

### A Welsh European in Border Country

Self-styled late in his career as a ‘Welsh European’ Williams made his home in the England and in the English institutions in which he prospered. (Even after the purchase of a house ‘on the border’ in Herefordshire his principal home remained his house in Saffron Walden.). Exile in the search for work was and is, of course, a central Welsh experience.<sup>187</sup> However, Williams did not leave Wales to search for work in the car factories of the English Midlands or to land a job in a London office; he left Wales in order to get a first class education at Cambridge, and he never settled there again. He could at many

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<sup>185</sup> Despite this, Williams’s could stage more sophisticated readings of ‘low life’ and ‘depravity’ than those associated with Brecht’s work (witness his evident enthusiasm for the exploration of *role play*, *function* and *power* in *The Balcony*), but it is unclear from Williams’s perspective what could be made of Genet’s other plays or his novels. (1968a: 350-4)

<sup>186</sup> The discussion of Fry’s work is in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1968a: 232-3).

<sup>187</sup> For discussion of emigration see the chapter ‘The Dismantling of Wales’ in *When Was Wales?* (Williams 1985: 252-260). In 1985 Williams described this book as ‘the best general history of the Welsh now available.’ (1985e: 20)

different stages of his very successful career, have chosen to live in Wales, but he never decided to do so.

His deep interest and commitment to the exploration of Welsh experience was concentrated in his fiction; he never published a monograph on any Welsh topic and he never edited or published a collection of his own writings on Wales,<sup>188</sup> nor did he edit the work of any other Welsh writer. It is certainly true that a substantial book or collection of essays focusing upon specifically Welsh experience might have encountered scepticism or resistance from London publishers who feared that such a book might attract little interest, but he would certainly have found a publisher in Wales.

Whatever his reasons for deciding not to publish a book on Wales his writings on Welsh politics, history and culture are scattered thinly throughout his oeuvre. They appear, perhaps with greater frequency after the mid-seventies, than during the first twenty-five years of his activity, and they appear to be associated with a sense of unease concerning the failure of mainstream socialist politics in England and with a new interest in the development of nationalist consciousness and nationalist politics in Wales.

He was not a Welsh nationalist, however. He shared a caution in approach to nationalism, if not the outright suspicion of nationalism, common in most communist and socialist circles during the fifties and for most of the sixties. Although Plaid Cymru had been a broadly social democratic party since the end of the Second World War it had achieved only marginal influence. Plaid Cymru presented problems for those who, like Williams in the nineteen-forties, fifties and sixties saw the Labour Party, the trade unions, and the co-operative organisations affiliated to it, as the vital centre around which working class activity should cohere. Consequently, nationalism, a positive outlook in most former colonies, was regarded in Britain as a diversion from the need to build and sustain class-consciousness and class solidarity. And, this probably accounts for a certain blindness concerning nationalism and national identity in much of Williams's work before 1970 or thereabouts. This was nicely illustrated by Christopher Hitchens's observation about the

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<sup>188</sup> The publication of a collection of Williams's Welsh writing had to wait until 2003. See Daniel Williams (Williams 2003).

limitation of Williams's outlook concerning nationalism in Catalonia:

[. . .] unless he is actually alluding to the title of Orwell's book, he invariably refers to 'Spain' and not to Catalonia. What was distinctive in the stoicism and resistance of the Catalans seems to have entirely escaped this bearer of a second identity.' (Hitchens 1999: 9)

This observation is certainly consistent with Williams's apparent indifference towards *Irish* nationalism. In common with much of the left in England, Irish nationalism did not attract his interest or his active support. There are scattered references to Ireland but no engagement with the armed insurrection, or long war that commenced in 1969 between Irish republicans and the British state.<sup>189</sup> In 1975 in a discussion of Welsh culture he referred somewhat ambiguously to 'the fighting hatred of some of the Irish' (1975b: 103) — this reference to the 'fighting' Irish is, of course, of a piece with the 'the endless romanticizing, boasting, sentimentality', 'the endless overflowing talk', the 'feckless rush, endlessly evading and posturing', with which Williams thought the Irish drama demonstrated its lack of respect for the Irish people.<sup>190</sup> His capacity to use these stereotypical phrases when criticising certain kinds of Irish writing, permits him to enunciate a dismissive attitude towards a particular aspect of Irish reality while simultaneously allowing him to establish an ironic distance between himself and the foolish low talk he is criticising.

He could approach a similar tone when talking of the stereotypes with which Welsh people might both encircle and entrap themselves, but it never assumed the weary sense of disappointment and distance that he employed when talking of the Irish. This was probably to do, not simply with his greater intimacy with Welsh cultural and political life, but also with a growing recognition of a powerful socialist strand within Welsh nationalism; it was a movement much more attuned to the rhythm of patiently working for the gradual widening of influence. Welsh nationalism had, perhaps inevitably, more appeal than the movement born in the bitter struggle for civil rights in the North

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<sup>189</sup> For scattered references see: 1972e: 163-167; 1972f: 168; 1983b: 194-5.

<sup>190</sup> See 1968a: 161-169; see also 'Sean O'Casey and 'endless, bibulous, blathering talk', Chapter 5, *above*).

of Ireland, and considerably more appeal than the insurrectionary violence of Irish Republicanism.

It was these very different aspects of Welsh nationalism: its cultural and linguistic struggles and debates, its environmentalism, its manifest engagement with the tempo and spirit of the Long Revolution that Williams found attractive. And, following Plaid Cymru's advances in the late sixties, at a time of increasing difficulty for the socialist mainstream, Williams's attitude to Welsh nationalism and its party became increasingly positive.<sup>191</sup>

In September 1975 he broadcast a talk for BBC Radio 3 entitled, 'Welsh Culture'. (Plaid Cymru subsequently published it.) In this talk he did not endorse a nationalist perspective, but he did indicate a serious regard for the different forces at work in Wales:

Real independence is a time of new and active creation: people sure enough of themselves to discard their baggage; knowing the past as past, as a shaping history, but with a new confident sense of the present and the future, where the decisive meanings and values will be made. But at an earlier stage, wanting that but not yet able to get it, there is another spirit: a fixation on the past, part real, part mythicized, because the past, in either form, is one thing they can't take away from us, that might even interest them, get a nod of recognition. (1975b: 103)

Despite his distaste for the 'myth' and 'fancy dress' often associated with nationalism he had a passionate understanding of Wales and the oppression of its people.<sup>192</sup> However, he did not

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<sup>191</sup> For a brief but valuable discussion of Welsh socialist and nationalist politics see 'Cataclysm and Community' in *When Was Wales?* (Williams 1985: 261-295). See also, Pyrs Gruffudd's essay 'Remaking Wales: nation building and the geographical imagination 1925-50' (Gruffudd: 1995).

