

III.

Desiring Culture as Community

By his critical endorsement of the notion of a “community of sensibility” in his early work on drama Williams had largely deferred to the notions of culture and community propagated in their different ways by Eliot and Leavis. Increasingly Williams became aware that what he had taken on board represented a dubious valorisation of the past. The idealisation of the organic community and cultural homogeneity of a mythical pre-modern society tended to lodge the affirmative senses of culture and community in the domain of an unreclaimable history, a lost world which could now be eulogised as a version of fallen man through which the values of a mechanical and deformed present could be unfavourably compared. Culture and community became part of the critical vocabulary announcing the withering decline of modern civilisation. This association of the terms with an idealised past tended to close off or make redundant the possibility of these terms carrying any affirmative contemporary applicability. True community was forsaken, true culture perpetually besieged. Arguments for their modern availability and effectiveness were, by association, misdirected or irrelevant. The sense of unity that both terms projected seemed inadmissible in a post-genocidal Cold War climate, an environment in which the expressions of modernism were consciously distancing themselves from articulations of connection and wholeness.

Politically the sanctification of a homogeneous past and its use in assailing the present held pressing difficulties for Williams. As well as carrying certain reactionary overtones in the privileging of an earlier social order in what is a type of latter day mediaevalism, the received position implicitly refuted the validity of any Marxist claim for the plausibility of a socialist community of the present. Williams had to move beyond this position if he was to hope to construct a socialist critical programme that challenged the conservative appropriation of culture and community. He would have to reactivate the terms.

For T.S. Eliot, “virtue and well-being in community” were to be considered as “the natural end of man”, but as he saw it, the process towards his vision of a “Christian community” was blocked by the “deformation of humanity” and the desecration of culture resulting from “the

hypertrophy of the motive of Profit”.¹ For Leavis, the new consumerism of the age had destroyed the “organic community” of the recent past, and it was to a literary elite that he looked for the preservation of a threatened culture and “to keep alive the subtlest and the most perishable parts of tradition”.² Minority culture worked in the name of true community against the barbarism of “mass civilization”. Eliot’s emphasis on culture is not as specifically related to literature as Leavis’s, but he too placed his hopes on the cultural elite whose preservation against egalitarian tendencies must be assured if the culture as a whole was to achieve a Godly community. The cultural elite and their position at the social apex is his own version of organicism, a regressive longing for the natural, simpler non-industrial life he privileges in the primitive societies of the past. In both Eliot and Leavis there is a distrust of what Williams calls, “the *necessary* complexity of any community which employs developed industrial and scientific techniques”.³ Along with this distrust comes an associated rejection of any notion of a modern community, such a community being both a subject and producer of a defiled and adulterated culture.

Although in his earlier work on drama Williams had acquiesced in the organicism of his mentors, by *Culture and Society* he had begun, somewhat tentatively, to take up an oppositional position which challenged the concept of an “organic” past and the merit and authority of minority cultural values:

I know perfectly well who I was writing against: Eliot, Leavis and the whole of the cultural conservatism that had formed around them.⁴

His project, as he claimed, was to “counter the appropriation of a long line of thinking about culture to what were by now decisively reactionary positions” in order to refute “the increasingly contemporary use of the concept of culture *against* democracy, socialism and the working class.”⁵ As a response Williams took up the notion of culture and directed it towards the theorisation of a democratised community of the future, so that the humane values of the appeal to culture could be enlisted, not against, but on behalf of egalitarianism, confirming social solidarity and collective identity. This is the road to his long democratic revolution. From Burke to Orwell Williams

¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, p. 33–34.

² F.R. Leavis, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, p. 2–5.

³ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 329.

⁴ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 112.

⁵ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 97–98.

extracts the radical moments from a selection of writers who, despite their tendency to come to substantially conservative conclusions, are interpreted as characters in a dialectical development towards socialist thought. Williams's concluding chapter is his own entry into the tradition, and in a clear declaration of his political position he gives himself the last word, so the book which begins with Burke's angry ruminations on the French Revolution, ends with Williams's leftist evocation of a "community of culture", a conceptualisation of community as an ideal future rather than an idealised past.

In attempting to reorientate the political bearings of the cultural tradition he unearths Williams lights upon what he perceives to be the common ground shared by conservative and radical aspects of the cultural discourse. The culture and society debate, he argues, is itself a consequence, a response, to the advent of industrialisation. Its philosophical challenge to utilitarianism and economic individualism links writers such as Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris and Lawrence despite the diversity of their opinions on other matters. Upon the ground of their common indignation towards a capitalist social structure, Williams tries to bring the politically antagonistic traditions of high culture conservatism and radical democratic reformism into consensual relation with each other, and, through a demonstration of their common process, reconcile them to their common hopes for a more humane and dignified social organisation. Williams held fast to what he considered to be the historical basis upon which this improbable union could be sustained: a common enmity, a mutual distrust and repugnance of the *laissez-faire* rationale of the rising middle-class industrial capitalists. This is the central structure of his analysis: individual writers representing conflicting views, yet bound together by their mutual recognition of an impending social crisis; a collective negative association that emerges within Williams's analysis as a turbulent pressure towards democratic reform.

Williams's socialist programme intended to engage directly with the conservative critical orthodoxy. He believed that this was the decisive front on which the struggle must be waged. Devoid, at this point, of an effective leftist methodology Williams confronted the academy on its own terms and in its own language, tending to stay clear of the Marxian vocabulary of ideology, economic determinism and class conflict. It was Williams's own admiration of the received cultural heritage, however ambiguous, that made him so particularly suited for such an

engagement. He was unwilling, as others had not been, to make a wholesale denunciation of conservative social writers such as Burke, Carlyle, Arnold, Eliot and Leavis, and so run the risk of losing sight of the contributions of their social criticism. Despite the left's unease with Williams's lack of denunciatory polemic against reactionary positions, one of the legitimate strengths of his work is its capacity, not to merely demolish political opponents, but to recognise what is valid and useful in the arguments of his adversaries and so come to terms with the relative strengths and weaknesses of his own position.

In contrast, other left intellectuals had shown what was for Williams a disconcerting inclination to dismiss their antagonists without concession or qualification, and he rejected what he saw as the crude class reductionism which passed for socialist criticism in the late fifties. Any discourse attempting to advance such a bipartisan position will always be fraught with the difficulty of holding the centre together. In drawing back from a leftist position that he claimed came "too easily to the pen", Williams often reacted by inflating the value of the conservative contribution to the idea of culture. At times he seems to be working too hard to absolve certain writers of their conservative bias. He tends to isolate and then analyse ideas from the work of individual writers which support his sense of a cumulative tradition, while overlooking, or attempting to rationalise aspects of their thought which must have been largely unacceptable to him. This tendency can come across as a type of subterfuge, forsaking conflict in the name of conciliation.

In attempting to avoid the critical delineation that would lend itself to an overly simplified correlation between these writers as representatives of an emerging intellectual middle-class, where "you don't so much as read but read from, a predetermined position", Williams succumbed to the reductionism of practical criticism's habit of isolating fragments of the writer's total work and then projecting these abstractions as wholly representative of their position. Subject to this practice with its particularly literary emphasis on "felt response" and "immediacy of experience", Williams talks of his virtual submersion into the psyche of the writers he was analysing and the "paradox of the induced passivity of the intensely active reader"⁶:

[A]s I was writing about each of these people I felt that I was looking at things so entirely in their terms that I was almost becoming them.⁷

⁶ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 122.

⁷ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 121.

As their advocate Williams recommends what they have to usefully offer him, but his method of demonstrating their significance draws on particularly selective readings, so that we are asked, for example, to accept in isolation Edmund Burke's affirmative emphasis on "the interrelation and continuity of human activities", on an "essentially social and co-operative effort in control and reform", based on his sense of "process", "tradition" and "organic relations". As abstractions these are social ideals which can, at least at the rhetorical level, claim an affinity with a democratic socialist position not unlike Williams's own. Yet when placed within the broader context of Burke's reflections on the French Revolution, they are ideas which must contend with the dubious vagaries of his "natural order", a "right order" founded by "right relations" and sustained by "right thinking". All of which is supported by a negligible reconstruction of history and immersed in a verbosity that is often irrational and at its worst morally questionable. Burke associates the condition of poverty with the virtues of untainted innocence and freedom too often to be credible. This becomes an argument for the preservation of the *status quo* as in his denunciation of the "spirit of innovation" which is "generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views".⁸ Representative government is the "degenerate fondness for tricking short-cuts", and insurrection or revolution are only justifiable when "necessary", and only then when divined by Providence itself in arrangement with the "right thinking", "wisdom of the nation".⁹ Behind a plethora of rhetorical conceits lies the deadening sense of political inertia that underpins his response to the political neurosis of the period.

For Williams, Burke's appeal rests with his rejection of what had become a standard argument against democracy: that the individual's liberty was threatened by the governance of a mass society. Burke's refutation of this idea offered Williams a valuable inheritance. Here a patriarch of political conservatism was proffering an anti-individualist perspective based on the idea of community as a founding principle of social organisation. Williams gladly accepted Burke's "historical community" of the time-honoured values of ages. It seemed to offer a philosophical lineage for the position he would take up on behalf of the left. Yet to accept it as such required him to rest easily with the abstractions of Burke's idea of community. Burke's anti-individualist community is "divine" in derivation, founded upon the religious belief that the individual is

⁸ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 119.

⁹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 116–117.

essentially wicked and that all human virtue is the creation of social organisation. As such, community serves a regulatory function over the unrestrained appetites of the individual. Moreover Burke conflates the regulatory community with the idea of the monarchical State, allowing the latter a divinely sanctioned authority, an authority that counted among the “rights of man” the right to be restrained.¹⁰ Neither the religious emphasis nor the authoritarian stress could genuinely serve Williams’s political or critical interests. In Burke, community is a principle of constraint and at odds with Williams’s own emphasis on it as a process and settlement of human liberation.

Williams is more than “conciliatory” in his reading of Burke. His generosity appears even more evident when compared with his account of the social criticism of the romantics. Here he takes the position of an apologist affirming an interpretation of the romantics as deeply humane critics of the society of their day, claiming that their critiques were “neither marginal nor incidental, but were essentially related to a large part of the experience from which the poetry itself was made.”¹¹ His defence is directed against a certain orthodoxy, “that popular and general conception of the ‘romantic artist’”, which accuses the romantics of perpetuating a separation and opposition between matters of nature, beauty and feeling and the practical matters of social condition and government.¹² Williams then offers to restore the balance, yet in this respect the structure of his argument seems somewhat artificial. The “popular and general conception” which Williams contests, appears not to represent any nominally conventional response to the romantics, but is more identifiable as Williams’s own constructed counter-position, his own fund of doubt concerning the degree of authentic radicalism attributable to them.

Despite his enthusiastic claims for the social criticism of Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats at the outset of his commentary, with its argument “so easily capable of confirmation”, Williams moves directly into an engagement with what he increasingly projects as the damaging “self-pleading ideology” of the romantic response to the social pressures of the time. Citing a number of instances Williams depicts the celebrated poets as increasingly moving away from

¹⁰ Edmund Burke, *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*; *Works*, Vol. 111, p. 82. Cited in *Culture and Society*, p. 9.

¹¹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 31.

¹² Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 30. Williams offers a strange defence of the early romantics’ loss of “revolutionary ardour” and the “conservatism of their maturity” by writing it off in a particularly un-Williamsonian manner, relegating their political criticism as “now less interesting than the wider social criticism” as if the two were easily separated.

their earlier affinity and reverence for the idea of an English “People” towards a petulant self-interest that laments their lack of public acknowledgment in a nation which scorns “the immortal muse” and creates art’s “desolate market where none come to buy”. This is Blake, but Wordsworth is more direct in rejecting that “loud portion of the community, ever governed by the factitious influence, which, under the name of the PUBLIC, passes itself upon the unthinking, for the PEOPLE.”¹³ Williams finds this rejection of a noisily identifiable “Public” in favour of an idealised and philosophically characterised “People” a persistent feature of romantic thought:

One finds it in Keats: ‘I have not the slightest feeling of humility towards the Public’; in Shelley: ‘Accept no council from the simple-minded. Time reverses the judgement of the foolish crowd. Contemporary criticism is no more than the sum of folly with which genius has to wrestle.’¹⁴

Here the public community is spurned as the vulgar mass, and it is only to “the embodied spirit” of community that the artist owes their allegiance. This differentiation represents one of the initial connecting points between the idea of community and that of culture. For both are seen in relation to this idea of an “embodied spirit”, a court of appeal in which real and permanent values are upheld over the fickle and ephemeral tastes of a market orientated society. The romantics’ revulsion from the “factitious” values being thrown-up by an industrialising society led, as Williams indicates, into a deepening isolation of the artist from community and a precious rendering of their artistic sensibility as the realm of genius and the province of the poet-legislator. And in his argument’s conclusion he finds Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* “painful to read” in its annunciation of “the separation of poets from other men” in which the artist as an enigmatic outrider resides now “beyond the living community”.¹⁵ As John Brenkman puts it, “the higher value attributed to the soul, thought, and art becomes the apology for reality rather than an implicit condemnation of it.”¹⁶

¹³ William Wordsworth, *Wordsworth’s Poetical Works*, ed. Hutchinson: Oxford, 1908; p. 953. As Cited in *Culture and Society*, p. 33. As Wilson Coates and Hayden White argue, “their fear of Jacobinism, their inherent aestheticism, and their Burkean political convictions rendered them suspicious of any political programme designed to substitute the ‘people’ for the ‘public’.” *The Ordeal of Liberal Humanism*, p. 77.

¹⁴ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 33.

¹⁵ As Coates and White put it, “the common thread of [the poetry of Shelley, Keats and Byron] is the yearning for community and the simultaneous awareness that they could never feel for others as they felt for themselves.” *The Ordeal of Liberal Humanism*, p. 77–78.

¹⁶ John Brenkman, *Culture and Domination*, p. 6.

While one can take Williams's general point that the romantics became increasingly internalised and meditative as their emphasis was transferred from the social to the mental world, the question that has been asked of his account is whether the romantics are figures ripe for prosecution when the reactionary Burke has been so strongly defended.¹⁷ For what, in effect, the romantics have been accused of by Williams is elaborating aspects of a Burkean world-view with its philosophical idealisation of "the People", its recourse to "organic" principles and its emphasis on tradition, custom and local loyalties.

