

## VI.

## Towards a Material Culture

*"There has never been a document of culture which was not at one and the same time a document of barbarism."*

Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

In *The Political Unconscious* Fredric Jameson argues that a basic utopian desire lies at the heart of most forms of contemporary criticism.<sup>2</sup> This remark is provocatively addressed to those who claim to be dismantling the utopian gestures of idealist critique by repudiating the "objective fact" and casting doubt on a phenomenologically knowable world. Jameson suspects that even within such a critical agenda there lives a residual nostalgia for some "ultimate moment of cure". For Paul Ricoeur this utopic impulse seems inescapable, encoded as it is in the actual formulation of language, its "double possibility" or "double motivation" which in the hermeneutic process reveals itself as "willingness to suspect, willingness to listen: vow of rigour, vow of obedience."<sup>3</sup> In this sense the act of criticism is both the inquisitor and hand-maiden of possibility, denying and affirming in a single moment, one eye on the closing door of the prison-house, the other looking to the freedom beyond. As Jameson implies, even in the theoretical rejection of the knowing subject there remains "a model of immanence", a "phenomenological ideal" insinuating the presence of a more formidable truth than that of the myth it challenges.<sup>4</sup>

In the cultural criticism of the Marxist tradition the critical conflict is of a different but closely associated kind. The issue is not the existence of "the real" but of determining the forces which block an effective consciousness of that condition and which construct a false consciousness, the "imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" as Althusser puts it.<sup>5</sup> For the latter the "truth" of his argument for the all pervasive nature of ideology relies on a recognition of ourselves as fully incorporated ideological subjects. But even this sombre recognition of "incorporation" is not without a related moment of "cure", for there is an

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 258.

<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, p. 282.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 281–282.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, p. 152.

epistemological gain in its exposure of the “illusion” of the autonomous subject. This exposure provides a type of liberating “escape clause” in that it forms the basis for a “knowledge” of the symptoms of our actual oppression, to which we can then turn our attention.

Simply speaking the critique of domination is utopic in that the burgeoning of class-consciousness through the recognition of common oppression allows an oppressed group to see themselves as engaged in a class struggle of which the desired outcome is the utopian vision of a classless community. But Jameson adds to this the significant proposition that ideology, the actual dissemination of false consciousness, is also itself inevitably utopian. This includes the cultural text which fulfils a “demonstrably ideological function”.<sup>6</sup> As he argues, it is only when the dominant order of a society begins to glimpse the political danger of the threatening unification of the oppressed into a conscious class that it activates itself to generate a “mirror-image” of that class’s self-identification and affiliation. As such this collective consciousness is a reaction “organised around the perception of what threatens the survival of the group”.<sup>7</sup> The working towards the suppression of the threat is utopian in its anticipation of an unthreatened dominance, and the cultural texts which are used to validate, naturalise and secure this domination likewise embody that same utopian impulse.

By arguing as such, Jameson is advocating a Marxist dialectic of culture, organised around a simultaneous study of the “*functional*” and “*anticipatory*” elements within culture.<sup>8</sup> This reciprocity between ideological function and utopian anticipation within the terms of culture - its “double motivation” - can be used as a basis for analysing not only the specific cultural text but the idea of culture in general. For throughout the Marxist tradition of cultural critique the relations between the functional and anticipatory have been the ground of great uncertainty. Engels, in his famous letter to the English socialist-realist Margaret Harkness, revealed a weariness in relation to the literature of what he called *Tendenzroman* (tendentious writing) which he believed lost much of its artistic integrity and potential impact through its explicitly political thesis.<sup>9</sup> He believed that the theme of a work should “spring forth from the situation and action itself”,

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<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 288.

<sup>7</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 290.

<sup>8</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 296.

<sup>9</sup> George Steiner, *Language and Silence* p. 271–291.

implying that it should reveal rather than project, and this is why he favoured Balzac over the more declamatory Zola. Conversely Lenin in “Party Organisation and Party Literature” and Trotsky in *Literature and Revolution* rejected “unpartisan” literature and appealed for a more programmatic and explicitly revolutionary writing as a vital part of a revolutionary culture.<sup>10</sup> The two positions remain of contemporary interest. The Engelsian position, later taken up by Lukacs, Benjamin and Goldmann in what Steiner calls the “para-Marxist” position, places a high degree of import on the mimetic function of the text.<sup>11</sup> The artist’s representation of life and its social and institutional relations will necessarily reveal the existing insufficiencies of the dominant order. This will occur without the need for any didactic programme, for social ills and inequities will come to light merely in the telling of the “real” and in the formal contradictions associated with that attempt. For instance Lucien Goldmann will see the problems involved in the use of a chorus in neo-classical tragedy as “a direct reflection of the fragmentation of post-feudal society”, just as Bakhtin will find in Rabelais a carnivalesque rupture of the monological *belles-lettres* of the dominant culture.<sup>12</sup> The forms “reflect” social and political instability and contradiction, and the critic, by recognising them as such, finds a utopian prospect upon which to dwell. The cultural text in this formula is a superstructural reflection of the contradictions and inadequacies of a social infrastructure.