<sup>192</sup> Interestingly, Williams never extended his scepticism concerning the mythological elements of Welsh identity to an investigation of the role played by ideas of solidarity and commitment in the Welsh labour movement; he never seriously engaged in analysis of the manner in which contemporary Welsh labour history was being made and remade. He looked at the General Strike, and the impact of the Spanish Civil War and of the last great Miners' Strike, in his novels *Border Country* and *Loyalties* (1960a; 1985a), but these reflections tend to confirm rather than question the role of the Strikes, and the defence of the Spanish Republic, in the creation of

advocate national self-determination; a vague belief in autonomy and self-management had to suffice: ‘People have to, in the end, direct their own lives, control their own places, live by their own feelings.’ (1975b: 104) However, this position did not result in him maintaining any arbitrary distance between himself and Welsh nationalism. On the contrary, he engaged in further discussion, and he acknowledged the role he was beginning to see for nationalist politics in the revival of the European Left. He told the Plaid Cymru Summer School at Llandudno in July 1977 that the ‘moment when we move from a *merely retrospective* nationalist politics to a *truly prospective* politics, we begin that affirmative thinking which some of the most developed and intelligent left politics in certain other centres of Europe has truly lost.’ (1977f: 118)

What had been lost was the sense of what liberation was for, not in ‘merely Utopian rhetoric’, but in the sense of what the struggle was seeking to achieve. This, he was beginning to feel, was being retained and developed in Welsh nationalist politics. By the mid-seventies Williams was beginning to see the contribution that Plaid Cymru could make to the revival of socialism itself:

That sense [of what the struggle is for] has been so truly lost in so many of those areas, especially through the complications of the modern history of socialism, that what is now being contributed, I think still very incompletely, but what is being contributed and almost alone is being contributed from the new nationalist movements, is a reconnection inside the struggle, including the negations, but also the sense of an objective which has the possibility of affirmation. And if I read the nerves of my contemporaries rightly, I realize how exhausted those nerves are after the extraordinarily confused and frustrating politics of the last thirty years. The new moment of affirmation is to me quite the crucial ingredient and at present it is coming from the periphery. It is the renewal of a crucial ingredient without which politics will be only the capitalist interplay of interests, and that would be the end of

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twentieth-century Welsh identity. See the interesting discussion in Robert Stradling’s, *Wales and the Spanish Civil War: The Dragon’s Dearest Cause?* (Stradling: 111-125).

politics in any sense which would have been understandable by me when I first started looking at political life. (1977f: 118-9)

So Williams was looking into the abyss — a world without socialism — and he was able to draw back because of the contribution being made by Welsh nationalism. And, it should be added, by environmentalism, and associated movements of opposition and affirmation.<sup>193</sup> ‘Exile’ was rejected in favour of an affirmation of belonging simultaneously to the Border Country, to Wales, to Europe, to England. Williams embraced Welsh nationalism in the interests of the survival and renewal of socialist politics, not in the name of national independence.

### George Orwell: A Cold War Émigré

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

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

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<sup>193</sup> See the discussion in ‘Socialism and Ecology’ (1982d); see also, ‘Ideas of Nature’ (1971d).

anti-communism was more or less effaced. In its stead the essence of Orwell—the secret of understanding him—was said to reside in a personality predisposed from the start to see ‘the dark side of his subject’; a divided self ‘temperamentally in his element when he was vituperating causes which in another part of himself he hoped to advance’.<sup>194</sup> However, although it was a critical strategy which was designed to read Orwell through his personality it did allow Williams to give a new lease on life to the view that George Orwell was, despite all evidence to the contrary, in some sense an enemy of socialism, and not, properly speaking, even a man of the left.<sup>195</sup> Consequently, Williams’s approach to the body of Orwell’s work remained within the orbit and understanding of a new left (and, eventually, an *old* new left, and a *new* new left) which regarded all attacks upon the Soviet bloc, *other than their own*, as resolutely bourgeois and pro-imperialist. More importantly perhaps Williams’s critical strategy enabled him to engage with at least two or three new generations of readers for whom the visceral hatreds and loyalties of the ‘30s and ‘40s could have no direct appeal.

In 1956 Williams wrote:

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

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<sup>194</sup> These remarks are quoted from Raymond Williams’s interlocutors. They succinctly reproduce the outlook and tone canvassed by Williams though they are not his words (1979b: 390).

<sup>195</sup> ‘I think the other condition of Orwell’s later works was they had to be written by an ex-socialist. It also had to be someone who shared the general discouragement of the generation: an ex-socialist who had become an enthusiast for capitalism could not have had the same effect.’ (1979b: 390).

paradox. He was a notable critic of abuse of language, who himself practised certain of its major and typical abuses. He was a fine observer of detail, and appealed as an empiricist, while at the same time committing himself to an unusual amount of plausible yet specious generalization. (1958a: 286)

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

Thus in attacking the denial of liberty he the exile is on sure ground; he is wholehearted in rejecting the attempts of society to involve him. When, however, in any positive way, he has to affirm liberty, he is forced to deny its inevitable social basis: all he can fall back on is the notion of an atomistic society, which will leave individuals alone. 'Totalitarian' describes a certain kind of repressive social control, but, also, any real society, any adequate community, is necessarily a totality. To belong to a community is to be a part of a whole, and, necessarily, to accept, while helping to define, its disciplines. To the exile, however, society as such is totalitarian; he cannot commit himself, he is bound to stay out. (1958a: 291)

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

Eric Blair had, moreover, grown up with that characteristic absence of normal family life, in an England

which was primarily a home base and a network of ruling-class schools. When this pattern was broken, in 1927, he found himself in an England where he had spent two-thirds of his life but always within institutions or, more rarely, in a family situation, which defined a particular set of social relationships. The political and cultural dominance of men with similar backgrounds and histories has been so marked, in the first half of the twentieth century in Britain, that Blair's growing up has been commonly described as normal and orthodox. In any other terms, including those of the lives of most people in Britain, it was in important ways strange and even alien. This needs to be remembered and emphasised as we look at the next nine years of his life. For what these amounted to were the making of a new set of social relationships and the creation, in an important sense, of a new social identity. This is the critical evolution of Blair into Orwell. (1971b: 8)

In this way Williams was able to incorporate the idea of Eric Blair's invention of Orwell, and the subsequent invention of 'plain honest George' by Orwell into the idea of the exile.<sup>196</sup> Orwell's rejection of his role in the Imperial Police, his apparently bohemian poverty in Paris and his forays into London's East End and the hop fields of Kent, are all explained as a response to exile which, by its deracinated nature, could do no more than perpetuate feelings of isolation and confirm his status as outsider. Orwell, who had 'only theoretically rejected' his class position (1971b: 17) could not, by the act and nature of that rejection, come to know England because he was 'not, in the most central ways, English' at all (1971b: 18). This is why Orwell had to *consciously join* the nation rather than simply *belong* to it in the manner an of authentic Englishman:

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<sup>196</sup> Richard Hoggart writing about Orwell's style says: 'It has a distinctive kick and energy. One critic, Richard Rees, calls it "debonair." This is not the word that would come first to mind, but when you think about it you realize that it is true and helpful, since it reduces the risk of talking about Orwell's style as though it were only that of a plain honest George.' (Hoggart 1965: 47)