Just as puzzling in this respect is the charitable account Williams offers of the contribution of Thomas Carlyle whose own deployment of the romantically derived "Man-of-Letters Hero" and characteristic conception of the "genius" is tolerantly accepted by Williams, despite the fact that it evolves into the dangerous authoritarianism of a cult of "power" and hero-worship. In response to Carlyle's rejection of democracy Williams remarks that "we have all learned to shout 'fascist' at it", as if to do so is the mark of habitual and unconsidered prejudice.¹⁸ Carlyle seems a far more admissible target for prosecution than the romantics but Williams is insistent on offering a defence. Concentrating on the early essay "Signs of the Times" Williams points to Carlyle's awareness of the dissolution of community, the increasing disparity between the conditions of the rich and poor, his hostility towards the workhouses and poor-law prisons, and his critique of the "spiritual emptiness" of the cash-nexus of the *laissez-faire* ethos. It is the quality of his "direct response" and his apprehension of "the feel, the quality, of men's general reactions" to industrialisation that Williams applauds, and which forms the ground of his "reverence" for Carlyle. Yet the admiration for Carlyle involves critical omissions which could seriously contest Williams's contention that Carlyle is "without argument, a radical and a reformer."¹⁹

While Williams is aware of Carlyle's deficiencies and remarks on his lapse into a "contemptuous absolutism", he nevertheless appeals on Carlyle's behalf, and in what appears as an ironic self-reflection, asks us to sympathise with Carlyle's moral isolation. As a radical and reformer

¹⁷ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 103–104.

¹⁸ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 80.

¹⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 76.

he is isolated, feels himself isolated: the existing framework of relationships, the existing society, is against him, necessarily, because he is against it. He feels himself cut off from all fruitful social relationships.²⁰

Again there is this sense of psychic empathy Williams feels with his subjects. But this is a case in which he has to obscure in order to create the “balanced” judgement he is striving for. He knows he cannot credibly sustain a defence of Carlyle without first disavowing the later work of “Shooting Niagara”, but while quoting heavily from Carlyle’s earlier writing he refuses to provide the reader with any illustration of the embittered intensity of Carlyle’s reactionary rhetoric. In this sense Williams is again guilty of practical criticism’s selective quoting, failing to deliver the “balance” he is striving for. It is clear that for Carlyle the Reform Bill of 1867 represented an immense national disaster. His response was vitriolic and cynical. The “unblessed” democratic process which had been insidiously creeping forward since the events of 1660 and now, near completion, would bring forth a temporal death, if not “death eternal”.²¹ England was destined to “lie torpid, sluttishly gurgling and mumbling, spiritually in soak in the Devil’s Pickle”.²² The cry of “liberty” was falsely uttered by the mouths of those who were “inexorably marked by Destiny as slaves”.²³ His attitude to human equality is summarily contained within his response to “The Nigger Question”:

The Almighty Maker has appointed him to be a Servant under penalty of Heaven’s curse, neither party to this pre-appointment shall neglect or misdo his duties therein.²⁴

The master and slave relationship is seen to be more pure than “servantship on a nomadic principle, at the rate of so many shillings per day”.²⁵ What is required is a “contract for life”.²⁶ It is to the “English Nobleman” that Carlyle looks for the restoration of correct principles, for it is he who, “after such sorrowful erosions” still possesses

something considerable of chivalry and magnanimity: polite he is, in the finest form; politeness, modest, simple, veritable, ineradicable, dwells in him to the bone.²⁷

²⁰ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 76.

²¹ Thomas Carlyle, “Shooting Niagara”, p. 310.

²² Thomas Carlyle, “Shooting Niagara”, p. 310.

²³ Thomas Carlyle, “Shooting Niagara”, p. 316.

²⁴ Thomas Carlyle, “The Nigger Question”, p. 302.

²⁵ Thomas Carlyle, “The Nigger Question”, p. 302.

²⁶ Thomas Carlyle, “The Nigger Question”, p. 303.

²⁷ Thomas Carlyle, “Shooting Niagara”, p. 314.

The “sorrowful erosions” are those of both natural aristocratic leadership and the similarly idealised “mediaeval community”.²⁸ For the late Carlyle the restoration of these values is the responsibility of what he now sees as the new “Industrial hero”, that practical “man of genius” upon whom the responsibility falls to “annihilate the soot and dirt and squalid horror now defacing England”, and in particular “the Trades Union, in quest of its ‘Four eights’ with assassin pistol in its hand”.²⁹ It is hard to understand how such denials of democratisation and common welfare could have been any less painful for Williams to read than the final pages of Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry*.

In *Politics and Letters*, Williams has suggested that what is needed in respect to Carlyle is an explanation of the paradox of his apparent shift from radical to reactionary, and to seek the clues in his early work that anticipate the lapse his later writing was to suffer from.³⁰ Williams knows what he has in mind here, and has known all along, for in *Culture and Society* he had taken great care when quoting from the “radical” “Signs of the Times” and had stringently omitted those “clues” which prefigure Carlyle’s future direction. Clearly Williams was attracted to the great metaphorical contribution of Carlyle’s prose. His coining of the term “Industrialism”, his definitions of “the profit motive” and the “cash-nexus” of the “mechanical age” were to provide a terminology which would carry weight well into the next century. And while it is true that Carlyle does register the changing character of the labour process and bring to light the “condition of England” question, this element of “social” criticism does not provide a full account of the general thrust of Carlyle’s argument. For Carlyle is, in effect, appealing for *less* social critique, less social philosophy. Rallying against the materialism of Locke and Hume and the codifying and systematic habits which were dominating the utilitarian ethos of his age, Carlyle is attempting to establish the necessity of balancing the “mechanical” exterior of the social with the “dynamic” interior of the individual soul. Against the “Police, called Public Opinion” Carlyle privileges the “Divine nature of Right” and the “absolute character of Virtue”. Against a material knowledge Carlyle looks to the “invisible” “mystic” “wonder” of infinite harmony, and within such thinking there is no place for the simplistic “democratic interest” of the social. Carlyle places his faith in the “higher wisdom” of the “*one man*” who is blessed with “angelic power” and “spiritual Truth”.

²⁸ The mediaeval community of Abbot Samson in *Past and Present*.

²⁹ Thomas Carlyle, “Shooting Niagara”, p. 325.

³⁰ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 105.

Against this vision of the prophet-hero holding sway over the multitudes of “little minds” and the abstractions of moral divinity, the human struggle to shape its own history by political means is held to be a pitiful irrelevancy.³¹

The omission of the more reactionary elements of the tradition Williams constructs is, as he has claimed, an overcompensation for the hostile polemic of the left that he had been reluctant to pursue. In the case of Matthew Arnold, Williams is clearly attracted by Arnold’s sense of the transformative capability of society, the cultural process of “replacement and betterment”, and his belief in the power of human reason against the Christian theology that had effectively limited the social theory of his influential predecessors Burke and Carlyle. Arnold’s recognition of the vested interests behind the *laissez-faire* philosophy of “doing as one likes”, and his understanding that the majority were in fact being “done by as others liked” made him a writer and thinker of enormous importance for Williams. Arnold’s denunciation of what he saw as the national obsession with the production of wealth, and his belief in education as the giver of “light”, were what Williams wished to recuperate from Arnold’s work. Williams finds fault with Arnold’s tendency to perceive the State as an idea rather than a material actuality, and condemns his inclination to convert his concept of cultural “process” to an absolutist decree when the authority of the State is subjected to the merest threat. Yet, it is significant that at this stage of his writing Williams omitted the most abrasive and reactionary response to social unrest to be found in *Culture and Anarchy*:

As for rioting, the old Roman way of dealing with that is always the right one; flog the rank and file, and fling the ring leaders from the Tarpian Rock! And this opinion we can never forsake.³²

That Arnold over-reacted to the “anarchy” of the Hyde Park demonstration of 1866 is clear. He reinforced, and in part legitimised, the type of thinking that perceived the struggle of a class for a voice in public affairs as irreconcilably at odds with “the best that has been thought and written”, and as such, at odds with his own notion of culture. The Burkean influence is again evident. Culture is imbued with the relativeness of “right knowing and right doing” and is to be guided

³¹ Thomas Carlyle, “Signs of the Times”, p. 236–242.

³² Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 203.

by the authority of the State in the name of “the right reason of the community”.³³ At an historical point where Arnold’s “populace” had lost patience with waiting for the dissemination of “sweetness and light” from above, his call for “authorised” force to restore “order” was a cynical negation of the rights of man. As Williams later wrote in “A Hundred Years of Culture and Anarchy”:

For the culture which is then being defended is not excellence but familiarity, not the knowable but only the known values. And while people like that dominate and multiply, it will always be necessary to go again to Hyde Park.³⁴

Williams’s account of Arnold in *Culture and Society* is more complex than the mere desire to present a mediatory perspective. As he has stated, the work was intended to be “oppositional”, but its oppositional stance is specifically ranged against the modern heirs of the culturalist tradition rather than their nineteenth-century precursors.³⁵ This is where the structural difficulty of the work lies. Williams wants to keep alive what he sees as the positive elements of a conservative cultural tradition which includes Burke, Carlyle and Arnold, but conversely to denounce these same elements as the negative character in the work of Eliot, Richards and Leavis. Williams wants to have and eat cake. He wants the nineteenth-century cultural discourse to be both a resource of socialist intellectual thought and, simultaneously, to deny the direct lineage between Burkean, Carlylian and Arnoldian and the faults he finds in the thinking of the latter day culturalists of his own epoch. The problem here, as Jan Gorak has pointed out, is that Williams is attempting to derive a common sense of culture from “capital accumulated by a quite different idea”.³⁶

A related difficulty within Williams’s work at this point is that he utilises a certain critical method which tacitly accepts the inherent ideology he seeks to counter. Williams’s consideration of culture as a common way of life, necessarily requires a consideration of that life’s “material”

³³ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 43.

³⁴ Raymond Williams, “A Hundred Years of Culture and Anarchy”, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, p. 8. What needs to be considered is the reverence given to Arnold by the critical establishment of the period in which Williams was writing. Even the extent to which Williams did find fault with Arnold was met with peremptory scorn and provides another insight into the type of pressures Williams was working under, and how difficult it must have been to maintain the appropriate sense of balance that he desired from his discourse: “In the discipline to which I belonged it was a shock that I made any major criticism of Arnold.” For a discussion of this see *Politics and Letters*, p. 124.

³⁵ Jan Gorak argues that even in regard to twentieth-century thinkers such as Lawrence and Leavis, Williams “proceeds in the best traditions of liberal sympathy.” Jan Gorak, *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams*, p. 53.

³⁶ Jan Gorak, *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams*, p. 43.

components, yet in *Culture and Society* his empathy for the progenitors of the cultural tradition sees him primarily locked into an idealist mode of thought which never quite allows him to make a fully realised connection between culture and society. Culture in his formulation is a defence against capitalist society; it does not include capitalism as a constitutive element of the common way of life. Culture remains an ideal, an end in itself, and as such it remains somewhat aloof from the material determination of the history that he claims it is a response to. Williams's method tends to abstract cultural thought from cultural phenomena, to the point where the writers he analyses are seldom connected to the concrete particulars of their own social and material history.³⁷

This can result in a dangerous type of historical abstraction as in Williams's tendency to omit consideration of the broader social and political determinants shaping the development of the English cultural tradition. The effects of the French Revolution and the politics it inspired clearly had a profound impact on Burke's political philosophy and his formulation of his principles of tradition and organicism. For the romantics the political upheavals on the Continent were at the heart of their various degrees of revolutionary zeal and reactionary backlash. In addition the new secularism of the age had a profound effect on the issue of culture. Thinkers such as Coleridge, Newman, Arnold, Ruskin and Eliot seemed to transfer much of the spiritual sensibility of traditional religious forms onto the "new religion" of culture. Williams makes little of the European revolutions of 1848. Chartism and the domestic legislation which produced the Trade Union Act and Second Reform Bill pass without comment. As Mulhern, Anderson and Barnett point out in *Politics and Letters*, Williams is guilty of an almost "systematic depreciation of the actual political dimension" of the writers he discusses, privileging the "universal" significance of social thought over the immediacy of direct politics.³⁸ That there existed a scarcely broken tradition of anti-authoritarian protest in this decisive period of history is never considered. In positing an alternative "response" to our origins as industrial people we could point to the wave of demonstrations by the London Corresponding Society, the massive reform petitions of the Chartists, Luddite executions, Jacobin dissent, the Seditious Societies Act, the Irish situation,

³⁷ As Gorak points out, Williams "worked as an almost microscopically close reader, unable to move away from verbal details despite his intellectual commitment to broader issues." Ian Gorak, *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams*, p. 47.

³⁸ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 100.

the suspension of Habeas Corpus and “Peterloo”, and it would be a cultural response more representative and closer to that of a whole community than any Williams has put forward in *Culture and Society*.³⁹

These elements can all, in some way, be related to the various social upheavals brought about by the industrialising process, yet Williams tends to see industrialisation from a single perspective. Industrialism signifies both a radical shift in the “methods of production” as well as an alteration in the economic “relations of production”. The distinction is an important one, for those critics who denounced industrialism were in most cases primarily concerned with the moral and social consequences of a system based on a “cash-nexus” and unrestrained competitive zeal. The human deprivation of manufactory practices was rightly seen as a by-product of a capitalist economics, but the force of the culturalist polemic was more particularly directed against the *laissez-faire* philosophy of market economy rather than the mode of production as such, against capitalism as a system rather than industry as a practice. Williams overlooks an alternative tradition of thinkers who largely accepted modernisation and recognised the labour-saving potential of a mechanised industrial process and the general social advantages it offered. Even Robert Owen and radical Chartists and Trade Unionists identified in the new industrial techniques the potential for the creation of the necessary free time for cultural development by which the conditions for enlightenment could be achieved - bread and rest as the conductors of “light”.⁴⁰ Such “disposable time” is essentially what Marx has in mind as the basic prerequisite for what he emphatically describes as “the true realm of freedom”.⁴¹

Williams’s lack of awareness of alternative traditions of dissent shows him to be a victim of the very misappropriation of culture which he intends to expose. The dominant social group, in upholding specific class interests, had manifested a specific relationship between the idea of culture and the dominant hierarchy, fashioning culture in their own image. The material by

³⁹ It was E.P. Thompson who exhaustively reconstructed much of the history of the English working-class. It was an unfortunate legacy of Williams’s withdrawal from any collaboration with other writers of the New Left that Thompson was writing his seminal work at the very time Williams was producing *Culture and Society*, and yet the vital connection was never made. Without the historical knowledge of radical working-class dissent Williams is more or less compelled to omit any genuine consideration of the cultural resistance to political authority. In the absence of a radical tradition it is only by a relative undervaluing of the authoritarianism of the minority position that he can construct a sense of equanimity and take up his posture of cultural conciliator and peacemaker.