Now the position of Lenin and Trotsky, in which a partisan literature is demanded in the name of the revolutionary cause, is generally considered to be overly mechanistic in its thinking, producing very little literature of any enduring quality. But it has behind it something of contemporary theoretical relevance. The appeal for a revolutionary literature in which the artist is charged with articulating the future historical resolution of conflict and in so doing writing “the other side of history”, may mistake the complexity of the creative process for a type of social engineering, but it does significantly privilege culture with a deterministic potential. Zhdanov demanded a literature which could “glimpse our tomorrow” just as Bukharin celebrated

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<sup>10</sup> See George Steiner’s account of Lenin and Trotsky in *Language and Silence*, p. 271–291.

<sup>11</sup> George Steiner, *Language and Silence*, p. 271–291.

<sup>12</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*; Lucien Goldman, *The Hidden God*.

a socialist realism which “dares to ‘dream’”.<sup>13</sup> Rather than merely reflecting, culture is seen as a primary agent in the construction of a possible, alternative reality. It is not only asked to represent social conflict but to be active in shaping a new order, to play a direct role in creating the conditions which will bring about a radical change in economic and material relations and as such determining rather than passively reflecting the economic base. As such, culture is seen to be what Raymond Williams would call “constitutive”. Although the analogy with the party line is perhaps an unfortunate one, in theory, the idea of culture as a primary process rather than a secondary superstructure is very close to what Williams has in mind when he defines the term “cultural materialism”, and like Jameson’s cultural dialectics it seeks to unearth both the ideological function and anticipatory moment of cultural production.

The theoretical progress towards cultural materialism can be charted across Williams’s *œuvre*. One can see the ground being cleared for a programmatic and sustained analysis of culture in the opening pages of *Culture and Society*. He begins polemically by describing the modern idea of culture as an immediate and direct response in “thought and feeling” to the Industrial Revolution. In this sense the concept of culture itself is not a reflection but a reaction to an economic structure, a challenge to utilitarianism, and again utopian as such. This challenge of culture, as Williams sees it, delimits its consideration as a functionary of ideological domination. Culture becomes his “resource of hope”, a human practice which far from being a passive endorsement of domination is patently a refusal of it. From the outset Williams sought to explore and reveal its possibilities:

It seems to me, first, that we are arriving, from various directions, at a point where a new general theory of culture might in fact be achieved. In this book I have sought to clarify the tradition, but it may be possible to go on from this to a full restatement of principles, taking the theory of culture as the theory of relations between elements in a whole way of life.<sup>14</sup>

It is a passage which pre-figures both the achievement and limitation of Williams’s cultural analysis. The opening up of the cultural field and the working towards a Marxist cultural poetics

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<sup>13</sup> A.A. Zhdanov “Soviet Literature-The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced in Literature” and N. Bukharin, “Poetry, Poetics and the Problems of Poetry”. Both in M. Gorky et al. *Soviet Writers’ Congress 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977. As cited by Andrew Milner, *Cultural Materialism*, p. 23–31.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. viii.

became his life work and enduring contribution, but that final phrase “the theory of relations between elements in a whole way of life” also pre-empted his most theoretically disabling position. That insistence on a “whole way of life” would turn back on him with a theoretical vengeance. The appeal that the expression must have had for him can be understood in its apparent offering of a mediatory position between the revolutionary character of Marx’s “social whole” and the Leavisian appeal to an “organic” past. As the phrase works its way through *Culture and Society* it becomes inextricably associated with the proposition of “our common life”:

The idea of culture is a general reaction to a general and major change in the conditions of our common life. Its basic element is its effort at total qualitative assessment. The change in the whole form of our common life produced, as a necessary reaction, an emphasis on attention to this whole form.<sup>15</sup>

This emphasis on the “whole” and its conflation with the “common” in the quest for “total qualitative assessment” has unerringly directed his criticism towards the contemplation of homogeneity and deflected some of the more obvious questions relating to class fractures and power relations. The reference to the common in his work becomes an *a priori* assumption that avoids asking what it is that is so “common” about our lives. At times in his later work, as I have argued, Williams showed a certain willingness to renegotiate the idea of the common whole, but the general emphasis remained deeply ingrained in his thinking, persistently surfacing as a rhetorical reflex, an anticipatory reference to the prospect of an impending socialist society in which wholeness became a healing metaphor against the disempowering alienation of modernity. In making the claim for a “common culture”, for its communal production of “meanings and values”, Williams tended to depoliticise the concept of culture by embellishing it with a sense of “totality” that drifted too far away from the necessary reading of its power as a persuasive technology of control or tool of ideological maintenance.