Much of Orwell's writing about England is so close and detailed, his emphasis on ordinary English virtues so persistent, that he is now often seen as the archetypal Englishman, the most native and English of writers. But it is necessary to remember the real history: the creation of Orwell from Blair. Many of the ways in which he sees England are affected and sometimes determined by his history: born, educated, and taking his first job in a ruling-class network that was in some deliberate ways cut off from ordinary England; rejecting this network and setting out on his own to discover the country for himself. Similarly, many of the ways in which he values English life are affected and determined by this kind of journey. His notable attachment to what he saw as ordinary England is an act not so much of membership as of conscious affiliation. (1971b: 16-17)

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

And then the double vision, rooted in the simultaneous positions of dominator and dominated, is at once powerful and disturbed. (1971b: 19)

These powerful tensions and disturbances, not surprisingly, had a direct impact on how Orwell functioned as a writer, because, as Williams insisted, for Orwell, being a writer meant 'to live "outside" society and to "write"' (1971b: 32). It was an idea and a position dictated by young Eric Blair's refusal of success by the standards of his class. Others were to make this observation,<sup>197</sup> but Williams distinctively connected it to the problem of the social position of the artist. He explained it thus:

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<sup>197</sup> Regarding success Bernard Crick notes: "Success "as a writer" did not for a long time appear to lie in concentrating on political and social themes. Yet Richard Rees, who knew him well in the 1930s and published most of his early essays, reviews and poems in *The Adelphi*, had "Fugitive From the Camp of Victory" as the sub-title of his book, *George Orwell*. He obviously saw much of Orwell in Gordon Comstock and "the cult of failure": that any kind of success in a capitalist civilization means selling out *both* on others

But there was not only the difficulty of stages—getting from being a writer to being a successful author. There was also the fact that on this projection the writer had no autonomous purposes: his definition of achievement would be shaped from the beginning by an external and alienated standard. i.e., making money. At the same time a growing minority of the same social class made a related but apparently opposite abstraction in reaction to this. If the only orthodox test of achievement was ‘social’ recognition and success, then this could be ‘opposed’ by a simple negation. The ‘writer’, the true writer, had no commercial aims, but also, at root, no social function and, by derivation, no social content. He just ‘wrote’. And then as a self-defined recognisable figure, he lived ‘outside’ society: unconventional, the ‘artist’. (1971b: 31)

### The ‘Invasion’ of Literature by Politics

Williams traced the aesthetic tensions to which Orwell was heir back to the final twenty years of the nineteenth century. He thought by the time that Eric Blair’s artistic outlook was being formed these tensions had become hardened and conventional, lying as they did, at the root of the ordinary modern distinction between form and content. Williams used these observations to highlight Orwell’s admission in ‘Why I Write’, of his having been *forced* by political exigencies into a weighting of his work towards a form which was suitable, and to a large extent, dominated by, its political content and purpose.<sup>198</sup> Williams then extends his observations by quoting at length Orwell’s essay ‘Writers and Leviathan’:

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

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and on oneself (though Gordon mainly feared selling out on himself and Orwell mainly feared selling out on others).’ (Crick: 1980: 108)

<sup>198</sup> (1971b: 32-3). See also ‘Why I Write’, (Orwell 1946: 23-30).

have developed a sort of compunction which our grandparents did not have, an awareness of the enormous injustice and misery of the world, and a guilt-stricken feeling that one ought to be doing something about it, which makes a purely aesthetic attitude towards life impossible. No one, now, could devote himself to literature as single-mindedly as Joyce or Henry James. (CEJL, IV, 408-9) (1971b: 34-5)

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

This account of invasion is significant. Totalitarianism, active interference with writers, is a special problem, but underlying it is something more general, a social conscience. And that is an invasion? Orwell usually describes his own feelings so accurately that surface analysis is hardly ever necessary; he seems to say very clearly what he means. But here he is saying that the 'social conscience' of the writer, hitherto detached but now necessarily involved, is an invasion of 'literature'. (1971b: 35)

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

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

orthodoxies and ‘party lines’ with all the timidity and dishonesty that that implies. (Orwell 1948b: 409)<sup>199</sup>

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

Reading Orwell’s account quickly, one might never remember the English novelists from Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell to George Eliot and Hardy: those contemporaries of ‘our grandparents’ who were indeed aware of ‘the enormous injustice and misery of the world’ and who in different ways made literature from just this experience. There is nothing especially new about social awareness in writers, and indeed in the nineteenth century it had been widespread and growing, especially among the novelists. (1971b: 35-6)

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

. . . that that implies. As against the Victorian writers, we have the disadvantage of living among clear-cut political ideologies and of usually knowing at a glance what thoughts are heretical. A modern literary intellectual lives and writes in constant dread — not, indeed, of public opinion in the wider sense, but of public opinion within his own group. (Orwell 1948b: 409)

In this piece of writing Orwell continued to consider the destructive and difficult implications of political labelling: ‘progressive’, ‘democratic’, ‘revolutionary’, ‘bourgeois’, ‘reactionary’, and ‘Fascist’.

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<sup>199</sup> The page number given here is that cited by Williams to Volume IV of the 1968 edition of Orwell’s *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*. The relevant page in the Penguin edition of 1970 is Volume IV, 464.

However, as Williams developed his case concerning the social, aesthetic, and political tensions bound up in the life of the deracinated upper class intellectual he was not without sympathy. He noted that Orwell had tried hard and seriously to reject the thinking of his class and education, and he even conceded that Orwell had, in ‘a number of ways and at great personal cost’, succeeded (1971b: 37). However, he concludes that Orwell’s sad sense that in another place and time he might have been a different sort of writer, less concerned with mass killings and political murders, and more able to dwell upon the state of his garden, is highly significant.<sup>200</sup> Williams evidently sees something haunting in Orwell’s sense of mourning for another kind of writing life:

An image of what he might have been under some other name (the renaming is crucial) is there and persists, while what he is and has chosen to be is very different. And the stress falls, necessarily, on ‘chosen’. What Orwell consciously made of himself under very real pressures can be seen as an invasion of his nature: not only because of the difficulty of the choice and its break from what he has been intended to be; but also because he felt, against much of the evidence, that he would in any case fail; that he would be dragged back, reabsorbed, into the powerful orthodox world. ‘Being a writer’, in one definition, had been a possible way out. But being the writer he was, the real writer, led him into every kind of difficulty, every tension that the choice had seemed to offer to avoid. (1971b: 39-40)

What Williams presented his readers with was a writer exiled from society who, despite the most heroic efforts, could not escape from his choice to stand outside the class allegiances of his birth, and yet could not embrace the circumstances, commitments, and loyalties of the great majority of his fellow countrymen. It was a writer whose artistic failure, in the novels of the ‘thirties, resides in the failure of their principal characters to