⁴⁰ See Barry Smith, *Melbourne Historical Review*, 8, p. 32.

⁴¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 3, p. 820.

which Williams could offer an alternative to the dominant interpretation was, as a consequence, largely unavailable. Any attempt to reclaim a totalised sense of culture as a “whole” that transgressed class specificity was inevitably obstructed by what was, at that stage, the unknowability of the radical English working-class tradition.⁴² Yet even if the type of material that E.P. Thompson was unearthing at that time had been available to Williams, it is difficult to see how it could have been accommodated within his particular emphasis on the affirmative character of culture or challenged his unwillingness to see community as a class response to domination. It is difficult to think of “Peterloo” or child labour or the Benthamite prison system as concomitant with culture as “the idea of the tending of natural growth”, yet they all demand attention within his general claim for culture as a “whole way of life”. Williams’s rhetoric, which bears the mark of the rhapsodic style of his idealist forebears, seems inappropriate to consider the full ramifications of a common culture:

... the idea of culture is necessary, as the idea of the tending of natural growth. To know, even in part, any group of living processes, is to see and wonder at its extraordinary variety and complexity. To know, even in part, the life of man, is to see and wonder at its extraordinary multiplicity, its great fertility of value.⁴³

Jan Gorak responds to this type of Burkean/Arnoldian rhetoric by asking the type of question that Williams has made a career out of asking others: “Is man’s ‘extraordinary variety and complexity’ the first response of a visitor to a Calcutta slum or a Ford production line?”⁴⁴ There is probably no need for Gorak to take his analogy so far from home. A Manchester slum or a Leyland production line would probably suffice. In any case what is being noted is the contradiction between the emphasis Williams consistently places on “felt experience” and its mystifying absence within the idealistic rhetoric of his discourse: “When Williams comes to formulate his cultural goals he forgets about “experience” and substitutes abstractions.”⁴⁵

⁴² In 1919 A.D.J. Plenty understood the dilemma: “For whereas a false culture like the academic one of today tends to separate people by dividing them in classes and groups and finally isolating them as individuals, a true culture like the great cultures of the past unites them ... The recovery of such a culture is one of our most urgent needs”. *Guilds and the Social Crisis*, p. 57.

⁴³ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 337. This is an instance of what Dwight Macdonald complains of when he refers to Williams’s sermonizing tone, a style which “puts the maximum distance between the reader and the subject ... The style is an end in itself, a magical device for charming away ... the threatening reality.” Dwight MacDonald, “Looking Backward”, *Encounter*, June 1961, p. 80. Cited in Jan Gorak’s *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams*, p. 42.

⁴⁴ Jan Gorak, *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams*, p. 43–44.

⁴⁵ Jan Gorak, *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams*, p. 44.

It can be seen how Williams's conciliatory desire to stress the positive elements of the cultural tradition he analyses leaves him once removed from the intense struggle of those seeking voice and protection through legislative reform. When approaching the most pressing problems of practical politics, those of class conflict, Williams tends to banish the contradictions in the name of a unity within which economics and politics are rendered as subordinate elements. As E.P. Thompson has suggested, a more illuminating way of seeing culture may be as "a whole way of struggle" rather than "a whole way of life".⁴⁶ In making this kind of distinction he is warning of the dangers of even someone as politically committed as Williams succumbing to the temptation to separate the murky realities of practical politics from the metaphysics of an idealist culture. In effect Williams's unwillingness to embrace a materialist consideration of culture, and his aversion to an engagement with direct politics, is an unfortunate separation of intricately related causes, and contrary to his own general emphasis on "connection". In a sense it is his own denial of the "knowable community" and of a holistic conception of culture.

It is, however, worth considering again the sorts of pressures Williams was working under in the late fifties. As Thompson has eloquently put it:

With a compromised [Marxist] tradition at his back, and with a broken vocabulary in his hands, he did the only thing that was left to him: he took over the vocabulary of his opponents [and] followed them into the heart of their own arguments.⁴⁷

At the heart of *Culture and Society* is Williams's critical engagement with the arguments of Eliot and Leavis, figures previously revered but now found indictable for their elitist misappropriation of the concept of culture, a misappropriation which authorised social division and exclusion. Williams's confrontation with his own mentors has something of an Oedipal rejection about it, a shedding of paternal dominance, and if today his account seems less than ardently provocative, it nevertheless represents a personal and critical break from that position which registers contemporary culture as the latest phase in a general decline.

It had been Eliot who had furnished Williams with a totalised conception of culture as a "whole way of life", and while he had taken up Eliot's definition in a rather servile manner in his

⁴⁶ E.P. Thompson, "The Long Revolution", *New Left Review*, May-June, No. 9, 1961, p. 24-33.

⁴⁷ E.P. Thompson, "The Long Revolution", *New Left Review*, May-June, No. 9, 1961, p. 27.

early essay “The Idea of Culture”, he was now more circumspect in regard to some of the underlying assumptions within Eliot’s social criticism.⁴⁸ Eliot’s adoption of the meaning of culture as an entity not to be found in any individual, nor in any group, but in the pattern of the society as a whole, made him a writer Williams had to confront on his own terms, for, rhetorically at least, this is the very formulation upon which Williams’s own cultural hypothesis is hinged. Having borrowed the general emphasis, Williams was compelled to investigate the political ideology behind Eliot’s thinking in order to free himself from any complicity regarding the latter’s right-wing assumptions.

He saw now in Eliot’s declarations only a lip-service to the idea of wholeness and genuine community: Eliot’s real concerns were clearly with the preservation and stability of a cultural elite within his presumed totality. It is not only that there is no egalitarian spirit that Williams could recover from Eliot’s emphasis on wholeness, it is also that Eliot never really offers any sustained consideration of the broader anthropological sense of culture he vaguely outlines. Ostensibly advocating the necessary extension and diversity of the cultural field and its consideration beyond the domain of the high arts, Eliot’s primary objective is to argue the case for a social stratification based on “merit”. He draws on the examples of primitive societies in order to affirm the naturalness and authenticity of such stratification, and argues for the need of an elite to form a cultural clerisy to oversee the maintenance of cultural values. In this respect Eliot is intent on establishing an organic correlation between social class and social function. Yet as Williams suggests, what Eliot sees as social function is easily confused with what is actually social privilege. In what is at this point a rare materialist initiative, Williams attacks Eliot’s organic relationship between culture, class and function by stressing the lack of any economic consideration within his definition of culture. As he remarks, Eliot’s social paradigm omits any consideration of “the tendency of function to turn into property” and the tendency of property to translate itself into class.⁴⁹ The economic factor is particularly relevant to Eliot because in his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* he objects to Mannheim’s theory of social elites on the basis that “it posits an *atomic* view of society” which is only a refinement of social *laissez-faire*, and unable to guarantee any fluid continuity of cultural authority from one generation

⁴⁸ Raymond Williams, “The Idea of Culture”, *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 3, No. 3, July, 1953.

⁴⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 236.

to the next as an hereditary class could. Williams agrees with Eliot's analyses of the atomistic nature of Mannheim's meritocracy, it being "a mere silhouette of the doctrines of economic individualism".⁵⁰ However, as he goes on to illustrate, there is an incongruous logic in Eliot's thinking in this respect, for the type of organic relationship Eliot envisages between the cultural elite and the governing class is itself only able to be maintained by the principles of the "free economy", the "central tenet of contemporary conservatism", with its own atomised and individualist logic:

Against the actual and powerful programme for the maintenance of social classes, and against the industrial capitalism which actually sustains the human divisions that he endorses, the occasional observation, however deeply felt, on the immorality of exploitation or usury seems, indeed, a feeble velleity. If culture ... is, as Eliot insists it must be, "a whole way of life", then the whole system must be considered, and judged as a whole. The insistence, in principle, is on wholeness; the practice, in effect, is fragmentary.⁵¹

The "fragmentary" practice is evident in the "pleasant miscellany" of Eliot's listing of the "characteristic activities and interests of a people" that he takes culture to be:

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.⁵²

There is the suspicion of a rather derisive flippancy about Eliot's tone here, but the point Williams makes is that his list conforms to the characteristic description of culture as leisure - "sport, food and a little art" - yet when Williams adds to the list by including "steelmaking, touring in motor-cars, mixed farming, the Stock Exchange, coalmining and London Transport" his extension of the parameters of culture is hardly expansive, seemingly limited to the inclusion of forms of economic productivity and "transport".⁵³ In one respect the consideration of rural and industrial production is relevant because certain modes of living form around or are determined by these activities. However, the inclusion of "London Transport" represents an early form of a problem Williams's holistic conception of culture would continually raise. If London Transport is an aspect of culture, what is not an aspect of culture? Eliot may in the end be conforming to the

⁵⁰ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 240.

⁵¹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 242.

⁵² T.S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, p. 16. Cited in *Culture and Society*, p. 233.

⁵³ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 234.

limited leisure model of culture, but Williams is in danger of forsaking any specificity of definition at all, to the point where the idea of a common culture can serve no apparent function, expressing little more than the idea of life in its completeness. If culture is as holistic as Williams suggests, then we can also include forms of economic utility, racial violence, mass-market strategies, police corruption and media monopolies, to which we can then ask, what does it signify, where does its differential potential lie, and against what is its power ranged?

Eliot's own sense of cultural wholeness is the abstract reflection of his conservative ideals. It is never intended to promote a programme for the broader dissemination of unifying cultural values. He is wary of such a prospect, fearing that the dispersal of the specialisms of minority culture will lead to their "cheapening" and "adulteration". It is the unspecified qualities of "urbanity" and "civility" that are under siege, and at his most precious he can lament the decline of the "manners" and "witty conversation" which allegedly provides context and meaning to the behaviour of a vanishing class. Yet Williams has evident difficulty in redressing the balance. For against the idea of a minority culture he implies a definition of culture so abstract and amorphous that it is difficult to ascertain its character and condition, or to divine any particular values that may be derived from it. Just because Williams's culture is so all embracing it tends to hinder his own advocacy of an alternative cultural structure. He is unable to offer at this point a firm sense of the working class culture he champions, for theoretically his preoccupation with connection and indissoluble unities never adequately allows him to formulate a consideration of a culture of dissent.

Much of the same problem is evident in Williams's consideration of F.R. Leavis. Here he is intent on addressing the Leavisian propensity to see both literature and literary criticism as a cultural "centre", a fixed point from which to examine and judge civilization. For Leavis, language was "the supreme act of community", a community of taste, upon which the preservation of the finest examples of articulated experience relied, bringing to light the shared attributes and common values of a lineage representing the greatest literary achievements of the past.⁵⁴ Values which could be requisitioned to act at once as a touchstone in ascertaining contemporary literary/cultural merit and more significantly as a powerful authority upholding humane values against the

⁵⁴ See George Steiner's essay "F.R. Leavis", *Language and Silence*, p. 229–247.

impinging forces of “progress”. A progress defined in the terms of a decline into a technologico-Benthamite and adulterated “mass” civilisation.

The task of preserving and assessing the quality of the past and keeping alive “the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition” as well as recognising the latest successors of the tradition necessarily relied on “a very small minority”. It is this minority - essentially the literary critic - who constitutes “the consciousness of the race”, the keepers of the language upon whom “fine living” depends:

In their keeping ... is the language, the changing idiom ... without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. By “culture” I mean the use of such a language.⁵⁵

Leavis’s position in this respect is accompanied by his assertion that culture and civilisation were becoming increasingly “antithetical”. Much in the manner of Eliot’s cultural elite, the literary critic, as imagined by Leavis, was to be the new cultural watch-dog, a sentinel against what was new and threatening in the post-war world, which, as Chris Baldick puts it, “was precisely that the ‘mass’ was beginning actively to challenge the status of the minority, creating an oppositional language subversive of cultural authority.”⁵⁶ Like Eliot, Leavis saw the crisis of culture as the separation of its standard-bearers from the realm of public authority. Any reversal of this fate required a consolidation and reinforcement of the minority, the forging of an autonomous culture that could sustain itself, independent of social systems. From this stronghold Leavis looked forward to the activation of a training programme for the cultivation of literary acumen which would promote powers of discrimination aimed at resisting the consumerist tendencies of the age. However, with the emphasis on judgement comes a specific and highly subjectivist criterion by which we are to ascertain the quality of articulated experience. We are to look for a “close, delicate wholeness”; “pressure of intelligence”; “concrete realisation”; “achieved actuality”; “moral seriousness”; “impersonality”; “living intuitive faculty”; “intellectual responsibility” etc. These notions appear abstract and contingent, and in this respect, Leavis’s claim to be partaking in a “common pursuit” is based upon, as Perry Anderson notes, a presupposition of a morally and culturally homogenous readership, a composite mentality whose assumptions are unanimous and reinforce a “stable system of beliefs and values”.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ F.R. Leavis, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, p. 5.

⁵⁶ Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism*, p. 163.

⁵⁷ Perry Anderson, “Components of the National Culture”, *New Left Review*, No. 50, July–Aug, 1968, p. 52.