Terry Eagleton in his now infamous oedipal rejection of Williams’s cultural politics attacks his former mentor for upholding an “ideologically innocent” construction of culture in which economic, social, ethical, political and aesthetic determinants are collapsed into an “empty anthropological abstraction”, and so “striking political strategy dead at birth”.<sup>16</sup> As Eagleton

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<sup>15</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 295.

<sup>16</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 26.

suggests, in positing the sense of culture as “common” or “ordinary” Williams found himself in the contradictory position of aligning himself against “a crippling hegemony” while simultaneously denying the full effects of its oppressive power.<sup>17</sup> As he quotes from Williams:

there is not a special class, or group of men, who are involved in the creation of meanings and values, either in a general sense or in specific art and belief. Such creation could not be reserved to a minority, however gifted, and [is] not, even in practice, so reserved: the meanings of a particular form of life of a people, at a particular time, seem to come from the whole of their common experience, and from its complicated general articulation.<sup>18</sup>

To which Eagleton replies that there are indeed such classes:

and their effectiveness is demonstrated by the fact that the “meanings and values” of common experience are for the most part their meanings and values.<sup>19</sup>

Eagleton is persuasive on this point, but it is worth mentioning that Williams responded to his former student’s criticism by pointing out, quite correctly, that Eagleton himself had been reproducing the same position ten years after the publication of *Culture and Society*, by which time Williams had already moved well beyond this “first-stage radicalism”. Eagleton later apologised for his “unacceptably acerbic and ungenerous” tone, but his general point still stands (even though it now has to be understood as a critique of both Williams’s position and, somewhat embarrassingly, his own duplication of that position).<sup>20</sup>

Yet even while it is clearly true that in *The Long Revolution*, *Modern Tragedy* and *The Country and the City* Williams is more cognisant of the ideological implications of various cultural forms, he very seldom presses the full weight of this acknowledgment to attack the affinity between the operations of culture and the operations of “the State”, in which the former become subordinated to the interests of the latter.<sup>21</sup> What is somewhat paradoxical in this respect is that rather than

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<sup>17</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> Terry Eagleton and Brian Wicker, eds. *From Culture to Revolution*, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> See the afterword to Eagleton’s Introduction in *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, p. 11. Williams responded to Eagleton’s criticism as follows: “For example Eagleton, who has recently attacked *Culture and Society* wholesale, went on reproducing the arguments of the book right up to ’68–9 in a way that irritated me much more than his subsequent extreme revulsion from it. If you look at the essay comparing Eliot, Leavis and myself in *From Culture to Revolution*, you will see that he simply laid it out again ten years later.” *Politics and Letters*, p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> See David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, “Culture and Society or Culture and the State”, *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, p. 269–304.

seeing the state as culturally augmenting and facilitating the economic structure, Williams tends to limit his indictment of coercive cultural mystifications to “capitalism” *per se* and in this respect is drawn into the logic of prioritising an economic system as a primary determinant, a position which he is otherwise inclined to reject. His unwillingness to explore the relations between a theory of culture and a detailed theory of the state may in part be attributed to the fact that his own vision of socialism was never satisfactorily able to reconcile the ideal of a fully participatory and extended democratic process with the central authority of state governance. The problem here, as elsewhere in Williams’s thinking, is one of theorising the connecting relations between the independent parts and what he habitually sees as a unitary whole. This difficulty represents Williams’s ongoing dilemma. When he talks of “the theory of culture as the theory of relations between elements in a whole way of life” his actual concern has less to do with the relations “between” elements in a whole than with elements as they comprise the whole. And this sense of the whole has a type of fixed finality about it which tends to obfuscate those relations between elements, which by their diverse, dispersive and contradictory nature seem to reject the very notion of wholeness. Williams looks to the idea of “wholeness” as a stitching together of the severed limbs of the body politic, but it is also, in a typically organicist mode of thinking, a utopian return to some originary state prior to the brutality of capitalist disembowelment, an atomistic fragmentation of the once “connecting” whole.