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<sup>200</sup> See the poem on the subject that Orwell published in *The Adelphi*, December 1936. Republished in ‘Why I Write’ (Orwell 1946: 27-28). See also Bertolt Brecht’s poem, *An Die Nachgeborenen* (Brecht 1936-8: 318-320).

express fully the personality of their creator: George Orwell. Consequently:

All of Orwell's writing until 1937 is, then, a series of works and experiments around a common problem. *Instead of dividing them into 'fiction' and 'documentaries' we should see them as sketches towards the creation of his most successful character, 'Orwell'*. It would not be so successful if it had not been so intensely and painfully lived. The exposure to poverty and suffering and filth and waste was as real as it was deliberate, and the record of the exposure is a remarkable enlargement of our literature. But in and through the exposure a character is being created, who is real in the precise sense that he becomes this writer, this shaping presence. Flory and Dorothy and Comstock, or the later Bowling, are aspects of this character but without its centrality. The only literary form which can contain the full character at this stage is the 'non-fiction journal' of an isolated writer exposed to a suffering but unconnecting world. The need to intervene, to force active connections, is the road away from Wigan Pier, back to an indifferent and sleepy and uncaring world, which has to be told about the isolation and suffering. [My Emphasis] (1971b: 52-3)

### **Necessary Killing and the Fact of Murder**

**T**his point of view leads on to further confusions regarding Orwell's precise relationship with his fictional characters that I will return to later. However, at this critical juncture, in reference to the year 1937 in the writing life under analysis, it becomes clear that Williams could not avoid an explicit encounter with what he had called the 'merely partisan debate' concerning the political positions and commitments of George Orwell. Yet, despite all its potential for trouble Williams did manage to move through the 'minefield' with considerable care. While not himself taking up a definite position towards the events reported in *Homage to Catalonia* he was able to report that 'most historians' took a view contrary to that of Orwell, the POUM, and the ILP.

Most historians have taken the view that the revolution—mainly anarcho-syndicalist but with the POUM taking part—was an irrelevant distraction from a desperate war. Some, at the time and after, have gone so far as to describe it as deliberate sabotage of the war effort. Only a few have argued on the other side, that the suppression of the revolution by the main body of Republican forces was an act of power politics, related to Soviet policy, which amounted to a betrayal of the cause for which the Spanish people were fighting. (1971b: 57)

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

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

The complicated issues of revolutionary violence cannot be settled by a simple formula, either way. The weight of the choice of killing is, in experience, tragic. But its reduction to a hard formalised gesture is merely wilful. Indeed, the most important thing to be said about such a gesture is not political but cultural. This brittle literary voice, which can set a tone towards killing that appears anti-romantic, is simply the perverted romanticism of the earlier uncommitted decadence. As a literary line, it follows directly from the bittersweet amoralism, sharing

with it a persuasive capacity to keep real experience at a distance. *The literary revolutionary, with his tough talk of necessary killing, turns out in fact to be our former acquaintance: the honest criminal or the generous whore.* This connection between the decadence and what was supposed to be a positive response to it has been widely and dangerously overlooked. [My Emphasis] (1966a: 196)

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

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

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

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

There are other things to say about Auden’s line and Orwell’s description of it. Murder is usually either a personal act or part of a specifically criminal pattern. There are, of course, political murders, but these are only one aspect of the general fact of political violence. Auden is simplifying, perhaps deliberately, to the norms of his own world, but so, in another way, is Orwell. It is interesting to imagine the line rewritten as ‘the conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary killing’ and then ask how many people, in reality, dissent from this. Most people I know, and most humane liberals I have heard of, accept killing in this sense again and again: from Dresden to Hiroshima, and from Stanleyville to Da Nang. If Auden got his commitment too easily and cheaply, Orwell and others have got their humane dissent on much the same terms. (1966a: 195 n.1)

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

This is a procedure that alerts the careful reader to the ellipsis and its function in the original citation.<sup>201</sup> What did Williams cut out between the end of Auden’s line ‘the necessary murder’ and Orwell’s ‘. . . It could only be written by a person to whom murder is at most a *word*’? Here are the missing lines:

*The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder;*  
 Today the expending of powers  
 On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring  
 meeting.

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

After this Orwell continues:

Personally I would not speak so lightly of murder. It so happens that I have seen the bodies of numbers of murdered men — I don’t mean killed in battle, I mean murdered. Therefore I have some conception of what murder means — the terror, the hatred, the howling relatives, the post-mortems, the blood, the smells. To me, murder is something to be avoided. So it is to any

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<sup>201</sup> In *Modern Tragedy*, completed in 1964 and published in 1966, Williams does not give a source for Orwell’s quotation of Auden. Consequently, I have cited the 1940 edition of Orwell’s essay, *Inside the Whale*. In the 1970 edition the relevant pages are pp.565-6 in Vol. I, *George Orwell: The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Secker & Warburg.

ordinary person. The Hitlers and Stalins find murder necessary, but they don't advertise their callousness, and they don't speak of it as murder; it is 'liquidation', 'elimination' or some other soothing phrase. Mr Auden's brand of amorality is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled. So much of left-wing thought is a kind of playing with fire by people who don't even know that fire is hot. (Orwell 1940c: 169-170)

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

There were more visible 'paradoxes' to hand: a socialist who believed that neither the Russian Revolution nor the Soviet Union had anything whatsoever to do with socialism; a socialist who hated communism and loved England; a socialist who had no belief in the revolutionary potential of the working class; a socialist who hated most of the socialists of his day. That Williams thought of these Orwellian verities as 'paradoxes' required some explicit reckoning with his own historical circumstance and political outlook. However, the trope of exile would either not permit this, or simply concealed its necessity. Orwell's socialism, because of its absolute refusal of Marxism, because of its visceral hatred of communists and their 'fellow

travellers', and because of its profound scepticism regarding an emancipatory role for the working class, had to be grasped by Williams through the paradox of exile.

It was a paradox that had two possible explanations. Firstly, there was Eric Blair's individual problem of identity in which he felt compelled, against his whole education and consciousness, to find a new social identity as George Orwell. It worked, through the rootlessness that formed Orwell, to produce what Keats had written of as 'negative capability'; a capability that had, during the nineteen thirties, become a class psychology. It was, Williams argued, a 'class psychology' that Orwell shared with 'Aldous Huxley, W. H. Auden, Graham Greene, and Christopher Isherwood, who for all their differences' shared 'a characteristic coldness, and an inability to realise the full life of another' (1971b: 89). Secondly, there was Orwell's counter position of 'democracy' to both fascism and communism as if 'democracy' had some existence independent of its capitalist incarnation in the West. Williams explained it thus:

If the only effective social contrast was between 'democracy' and 'communism', then some sort of accommodation with capitalism—that capitalism which was 'on the point of' becoming a social democracy—was at first temporarily and then habitually conceivable. Having made this accommodation, and the corresponding identification of 'communism' as the sole threat, it became harder to see and to admit what capitalist imperialism was still capable of doing: what, in the years since Orwell died, it has done again and again, in repression and in war.

