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 immoveable 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.[1] 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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[1] 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 19th-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.[2] 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.[3] Consequently, Williams could

[2] See Williams's *Guardian* review of *August 1914* (1972b: 14).

[3] 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

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*.[4] 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.[5]

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).

[4] For similar left-wing accounts of Solzhenitsyn's development see Medvedev 1973: 25-36 and Mandel 1974: 51-61.

[5] 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.
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> (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.[6]

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.[7] 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.
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> (1947b: 43)

[6] See 'Soviet Literary Controversy in Retrospect' (1947b: 48).
[7] 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.[8]
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> (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 wrought 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

[8] 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.
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> (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

Nothing 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.
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> (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.[9] For example, in 1918 Max Weber felt that he had to explain to the officers of the Austro-Hungarian army that:

[9] During the late 1970s and the 1980s 'market socialism' was debated in Marxist circles. Specific ideas concerning the configuration that a socialist

> 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.
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> (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*.[10] 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.[11] 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-

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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 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).

[10] Williams gives this account of his early Marxist reading in *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 40-1).

[11] See *Anti-During* (Engels 1878: 292)

> possessors, wage workers and bourgeois; and on the other hand, of the anarchy ruling in production.
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> (Engels 1878: 23)

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.[12] 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.
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> (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.[13] It was a strikingly vague and

[12] 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).

[13] 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)

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, 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.
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> (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.
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> (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.[14] 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.[15] And, this knowledge did not at any moment during Williams's working life in any sense *make the*

[14] 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).

[15] See Sheila Cohen and Kim Moody's 1998 discussion of modern class-consciousness in *Socialist Register* (Cohen and Moody 1998: 102-123).

case for socialism or demonstrate the historical exhaustion of capitalism in the fields of technological or artistic creativity.

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[16], 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

[16] 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.

> fight against the objective, external horrors accompanying the collapse of our social system, against Fascism, against 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.
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> 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.
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> (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 the world crises. And, in Cambridge, it did not stunt their enthusiasm for Joyce, Jazz and surrealism.[17]

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*

[17] See the reminiscence in *Politics and Letters* (1979b: 45-6).

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 disagreed with Soviet literary criticism or were even hostile to socialist realism.[18] 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.
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> (Heinemann 1988: 118)[19]

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

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[18] 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)

[19] 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).

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 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)[20]

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,” be-

[20] 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 22nd Party Congress in 1961, would under communism remain permanent even when the state had eventually withered away.’ (Kelly 1992: 400)

> cause 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 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'

It 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'; [21] 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? [22]
>
> (Clark 1981: 34-5)

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[21] The brief discussion in *Culture and Society* of Socialist Realism is subsumed in a discussion of 'structure' and 'superstructure' (1958a: 279-284).

[22] 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).

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 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,[23] 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*[24], 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[25] 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.[26]

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

[23] 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).
[24] For a more thorough discussion of the *May Day Manifesto* see 'Marxism Reasserted' in Chapter Two below.
[25] 'The Knowable Community in George Eliot's Novels' (1969f), *The English Novel* (1970a), and *The Country and the City* (1973c).
[26] '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).

> future of the cities and of industry. One of the real merits of some rural writers, often not seen because other elements are present, is an insistence on the complexity of the living natural environment. Now that the dangers to this environment have come more clearly into view, our ideas, once again, have to shift. Some of the darkest images of the city have to be faced as quite literal futures. An insane over-confidence in the specialised powers of metropolitan industrialism has brought us to the point where however we precisely assess it the risk to human survival is becoming evident, or if we survive, as I think we shall, there is the clear impossibility of continuing as we are.
>
> (1973c: 300-1)

From reading this in the opening years of the twenty-first century it 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.[27] 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

[27] 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)

> about world revolution, the 'countryside' was surrounding the 'cities'. Thus the 'rural idiots' and the 'barbarians and semi-barbarians' have been for the last forty years, the main revolutionary force in the world.
>
> (1973c: 304)

History was taking its revenge upon Marx and Engels's anti-rural rhetoric and upon the sophisticated distain 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 Communist Party of China'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 consoledation, an economy capable of producing everything from jet fighters to medical instruments.

The long struggle for women's rights,[28] the attainment of National unification in 1949 after decades of war, the battle for literacy and rural education, were all remarkable achievements.

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[28] 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*).

Under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong the economy grew on average by six percent per annum.[29] 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,[30] 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.

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[29] '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)

[30] See Penny Kane's *Famine in China* (Kane 1988: *passim*), and Dali L. Yang's *Calamity and Reform in China* (Yang 1996: *passim*).

> This change of basic ideas and questions, especially in the socialist and revolutionary movements, has been for me the connection which I have been seeking for so long, through the local forms of a particular and personal crisis, and through the extended inquiry which has taken many forms but which has come through as this inquiry into the country and the city. They are the many questions that were a single question, that once moved like light: a personal experience, for the reasons I described, but now also a social experience, which connects me, increasingly, with so many others. This is the position, the sense of shape, for which I have worked. Yet it is still, even now, only beginning to form. It is what is being done and is to do, rather than anything that has been finally done.
>
> (1973c: 305)

Looking beyond the surreptitious *hubris* of this embarrassing passage[31] 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.

[31] 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).