### Culture’s Grand Narrative

Despite Williams’s emphasis on process his gestures towards “totality” have often led to his indictment as a participant in “the grand narrative of culture” against the pressing mediocrity of modernity. Such criticism is warranted: Williams’s disposition in this regard remains a consequence of the anti-industrialisation historiography he shares with the “culture and society” tradition and the tendency he has inherited from it to privilege culture as an ultimate court of appeal. As Mulhern sees it, his central concept of culture has remained “an object of moral judgement.”<sup>22</sup> This is most obviously the case in those recurring instances in which Williams elicits culture as a positive tool of resistance against the values of utility and economism. It is his own reorientation of Matthew Arnold’s “culture and anarchy” dichotomy (which he effectively

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<sup>22</sup> Francis Mulhern, “Towards 2000, or News From You-Know-Where”, *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Terry Eagleton, p. 69.

rewrites as “culture and capitalism”). Arnold’s and Williams’s mutual appeal to the concept as a corrective supplement, despite their obvious political differences, reveals the implicit neutrality of the term. As Lloyd and Thomas make clear:

The values to which the discourse of culture appeals and that it seeks to preserve are those by which it is defined: wholeness, disinterest, humanity, cultivation, reconciliation.<sup>23</sup>

Neither Williams nor Arnold would deny these values, though they would have vastly different ideas as to their context, and the means by which they might ideally be achieved. Just as the term “community”, as I have remarked, has served both the left and right factions of the political spectrum, so “culture” accommodates both the politically conservative Arnold and Williams the socialist. This is not just a matter of the term’s political neutrality but of the immense semantic variation it is capable of sustaining. Attending to a proliferation of meanings the word actually encodes the problematic relationship between the part and the whole characteristic of Williams’s work, referring to certain isolable elements within a social structure and the sum of those elements in the entirety of the social structure. In fact one of the most unnerving aspects of Williams’s cultural analyses is the manner in which he shifts without warning from the specific sense of a cultural text to culture in its more general, anthropological application.

The problem is not all of Williams’s making, for the concept is notoriously slippery in terms of the signifier-referent relationship. As the above quotation suggests, culture appeals to the very values that define it. It seeks to produce itself. Catherine Gallagher puts her finger on the irony when she suggests that Williams often seems intent on exploring the relationship between “Culture” and “culture”.<sup>24</sup> Williams himself never opts for the discriminatory clarification of the upper and lower cases, stringently avoiding a hierarchical prioritising of “the arts” over culture as a “whole way of life”. The difficulty would not be so great if Williams limited himself to these alternatives, but he throws the concept into greater confusion by mediating the two with an epistemological sense of “meanings and values”, so that, for instance, culture becomes the meanings and values of a whole way of life which are specifically represented in the arts of the

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<sup>23</sup> David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, “Culture and Society or Culture and the State”, *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, p. 269.

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Gallagher, “Raymond Williams and Cultural Studies” *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, p. 311.



period. While this is a partially effective means of defining the relations between the specific and general senses, Williams's rudimentary usage of "culture" often resists the possibility of incorporating all three senses simultaneously. For example when Williams refers to trade-unionism as the great cultural achievement of the nineteenth-century working class all three referents are thrown into disarray. The "meanings and values" of unionism were highly negotiable within any sense of a "whole way of life", and while positively apprehended by its members they were principally marginalised or negatively apprehended by "the arts" of the period. A subtle alteration in terms could right the balance here, but the high cultural resonances of "the arts" and the unitary vagueness of the "whole" with its organic implications of completeness surrender Williams's radical imperative to the consuming rhetoric of culture's grand narrative. Again Williams's conception of the term tends to gloss over the inclusionist/exclusionist dialectic of culture. Despite his desire to demystify the notion, he has unwillingly participated in fostering its mystique. As Prendergast argues, culture for Williams is "not just the area of production of 'meanings and values'" but is "itself privileged as a meaning and value."<sup>25</sup>

For Williams the emphasis on "wholeness" was vital to his critical concerns. It amounted to a strategic device which would overcome what he saw as the abstracting tendency of a critical practice in which art was perceived as a rarefied and isolable element, yet held up for examination in the light of the society that produced it. Theoretically he saw this practice as flawed, for the abstraction of art from the social complex for the process of comparative study put art outside life. Life as such became a "specious whole", momentarily and artificially devoid of one of its constituent elements, the narrative forms that represent it. And conversely the aesthetic becomes isolated from that which forms its most immediate determining correlative:

If the art is part of the society, there is no solid whole outside it, to which  
... we concede priority.<sup>26</sup>

Yet Williams's enlistment of the notion of culture as a whole seems at times to be only a rhetorical gambit to create the sense of indissoluble connection, for in fusing art and society into the single term "culture" he is only masking and evading what is in effect the distinction between Culture and culture.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Prendergast, "Introduction: Groundings and Emergings", *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> The same type of problem exists in Williams's stated preference for the term culture over that of "society". Despite their close association in the anthropological sense, culture is Williams's favoured term because it possesses a positive sense of process whereas society, he argues, "can seem very static". This is at least semantically dubious, not only because of Williams's own documentation of the reifying tendency of a dominant culture to manifest itself in "fixed forms", but because societies are never reducible to the "static". Clearly they are constantly active and mobile in a variety of ways, not least in relation to demographic factors, modes of production and variants of a more specifically political nature.

