

CULTURAL CRITICISM AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

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Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, London: New Left Books, 1979, pp. 444.

In recent years Terry Eagleton and Anthony Barnett have published critical assessments of Raymond Williams, terminating a protracted period in which the *oeuvre* of this major figure had not been the specific object of a systematic critique.¹ In *Politics and Letters*, a series of interviews conducted by three members of *New Left Review* (Barnett, Perry Anderson and Francis Mulhern), Williams replies to criticisms of his work, to questions both of method and substance occasioned by his theoretical development. Above all, Williams's critical engagement with the younger generation — those who, in Eagleton's words, "he has enabled to speak"² — focuses the pivotal questions of English cultural criticism.

Everywhere within the English tradition cultural theory has been dominated by the organic model, the notion inherited from Romantic and Victorian thinkers of the organism as a fundamental paradigm. The significance of the organism as prototype lies in its fusion of both the historical and the structural, the diachronic and the synchronic. In tracing the successive evolution of the organism (the diachronic) what is also disclosed is the co-temporal inter-relations of its constituent parts (the synchronic). Culture, conceived as an organism, became, in Williams's formulation, that 'whole way of life' which would foster and develop the growth of human capacities. Or, as the influential F.R. Leavis puts it, culture partakes of "the common flame in all things that live and grow."³

To be sure, the vocabulary which this organicist cultural criticism utilized — life, human, individuality, sincere and vital emotion — lays claim to concrete totality. In literary criticism, however, it is evident that such dominant categories achieve only a pseudo-concreteness. As Eagleton has noted, the methodology of cultural theory remained silenced and mute when confronted with contradiction: "all one could do was to point to which phenomena represented 'life', and which did not; there was by definition no possibility of real development within the case, self-limiting and self-referential as it was."⁴ Among the criticisms of Williams's writings, none raises more urgent questions than the judgment Eagleton goes on to elaborate. Williams's early work, he argues, adopted a 'left-Leavisite' stance. Caught between the organicist aesthetics of *Culture and Society* and the corporatist sociology of *The Long Revolution*, his project was ironically deflected from

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its very purpose. Even if Williams had set out to reaffirm the capability of men and women to remake cultural values within their own lived experience, the English tradition left him bereft of a methodology through which to disentangle the seamless web advanced capitalist societies wove about the individual. Similarly, Eagleton contends, Williams's culturalist aesthetics favoured an "art which consolidates given meanings, rather than an art which ruptures and subverts them."⁵ Thus, although Williams's work stood as a courageous affirmation of culture against society, it appeared tragically to lack the critical cutting edge necessary for qualitative transformation.

But if the stucturalist inspired critique of Williams has its decisive moment of truth, it must surely be to direct our attention to the synchronic texture of his work, to underline the ruptures, the rifts and elisions which are inscribed within his project. What informs the *Politics and Letters* interviews is the one-dimensionality of an interpretation seeing Williams's development merely as a movement from an early culturalist deviation to the more *engagé* political perspectives of *The Country and the City* or *Marxism and Literature*. Rather, the contrary is true. In reality, Williams's thought is revealed to be fractured by a series of contradictory sub-themes. While the elements of an idealist, organicist aesthetics are certainly inherent, the interviews begin to bring to the foreground a continuing awareness, present even at an early stage of his development, of the obstacles, distortions and blockages threatening the development of human capacities. In this context the interview format of *Politics and Letters* works remarkably well. Unlike interviews where the question functions simply as touchstone for an expansive, often only slightly related answer, the subjects of controversy put to Williams are detailed and concrete, at various points formulating and posing alternative positions. The interviewers both force and permit a specific intervention by Williams, resulting in genuine debate, exchange, self-criticism and dialogue.

The motif which pervades Williams's project is an endeavour to supersede the literary methodology of his training, to move beyond ways of seeing the past as static, codified tradition, and, to insist instead, on its constitutive pressures on the present. Commenting on the methodology of *Culture and Society*, he wrote, "from analysing and interpreting the ideas and values I moved to an attempt to reinterpret and extend them, in terms of a still changing society and of my own experience in it."⁶ Paradoxically, however, the accent on the category of 'experience' tends to recall Leavis's subjectivist notion of 'life'. Not surprisingly, the *NLR* interviewers engage Williams about the hypostatization of this questionable construct. His reply divulges an essential undercurrent in his thinking. Refusing "to make a god out of an unexamined subjectivity," he insists on the impossibility of direct, unmediated contact with reality and the necessity of developing a critical vocabulary "for all that is not fully articulated, all that comes through as disturbance, tension,

blockage and emotional trouble.”⁷ Although the focus on culture as a whole way of life, on the creation of cultural values in ordinary, unexamined lives has been brought to the fore in *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*, an equally emergent theme is the awareness of the imperative to unravel the complex density of the structural ensemble that inhibits, distorts or fractures such a process. In addition, it should be noted that Williams’s defence of the “ordinariness” of culture was directed, in part, against an elitism which saw cultural tradition as the privileged enclave of high art and dismissed the lives of working people as manipulated, uncreative, passive and insignificant.