This “homogeneous readership” and “composite mentality” is what Leavis actually comes to conceive as “community”, based on a consensus of implicit values and manifesting itself as a centre of cultural renewal. This ideal, antipathetic to mechanical and economically driven structures, becomes, in effect, his own version of the Burkean metaphor of the “organic community”.⁵⁸ As a paradigm of this organic order Leavis relies heavily on George Sturt’s account of the life of *The Wheelwright’s Shop* (1923) in which the organic past and its loss is expressed in the same terms that Leavis was to adopt:

That lore of the English tribes as it were embodied in them [the sawyers] was not stupid any more than an animal’s shape is stupid. It was an organic thing, very different from the organized effects of commerce.⁵⁹

Leavis draws on such instances to arrive at his own conclusions concerning the labourers’ quality of life and their natural, animal-like, relationship to their work and their environment:

The more “primitive” England represented an animal naturalness ... and the things they made - cottages, barns, ricks, and wagons - together with their relations with one another constituted a human environment, and a subtlety of adjustment and adaptation, as *right and inevitable*.⁶⁰ [my italics]

The closing phrase, “right and inevitable” was one Williams was to take considerable exception to. This sense of rightness and inevitability was at the heart of the conservative use of the organic metaphor. While Leavis did not aim at a restoration of the past, he did, however, place a profound stress on the “memory” of this order as an incitement towards a future model of civilization. Yet, significantly, it is this memory of the past, this persistent “myth”, which throws a shadow over Leavis’s programme for cultural renewal. Leavis’s critique of Sturt’s work fails to reflect the critical discernment and complete responsiveness to the finest nuances of word and meaning that he claims as the attribute of the critical minority he advocates.

What is most striking about *The Wheelwright’s Shop* is that, for all its intents and purposes, it is in the end a rather pragmatic account of a “small business” as it makes the transition from wood to iron and from manual dexterity to machine labour in the inevitable surrender to the

⁵⁸ As Baldick writes, “It is in this sense that Leavis states that ‘literary education ... is to a great extent a substitute’ for the organic community.” Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism*, p. 193.

⁵⁹ George Sturt, *The Wheelwright’s Shop*, p. 33.

⁶⁰ F.R. Leavis, *Culture and Environment*, p. 91.

competitiveness of free-market competition. Despite Sturt's polemic against the "organized effects of commerce" there is throughout his work the constant utilitarian consideration of pounds and pence and the credit and debit of human affairs. Beyond the meditative idealisation of the labourer's life and his own ardent admiration for Carlyle, Ruskin, Thoreau and Emerson is the imperative of material considerations within a capitalist system and the utilitarian ethos of "getting on". Leavis refuses to acknowledge this, nor does he register the overt sentimentality of Sturt's often credulous and contradictory depiction of working life:

It was in fact a fascinating task [carting and "converting" timber] ... It must have been a cold job too ... At least so I should suppose now; yet I have no recollection of feeling the cold at the time. The work was too interesting. The winter, the timber, the wheelwright's continuous tussle, the traditional adaptation, by skill and knowledge - all these factors, not thought of but felt, to the accompaniment of wood-scents and saw-pit sounds, kept me from thinking of the cold - unless to appreciate that too. Delightful? It was somehow better than that. It was England's very life one became a part of, in the timber-yard.⁶¹

It is disappointing to find Leavis omitting any consideration of Sturt's description of the labourer as overworked, underpaid and dwelling in sub-standard conditions. It is on these grounds that Williams attacks the substantial "myth" of the organic society as propagated by Leavis and others:

This is, I think, a surrender to a characteristically industrialist, or urban, nostalgia - a late version of mediaevalism, with its attachments to an adjusted feudal society ... and it is foolish and dangerous to exclude from the so-called organic society the penury, the petty tyranny, the disease and mortality, the ignorance and frustrated intelligence which were also among its ingredients.⁶²

The criticism is valid. Leavis has been guilty of avoiding these types of considerations, and it does lead to a questioning of the integrity of his critical interpretation. Considering that his method is to incorporate a body of local critical judgements into a general outline of history, it becomes increasingly difficult to value a detailed judgement that reinforces an inadequate history, or when it appears the result of an inadequate reading. Another related example of this selective

⁶¹ George Sturt, *The Wheelwright's Shop*, p. 31. It is not difficult to see the influence of these recollections on Leavis's own conception of a pre-industrial society. As well as this Sturt's correlation between the nature of the work and the notion of something intrinsically "English" is also consistent with Leavis's notion of a "peculiarly English tradition" in literature. The notion of a national literature embodying a moral and spiritual essence is one of the hallmarks of Leavis's criticism, and is the foundation upon which his political and social ideology appears to rest. Williams has conceded that he was unaware of such complexities: "All I can say is that I did not see that when I was writing." *Politics and Letters*, p. 119.

⁶² Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 259-60.

interpretation of the text can be found in his study of Lawrence. Discussing “Lawrence and Class” he writes:

Class, the villain of the drama, is represented by the proud class superiority of the impoverished vicar’s family. We know of course that Lawrence grew up in a working-class environment. But the only evidence of the fact in “The Daughters of the Vicar” is the inwardness and the freedom from any form, direct or inverted, of *sentimentality or idealisation* with which we are given the world of the cottage and the mine.⁶³[my italics]

Consider then the following description of life in the “pit” from “The Daughters of the Vicar”:

The day passed pleasantly enough. There was an ease, a go-as-you-please about the day underground, a delightful camaraderie of men shut off alone from the rest of the world, in a dangerous place, and a variety of labour, holing, loading, timbering and a glamour of mystery and adventure in the atmosphere, that made the pit not unattractive to him.⁶⁴

The swaggering ease of the go-as-you-please day, the delightful camaraderie, and the glamour of mystery and adventure. Are these the expectations with which the coal-miner meets the day ahead as he enters the pit? Leavis has not overlooked this passage. He in fact quotes a large section of it as evidence by which he may reaffirm, even more dogmatically, his earlier conviction that “there is no sentimentalising of the miner’s life” in “The Daughters of the Vicar”. Can the reader accept this as a “complete responsiveness” or a fine sense of discrimination? Is there a concreteness, a moral seriousness, an intellectual responsibility evident either in Lawrence’s account or Leavis’s reading? Such is the coercive relativism of Leavis’s idiom that he can write:

This truth about the nature of Lawrence’s treatment of class might perhaps be so plain and indisputable as not to need insisting on.⁶⁵

What we see in “The Daughters of the Vicar” is, according to Leavis, the victory of “life” over the class struggle. What he refused to see is that integral aspects of the class struggle were in fact determining what the majority of people called “life”. In the end Leavis’s own writing failed to live up to the criterion he placed upon others - it was not “rooted in the soil”.

Despite Leavis’s desire to see a community of values overpowering private interest, his fear of the “mass” public and the hope he placed in a cultivated minority both tended to direct him

⁶³ F.R. Leavis, *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist*, p. 87.

⁶⁴ D.H. Lawrence, “Daughters of the Vicar”, *Selected Short Stories*, p. 133.

⁶⁵ F.R. Leavis, *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist*, p. 101.

along the humanist path towards a primary concern for the circumstance of the individual. As Fred Inglis has pointed out, Leavis's preoccupation with the nature of the community was at odds with his assertion of

the paramountcy of the Blakean-Wordsworthian-Dickensian-Laurentian individual, brave, free, responsible to life and life's integrity, and to acclaim such a hero against the threats of acquisitive practices, mechanical structures and bureaucratic institutions.⁶⁶

His dilemma was exacerbated by his unwillingness to see life reduced to aspects of class conflict, a conflict which seemed to point to the baseness and crass materialism of the human condition. This unwillingness is the result of the idealism he has inherited and which is evoked by the Laurentian metaphysic he adopts. Like Burke and Richards before him, "life" becomes an idealised concept somehow removed from the sordid clamour of the "living".

In his challenge to the authority of Leavis and Eliot, Williams identifies the limitations of the elitism and exclusiveness of what becomes, in their hands, a class-centred minority culture which endorses the ruling prerogative of that class, often in the disguise of an apolitical neutrality. Yet, what he has to offer as an alternative suffers by the same degree in the opposite way. Against a limiting exclusivity he offers an overladen concept of cultural totality. Culture's very "inclusiveness" diminishes its capacity to facilitate a "response" to our changing circumstances, since such circumstances must by definition be included within its domain. The idea of "response" has been at the core of his argument for the historical value of the term, for as he argues "only in such a context can our use of the word 'culture', and the issues to which it refers, be adequately understood."⁶⁷ Lacking a sufficiently rigorous dialectical procedure, his interpretation of culture and his insistence on the "effort of total qualitative assessment" leads ambiguously to the proposition that culture is a felt "response" only to itself, to a "whole way of life". Williams actually recognises the nature of the problem when he writes that

[t]he difficulty about the idea of culture is that we are continually forced to extend it, until it becomes almost identical with our whole common life.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Fred Inglis, *Radical Earnestness*, p. 104.

⁶⁷ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. vii.

⁶⁸ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 256.

Williams claims that this “transforms” the problem, and that now we must be prepared to make “very fine and very difficult adjustments.” Yet it is never by any means clear that he adequately makes such adjustments. The word “common” seems to be at the root of the problem. It is the connecting idea within his consideration of the notions of culture and community and the alliance between them. When Williams talks of “our common life” he slides arbitrarily between the sense of what we have “in common” in our otherwise diverse lives, and the more general sense of our common existence and relation to life. Within this movement it is difficult to establish a precise definition of the common, and its vagaries delimit the terms of conflict which the notion, one assumes, is intended to resolve.

His theorisation of a prospective “community of culture” is, despite his deconstruction of the myth of the “organic community”, still powerfully informed by his own reflections upon an older rural village culture. The clue that he has not quite given up on the idea of an organic non-industrial past is evident in his own rather puzzling self-inclusion in the “myth” as he unfolds its misconstruction in history. Arguing that it is “a surrender to a characteristically industrialist, or urban nostalgia” he notes that, “if there is one thing certain about the ‘organic community’, it is that it has always gone.”⁶⁹ Pointing to its retrospective invocation in the work of Goldsmith, Crabbe, Cobbett and Sturt, he then intervenes:

for myself (if I may be permitted to add this, for I was born into a village,
and into a family of many generations of farm labourers) it was there ...
in the 1930s.⁷⁰

Drawing (he would later say “unconsciously”) on his own memories of his Welsh village background, he never argues for its “right and inevitable” character, but his emphasis on “the inherited skills of work, the slow traditional talk, the continuity of work and leisure” still has much of Sturt and Leavis about it.⁷¹ His reference to “the continuity of work and leisure” seems to be his own version of pastoral, momentarily forgetting that harsher continuity of work and poverty. In this mood Williams’s extolling of the “common” has its own mediaevalist ring to it, a received pre-enclosure nostalgia for a bucolic feudalism.

⁶⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 259.

⁷⁰ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 260.

⁷¹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 260.

Not only does Williams still absorb the organicist spirit which informs minority cultural values, but he takes the idea of minority culture as a discriminating “court of appeal” and transfers that status onto his ideal of community. Community is now the basis upon which a mass-culture ideology can be rejected. While “the speed and magnitude of change” has broken up the organic settlement, community itself is not necessarily vanquished. For Williams the institution of the “local newspaper” is a “controlling evidence” of community’s preservation and potential. It does not, he argues, succumb to the crude devices of mass communication. Produced

for a known community on a basis of common interest and common knowledge, the local newspaper is not governed by a ‘mass’ interpretation. Its communication, in fact, rests on community, in sharp contrast with most national newspapers, which are produced for a market, interpreted by ‘mass’ criteria.⁷²

As he goes on to say, “any real theory of communication is a theory of community.” We can “judge” the inadequacies of mass communication by the degree to which it is conditioned by its “lack or incompleteness of community”. But it is still evident that this notion of community is disabled by its organic dimension. It is a localised, knowable, provincially rooted settlement that he imagines, and as such seems to have a decreasing relevance to where, in industrialised states, most people tend to live. There is a sense that Williams’s notion of community becomes akin to the Burkean and romantic abstraction of “the People” over and against the crudities of “mass” ideology. This ideology looks towards “selected aspects of a ‘public’ rather than an actual community”.⁷³ But “actual” community is the problem. When Williams describes an actual community it tends to be small, but when he theorises it as a site of common life (in all its apparent divisiveness) it tends to move into the realm of nation or state, where its use, particularly in the twentieth century, has often been in the name of nationalism.⁷⁴ Williams is attracted to the term because of the way it has been utilised as a critique of theories of individualism, but his use hardly distinguishes it from its more sinister manifestation as a tool of national bonding against the perceived danger of other nations.

This raises the overt political ramifications of the adherence to community, ramifications which, at this time, Williams is unwilling to negotiate. The difficulty of a “national” community

⁷² Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 312.

⁷³ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 312.

⁷⁴ See the discussion of this issue in *Politics and Letters*, p. 119.

is that, despite its darker overtones, its relation to the idea of “state” is uncomfortably close to his own long term political hopes for community. He wishes to draw on the organic sense of community as place, region and settlement where there apparently existed a “culture in common” and use it as source from which to project a line of continuity towards a modern socialist consideration of a communitarian state.

For Williams, the “inequalities of many kinds which still divide our community” must be resolved by a “common culture” which will communicate our “common experience”. The implication is that the recognition of our commonality will work against inequality. The ideal culture will be a community of “equality”. But, as Lesley Johnson has recognised, it is very difficult to ascertain “exactly what Williams means by equality”.⁷⁵ Indeed his contemplation of the term amounts to one of the most imprecise and rhetorically tortuous moments of *Culture and Society*. While admitting that he uses the term with “hesitation” because it is “commonly confusing” Williams confuses the reader, and possibly himself, by remarking that inequality is “inevitable and even desirable”. Against this positive inequality there is an “evil” inequality which “denies the essential quality of being”.⁷⁶ The distinction between affirmative and negative versions of inequality is vague. The essentialism of his “equality of being” is never closely examined or articulated but given out as a general antonym for coercive domination. As Johnson suggests:

It is not clear from Williams’s discussion of equality whether he envisages anything more positive than the elimination of these features of inequality of being. Nor is it clear how they can be eliminated.⁷⁷

All that can be surmised from Williams’s account is that honouring “equality of being” is to desist from the habit of dominating others and to offer “respect” for the basic humanity of each individual. He attempts to argue away the thought that an “insistence on equality may be, in practice, a denial of value”, but his argument is neither effective nor enforced with great conviction, since, judgement, discrimination and response are integral to any valuing of common experience over an atomistic mechanical ideology.⁷⁸ They are the inherently necessary adjuncts to any assessment of the inadequacies of mass culture on the basis of its “lack or incompleteness of

⁷⁵ Lesley Johnson, *The Cultural Critics*, p. 161.

⁷⁶ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 317.

⁷⁷ Lesley Johnson, *The Cultural Critics*, p. 161.

⁷⁸ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 318.

community". The discerning social critique and the valuing of certain forms of life over others is at the heart of the tradition Williams unfolds, and which he is a part of.