As Stephen Greenblatt suggests, the term culture is “shifting and conflict ridden”, torn between the notions of “constraint” and “mobility” and offering only “a vague gesture toward a dimly perceived ethos.”<sup>28</sup> More dramatically Ben Agger finds that culture’s heterogeneity and multiplicity render it “irreducible to official narratives about it”.<sup>29</sup> Indeed contemporary cultural critics have seen the term’s very reluctance to conform to strict definition as providing the very ground for a discourse theory that will orchestrate a self-reflexive, self-revising critique of its ontological constitution. It appears to revel in its own arbitrariness in which subject/object relations seem somehow unequipped to cope with its myriad linguistic and conceptual configurations.

Citing one particular page of *The Long Revolution* Gallagher records the adjectival flexibility Williams offers in soliciting culture:

that living, particular, unique, common, communicative, active, interacting, creative, ordinary, daily, exceptional thing ...<sup>30</sup>

Within the vicissitudes of the high and low, minority and popular, organic and consumerist, autonomous and determined, common and private categories of culture the term itself begins to evade any semblance of concrete definition. Williams, as he progressively attempted to come to terms with its implications drew on the various sources of Vico, Herder, Eliot, Leavis, Marx, Gramsci and Goldmann touching on all the above categories and in doing so both holding them apart and running them together. As Frow puts it :

The problem that arises when the concept is taken to be co-extensive with the whole realm of meaningful structures and actions is that it then becomes so inclusive as to lose any structure of its own.<sup>31</sup>

Or put more concisely:

If the concept of culture says everything then it says nothing.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, “Culture”, *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentriccia and Thomas McLaughlin, p. 225–232.

<sup>29</sup> Ben Agger, *Cultural Studies as Critical Theory*, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Catherine Gallagher, “Raymond Williams and Cultural Studies” *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, p. 312.

<sup>31</sup> John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, p. 10.

Gallagher suspects Williams's "terminological looseness" is in part a response to Arnold's own "ludicrously narrow" definition which has exerted a profound influence over the culturalist tradition. Yet as she goes on to argue, while Arnold may have had a restrictive consideration of what culture was, he was at least very clear as to what it was *not*. His catalogue was detailed. Culture was not

nature, society, progressive civilisation, the economy, technology, industry, mass education, mass communications, daily life, most forms of politics, and, of course anarchy.<sup>33</sup>

And within this consideration he differs markedly from Williams and recent cultural critics who through their habit of utilising culture as a "world-conjuring" term have sustained a programmatic refusal to define its "other", to provide an "antonym against which it might be contrasted."<sup>34</sup> While for Arnold culture represented a particular property which provided a type of spiritual resistance against a host of civil phenomena, for Williams and his followers it was converted so that it actually came to represent almost everything Arnold claimed it was not. This is certainly the case when Williams begins to see the arts as one among many modes of production, grouping all possible distinctions and variables into the realm of productive forces.

Yet in relation to this "crisis of signification" Gallagher raises a vital point in defence of Williams. Within the paradox in which culture's "wholeness" leaves it meaning everything and consequently nothing, Williams's enlistment of the concept of culture can be read as a conscious critical engagement with the term's apparent arbitrariness and a strategic refusal to privilege one definition over another. By constantly playing the meanings off against each other Williams implements the concept as a discursive device which undermines any attempt to reify it. In persistently problematising the concept he resists its enclosure and leaves the cultural field open for renewable semantic inspection. In doing so he keeps its ontological sense (way of life) and its epistemological sense (meanings and values) available for constant and ongoing renegotiation, which then gives his emphasis on culture as "process" its fullest analytical capability.

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<sup>33</sup> Catherine Gallagher, "Raymond Williams and Cultural Studies", *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, p. 309.

<sup>34</sup> Catherine Gallagher, "Raymond Williams and Cultural Studies", *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, p. 308.

Although Williams never completely elaborated his position as such, it can be seen with theoretical hindsight that his analysis is a progression from the concept of culture as an undifferentiated system towards a recognition of it as a site of semantic and phenomenological conflict. As he remarked in *The Long Revolution* :

The variations of meaning and reference, in the use of culture as a term, must be seen, I am arguing, not simply as a disadvantage, which prevents any kind of neat and exclusive definition, but as a genuine complexity, corresponding to real elements of experience.<sup>35</sup>

Agger describes such complexity as a “a region of serious contest and conflict over meaning” which works towards decentring culture, and as culture in at least one of its manifestations is linked to the apparatus of power, it is by association decentring the foundations of that power, and as such activating “a fundamental challenge to the dominant order”.<sup>36</sup> The difficulty with Agger’s proposition is that a decentring theory cannot remove itself from culture’s grasp, for it is itself culture and must negotiate its own relationship to the dominant order.