This is the knot that was tied in the middle 1940s. And Orwell, indeed, helped to tie it. Then in his last fiction he discarded the apparently positive element of the illusion—the belief in the imminence of social democracy—and was left with only its negative effects. He could see only authoritarian communism in the future, with no alternative or countervailing social forces. (1971b: 93)

It is at this point that the fictionality that Williams ascribes to the person of Orwell unavoidably comes face to face with the vicissitudes of Williams's own political conduct. For it must be

remembered that Tank Commander Williams fought against fascism with the forces of the British Empire under the supreme command of American imperialist, General Eisenhower. He had allowed his Communist Party membership to lapse on entry into the army and it is safe to assert that he, like Orwell, broadly welcomed the Labour victory in 1945, and continued to hope that some permanent advance might possibly come from the direction of the Labour Party. Indeed, Williams appears to have harboured the Orwellian illusion in the social democratic potential of the Labour Party, and its political environs, until at least 1966 or 1967.<sup>202</sup>

### Colluding with Dystopia

**T**he aspirational structure of Williams's politics led him to suppose that he had, in the leading role of the working class, some social force that could avert the totalitarian nightmare. And, the fictionality that he attributed to the person of Orwell led him to confuse Winston Smith with his creator. Hence Winston Smith's profound isolation, his sense of exile, his dismal speculation on the potential of the Proles to overthrow the rule of the One Party is conflated with Orwell's own outlook. In fact, matters are worse than this when we read:

Orwell's 1984 is no more plausible than Morris's 2003, but its naturalized subjunctive is more profoundly exclusive, more dogmatically repressive of struggle and possibility, than anything within the utopian tradition. It is also, more sourly and more fiercely than in Huxley, a collusion, in the state warned against and satirized—the repression of autonomy, the cancellation of variations and alternatives—is built into the fictional form which is nominally its opponent, converting all opposition into agencies of the repression, imposing, within its excluding totality, the inevitability and the hopelessness which it assumes as a result. (1978b: 208)

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<sup>202</sup> Williams resigned from the Labour Party in July 1966 (1979a: 15) and had a complicated if not unique view of the place of the party in the British working class movement. See Williams (1965). See 'Marxism Reasserted', Chapter Two, *above*; see also (Hall 1967) and Williams (1968b); Williams (1981b).

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell was *colluding* with the suppression of dissent. So, by extension we can see that Orwell is not merely Winston Smith he is also and necessarily, O'Brien. The striking thing about Williams's point here is that it cannot be understood unless one extends the conflation of Orwell with Winston Smith, to O'Brien, and thence, through successive personalities, to Senator McCarthy and the Devil Himself. Williams understood *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a 'negative present' from which countervailing or mitigating factors are simply excluded.<sup>203</sup>

Orwell's cautionary tale was written as a warning to the middle class intelligentsia of the dangers of compromising or fellow travelling with what he regarded as totalitarian ideologies. It is importantly a vision of the destruction of *middle class* life and of the critical intelligence and capacity for positive leadership that Orwell evidently associated with this strand of society.<sup>204</sup> It is this belief—the belief in the potential of the English middle class—that was not grasped by Williams as a possible socialist position. He knew that Orwell believed in the English middle class as a social force. He knew that Orwell believed that this class, if sufficiently roused and properly led could, in alliance with working class people, form a mighty bulwark against tyranny. He knew that Orwell believed that, armed with common sense, fair play, and a healthy suspicion of the deracinated enthusiasms of the left-wing intellectual of his day, this social force could create a solid foundation for democratic socialist advance. Yet, despite this knowledge, Williams felt compelled to read Orwell's stern warning in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* of the danger posed by totalitarian ideologies as a bleak projection of Orwell's personality; as a projection of his own bleak exile from his class, from the mainstream left, from his country.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> See Williams's 'The Tenses of Imagination' (1978c 1985: 266). In regard to his 'Afterword: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1984' in the Second Edition of his *Orwell* it is surprising that Williams did not appear to be aware of the work of William Steinhoff (Steinhoff 1975).

<sup>204</sup> See Orwell's comments on the passive role into which workers are forced and his faith in the middle class's capacity for leadership. 'I do agree that in almost any revolt the leaders would tend to be people who could pronounce their aitches.' *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Orwell 1937: 44-5; 45)

<sup>205</sup> Williams seems to have believed that Orwell broke from the orthodox Left in 1938. However, it is difficult to see how being the literary editor of

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

Most middle class Socialists, however, are very unlikely to get into fights with drunken fish porters; when they do make a genuine contact with the working class, it is usually with the working class intelligentsia. But the working class intelligentsia is sharply divisible into two different types. There is the type who remains working class — who goes on working as a mechanic or a dock labourer or whatever it may be and does not bother to change his working class accent and habits, but who 'improves his mind' in his spare time and works for the ILP or the Communist Party; and there is the type who does alter his way of life, at least externally, and who by means of State scholarships succeeds in climbing into the middle class. The first is one of the finest types of man we have. I can think of some I have met whom not even the most hidebound Tory could help liking and admiring. The other type, with exceptions — D. H. Lawrence, for example — is less admirable. (Orwell 1937: 151-2)

Williams could not, of course, directly engage with this kind of position. As a scholarship boy who had clambered into the middle class intelligentsia, and as a novelist who expended considerable literary effort investigating the tensions that this kind of transition created, there was no *safe* point of contact with

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*Tribune* during the general editorship of Aneurin Bevan is consistent with a complete 'break with the orthodox Left' (1971b: 13-14). Williams's use of the term 'orthodox left' referred to the left in and around the Communist Party and its far-flung circles.

Orwell. This is because Williams's interest in the transition from one class to another, from one place to another, and from one name to another, was expressed through an investigation of the various manifestations or instantiations of what he plainly regarded as the essential connections and loyalties which constitute personalities, relationships, and communities.<sup>206</sup> He did not understand his own work as a trade, for polemical purposes, in fixed profiles of class. This was Orwell's stock-in trade:

This is the kind of position which becomes a problem again in a writer like Orwell, who typically did not include in his diaries or notebooks those working-class men and women he met who were well-read, articulate, politically conscious or active in some pursuit which is conventionally not assigned to the class. If, on the other hand, he met somebody who fitted a middle-class vision of the drunken or feckless or ignorant or helpless working man, down it went. When he wrote *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he sought out the lowest doss house in town, even though he'd arrived with introductions from leaders of the Unemployed Workers' Movement and trade unionists and had stayed with educated working class socialists. He then 'proved' that socialism is just a middle class idea. Working class people are either just not interested or they've got more common sense or they're good natured, thoughtless, rather childish and at times drunken people—what he represented in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as the Proles. (1982b: 249-250)

The anguish expressed here is the anguish of somebody who, for all their subtlety and sophistication in other respects, does not quite understand the intractable nature of their oppression. Being well read, or acquiring any other atypical virtue, was unlikely, during the mid twentieth century, to save any working class

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<sup>206</sup> It is surprising that Williams makes no reference, in his work on Orwell, to the issue of name changes in his own *Border Country* or the manner in which he writes about the tensions encountered by people who leave their place and situation of birth in order to make their own way of life. For a discussion of the autobiographical aspects of *Border Country* see Laura Di Michele's essay 'Autobiography and the "Structure of Feeling" in *Border Country*' (Di Michele: 1993).

person from the disdain and patronage of many of those born in the English upper middle class. This failure of insight in Williams's criticism goes some way to explain why he regarded Orwell's position as both 'dominator and dominated' as, in some sense, special or peculiar. Arguably, it is nothing of the sort and may be strongly felt by anybody who attempts to alter or challenge the conditions and relationships ascribed to them at birth. In fact it could be said to define a central tension in the lives of many people, including the life of Raymond Williams.