The invocation of equality is in aid of establishing a seamless moral connection between the tradition of anti-individualism and an affirmation of the working class culture of "co-operation" and that class's "basic collective idea". It is in the working class model of community that Williams sees the prospect of an egalitarian culture of the future. This is the final thrust of his work which now turns toward an approbation of working class co-operation and collectivism. However, there is also the subtle intrusion of a more sombre reflection. For Williams recognises in the final pages of his book that there are two significant interpretations of community, and while they are both opposed to "bourgeois liberalism", they are nevertheless opposed to each other. Community, as he now belatedly declares, divides itself between the idea of "solidarity" and the idea of "service". And as if stirred by the recollection of that ideology of service, Williams adopts a tone, an angered and autobiographical voice, previously unheard but soon to become his personal signature, his stamp of empirical authority. The personal pronouns predominate:

It seems to me inadequate because in practice it serves, at every level, to maintain and confirm the *status quo*. This was wrong, for me, because the *status quo*, in practice, was a denial of equity to the men and women with whom I had grown up, the lower servants whose lives were governed by the existing distributions of property, remuneration, education and respect. The real personal unselfishness, which ratified the description as service, seemed to me to exist within a larger selfishness, which was only not seen because it was idealised as the necessary form of a civilization, or rationalised as a natural distribution corresponding to worth, effort and intelligence. I could not share in these versions, because I thought, and still think, that the sense of injustice which the "lower servants" felt was real and justified.⁷⁹

Along with the celebration of co-operative community and solidarity comes this harder reality. As Williams has said he would no longer use the word community in quite the same way again.⁸⁰ He sensed the genesis of a new position:

I don't much know the person who wrote [*Culture and Society*]. I read this book as I might read a book by someone else. It is a work most distant from me ... I have never known a book that finished so completely

⁷⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 329.

⁸⁰ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 120.

with the last page that was written. I had the strongest sense I have ever experienced that now it was done, I was in quite a new position and could move on.⁸¹

What he moved onto was a position he had begun to outline in an essay entitled “Culture is Ordinary” (1958), where in an impressive polemic he returns from the Olympian heights of *Culture and Society* to the shadows of the Black Mountains and his own experience of the village to offer a markedly contrasting perspective on industrialisation and the idea of community:

For one thing I knew this: at home we were glad of the Industrial Revolution, and of its consequent social and political changes ... But there was one gift that was overriding, one gift which at any price we would take, the gift of power that is everything to men who have worked with their hands. It was slow in coming to us, in all its effects, but steam power, the petrol engine, electricity, these and their host of products we took as quickly as we could get them, and were glad. I have seen these things being used, and I have seen the things they replaced. I will not listen with patience to any acid listing of them - you know the sneer you can get into plumbing, baby Austins, aspirin, contraceptives, canned food. But I say to these Pharisees: dirty water, an earth bucket, a four mile walk each way to work, headaches, broken women, hunger and monotony of diet. The working people, in town and country alike, will not listen (and I support them) to any account of our society which supposes that these things are not progress: not just mechanical, external progress either, but a real service of life. Moreover, in the new conditions, there was more real freedom to dispose of our lives ... more real say. Any account of our culture which explicitly or implicitly denies the value of an industrial society is really irrelevant; not in a million years would you make us give up this power.⁸²

The tone of this essay, written the same year as the publication of *Culture and Society* is radically altered. Now any account of culture which denies the value of industrialisation is “irrelevant”. The expression of the material harshness of a pre-industrial community brought with it not only the claim that culture was ordinary but also the sombre recognition of the tragic community.

⁸¹ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 107–109.

⁸² Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary”, *Resources of Hope*, p. 10.

IV.

Tragedy: Community and Revolution

... to be half inside and half outside such a system is to be reduced to despair.¹

Throughout his career Raymond Williams has periodically returned to the study of drama, partly in order to complete his initial critical project, partly, one feels, to atone for the unconscious conservatism of his early work which he must have felt increasingly hard to defend. His forays into the dramatic field reveal a characteristic reluctance to leave his intellectual past behind, and his writings in general have often carried the sense of a determined effort to redirect, re-evaluate, and rewrite his earlier positions, as if to drag them into alignment with his increasingly materialist perspective. This desire to connect past and present positions is symptomatic of the priority Williams gives to the notion of wholeness, and he has always made strong claims for the continuity of his own work, describing his critical development as an organic but often unconscious response to his immediate cultural climate. He documents this type of transformation in explaining his altered perspective from the Cambridge shaped criticism of *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, to the militant and polemical defiance of *Modern Tragedy*:

It was as if I went into the lecture room with the text of a chapter from Drama from Ibsen to Eliot in front of me and came out with the text from a chapter from Modern Tragedy.²

Responding to what he found to be an increasingly ideological interpretation of tragedy upon his return to Cambridge as a lecturer in drama, Williams set about interrogating the “essentialism” that permeated the dominant critique of tragedy, and which by the weight of “sheer authority” was habitually “repeated, without real challenge”.³ More immediately antagonistic had been the sustained absolutist assumptions of George Steiner’s influential *The Death of Tragedy* which had not only denied the validity of tragedy in the twentieth century but had indicted Marxists for their role in the murder of the form.⁴

¹ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 14.

² Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 211.

³ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 14 and *Politics and Letters*, p. 211.

⁴ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*. Interestingly Williams never actually cites Steiner’s work. In this respect Steiner becomes one of those silent antagonists which characteristically inform the terms of Williams’s criticism. The most obvious instance of this being his refusal to refer to Leavis in *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* which is clearly a personal response to *The Great Tradition*.

Both Williams's followers and critics have been puzzled as to why he has invested so much in the category of the tragic, why he finds it imperative to revive tragedy as a contemporary form, and why he finds it relevant to the advancement of a socialist poetics. As it turns out these are questions which *Modern Tragedy* never satisfactorily resolves, though the motivation behind Williams's critical intervention becomes clearer as the work unravels its complex argument. Just as he had earlier attempted to reclaim the misappropriation of culture as a minority activity and assert its sense of totality as "a whole way of life", Williams now moved into the high cultural domain of tragedy to redefine it in terms of "a whole action", an action which embodies the integral connection between the crisis of the individual and the tragic fact of the world. Within this "whole action" individual and environment, protagonist and community, are seen as mutually determining agents of the tragic condition. By placing stress on this collective action Williams seeks to restore the social function and communal reference of the tragic form. Such characteristics, he argued, were being undermined by the critical orthodoxy's preoccupation with the single and specific action of the individual tragic hero. It was this emphasis on the exceptional individual that Williams believed had promoted the ideological reception of tragedy as an aristocratic form exclusively entailing the fall of great and noble men.

Now speaking openly as a socialist and vigorously dissolving the divisions he had previously maintained between academic criticism and radical political intervention, Williams sought to remodel the dominant notion of tragedy from its individualist and metaphysical bearings towards a social, culturally determined, expression of human struggle, deadlock and defeat. In this respect his critical programme is more identifiably Marxist than his earlier work, but it contains the germ of a contradiction that persistently arises in almost all of Williams's cultural criticism. For in developing a more dialectical approach Williams seeks to enlist class struggle and revolt as a tragic experience and to see "tragic man" as a "social" condition. The tragic experience is born out of social conflict, but then to see tragedy as a "whole action" seems to provide the term with a homogeneous sense which appeals to the ideas of synthesis and completeness. Ideas which, at any rate, stand in opposition to that of conflict, struggle and defeat. In these terms there is an unclarified contradiction between Williams's communal and collective emphasis which in his previous work has stuck fast to the notion of a "whole way of life" and what now appears to be his evocation of a class specific community of struggle whose tragedy is its need

to revolt, its need to rupture the body of the whole.

Williams's claim that political revolution is both necessary and tragic is the most polemical aspect of his argument, an argument which provides a radical and confrontational response to the "generic closure" by a critical tradition which, in defining tragedy in accordance with a set of *a priori* "constants", privileges the individual personality over collective experience, and constructs certain limits on what we are entitled to describe as the condition of tragic suffering. Williams can contemplate no reason why the upheavals and crises of our own century should not be defined as tragedy. He asks why it is that the tragic form, which for over two thousand years has represented catastrophe and suffering on the grandest scale, has been suddenly denied to us in our own time. His suspicion that tragedy has been ideologically captured by a critical orthodoxy serving the interests of a bourgeois world-view is consistent with a Marxist critique, yet the attempt to reclaim tragedy on behalf of a revolutionary Marxist poetics is, as we will see, never finally able to negotiate the philosophical contradictions between an aesthetic of defeat and a politics of liberation.

Upon its release *Modern Tragedy* met with open hostility, and it is significant that the work's reception in the mid-sixties varies so markedly with the influential status it has achieved in the contemporary study of tragedy. The discrepancy denotes a type of intellectual generation gap which Williams's prescient leads have bridged. His "politicisation" of the tragic form has been more acceptable to latter-day critics who, in embracing the self-fashioning and reflexive nature of texts, have welcomed his unremitting attacks on the universalising and essentialising tradition of orthodox tragic theory. In this respect Williams has opened the field to a host of cultural critics seeking to examine the ideology of power as it manifests itself in both the literature and its critical reception. While Williams attacked the imposed interpretive limitations placed upon the tragic form by a dominant critical tradition, reviewers of the day countered by denouncing the arbitrary and "open-ended" possibilities Williams imbued the idea of tragedy with.

Frank Kermode sees in *Modern Tragedy* "an extremely dangerous undertaking" and he takes exception to Williams's "rash" survey of bourgeois thought and "perversely mandarin" tone.

He questions Williams's materialist disqualification of the metaphysical constitution of tragedy aligning himself in the process with a "post-Hegelian" tragic sense of life.⁵ Stuart Hampshire's review in *New Statesman* finds, like Kermode, that the work is "meditative" and casts a disapproving eye on the unscholarly mode of Williams's discourse with its mixture of autobiography, generic analysis, political philosophy and revolutionist polemic.⁶ Kermode believes only the author will finally be satisfied with the book's sense of continuity, while Hampshire is perplexed by the circuitous "connections" of the argument. Finding himself "wandering around in a circle" he queries the degree of cultural determination Williams ascribes to the development of the tragic form. On the academy's behalf Hampshire affirms the autonomy of the text, arguing that social factors "only touch the surface of the mind" and that the source of the tragic action is "primarily the subject matter of individual psychology".

In much the same manner Walter Stein, who has devoted an entire chapter of his work *Criticism as Dialogue* to systematically interrogating Williams's position, reasserts the essentialist and universalist perspective in extolling "the great tragic constants" and berating Williams for disowning "tragic absolutes in toto".⁷ For Stein "traditional tragedy is essentially metaphysical" and, denying the loss of community Williams identifies in the individualist preoccupation of tragic criticism, he counters with the proposition that real community is founded upon just such an individualist metaphysic:

there can be no meaningful human community - no properly human values at all - but for communal reverence for absolute personal meanings and claims.⁸

It is this easy association between tragedy and "absolute personal meanings" that spurs Williams to take up his aggressive counter-position against what he sees as the tradition's systematic dislocation of tragedy from its social and communal origins. In doing so he accuses each significant cultural period of fashioning the tragic form in order to complement their own construction of order and ideological authority. Each shift that he documents from the classical to the mediaeval, from the renaissance to the neo-classical, from the romantic to the liberal and

⁵ Frank Kermode, "Tragedy and Revolution", *Encounter* 27, August 1966, p. 83-85.

⁶ Stuart Hampshire, "Unhappy Families", *New Statesman*, July 1966, p. 169-70.

⁷ Walter Stein, *Criticism as Dialogue*, p. 183-246.

⁸ Walter Stein, *Criticism as Dialogue*, p. 236-237.

then modernist form of tragedy corresponds not only with an increased emphasis on the individual and a distancing of the tragic community, but also with the philosophical alterations required to accommodate the rise of emerging capitalist structures. In this respect Williams's history of tragedy is a documentation of what he believes to be a constant process of "separating" and "abstracting" the previously unified aspects of the tragic, the originally homogeneous relations between protagonist, chorus, audience and community. This division facilitates the abstraction of the relations between the metaphysical and the social, myth and action, and fate and human agency. This breaking of real connections and ongoing dissolution is to be found in the course of a history that takes Williams from Oedipus to Godot.

Yet such an account inevitably confronts certain difficulties. For contrary to its radical initiative Williams's position reflects a certain type of cultural conservatism, predicated as it is upon a dubious nostalgia for the mythical plurality of the Greek polis. Tragedy not only emanates from this locus but, as Williams implies, finds in this epoch the apotheosis of its communal form. The history he then details is one of cultural decline so that even tragedy's localised aesthetic brilliance cannot but reflect an ongoing tale of social dissolution. And this is where the real difficulty lies, for Williams's interpretation of the development of the tragic form again relies on a dialectical treatment which rests uneasily with the communal and unitary emphasis of tragedy's "whole action". As we will see the relation between the whole and the parts that comprise it is a theoretical dilemma that consistently plagues Williams's thinking. Caught between an organic world view and the Marxian dialectic he struggles to resolve their respective claims so that while the "whole action" of tragedy can include the dialectical tension between tyranny and struggle, this appears at odds with the integrative sense with which Williams generally privileges the notion of community. Williams struggles to resolve his critique of tragedy's role in the isolation of the individual from their communal context with his own desire to recapture and valorise its lost integration. As tragedy looks away from the communal interest to the individual psyche Williams can do little but trace this perceived decline. He can indict tragic criticism for facilitating the demise of tragedy's communal bearings but his own account is surprisingly bereft of a counter procedure which will allow him to read tragic drama from a communal perspective. He cannot draw a collective hermeneutic from the pages of tragedy. Williams can politicise tragedy but at this stage he is apparently less willing to confront the political character of community as it

manifests itself in the tragic form. His silence pronounces the difficulty of the task.