Williams’s desire to test and challenge the experiential validity of the dominant culture was absolutely integral to his critical project as he set about examining the recorded experience of literary works against what he described as “actual lived experience”. Clearly this type of critical practice was bound to run headlong into the philosophical quandary of “subjectivity”. But Williams in an innovative endeavour attempted to construct an analytical procedure which could locate and identify recurring structures in the culture of a period that represented latent responses to experiences not yet fully articulated, but nevertheless coming through as subtle “impulses”, “restraints”, and “tones”. Resonances that, in the art of a period, internally challenge the ideological forms or conventions the work draws upon, and which determine its final rendering of “experience”.

The problem of culture as both part and whole, and the ideal of “authentic experience” as opposed to “false consciousness”, find their most problematic instance in the concept Williams has defined as the “structure of feeling”. As it is a concept which in various forms has spanned

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<sup>35</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> Ben Agger, *Cultural Studies as Critical Theory*, p. 11.

his work from *Preface to Film* (1954) through to *Marxism and Literature* (1977) and which Williams has insistently and repeatedly relied upon, it demands detailed consideration in its own right.

### **Structures of Feeling**

Man as machine is the recurring metaphor of the industrial age. The industrial workers and the mechanistic repetition of their labour were seen in the critical observer's eye as indistinguishable from the machine they served. Literally cogs in the wheel of the greater productive process, performing unnatural physical actions specialised to accommodate the efficiency-driven apparatus of the new age, they became servile adjuncts to the synchronicity of mechanical motion. The machine it seemed produced human machinery, the atomistic life of the monad regulated by the rigid discipline of the clock. But not only the labourer appeared to be the victim of a mechanistic logic. The philosopher, the priest, the politician and the scientist succumbed to its utilitarian habit of mind, the rationale of the profit motive and the scientific laws of economy.

This, at least, is the way Williams, taking his place in the organicist tradition of dissent, perceives the formation of what he considers to be the typically "bourgeois" mode of thought behind the modern habit of persistent abstraction which through its reasoning has forced the artificial and mechanical separation of the individual from community, art from society, presence from history, evolution from revolution, politics from culture and theory from experience. His claim is that these elements have, through the habits of categorisation, become isolated as fixed abstractions, dichotomised as oppositional values, whereas in the phenomenological experience of living they exist in "solution" and only theoretically exist as "precipitate". It is not so much that they need to be unified, but that they need to be seen and articulated as the unity they really are, as the wholeness through which they are lived and felt.

Williams claimed that the tendency to perceive the isolable components of cultural formation of a period as "finished products" impeded any historical attempt to accurately construct a fully embodied sense of reality. To recover this sense Williams looked to the literature of the period

where in its representation of the “deep community” of living experience it sought to connect the diverse structures of life under the banner of realism. Yet because literature itself was not immune to the ideological forms and conventions that provided its artistic medium it could not be taken on face value but, as Williams claimed, in the best art of the period and even within its determining conventions, fissures and fractures, ironies and contradictions, could be located which would test and pressure the limits of those conventions. Within the closed forms, sympathy and observation forced new and previously unrealised apprehensions of the lived quality of life which could not be easily reduced to the received ideology of a dominant order. Here the relative autonomy of the artist began, often in very subtle ways, to break through and reveal a previously unrecorded and “actual” experience.

This tension between “the official consciousness of an epoch - codified in its doctrines and legislation” and the “whole process of actually living its consequences” is the theoretical site of what Williams has termed a “structure of feeling”.<sup>37</sup> While this structure is absent in the “weaker” popular forms of writing which tend to reproduce dominating forms, it begins to emerge and find its semantic figure in the superior literary achievement of the age. It is in such “serious writing”, as Williams calls it, that the received truths of the “social character” are revealed as historically variable and contingent structures rather than the morally stable universals of a dominant ideology. Yet as a result of the entrenched authority of conventional modes of writing, the intransigence of critical reception, public appreciation and market forces, the aesthetic difficulty of producing new literary forms is bound to be immensely difficult and seldom achieved in a single blow. But Williams sees in his own variation of “the great tradition” of the novel, and his documenting of the dramatic canon, the constant pressure towards the realisation of this process of discovering radical new forms. A process always evident though at times uncertain, at times latent, at times defeated.

While Williams has on a number of occasions convincingly articulated and demonstrated this sense of process and endeavour in his criticisms of particular works, it is as one would expect never a politically neutral sense of emergence that he is tracing. What he valorises as the innovative

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<sup>37</sup> Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 159.

rendering of new experience always corresponds to his own sustained belief in what the truth of experience actually is. It is never distant from his desire to see in the great literature of the nineteenth-century a steady progression toward a radical critique of bourgeois domination, its capitalist structures and the emergence of a radical egalitarian aesthetic. And while this remains the practical critical upshot of his analytical endeavour, theoretically his “structure of feeling” is an attempt to conceptualise the inevitability of this process while simultaneously responding to a host of antagonistic critical positions. Its agenda in this respect is extraordinarily broad. Principally Williams attempts to theoretically substantiate his belief in the active and “primary” process he takes culture to be against its “secondary” superstructural status within Marxist thought. In doing so he seeks to reveal the “social” sources of cultural production against both the idealist individualism of the romantic and enlightenment positions and the economistic imperatives of Marxism. The agents of this initiative are the much maligned concepts of “autonomy” and “experience”, both of which he attempts to reorientate, initially against their Leavisian invocation, and later against their wholesale denunciation by Althusserian structuralism.