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

Indeed the contradictions, the paradox of Orwell, must be seen as paramount. Instead of flattening out the contradictions by choosing this or that tendency as the 'real' Orwell, or fragmenting them by separating this or that period or this or that genre, we ought to say that it is the paradoxes which are finally significant. No simple explanation of them will do justice to so complex a man (the more complex because he appears, on the surface, so plain). Some of the concepts we need for any full explanation may be beyond our reach just because of what we share with Orwell: a particular kind of historical pressure, a particular structure of responses and failures to respond. (1971b: 87)

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

axiomatic for Williams. And, consequently, it was axiomatic that those cut off from such community and such connectedness could not hope to grasp the future of socialism.

### Plain Men Bumping into Experience

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

On the other hand, if you ask what was it in Orwell that allowed him to fulfil the summons of the conjuncture, so to speak, you refer to a quite separate order of determinants. Here the sort of analysis which Sartre has sought to make of Flaubert would be a relevant model: he first tries to reconstruct the constitution of Flaubert's personality within his early family experience, and then to explore the reasons why the society of the Second Empire should have conferred such a signal if paradoxical success on *Madame Bovary*. (1979b: 389-390)

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

The key question, however, is what deep structures of consciousness and pressure were producing the shifts

during the thirties and forties which in Orwell's case resulted not in an isolated major individual, but what was to be a widely imitated style. The next generation received that form as wisdom, achievement and maturity, although it was false to the core. So far as Orwell himself is concerned, once the plain style goes, the centrality goes and this is the question about what was writing him. (1979b: 389)

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

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

The part of the book I am most satisfied with is the attempt to define the peculiar question of the plain style of Orwell's prose, which has been extraordinarily influential as a convention well beyond literature. It has become a reportorial format and a television style. I share with my friends the modernists a profound suspicion of anything that appears so natural. The chapter that I would not have missed writing was the one where I discuss the creation of a character called Orwell who is very different from the writer called Orwell — the successful impersonation of the plain man who bumps into experience in an unmediated way and is simply telling the truth about it. (1979b: 384-5)

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

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

The first big bump was the Russian Revolution. For somewhat complex reasons, nearly the whole of the English Left has been driven to accept the Russian régime as 'Socialist', while silently recognising that its spirit and practice are quite alien to anything that is meant by 'Socialism' in this country. Hence there has arisen a sort of schizophrenic manner of thinking, in which words like 'democracy' can bear two irreconcilable meanings, and such things as concentration camps and mass deportations can be right and wrong simultaneously. (Orwell 1948b: 465-6)

'Bumps against reality' of this sort did not stop in the 'thirties. For Williams they occasioned the defence of forced labour policies introduced under the Maoist Cultural Revolution in China,<sup>207</sup> and of the Khmer Rouge's evacuation of the entire population of Phnom Penh at gunpoint. As Williams explained in the late seventies:

Many people draw back at the spectacle of forceful repatriation to the countryside and the very brutal discipline employed to enforce it, although it could be argued that these were a consequence imposed by a revolutionary seizure of power in a situation made so

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<sup>207</sup> 'When I heard pathetic stories about professors being taken from their libraries and laboratories and sent to help bring in the harvest I felt totally on the side of the revolutionaries. If people are genuinely ill it is a different matter, but I do not see why an ordinary healthy man or woman should not participate in manual labour. A socialist movement will have nothing to offer to the working class unless it stands by that.' (1979b: 404)

exposed by the previous history. The tragedy of a revolution is not at all insurrection or the use of force against enemies — although it can be a tragic experience in another sense to be confronted with a bitter and cruel enemy aided by outside intervention, like the Chilean junta. The real tragedy occurs at those dreadful moments when the revolutionary impetus is so nearly lost, or so heavily threatened, that the revolutionary movement has to impose the harshest discipline on itself and over *relatively innocent people* in order not to be broken down and defeated. That kind of hardness, although it shifted around in the complicated politics of the USSR in the twenties, was in different ways taken up by everybody in the Soviet Party. Those who withdrew from the notion of a hard line — hard yet flexible — did stop believing in the revolution. That has been the main block in the minds of most people thinking about the Russian Revolution in another sort of society ever since. [My Emphasis] (1979b: 395)

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

person alienated from the structural realities of capitalist social relations could believe so.

### **Animal Farm: Anti-Communism and Collective Failure**

These aspects of Williams's outlook go some way to revealing the reason for the failure of his critical strategy for reading Orwell. Because he insisted on displacing Orwell's social, political, and aesthetic posture, with an analysis centred upon the dissection of a peculiar personal development he was unable to consider with any degree of clarity or determination the role, the extent, and the texture of Orwell's anti-communism, his conception of capitalist society, and of contemporary social relationships. Consequently, the role of these diverse and complex elements in the formation of Orwell's novels, essays, and criticism, eluded him. Williams's strategy narrowed his critical repertoire to a remarkable degree. One consequence was that Winston Smith, Flory, Dorothy, Comstock, and Bowling, were all in some sense said to be George Orwell, and even that the collective failure of the animals on the farm in the face of Mr Jones and the Pigs was also George Orwell in the guise and personality of 'collective failure'. For all Williams's critical sophistication he was reduced to these meagre resources by his need to find a crushing pessimism and denial of the human spirit in the work of Orwell:

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

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

the animals who free themselves and then, through violence and fraud, are again enslaved. (1971b: 73)

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

The collective projection has a further effect. What happens is a common rather than an isolated experience, for all its bitterness. The whine of ragged nerves, the despair of a lonely trajectory, are replaced by an active communication which is the tone of the critical narrative. A paradoxical confidence, an assured and active and laughing intelligence, is manifested in the very penetration and exposure of the experience of defeat. (1971b: 73-4)

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

The reason for this hostility is fairly evident. Orwell was the foremost socialist in English letters from the publication of *Animal Farm* in 1945 until the decay and disappearance of the socialist movement during the course of the nineteen eighties. Raymond Williams, on the other hand, was striving in different ways throughout this period to sustain and develop an active socialist commitment against the pessimism, demoralisation, and accommodation with the Western capitalist democracies that appeared to be sanctioned and advocated by Orwell's most powerful work. Williams was particularly concerned to undermine the appeal of the deceptive lucidity and simplicity of Orwell's style and to disrupt the appeal of his wretched social patriotism. Williams was essentially engaged in policing the reception of Orwell among successive cohorts of young readers. Inevitably, this was a critical relationship riven with political

rivalry and active animosities that could neither be contained nor concealed by the ingenious creation of Orwell as exile.