Naomi Conn Liebler has taken this difficulty on board in her attempt to recentre community in the tragic discourse.⁹ Like Williams, she points to Aristotle's emphasis on the primacy of action over character in order to see tragedy as a whole action in which the relationship between protagonist and community is interdependent and reciprocal, a mutual act of determination and definition. Reading Aristotle, Liebler finds the impetus for the tragic action in the violation of kinship and community, and the protagonist's crisis also that of the "abetting community".¹⁰ The individual, embodying elements which are both identical and antithetical to the community, precipitates the tragic action when they overreach that community's normative standards. Grasping at authority and power they unleash the destructive energy of tragedy by severing the bonds that "identify and protect a collectivity of individuals as a community". As a consequence the individual transgression of the hero places the *status quo* of the community in peril and sets in motion a process which results invariably in the community's rejection of the hero. Because of the reciprocity between the individual and the collective the fissure in the social structure effectively means that the "entire sociopolitical organism" turns against itself only to be purified by a purging of the "exceptional" individual. The death of the hero at the play's end represents a ritualistic cleansing whereby the diseased element of the body-politic is cut away and then eulogised as a necessary sacrifice for the community's survival:

[W]hen the ordered relations of a community are disrupted, the hero draws to herself/himself all of the ambiguity and crisis present in the community, just as an organism fighting a disease localises antibodies at the site of infection.¹¹

For Liebler it is the community's preservation that is at issue:

After the purgation of pity and terror ... what tragedy clears the way for is the reaffirmed self-definition of community.¹²

In this respect tragedy offers the prospect of social and spiritual survival, a means by which we can recognise and recover from crisis. This is tragedy's "positive charge", its affirmation of life.

⁹ Naomi Conn Liebler, *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy: The Ritual Foundations of Genre*.

¹⁰ Naomi Conn Liebler, *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy*, p. 49 and p. 45.

¹¹ Naomi Conn Liebler, *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy*, p. 5.

¹² Naomi Conn Liebler, *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy*, p. 48.

However, it appears positive only in respect to its potential to reveal the threat to that order which constitutes itself in the name of community. As Liebler recognises, the fictive communities of tragedy are “conservative in regard to their social structures and customs” and its purging of the hero is in the name of restoration, a return to order.¹³ In other words, for whom is this re-consecration of the prevailing social order festive and celebratory. Tragedy through its action may decentre power, but through its closure it ratifies the authority threatened by the crisis and serves only the moderate rather than radical community. Significantly Liebler cannot on Williams’s behalf radicalise community, nor can she deter tragedy from its willingness to “return” to order. This return defers to the conservative ideology of the fixed condition, aligning itself with the philosophy of a universal human experience encoded within the “tragic absolutes” of traditional scholarship.

To this degree tragedy seems to refuse a radical materialisation of its form. Indeed Williams’s materialist reading of tragedy is predominantly limited to his indictment of the metaphysics of tragic criticism. He sees in the establishment of tragic essentialism a construction of the irrevocable fate of man, a course set by a force or logic outside of our knowable world, evoking a meta-rational aura that draws heavily on the metaphors of dark, intangible and invisible forces. In presenting it as such, the advocates of the tragic universal are enlisting the metaphysical resonances of Greek tragedy on their own behalf, and offering them back to the text as a critical paradigm for determining the play’s universal significance. By evoking a critique that is, in itself, prepared by a pre-determined metaphysic, the tragedies find a reception that evokes the sense of a supra-reality against which human agency appears to be an arrogant folly. As Williams argues:

It is common-place, in the modern “Greek” system, to abstract, for example, Necessity, and to place its laws above human wills. But the character of necessity, insofar as it can be generalised in this culture and these plays, is that its limits on human action are discovered in real actions, rather than known in advance.¹⁴

The correspondence between the metaphysical and the rational, in which super-natural powers and human agency make rival claims for truth and potency, is fractured by any account that

¹³ Naomi Conn Liebler, *Shakespeare’s Festive Tragedy*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 17–18.

seeks to extol the primacy of the former over the latter. Essentialist interpretations characterise “necessity” as “determinism or fatalism” but as Williams suggests, in the action of the actual tragedies these limits are being tested and fought out as the *agon* of the dramatic action and in the remaking of the myths as “particular and presently experienced dramatic actions”.¹⁵ Williams is arguing against essentialism from a materialist point of view and he is, in effect, rejecting what Jonathan Dollimore describes as “the view that literature and criticism meet on some transhistorical plateau of value and meaning.”¹⁶ Essentialism, as the latter points out, tends to give priority to the spiritual as “the ultimate counter-image of actual, historical, social, existence.”¹⁷ The individual is comprehended as being determined by a “pre-social” essence and invested with a “quasi-spiritual autonomy”. Williams is taking up a relativist position rejecting the essentialist’s tendency to overlook specific material contexts in favour of seeking out the patterns of cultural continuity that they can deem to be universal in application. Yet, in one respect, to universalise tragedy is also to universalise history, which is to implicitly see history as tragedy, as an irrevocable destiny, punctuated by crisis and suffering, and finding relief only in its death.

The critical tradition’s separation of the metaphysical from the social effectively dehistoricises the text through the invocation of forces beyond time and man, but as Williams points out, it also historically reflects a general cultural and philosophical process which increasingly privileges the status of the individual and the individual’s response to their world. In the transition from the classical to the mediaeval world the individual in tragedy is still pre-eminently a representative member of a group rather than an isolated being, but despite the Christian conception of providence and a beneficent God the “wheel of fortune” turned on an arbitrary basis and evoked an “incomprehensible power”, more random than absolute, and beyond grand design. What were once the indistinguishable connections between the social and the metaphysical were now in the mediaeval period in acute opposition. And what this effectively created was not only a powerful sense of forces operating on individuals outside of any common human destiny but “a radical dualism of man and the world”. This shift found its origin in the Senecan emphasis on the “nobility of suffering”, a private suffering removed from the general action, which then blended easily into an emphasis on the eminence and nobility of rank. This led towards the stress on “the

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 249.

¹⁷ Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 250.

fall of famous men, as a whole meaning”, an adaptation of the generalised Aristotelian “change of fortune” to the specific and worldly fall of princes. It is, as Williams notes, an abstraction which now defines only a limited action.

While renaissance tragedy also focused on the fall of famous men, it reconnected this fall from grace with the common experience, so that the crisis of the heads of state was also the trauma of the body politic. But, according to Williams, in this inquiring age the critical focus moved away from the dramatic action of the play and became preoccupied with its critical “treatment”. This development, which continues from the Italian renaissance scholars through to the neo-classical critics, is reflected in Sidney’s inquiry into the nature of the tragedy “well made and represented”. But as Williams claims, this emphasis on the “rules for tragedy” which had established “exalted rank” as its fundamental principle steered the criticism towards the issues of dignity and “decorum”. Rank became the matter of style rather than the “fate of a city”, and it bred the critical terminology of the classist “high and low styles”. The loss of the general and representative quality is augmented by the subtle shift from the Aristotelian “change in fortune”, now read as the “change in the hero’s fortunes”.

By way of this emphasis on the fate of an individual the broader public character of tragedy was forsaken amidst “the abstraction of order, and its mystification”:

What had been a whole lived order, connecting man and state and world,
became finally, a purely abstract order.¹⁸

In the light of a tradition which “offers as absolutes the very experiences which are now most unresolved”, it was inevitable that a modern bourgeois society should reject the communal and social element of tragedy.¹⁹ Liberal consciousness had inherited the separation between personal values and the social system and the increasing influence of utilitarian principles consolidated the belief that the individual was not an element of the state but “an entity in himself”. Romantic criticism, spurning the mechanical rationalism of the enlightenment, saw that this artificial division and the “assumed division of feeling” that accompanied it was itself a tragic cause, and one which ushered in the contemporary shift from tragic hero to tragic victim. But if the romantics

¹⁸ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 50.

¹⁹ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 57.

had been hostile to the primacy of reason they were guilty of collapsing into what Williams has described as the “alienation of the irrational” in which society became the enemy of human liberation. As romantic individualism declined into subjectivism it took on its own form of nihilist alienation. The romantic tension between “personal liberation and social fact” implicitly identified community as impeding the free expansion of the spirit. It is this influence which Williams sees as shaping tragic criticism’s denial of the social and communal significance of tragedy as it has turned away from the collective world to examine the alienated soul.

However, while Williams has pleaded for a more profound consideration of the social determinants of tragedy he is himself somewhat remiss in his documentation of the liberal and romantic response to social crisis and particularly the French revolution which was, despite Williams’s claim to the contrary, widely articulated in the terms of social tragedy. Kenneth Surin believes that as Williams has considered tragedy from a European rather than specifically English vantage point he is somewhat negligent in his omission of a tradition of German romanticism including Hegel, Schiller, Schelling, the Schlegel brothers and Hölderlin who “all used a variety of conceptions of tragedy and the tragic to reflect on what was for them the historically exigent question of the politics of revolution.”²⁰ It was under the rubric of tragedy that these writers sought to explore the philosophical conflict between freedom and nature. In the opinion of John Farrell this had also been the concern of nineteenth-century British liberals.²¹ Taking up Williams’s “tragedy and revolution” argument to highlight the political tension underlying the work of several nineteenth-century writers, Farrell arrives at a different set of conclusions. He sees tragedy and revolution not as separated in literature, but as “the dialectical dance” of the moderate who while not reactionary feared the totality and comprehensiveness of revolution and its “fury against fine distinctions.”²² As he suggests, the moderate “sought the comprehensiveness of tragedy in order to withstand the comprehensiveness of revolution.”²³ In response to Williams, Farrell believes that the tragic resonances of revolution were already understood in the nineteenth-century, and that “the grievous parity between the aims of autocracy and the aims of revolution” was itself recognised as tragic. Certainly Byron has this in mind when referring to the failure of revolution as our greatest tragedy, “Man’s worst - his second Fall”,²⁴

²⁰ Kenneth Surin, “Raymond Williams on Tragedy and Revolution” *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, p. 150.

²¹ John P. Farrell, *Revolution As Tragedy: The Dilemma of the Moderate from Scott to Arnold*.

²² John P. Farrell, *Revolution As Tragedy*, p. 19.

²³ John P. Farrell, *Revolution As Tragedy*, p. 21.

²⁴ John P. Farrell, *Revolution As Tragedy*, p. 22.

Here tragedy is being unequivocally linked to social catastrophe, but while for Byron tragedy refers to the “failure” of revolution, the idea of ‘the fall’ was also widely implemented to register a conservative antipathy to the prevailing atmosphere of political radicalism. The “fall from community” is embodied most particularly in the writing of Walter Scott who finds the tragic subject in the political divisiveness which characterises what he called “the conflict of opposing fanaticisms”. For Scott the *laissez-faire* and utilitarian philosophy endangers the community of traditional duties and obligations as much as the abstract political philosophy of revolution. Despite Scott’s representation of the moderate’s cause, he shares with Williams a sense of the tragic loss of community, a desire to uncover its lost treasure and to project it as a teleological panacea. Yet for Scott, as Farrell explains, community is attained through a “levelling” of all antagonistic political positions, and exists as a reflex of the prudence required to assume the hegemony of “the social will” amidst “the triumph of social affections”.²⁵ Scott infused community with a fundamental moral sense that could be relied upon in a way that the mechanics of “reason”, that agent of political action, could not. This is, as Sheldon Wolin notes, an instance of a prominent tradition of nineteenth-century post-Hobbesian thought in which the “non-rational prejudices” were seen to effectively dispose men “towards obedience and subordination” at the level of local community, producing “a web of association stronger than any conscious thought could conceive.”²⁶ Here the “non-rational” community finds a certain correlation with the “non-rational” convictions of tragedy.

Community in this sense serves a conservative ideology just as effectively as the dominant interpretation of tragedy. Community is what we have when the excesses of *laissez-faire* politics and revolution have been avoided. But Williams himself has his own ideological reasons for steering clear of this interpretation of community and its relation to revolution. Williams is intent on censuring tragedy’s marginalisation of community and can find no comfort in a conception of community which conversely seeks to distance itself from the reality of collective tragic experience and the radicalism it may incite. The problem here for Williams is that while his own political bias requires some conception of a radical community or even revolutionary community he is persistently drawing on the myths of various historical communities whose “ideal” has also served the ideology of conservative and anti-radical interests.

²⁵ John P. Farrell, *Revolution As Tragedy*, p. 80.

²⁶ Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, p. 290–91.

While Williams himself is content to maintain an unspecific, undeclared and, in the end, rather non-material notion of community, he takes issue with the dominant critical establishment's "dematerialising" of tragedy and the casting off of its concrete social implications. For Williams this process is engendered in the semantic particularity the academy has invested in the term "tragedy" itself. He sees the distinction between tragedy and social catastrophe as augmented by the discrimination between the academic and generic term tragedy and the common-place use of tragedy to describe an actual non-literary experience of suffering. It is Williams's concern that this distinction, while appearing to be merely a point of academic pedantry, actually exacerbates a denial of that human experience which, while it may entail immense suffering, does not as a consequence of its general social dimension warrant the description of genuine tragic experience. This can have a powerful cultural effect. It can, at its worst, imply that certain types of human crises, because they seem difficult to assimilate to ideas of irrevocable destiny, poetic justice, or the *hamartia* of a particular hero of esteemed rank, are not genuinely tragic in their effect or circumstances. The ideological ramifications of this can be chilling, for it implies that our apparent inability to negotiate the social and political crises of our own times is not in itself an appalling tragedy. That we can roll out the names of our century's theatres of blood - Auschwitz, Bosnia, Dresden, Hiroshima, Kampuchea - to have them turned back because they cannot be comfortably accommodated within the high aesthetic realm of the tragic dramatic form suggests that

we have in fact been oppressed by a traditional persistence, in the definition of tragedy, which has often succeeded in persuading us that it has a kind of copyright both in the experience and the form.²⁷

Frank Kermode considers that this distinction between tragic drama and tragic experience is merely a question of semantics, that no exclusion of experience is meant by it. It is just that over time the common-place usage of the term "tragedy" has taken on a general meaning independent of tragedy as a dramatic form. Williams keenly disputes this suggesting that there is actually very little distinction between the two uses of the word, other than that which the critical tradition has itself constructed:

²⁷ A. Schwarz, *From Buchner to Beckett*, p. xiii.