By advocating even “relative autonomy” Williams is challenging a prevalent Marxist notion of ideology which interprets cultural forms as a fully “closed” system, slavishly transmitting dominant interests. He argues instead for the presence of a radical and transformative cultural potential in which ideology is a more porous entity and less resistant to challenge. Such autonomy then allows for a recognition of experience that is in contradiction with received notions of truth and reality. Against much contemporary wisdom, autonomy and experience are enlisted as resistant concepts and are central to the establishing of what Williams would progressively come to define as “cultural materialism”, the key to which is the primary relation culture has to the making of a man-made rather than externally determined history.

In distancing himself from “vulgar” Marxism Williams was initially reluctant to become dependent on Marxian terminology. The structure of feeling was a concept which he developed to allow him a certain theoretical independence in this respect. Though against what he considers to be the lack of flexibility within “reflectionist” notions of ideology and determinism, his own term suffers from a lack of precision and, like his consideration of culture and community, falls into the ongoing dilemma of the relationship between the parts and the whole.

In *The Long Revolution* Williams defines the structure of feeling as “the culture of a period”, the “living result of all the elements in the general organisation”.<sup>38</sup> Here his sense is clearly holistic and totalising. In this respect a structure of feeling appears to be vaguely synonymous with culture as a “whole way of life”. But in *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (in which he repeats verbatim his earliest definition from *Preface to Film*) he considers the improbability of gaining any empirically derived sense of a social totality, recognising that even in assembling all the isolable elements that constitute it we can never recapture the full sense of living for that is the complex of these elements experienced in “solution”. Here the sum of the parts can never quite add up to the whole. In the literature of a period, where the connections are dramatically available in the represented experience of living, the relation of a work of art to the observed totality may be “useful”

but it is a common experience, in analysis, to realise that when one has measured the whole against the separable parts there yet remains some element for which there is no external counterpart. This element, I believe, is what I have named the structure of feeling of a period and it is only realisable through experience of the work of art itself as a whole.<sup>39</sup>

Here the concept slides between the broadly experiential and the specifically textual. Experience is now the experience of a work of art, just as the sense of “whole life” has been converted into the work of art as a “whole”. In relation to this whole a structure of feeling is now a “part”, a missing element, an experience bereft of its referential counterpart. It must be discovered and defined if any sense of wholeness, any full sense of culture is to be achieved. A structure of feeling is here, not the “culture of a period” but an absence, which when recognised could allow for the intellectual and analytical recovery or reconstruction of a culture.

In Williams’s highly perceptive analysis of the Industrial novels of the mid-nineteenth-century he identifies, in the work of Gaskell, Dickens, Disraeli, Kingsley and Eliot, a common structure of feeling, a persistent tension between the received interpretation and the historical experience as it was lived.<sup>40</sup> These common assumptions of the dominant ideology of the period are what Williams defines in *The Long Revolution* as the “social character” of the age. Its elements relate

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<sup>38</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 48.

<sup>39</sup> Raymond Williams, *Preface to Film*, p. 21-22.

<sup>40</sup> One of Williams’s many achievements has been the establishment of the Industrial canon which has been a major influence and mandatory reference point in the development of an important sub-genre. See Catherine Gallagher’s *The Reformation of the English Novel*.



to “the belief in the value of work” and its relation to “individual effort, with a strong attachment to success gained in these terms”. Social status on the basis of birth is giving way to the primacy of social function, poverty is considered as a symptom of personal and moral failings, and punitive legislation is a necessary check against such vice. Suffering “teaches humility” and “dedication to duty”:

Thrift, sobriety, and piety are the principal virtues, and the family is their central institution. The sanctity of marriage is absolute, and adultery and fornication are unpardonable. Duty includes helping the weak provided that such help is not of such a kind as to confirm the weakness; condoning sexual error and comforting the poor are weaknesses by this definition.<sup>41</sup>