Moreover, behind this feature of his thought lies a crucial theoretical project, the effort within the English tradition to specify what Sartre has designated *le vécu*. The critical construct Williams developed — one which appeared from *The Long Revolution* to the recent *Marxism and Literature* — is “structure of feeling.” The notion originates in his intention to express the common themes among a generation of dramatists or writers, to give definition to their singular way of seeing and inscribing within their work unique pressures, problems, disturbances. The term was to be both more concretely specific and less expansive than the abstract universalism of *zeitgeist*. It gave form to an experience as pressuring, determining and inescapable as “structure,” yet often semi-articulated, perceived only as experience, as “feeling.” In *Marxism and Literature* Williams maintains “we are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-related continuity.”⁸ The difficulty of the speaking voice underscores both the textured density of the notion and the mediated area of experience it is designed to articulate. He goes on to describe the typical emancipatory wedge a structure of feeling may embody. Put simply, it occurs in the field of tension and rift between residual or dominant ideology and emergent or critical experience.

Here the complexity of the interviews makes it possible to analyze Williams’s own theoretical development in terms of a structure of feeling. The third chapter contains Williams’s first extended commentary on his creative writing, especially his four novels — *Border Country*, *Second Generation*, *The Fight for Manod* and *The Volunteers* — published between 1960 and 1978. The dates are deceptive. He began the first of seven drafts of *Border Country* in 1947 and put the other novels through equally extensive revisions. The writing of fiction has been a sustained activity throughout his adult life. Furthermore, the novels embody a structure of feeling often submerged or displaced in his other writings. While the analytical works may incorporate culturalist or idealist notions, the novels emphasize the brutalization and distortion of human capacities, the actual difficulties of living out authentic values in

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advanced capitalist societies. Since the novels involve Welsh working-class characters, often making the transition to academic lives, most critics tend to view them merely as autobiographical glosses to his other writings. Doubtless such an inter-relationship is always structurally implicit in them. Yet if the novels testify to culture as "a whole way of life," it is a culture of truncation and fragmentation, of the alienation of human projects and the displacement of human lives. Matthew Price, the sociologist of *Border Country*, Peter Owen, the young research student of *Second Generation*, and Lewis Redfern, the journalist of *The Volunteers* — all professional workers with words — are forced to retreat into mute silences in the face of the opaque entanglements they seek to unravel. Any eventual victory is paid for in their own lives and the lives of their families. Williams speaks of one novel representing "a specific contemporary sadness: the relation between a wholly possible future and the contradictions of the present."⁹

Such a vision — at once emancipatory in its insistence on possible transformation and tragic in its recognition of the brutal devastation in advanced capitalist societies — underlies his later works. In particular, *Modern Tragedy* seeks to widen the notion of tragedy from its definition as literary category to encompass the twisted texture of the twentieth century. The tragedy of genuine lived experience and history is given form in the blockage of any potentially radical transformations. Yet Williams refuses to ground his analysis in resignation and passivity. Brecht's drama, he argues here, is at its most innovative in the interplay of an indicative mode, the presentation of reality as it exists, and a subjunctive mode, the representation of what might have been:

"a dramatic form . . . may have to represent a social situation in which at one level or another all roads have been blocked; or even if certain limits are being pushed back, they will still by definition subsist so long as this class society remains. It is at this point that the notion of a subjunctive mode needs to be introduced."¹⁰

The subjunctive, according to Williams, refuses the millenarianism of the utopian, replaying instead what might have been, inscribing the possible within the web of what is.

This acknowledgment that the potential for qualitative change can break into consciousness even within the perceptual entanglement and confused boundaries of lived experience is one of the most important underpinnings of Williams's distinctive critical practice. It represents a significant advance from the culturalist idealism and organicism which forms the dominant thematic of

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an early work such as *Culture and Society*. Especially striking is the parallel Williams now draws between some of his own concepts and Sartre's theory of scarcity.¹¹

Because Williams has so consistently emphasized, focused and deepened his concept of lived experience, there is an unsettling irony in his persistent unwillingness to engage fully Freudian theory. The ideological effect of such an approach is to deny psychoanalysis the status of science, to consider its texts as simply mediated experience: "Freud's writings should be read, not so much as a body of science, as what are called novels."¹² His concern to locate Freud's texts within the sphere of literature is an effort to undermine their acceptance as theory. Certainly, his polemic is partially motivated by a reductive Freudian criticism which views literary texts merely as the sublimation of impulses. Even so, it is precisely in the status of Freud's theoretical insights that cultural critics are able to gauge the depth and intensity of the deformation of human capacities. From this critical map of psychic distortion ("the history of man is the history of his repression"¹³) Marcuse reinvents a liberating vision in *Eros and Civilization*. Williams disavows such a crucial mediation, retreating away from an engagement with Freudian theory.

Still, what characterizes *Politics and Letters* is an on-going willingness to engage debate, to take up awkward conceptual dilemmas again and again. The book takes its title from a short-lived journal co-edited by Williams for a brief period after the war. The retrieval is not to be overlooked: even if *Politics and Letters* managed only four issues, its impulse has stubbornly survived, extended and developed in Williams's own critical projects.

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Notes

1. Terry Eagleton, "Criticism and Politics: The Work of Raymond Williams," *New Left Review*, 95 (1976), 3-23, and Anthony Barnett, "Raymond Williams and Marxism," *New Left Review*, 99 (1976), 47-64. For a survey of Williams's writings see Michael Green, "Raymond Williams and Cultural Studies," *Cultural Studies*, 6 (1975), 31-48.
2. Eagleton, p.9
3. F.R. Leavis, *D.H. Lawrence*, Cambridge: Minority Press, 1930, p. 6.
4. Eagleton, p. 7.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
6. In *The Long Revolution*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1961, p. ix.
7. *Politics and Letters*, p. 168.

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8. *Marxism and Literature*, London: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 132.
 9. *Politics and Letters*, p. 294.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 332.
 13. *Eros and Civilization*, New York: Vintage, 1955, p. 11.
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