The coexistence of meanings seems to me quite natural, and there is no fundamental difficulty in both seeing their relations and distinguishing between them. Yet it is very common for men trained in what is now the academic tradition to be impatient and even contemptuous of what they regard as loose and vulgar uses of “tragedy” in ordinary speech.²⁸

Kermode finds this untenable, claiming that only the most “reactionary of purists” has not come to terms with the extension of the word. Robert Corrigan, in the preface to his compendium on tragedy, sides with Williams when he claims that there existed within the academy a general feeling that the power of the term tragedy had been diminished by its indiscriminate use to describe any type of painful experience. “Tragedy” had become “a dirty word in public parlance” while in academic circles it had become “an honorific term reeking with the musty nostalgia for the past ages of glory”.²⁹ Robert Heilman in discussing the problem believes “we must make some attempt to counter bad usage” for fear of the word losing its “character”:

In fact, we can propose it as a law of language that when one word gains several meanings ... the rougher, more general, looser or lazier meaning will win out over the more exact or precise or demanding meaning ... I will go a step further and suggest that if experiences are not understood, there is a sense in which they are not even experienced.³⁰

For Heilman this throws a shadow over our fundamental sense of “reality”. But then this begs two questions. Upon what principles are we meant to determine that the tragedy of the drama is to possess a more “demanding meaning” than social crisis and catastrophe? And secondly, where in the critical tradition are we to go for a meaning of tragedy that is “exact or precise”? As Corrigan points out, nowhere in the history of drama will one find such “formal consistency”.³¹ Clifford Leech, who is himself wary of the smudging of labels, notes that “even those who have aimed at using the word precisely have not reached agreement concerning the nature of the literary type to which the word is, by them, applied”.³²

As Williams says “tragedy is not a single and permanent kind of fact, but a series of experiences and conventions and institutions” and is not to be taken as the specific province of literature.³³

²⁸ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 14.

²⁹ Robert Corrigan, ed, *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, p. ix.

³⁰ Robert Heilman, “Tragedy and Melodrama”, *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, Robert Corrigan, ed. p. 246.

³¹ Robert Corrigan, ed, *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, p. xi.

³² Clifford Leech, “The Implications of Tragedy”, *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, Robert Corrigan, ed. p. 343.

³³ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 45–46.

Arguing against the universalist character of most tragic theory, he rejects the closure of generic formalism, refuting the idea that there is no profound tragic significance in experience until it finds artistic expression. Williams denies the validity of any position which sees tragedy not as the event or the crisis but solely as the art which attempts to apprehend it. The question he asks is how the real action and the representation of action are to be seen as significantly different. The conventional response would indicate that the art of tragedy organises this experience in a way that reveals some significant meaning by which the action may then be interpreted in relation to the wider universal character of humanity. But this type of response seems to miss the true interdependence of their relationship. To say one is a dramatic code and the other an experienced action seems to imply an awkward separation of life and art. Tragedy was not an extant skeletal form waiting to be substantiated by an appropriate action. Tragedy arrests the experience as well as defining it. It is the form and the action, and its nature is born of this paradox. Tragedy asks rhetorical questions, deals in irony and misrecognition, reveals a world in which nothing appears certain and in which no one is either entirely right or entirely wrong. Playing on the apparent irreconcilables of fear and sympathy it may be argued that its greatness lies in its apparent desire to elude any absolutist interpretation.

It is Williams's general argument that the ideological legacy of the received tradition with its adherence to a taxonomy of tragedy has persisted in shaping the formation and reception of "modern tragedy". The works of dramatists from Ibsen and Buchner to Strindberg and Brecht have removed the emphasis on the nobility of rank and metaphysical determinants in order to engender common secular man with tragic significance. But as Williams argues, the critical reception of this work, has maintained an insistent essentialism in seeking to uncover the expression of human disorder within these texts as "the fault of the soul" rather than in the tangible disorder of our collective social existence. This disorder, the tragedy of our non-community, producing alienation, poverty, hunger, persecution, torture and murder finds its flashpoint in the act of rebellion and desire for revolution.

The point Williams is intent on making is that, despite the enlightenment rationale of the "modern", the tragic genre's prevalent concern with man as subject to a metaphysical order has carried over into the modernist epoch as an entrenched political ideology. Any active desire to

overcome the immanent experiences of domination and dislocation is projected as a rebellious act of “disorder”, a violation of the natural order of the cosmos, a resistance to a divined “fate” that delimits autonomous human agency and denies our ability to create our own history. And the received tradition of tragedy lends its cultural authority to validate this position as a universal principle. Tragedy is enlisted as a time-honoured attendant of a conservative political philosophy. Alternatively Williams wants to see tragedy and the dissenting spirit of revolution as part of a “whole” action, to see revolution as tragedy, not as absolutely philosophically opposed to it. In this respect Williams is looking to open up the field of contemporary tragic experience, and to see it as compatible with what historically has been the structurally appropriate aesthetic form for its blood-soaked narrative. The emphasis on revolution as part of a whole action is designed to evoke the sense of the double-sided matrix between tragedy and revolution, for the brutal denial of basic humanity is often revolution’s tragic cause, and too often its tragic effect. In the name of purging the old order and establishing the new revolution must negotiate its own production of inhumanity.

The crucial distinction Williams seeks to make is that while tragic drama and its critical tradition have often neglected the collective crisis, those who have refused tragedy’s fatalism and looked towards revolution in the quest to make their own history have also denied the tragic perspective and failed to embrace the full ramifications of their actions. Williams speaks for revolution but rejects any romantic construction of it and any account which does not read it as tragic:

Before, we could not recognise tragedy as social crisis; now, commonly, we cannot recognise social crisis as tragedy.³⁴

By bringing tragedy, community and revolution into a single frame Williams’s general argument begins to engage with certain philosophical difficulties that are not easily negotiated. Marxism and the action of revolution both possess an epic *telos*, the promise of a new Jerusalem where man’s full humanity will be restored. Here the tragedy of contemporary crisis, the tragedy of man against man will be resolved. Yet it is difficult at times to distinguish this vision from the metaphysics of Christian myth which awaits redemption in a promised land. Both offer

³⁴ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 63.

transcendence, both demand faith and sacrifice. Against this epic structure the received idea of tragedy seems irreconcilable. Tragedies end badly, they defeat ambition, they remind us of the futility of human endeavour. What they are said to articulate is the fact of evil as inescapable and irreparable. And yet while Williams denies the metaphysical priority of tragedy he tends to adopt a liberationist eschatology of revolution which retains a residual metaphysical component, particularly with regard to his latent assumptions of a post-revolutionary utopia which is not altogether free of its own “absolutist” assumptions of inevitability.

As Williams considers it, the metaphysical reading of tragedy has led to a preoccupation with the individual being and his or her particular relationship with the cosmic universe. Material concerns are seen as peripheral, the communal nature of crisis revealed only as an impediment to the individual who is either indifferent to or visibly at odds with the community. However, if Williams’s metaphysical evocation of revolution seems paradoxical the idea of community can hardly escape the same ambiguity. For just as the metaphorical structure of revolutionary rhetoric has persistently drawn on a religious sense of transcendence, most particularly in its incorporation of the Biblical imagery of Exodus, likewise the idea of community is born out of a Christian metaphysic.³⁵ Sheldon Wolin believes the inception of the notion of community emanates from a metaphysical belief which was materialised as a form of social organisation:

Christianity succeeded where the Hellenistic and late classical philosophies had failed, because it put forward a new and powerful ideal of community which recalled men to life of meaningful participation. Although the nature of this community contrasted sharply with classical ideals, although its ultimate purpose lay beyond historical time and space, it contained, nevertheless, ideals of solidarity and membership that were to leave a lasting imprint, and not always for good, on the western tradition of political thought. At the same time, the movement quickly evolved into a more complicated social form than a body of believers held together in fervency and mystery; the mystic community was soon encased in its own structure of governance.³⁶

³⁵ In his research Michael Walzer has found the language of Exodus central to radical polemic. It is, he argues, particularly the case in the communist “anti-theology” of Ernst Bloch. *Exodus and Revolution*.

³⁶ Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, p. 97.

Wolin argues that at its most fundamental level the idea of community was constructed around the mystery of the *corpus Christi*. As in St. Paul to the Romans:

I am making up in my own flesh the deficit of Christ's suffering for His Body which is the Community.³⁷

This is the early form of the organic community which relies on a mystic fusion between the "body politic" of society and the organic body of the Saviour.³⁸ And despite Williams's adherence to a materialist critique he is never entirely free from such metaphysical associations and imagery.

In his essay "Community: The Tragic Ideal" Glen Tinder sees this "non-rational" community as tragically irrational, an ideal by which "man is lead repeatedly to invest great hope in abortive communal strategies".³⁹ For Tinder, Marxism is merely the latest version of the "myth of community", the tragedy of which is its futile gesture towards a harmony which is finally "unattainable". In seeking community

we come face to face with our finitude, our mortality, and our defectiveness. The unattainability of community brings a realisation of the circumstances that are most oppressive in our fate.⁴⁰

Within this view the "non-rational" community finds a certain correlation with the "non-rational" convictions of tragedy, though this is a particular connection Williams is unwilling to make, caught as he is between the aesthetic mystifications of tragedy and the political mystifications surrounding the idea of community.

In any case tragedy, community and revolution, the three keywords of Williams's discourse, are all infected by metaphysical imagery, and in this respect Williams is drawn into the non-rational intrigue he seeks to expose. Against the metaphysics of tragic individualism he implicitly valorises the "mystic community" just as he asserts the necessity for redemptive revolution.

³⁷ C.H. Dodd, *The Meaning of St. Paul for Today*, p. 57.

³⁸ In Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* the author provides an ironical rendering of the organic metaphor by pointing to the organic disorder of the starving body. As she writes "When the poor, driven by the needs of their bodies, burst upon the scene, [revolution] lost its old connotations and acquired the biological imagery which underlies and pervades the organic and social theories of history, which all have in common that they see a multitude - the factual plurality of a nation or a people or society—in the image of one supernatural human body driven by one superhuman, irresistible 'general will' " *On Revolution*, p. 42.

³⁹ Glen Tinder, "Community: The Tragic Ideal", *The Yale Review*, p. 550–564.

⁴⁰ Glen Tinder, "Community: The Tragic Ideal", p. 558.

Walter Stein considers the eschatological bent of revolutionary and radical communitarian discourse to be the relevant ground for censuring *Modern Tragedy*. In effect he indicts Williams for adhering to a vulgar Marxism in offering revolution as “the ultimate hope of a total communal redemption”.⁴¹ Here Stein overstates the case, engaging in what is finally a radical misreading of Williams’s position. Stein picks up on the phrase “the total redemption of humanity” which Williams draws from Marx’s *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechts-Philosophie: Einleitung*. But importantly it is this sense of “total redemption” that Williams finds “inescapably tragic”. By this he means that Marx’s revolutionary conception of total redemption is the final consequence of having recognised the “*total loss* of humanity”. As Williams remarks, it is a tragic perspective

born in pity and terror: in the perception of a radical disorder in which the humanity of some men is denied and by that fact the idea of humanity itself is denied. It is born in an experience of evil made the more intolerable by the conviction that it is not inevitable.⁴²

For Marx the only really universal character of society is its suffering. Williams wanted this suffering, which creates “the necessity for revolution”, to be seen as the relevant and pressing subject matter of modern tragedy. There is little in this formulation that suggests that Williams adheres to any conception of revolution as a paradisaical recovery of humanity, and in fact his own proposition of a “long revolution” is always very guarded in this respect, demanding constant vigilance against the enduring institutionalised forces of reaction. Stein may be justified in denouncing Marx’s “secularised eschatology of redemption” but reductive in associating it too easily with the more sombre disposition of Williams who expresses a deeper reserve in regard to revolution’s immediate cost. Williams is an idealist and his first impulse is always positive, but in *Modern Tragedy* he offers fairly little of what Steiner has called “the blackmail of transcendence ... the virus of Utopia”.⁴³

If Williams was to reactivate the sense of contemporary tragedy he would first have to resurrect it from its death at the hands of Steiner and the persistent influence of Nietzsche. In *The Death of Tragedy* Steiner had evoked a metaphysics of tragedy, beyond the pale of empirical reason and driven by the forces of an “otherness”:

⁴¹ Walter Stein, *Criticism as Dialogue*, p. 208.

⁴² Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 77.

⁴³ Cited from the entry: Steiner, George. *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature*, ed. Margaret Drabble.

Call them what you will: a hidden malevolent God, blind fate, the solicitations of hell, or the brute fury of our animal blood. It waits for us in ambush ... It mocks and destroys us. In certain rare moments it leads us to some incomprehensible repose.⁴⁴

To accommodate this metaphysics in tragic form certain mythological, symbolic and ritual reference points have to be available within the living culture of a society, and for Steiner the twentieth-century experience of totalitarianism, war and the Holocaust have destroyed the humane classical and Christian structures available to the Golden and Elizabethan ages.

For Steiner too, the tragic theatre is an “expression of the pre-rational phase in history”, and Marxists have destroyed its metaphysical resonances, destroyed the sacred aura of tragedy which “can occur only where reality has not been harnessed by reason and social consciousness.”⁴⁵ Why Marx, and not for instance Machiavelli or Montaigne or even Vico, is given the credit for destroying the “psyche occult” of tragedy is uncertain, the proposition itself merely echoing Nietzsche’s earlier claim that Socratic reason had laid the foundation for the “suicide” of Grecian tragedy.⁴⁶ For Steiner, the Marxists have no place in the scholarship of tragedy, for they are “like the medieval visionary with his absolute faith ... that the kingdom of justice is nearing on earth.” This optimism has no place in Steiner’s world-view:

The Marxist conception of history is a secular *commedia*.⁴⁷

Just as Nietzsche proclaimed that tragedy was imperilled by Hellenic “optimism”, so Steiner ridicules the sanguinary resolution of socialism. It is this position that *Modern Tragedy* responds to. Williams attempts to construct a Marxist poetics, a dialogue on tragedy which will allow Marxism a point of entry into the debate Steiner so firmly excludes it from. He makes a significant connection by pointing out that the standard concerns of tragedy with social crisis, the rites of sovereignty, the relativities of order and disorder, the issue of defeat and renewal, are also the stock currency of revolution. But perhaps what is again most significant is that shared philosophical paradox that tragedy and revolution have in common, for both have claimed a capacity to transcend the *agon* of existence; tragedy through the cathartic manifestation of

⁴⁴ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, p. 342.

⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 54–75.

⁴⁷ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, p. 343.

“incomprehensible repose” or as Nietzsche sees it through its aesthetic ascendancy over the absurdity and futility of existence, “the taming of horror through art”.⁴⁸ Yet both have revealed and been received as inherently fatalistic and defeatist. In this sense optimism and negation, and their off-spring utopianism and nihilism, provide the dialectical structure for the consideration of tragedy and revolution.