## Chapter Eight: Real History and the Knowable Community

### 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 did not discuss history in his work as a literary enterprise, it appears always in the guise of a record to be consulted, 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 Country and the City* 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.<sup>208</sup> 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 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

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<sup>208</sup> 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).

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)<sup>209</sup>

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 or acknowledge in *The Country and the City*.

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

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<sup>209</sup> 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)

Why do I discuss a minor 18<sup>th</sup>-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:

‘[. . .] 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)<sup>210</sup>

For Williams 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 men who were making and

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<sup>210</sup> For a sustained development of this position, see Williams's explication in *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 311-315).

working the land, in any event, under the old owners and the new. (1973c: 50)<sup>211</sup>

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.<sup>212</sup> 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:

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<sup>211</sup> 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.

<sup>212</sup> 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.'<sup>213</sup>

This was a fruitful critical response. The contrast between the two novelists enabled him to discuss Jane Austen's achievements within her enclosed world<sup>214</sup> 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',<sup>215</sup> 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:

. . . 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

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<sup>213</sup> (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)

<sup>214</sup> 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).

<sup>215</sup> 'Adam and Dinah' is Chapter 52 of *Adam Bede*. For these irate discussions see Williams (1969f: 265-8).

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’.<sup>216</sup> 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 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 (See 1961a: 315).

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<sup>216</sup> 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).

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.<sup>217</sup>

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 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.

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<sup>217</sup> '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)

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.<sup>218</sup> 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.<sup>219</sup>

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

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<sup>218</sup> 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).

<sup>219</sup> 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).

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)<sup>220</sup>

What Williams, whose mother had been a farm servant and whose grandfather had been a landless labourer in a ‘traditional

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<sup>220</sup> 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).

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 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)

It is necessary in this argument for Williams to depict *Daniel Deronda* as a novel of 'country-house' England in order to make his criticisms of Leavis and Eliot, plausible. Consequently, he follows Leavis in choosing to ignore the Jewish family and Jewish characters in *Daniel Deronda*.<sup>221</sup> The critical elision of Eliot's portrayal of the lives of Jewish shopkeepers and artisans is compounded by Williams's surprising refusal to discuss the 'The Philosophers' club, held at the *Hand and Banner* in Holborn, where Jewish workingmen met for intellectual discussion and argument (Eliot 1876: 444-460). Because there is no trace of anti-Semitism in Williams's life or work the explanation for this omission must be that to include it would have disrupted the progress of his argument about country houses and the disappearance of a concern for want or hardship from Eliot's work.

Alternatively, 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 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.

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<sup>221</sup>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).

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*.<sup>222</sup>

### F. R. Leavis and Dickens

Although Williams was prepared to acknowledge that F. R. Leavis’s criticism supported a complicated range of responses<sup>223</sup> 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 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

<sup>222</sup> 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 trial to refined persons but inseparable from his strength.’ (Kettle 1966: 266).

<sup>223</sup> 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)

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.<sup>224</sup> 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

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<sup>224</sup> 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)

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 solidarity<sup>225</sup> 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 [T. S.] Eliot.

The red-eyed scavengers are creeping  
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,

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<sup>225</sup> 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)

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)<sup>226</sup>

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)

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’.

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<sup>226</sup> 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'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'.<sup>227</sup> 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 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

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<sup>227</sup> See 'The First Major Novel: *Dombey and Son*' (F. R. Leavis 1962: 21-56) and *The English Novel* (1970a: 9).

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’ (See Leavis 1962: 54-6).

### 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 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 with 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 ourselves 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.

## Chapter Nine: Modernism and the Unknowable Community

### 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*.<sup>228</sup> 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. As we have seen 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'<sup>229</sup> or as 'a parting of the ways' in which the sociality of the past gave way to a world in

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<sup>228</sup> 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).

<sup>229</sup> 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)

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.<sup>230</sup> 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.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Frederic Jameson is perhaps more successful in this respect in his essay ‘Modernism and Imperialism’ (Jameson 1988: 43-66).

<sup>231</sup> 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 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>232</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:

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,

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<sup>232</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)

Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy.<sup>233</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 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,

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<sup>233</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.

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 Bladestover 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>234</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>235</sup>

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

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<sup>234</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>235</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).

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 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, something 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 (*See* Britton 1991: 116-7). 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

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 (*See* 1985c: 23). 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 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>236</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>237</sup>

### **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

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<sup>236</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>237</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).

cogent analysis better demonstrated than in his writing on the Bloomsbury Group.<sup>238</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)

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

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<sup>238</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).

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>239</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 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

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<sup>239</sup> This article was based on a lecture given at Canterbury in 1978 (1980a: ix).

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>240</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 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

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<sup>240</sup> C. Bell, *Art* (London, 1914), pp.274-5, cited by Williams (1978d: 168).

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.

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 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<sup>241</sup> 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>242</sup> Consequently, in his attempt to rebut and reject what was narrow in Leavis’s idea of tradition, Williams appears to have unwittingly accepted the national parameters of the argument, so that even his fertile 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 Denys Thompson or F. R. Leavis’s idea of the organic community provoked the articulation of his own

<sup>241</sup> See ‘Beyond Soviet Experience’, Chapter Two, *above*.

<sup>242</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).

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.

### Postscript: Positive Criticism

The world of Williams's revolutionary conception of the working class and its cultural achievements has passed away. However, the aspirations that sustained his outlook, if not its precise purposes, survive intact in many radical reformist critiques of capitalism. These desires inspire movements for the democratisation of economic and social policy, and for the social determination of goals in opposition to those formed principally by the pursuit of profit. Indeed, many of Williams's ideas could be said to have anticipated not merely those of late-in-the-day Euro-Communists, but also those adopted by growing numbers of socialists during the years of stagnation that preceded the collapse of state-socialism.<sup>243</sup>

Williams's criticism of socialist models based upon 'productivism' and the domination or 'conquest of nature' sit harmoniously with many contemporary ideas of sustainability, communitarianism, and democratic localism canvassed by modern anti-capitalists. Similarly, his opposition to monopolies and his specific hatred of American capitalism continue to have an up-to-date ring about them.

So, too does his explanation for the many crimes and failings of the Soviet dictatorship: its encirclement by implacable opponents and enemies systematically committed to its downfall. This kind of argument continues to have considerable force. Although, it is true that North Korea's embattled status has won it few allies, similar mitigations continue to be deployed by socialists throughout the world as justification for the nature of Fidel Castro's dictatorship. The US sanctions explain the inability of the planned economy to meet adequately the needs of the Cuban masses. Without the trade embargo, it is often argued, the planned economy would flourish and the dictatorship enforced by the Communist Party<sup>244</sup> would lose many of its unpleasant features.