As Williams affirms, common representations of revolution oscillate between the heroic and the apocalyptic. Successful revolutions write their historical narrative in the epic form, celebrating trial and triumph. Revolution becomes part of the myth through which a people will come to define themselves, celebrate and sentimentalize the birth of their nation, the valour of their own classical epoch:

When the suffering is remembered, it is at once either honoured or justified. That particular revolution, we say, was a necessary condition of life.⁴⁹

This construction, however, can only be maintained by a post-revolutionary generation. In a contemporary revolution “the detail of suffering is insistent”. Violence, dislocation and destruction are so much a part of the whole action of revolution that the issue of suffering itself becomes the moral dividing line in the crisis, so that to renounce the violence can be construed as a counter-revolutionary act, just as the action of revolt can be reduced by its enemies to the cold rationalisation of brutality and bloodshed. As Williams says, “revolution is a dimension of action from which, for initially honourable reasons, we feel we have to keep clear”.⁵⁰ It is this abstraction of revolution to its crisis of violence and disorder that Williams seeks to respond to. His point being that the concept of disorder is relative, depending on what one considers an acceptable “order”. As he remarks, in a post-revolutionary society the old institutions are seen as the real forces of “systematic violence and disorder”, but while such institutions maintain their power they can seem “to an extraordinary extent, both settled and innocent”.⁵¹ Subsequently any resistance to this oppression is seen as the exclusive source of violence. Williams believes in the need to see the crisis of society as a dialectical action, and that which we call revolution as

⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 40.

⁴⁹ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 64.

⁵⁰ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 65.

⁵¹ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 66.

its decisive conflict, the point in which historical imbalance and inequity seek tragic purgation through violent action.

Thus the relation Williams draws between tragedy and revolution has a specific referent in that he is seeking some intellectual means by which Marxists in the sixties might be able to cope with the constant documenting of the atrocities of the Russian revolution, and the defeat of their most profound hopes. By seeing the revolution as tragic Williams brings the loss of the left's deepest hopes back to a literary centre where it could be read and interpreted as a tradition of defeated but noble aspiration. In evoking this tragic sense of revolution Williams runs the risk of aestheticising and textualising human suffering, removing the murderous action to the pages of academic and theoretical inquiry. Yet the difficulty of bringing the issue to the page should not be undervalued when clearly many had been too devastated by the Russian experience to do so, acting out Steiner's dictum that silence itself was the only appropriate response to the horrors of the twentieth century.

Written in the shadow of socialism's darkest moment, Williams's advocacy of revolution seems to be borne down by the weight of the tragic inheritance to the point where his thinking seems subsumed by the ideology he seeks to discredit. Against his rejection of the nihilist metaphysics of futility and inevitable defeat at the hands of an indiscriminate cosmos, Williams is unable to re-energise tragedy as a contemporary medium. His critique of modern tragedy appears to only further facilitate a history which records its decline and death. Williams could be considering his own predicament when he writes:

The most complex effect of any really powerful ideology is that it directs us, even when we think we have rejected it, to the same kind of fact.⁵²

This "same kind of fact" underwrites Williams's contemplation of modern tragedy. His analysis of the "liberal tragedy" of the nineteenth century, of which Ibsen is the key figure, reveals in its tragic structure a deep recognition of defeat and the incontestable limits of victory.⁵³ Sprung by the tension between the thrust of the individual and an absolute environmental resistance, the tragic hero is transformed into the tragic victim whose *hamartia* is their desire to free themselves

⁵² Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 61.

⁵³ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 87.

from social bondage. Here tragedy is built upon the irreconcilability of the aspiring individual and an enclosing nullifying community. This is what Williams takes to be the tragic voice of modernity: the interiorised, existential quest for meaning that raises the tragic hero above the general nature of suffering. The common character of suffering had brought the romantics' "first impulse of revolt" but increasingly it gave way to the articulation of a personalised alienation in which man is guilty of "the ultimate and nameless crime of being himself". The impossibility of establishing community with the world condemned the hero to a guilty wandering, dislocated to the point where he is now "on the run from himself". Community becomes a lost term and other people are merely images external to a private agony.

The romantic intensities of alienation permeate the private tragedy of Strindberg, O'Neill and Tennessee Williams as a profound desire for death. This, as Williams remarks, is "a tragedy that has got into the blood stream" and every "attempt to break out, to tell the truth, is met by a revelation of the truth-teller's complicity".⁵⁴ Once tragedy spoke for the isolation of the individual it became the expression of defeat that is registered by a profound inability to communicate as in Chekhov where the determination to be on the side of life seems to be finally cancelled by a recognition of the unbearable facts. From here it was only a short step to an expressionism in which even aspiration signalled an absurdity. Against this resignation Brecht rejected the idea that we are ennobled by our suffering and projected a new sense of tragedy in which suffering is declared avoidable, but tragically it is not avoided. This new sense of tragedy in which life is nevertheless affirmed, "learned as closely in suffering as ever in joy", pronounced the tragedy that it is only man that is against man, and that the recourse to the dark forces of the tragic spirit beyond our knowing were as Scott Fitzgerald claimed "essentially a cheat and its conditions are those of defeat."⁵⁵

Against the passive linearity of tragic fate Brecht offers a critical theatre that, through its decentring of the action, fosters a distancing critical perspective. This is a perspective informed by the proposition that while the action has taken this particular turn, it could have taken another, compelling the audience to ask "why" the eventual course of the action has taken its final form.

⁵⁴ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 114.

⁵⁵ Robert Corrigan, ed. *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, p. xi.

In this there is an affirmation that we are not bound by an eternal destiny or arbitrary forces beyond our influence. Brecht destroys the “*telos* of harmonic integration”, and this offers his drama a radical and potentially subversive edge. But theoretically Williams must struggle to incorporate Brecht’s development into his discourse on tragedy for, significantly, Brecht defines his work as “Epic Theatre” consciously distancing it from the fatalism of the tragic genre. Brecht offers Williams a glimmer of hope in creating a more congenial climate for the prospect of a liberating aesthetic, but its liberty is in its affirmation of the “anti-tragic”, a denial of the nobility of suffering. Again the problem for Williams is how to celebrate life and also maintain continuity with a form that cancels out optimism. In the end the sense of defeat and negation wears Williams down. He seems drawn into the tragic vortex until finally it is Beckett’s unequivocal death knell, the absoluteness of the futility it projects, that seems to reverberate through Williams’s melancholic and sometimes bitter rhetoric. It is there in the autobiographical accounts of the tragedy he has known in his own life, of “the corrosion of hope”, of broken men and divided families. And the tone is even darker, barely staving off despair, in the sombre recapitulation of his added “Afterword to Modern Tragedy” in which he hears in modern tragedy “the last cries of a dying world, overwhelmed by convictions of insignificance and guilt.”⁵⁶

It is here that the dialogue between tragedy and revolution finally breaks down. Williams can evoke the tragic sense of revolution but he can never adequately complete the equation and provide the reciprocal discourse on the revolutionary potential of tragedy. Strangely he never attempts to engage with the paradox he negotiates in his consideration of revolution. Here, by seeing revolution as part of a “whole action”, he was able to see the double-edge of the tragic, the tragedy of revolution’s necessity, and the tragedy of revolutionary aftermath in which the violence carries over into the establishment of order. Yet while Williams argues for the “whole action” of tragedy and a recognition of its dialectical expression of struggle and limitation, there is, in the structure of his own critique, a latent psychological acceptance of the enclosing limits of tragedy. He defers any textual examination of those tragedies in which the set limits are contested through acts of transgression within the plays themselves. For instance Antigone’s fate is only as irrevocable as her desire for death, a desire which remains subversive as long as

⁵⁶ Raymond Williams, “Afterword to Modern Tragedy”, *The Politics of Modernism*, p. 100.

she continues to transgress Creon's command to leave the body of her brother unburied. Hers is, as in the case of Cordelia, Saint Joan, Hamlet and Prometheus, a transgression of authority in the name of humanity, which is exactly the way Williams justifies the act of revolution. These examples are only analogous to the praxis of revolution but their cases amplify the spirit of resistance to power which can allow for a more radical interpretation of tragedy. Williams, finally, cannot radicalise tragedy nor can he effectively reinvigorate the communal sense of modern tragic drama. This work he has left to those who would follow his leads, but significantly they too have confronted the formidable resistance of the tragic form to being read in terms of political subversion. The desire to exact from tragedy its radical potential has led Jonathan Dollimore to explore the concept of tragedy as a subversive decentring of power in which the received sources of earthly and cosmic authority are thrown into disarray.⁵⁷ Concentrating on Jacobean tragedy Dollimore argues for the radicalism of a tragedy that under Montaigne's influence, disestablishes providentialism, disclosing its ideology and interrogating it through the conflicts of the action, "seizing upon and exposing its contradictions".⁵⁸

However, while detecting in the tragedy of the period an emerging sense of a form shaking off its metaphysical constraints and establishing human consciousness as the determinant of social being, Dollimore also recognises that the liberating capability of its scepticism is muted by tragedy's tendency to reflect the ideological structure it seeks to expose. In his account tragedy subtly transgresses, ironically subverts, disperses the subject, but never really threatens to shake the establishment. Its affirmation of life and prospect of encouraging or accommodating change is reduced to the question of how far consciousness of an hierarchical ideology goes towards dismantling it. Dollimore ends his book with the consideration that the process of decentring the subject allows for an alternative conception of relations which are given as natural but which act in the interests of domination. As such tragedy's radicalism seems confined to the destabilising effect Jacques Derrida essays in his consideration of "*the non-centre*" not as a lamentable "*loss of centre*" but as a celebratory "*affirmation*" of its unfixed and negotiable status.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 6.

⁵⁹ Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 271.

Despite his politics Dollimore expresses reservations regarding tragedy's subversive potential just as the cultural materialists and new historicists studying the politics of renaissance drama have tended to offer more convincing accounts of tragedy's coercive object than of its subversive prospect. Along with Williams these writers struggle to critically elaborate and develop Marx's own considerations on tragedy which look to identify a "progressive" element in the disharmony between the hero and the historical conditions in which he or she lives. It is the sense of being out of time, of having spent heroic passion "too soon", that marks the individual's tragic fate. Of course such an interpretation bears the sign of the Marxist "faith" in the coming of propitious conditions, and the longer the wait the more tragic this itself becomes. Yet as Paul Delaney has implied, Marx can be highly ambiguous and surprisingly sympathetic when he also perceives tragedy in the failure of the old order to "recognise that the time has come when it must yield".⁶⁰ In this respect Marx offers tyranny the grand exit of tragedy.

In following Marx's initiative Lucien Goldmann has argued that tragedy's "implicit condemnation of the world" challenges the contemporary values of society and as such offers the prospect of an "ideologically subversive" form.⁶¹ Like Williams, Goldmann considers that the origin of all tragedy is social, the tragic figure has lost communion with its material environment and now looks blindly to the gods, placing itself entirely in their hands. As with Williams it is this irrecoverable loss of connection which is tragic, and Goldmann finds in this representation of alienation the expressed misgivings and anxieties of social dissent. However, even in accepting this point it remains questionable as to whether these subversive strains can really overshadow the ideological function of tragedy as it drives the tragic action towards an ultimate renewal of the original values of its "natural" and "divinely" sanctioned authority.

Some of this critical tension between interpretations of tragedy as an ideological legitimization of authority or as a potentially subversive form is reflected in the way Williams can at one moment point to the manner in which tragedy has been traditionally enlisted in times of national crisis to reaffirm the solidity of the present order, and at another moment argue that the most significant tragedy is produced in periods in which established orders are beginning to experience

⁶⁰ Paul Delaney, "King Lear and the Decline of Feudalism", *Materialist Shakespeare*, ed. Ivo Kamps, p. 20–38.

⁶¹ See Geoffrey Brereton's *Principles of Tragedy*, p. 68–73.

decline. The former position views tragedy as the incorporated aesthetic of the State, while the latter accords with Goldmann's definition of tragedy as the art of a "dying society" which is now forced to radically examine its cultural assumptions. Such a position has to contend with the opposing argument that far from being the aesthetic of social disintegration tragedy is actually the product of a "confident society" which can afford the luxury of tolerating qualified subversion particularly when presented in established art-forms. Here the "fears of real subversion" are purged through the fate of the expendable hero who acts as an "insurance premium" allowing for the secure and fortified contemplation of the tragic spectacle.⁶² In this sense tragedy is a purging by authority of the subversive impurities of its audience, impurities which, as Augusto Boal argues, are "directed against the laws" of the ruling order.⁶³

Yet if Williams is to keep alive the idea of a radical and life affirming tragedy he must resist any temptation to interpret the tragic form purely as a coercive system of State control. Against such a tendency he seeks to valorise humankind's insistent struggle against tyranny and to read this human resistance into the sphere of the tragic sublime. But even the heroic nature of the Promethean will to resist seems destined to confront a dark finality, and Williams in the final pages of his "Afterword" appears to ultimately accept this:

It is here that the loss of a future is most keenly felt. It has been argued that it is time now to move from a tragic to a utopian mode, and there is some strength in this; it is a classical form of invigoration and hopeful protest; ... But it is not, when we look into it, a question of this or that prescription. The fact is that neither the frankly utopian form, nor even the more qualified outlines of practicable futures, which are now so urgently needed, can begin to flow until we have faced, at the necessary depth, the divisions and contradictions which now inhabit them.⁶⁴

For Williams we must learn the tragedy of revolution before we can adequately begin to regain the future. Our moment of cure must be predicated upon the full knowledge of its cost, and it is this which Williams takes to be the "whole action" of tragedy. But it is profoundly ironic that he insists on this type of political and aesthetic integration in respect to tragedy, for this fundamental longing for a unifying synthesis possesses its own tragic implications. As Goldmann declares,

⁶² Geoffrey Brereton, *Principles of Tragedy*, p. 65–66.

⁶³ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, p. 31–32.

⁶⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism*, p. 104.

the desire for completeness is itself one of the “essential” characteristics of “tragic man”:

What does he expect from his silent and hidden God? His demand ... is a demand for unity, for a synthesis of conflicting elements, a demand for completeness⁶⁵

Significantly Goldmann’s depiction of “tragic man” paints an accurate portrait of Williams himself, caught-up as he is in the constant striving to find communion amidst the irreconcilable, to unify antagonisms that refuse harmonic integration and to make whole that which has been irrevocably severed.

⁶⁵ Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, p. 91–92.