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<sup>243</sup> For an interesting discussion of socialism after the disintegration of state-socialism see Jürgen Habermas's article 'What Does Socialism Mean Today?' (Habermas 1990)

<sup>244</sup> Two years after the Cuban Revolution of 1959 the People's Socialist Party was amalgamated with the 26<sup>th</sup> July Movement, and the Revolutionary Directory March 13<sup>th</sup>, to form the Integrated Revolutionary Organizations (ORI). In March 1962 the ORI became the United Party of the Cuban Socialist Revolution (PURSC), which, in turn, became the Communist Party

Yet, capitalists, large and small, can be relied upon to do everything in their power to oppose the destruction of societies resting on profit seeking and market relations — this is what the Marxist analysis of society (any version) assures us. And Williams, like many modern apologists for the regime in Havana, could not actually conceive of any model of socialism (or of *the transition to socialism*) that could function in the teeth of sustained and ferocious capitalist opposition without resort to one-party rule, unbridled police powers and the suppression of opposition or criticism in the trade unions, in politics, in literature, in the arts and popular entertainment.

Williams endorsed a form of political response to *actually existing socialism* in which the crimes and excesses of communist dictators were roundly denounced and yet the failings of their regimes were understood as *deformations* contingent upon their embattled circumstances. In a spirit of solidarity and constructive criticism, he defended communist dictatorships upon the grounds that not much more could be expected of them given their economic and military encirclement.

Consequently, while Williams's socialism, its commitments and its formal apologetics, may have become *manifestly* outmoded, its *latent* or *essential* content is seen by many socialists to be as sound as ever; it has not in any fundamental sense been discredited or rendered defunct. The corollary of this is that many of the problems exemplified by his criticism, or bequeathed to us by Williams's criticism, remain. They have assumed new guises, to be sure, but they remain within modes of criticism that frame their assessment of artworks with historical, social or political criteria derived in one way or another from socialist critiques of capitalism.

These modes of political criticism circle around an impenetrable aspirational core, imagined as the site of a dynamic process known as 'the struggle for emancipation'. It is the site of vast efforts of imagination, which have given form and coherence to equally vast material struggles for a better life waged under the aegis of socialist and egalitarian ideas for more than a century and a half by hundreds of millions of workers, peasants, students and intellectuals throughout the world.

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of Cuba in October 1965. For a generally favourable account of the evolution of the Cuban communist dictatorship see Lievesley 2004: *passim*.

Within the critical process this struggle has assumed the form of meditation upon alienation, inequality, domination and subordination, giving rise almost automatically to contemplation of exploitation, colonialism, racism, gender, and sexism, which turn inevitably to historical consideration of the conditions of their production and reproduction within ‘the capitalist system’.

It is well known, of course, that much was wrong with the world before the inception of societies fashioned through generalised commodity production. However, capitalism is arraigned either for *producing*, *intensifying*, or *sustaining* these oppressive or exploitative contexts from which we all need emancipating. The analysis of these contexts, their identification and illustration, the determination of their nature and extent, forms the historical matrix within which political criticism seeks to engage with art works.

It is here, in the employment of history that much contemporary criticism, often of considerable sophistication, exhibits a striking similarity to that of Williams’s work. The deployment of historical assumptions and historical texts takes place in a manner in which critical reflection upon the formation of those historical assumptions and those historical texts does not play an active or dynamic part in the development of the criticism. The result of this procedure is the formation and hardening of critical contexts composed of aspirations, dissatisfactions, fore conceptions and histories, which take little account of the reading, speaking and writing that have brought them into existence.

History is often treated as a stable source from which evidence is sought without regard to the manner in which historical selection occurs and texts are produced. As we have seen Williams found a particular view of enclosure, rural impoverishment and depopulation, acceptable — it fitted his view of landlords, their bailiffs, and their ‘house-trained’ poets. Matters would have become much more complicated if he had questioned the coherence and relevance of his *historical sources*. Poems and novels read would have assumed a different status, their formal qualities and their content would have assumed new and different relations as, for example, pastoral landscapes — landscapes without labour — reminded critics more of a lively interest in classical antiquity and a yearning for prelapsarian harmony than a

landed magnet's desire to conceal the real source of nature's bounty.

An historical account is the product of particular modes of writing and composition, of discrete synthetic practices, emerging from within particular conceptions of human purposes and being. Therefore, literary critics cannot proceed as if history, the body of historical writing and reflection, is a datum against which other kinds of writing can be weighed and measured. Literary critics who deploy political and historical readings of artworks cannot do so without consideration of the manner in which the political and historical context has been summoned up or evoked, furnished and populated, drawn and detailed.

Consequently, a critical engagement with historiography, together with a critical engagement with the history of criticism is essential, before significant reflection can take place upon the way in which the text or artwork under discussion contributes to and alters our understanding of historical development. Literary critics engaged in political criticism are not substantiating a historical interpretation; they are not illustrating a particular historical position. On the contrary, they are conceiving of a new way of explaining the manner of a text's composition, its course and development, its influences; they are excavating and investigating its origins. In the course of analysing a text and producing a new account of its language, its movement from one thought to another, its indeterminations, its arguments, its inspirations and its paradoxes, the literary critic is writing history.

We need to recognise our criticism as a form of historical writing in which a new reading of texts is produced. In every reading we produce, *in the course of producing it*, we must attempt to derive the political and historical problems from the text or artwork under consideration, to approach the individual artwork (or particular body of work) as a distinct production, one concealing within it the appropriate means by which it may be read. Critics must not impose a critical context upon a work *in advance* of their reading and evaluation of it as a unique work of art.

This means that the historical problems revealed or created by a text, its political register, its moral or philosophical implications, should be sought within the text — the critics' task is to determine during her encounter with a particular artwork the appropriate means of reading it. We should not measure and

weigh works against ready-made critical contexts, offering a particular novel to post-colonial readings or another to a feminist account, and so on. In each case we should look *within the artwork* for the means by which it may be read most effectively.<sup>245</sup> We should strive to ensure that the work under consideration survives our analysis; we should strive to ensure that the novel, the play, the poem, the fragment, does not collapse under the weight of political and historical impositions and associations, in which it is asked merely to illustrate a ready opinion, or required to underwrite some current ontological imperative, or to do service as proof or confirmation of what we knew well before we started reading.

This does not mean dispensing with the use of political or historical resources in the course of criticism. On the contrary it means ensuring that reflection upon politics and history must assume an active role in the encounter with an artwork or text in a manner, which grasps that text as a unique contribution to the history of art and to the history of its criticism.

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<sup>245</sup> See Gary Banham's essay 'Kant and the ends of criticism', Banham 2003: pp193-207.

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