These may be termed “bourgeois values” but what Williams is concerned with pointing out is that no unequivocal relationship could be drawn between these values and what later became known as “bourgeois fiction” and “bourgeois realism”. The habit of doing so was clearly erroneous. No easy equation could be made between the writer of the Industrial novel, for instance, and anything construed as “bourgeois ideology”, for those writers, while never entirely free of ideology, showed a marked openness to challenge its common assumptions. They challenged significantly the idea that success was a logical consequence of effort and that poverty was a personal and moral failure, that self-help was a viable solution, and that class and morality were implicitly connected. Against the confident assertions of liberal reform and empire building was the disquieting representation of a “pervasive atmosphere of instability and debt” rendering the facts of external causation beyond the reach of the victim.<sup>42</sup> This is what Williams calls the structure of feeling of “sympathetic observation” and “imaginative identification”, often coming through the work in an embryonic form, prior to full recognition and articulation but detectable as “an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency; the moment of conscious comparison not yet come.”<sup>43</sup>

Williams’s argument then becomes more complex, for what he pinpoints in the Industrial novel, in *Mary Barton*, *Hard Times*, *Alton Locke*, *Sybil* and *Felix Holt*, is the narrative moment

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<sup>41</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 61.

<sup>42</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 65.

<sup>43</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 130.

when the deep and humane sympathies of the writer are tested and strained by the final implications of this sympathy, when their respect and feeling for the industrial working class, for the motives behind Chartism, for their recognition of the principle of trade unionism and activism are confronted by the radical political overtones of their endorsement. These writers, under pressure, succumb to the ideological closure of the formal literary conventions of the period and withdraw from a full confrontation with the tragedies they have set in motion, opting for a last minute conversion into the novel of resolution, where within the circumstances they have set down no such resolution is socially available. What the novels are finally determined by is the backlash of their own sympathy, the conservative apprehension of the “fear of anarchy”. Each of the novels resorts to a representation of political violence in which assassination, cloak and dagger conspiracy, malevolent agitation or mob riot are a characteristic feature. Resolution in relation to the individual heroes is artificially constructed by the rendering of magic remedies, the recourse to a rescue by unexpected interventions and inheritances or immigration to a new world.

This withdrawal from the terms of the conflict by “magic solution” is, in the end, a negation of much of the sympathy sustained in the course of the work. As Williams argues, this representation of violence and anarchy submits to an ideological construction of working class violence which actually has no valid historical context and is “so uncharacteristic as to be an obvious distortion.”<sup>44</sup> Yet Williams can describe this “surrender, virtually without a fight” as “the general structure of feeling about these matters which was the common property of [a] generation.”<sup>45</sup> Now this structure of feeling is obviously theoretically very close to the “false consciousness” of ideology and as such it is seen to effectively block the emergent structure of feeling of imaginative identification and sympathetic observation. There are it seems two structures of feeling operating within the text simultaneously. Yet when Williams puts the case in relation to Gaskell his emphasis seems slightly altered:

Her response to the suffering is deep and genuine, but pity cannot stand alone in such a structure of feeling. It is joined in *Mary Barton*, by the confusing violence and fear of violence and is supported, finally, by a kind of writing off.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 90.

<sup>45</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 109.

<sup>46</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 91.

Here there are not two alternative structures of feeling but a single structure which now becomes the particular site of a tension *between* “pity” and the “fear of violence”. The inconsistency again indicates the conceptual difficulty Williams has in attempting to totalise, as he puts it, the relations between “precipitate” and “solution”.

Because of the apparent problems Williams has applying his theoretical term convincingly in practical analysis it comes as somewhat of a surprise to hear his proclamation that though he has never been entirely satisfied with his theoretical postulation of the concept he finds his insistent recourse to it justified because of its apparent efficacy within “the actual experience of literary analysis”.<sup>47</sup> Within that particular experience Williams’s application of the concept has been infamously vague and consistently bewildering. In *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* he refers to a structure of feeling in relation to each of the writers he discusses, but without establishing any *prima facie* basis for its analytical relevance. Loosely inserted into his general commentary the term is an undefined supporting clause for any decisive point which he wishes to make. It is given as if it is a self-evident signifier of some more complex epistemological grounding for his argument, apparently already covered and now needing only a prompt to bring its full weight into force. He primarily draws on it in relation to any of the various narrative techniques he sees emerging within the tradition of the novel.

As he traces the innovative strategies of the great realists he finds a creative struggle being fought out in the work existing as a tension between a personal moral vision and a passionate concern with social observation. This is said by Williams to be “the structure of feeling of the greatest Romantic poetry”; it is a tension structured into the general problem of subject/object relations. The isolated writer conveys on an isolated subject the sense of personal need, but that very isolated condition then has to contend with the realist’s need to observe social life and its connections, the “social experiences of ordinary life”.<sup>48</sup> This presents itself as a formal problem, “a conflict of grammars: a conflict of ‘I’ and ‘we’ and ‘they’”.<sup>49</sup> It is here at this grammatical level that everything Williams is trying to elucidate in his conception of a structure of feeling finds its critical centrality. For that “I” in the Brontës and Gaskell and Eliot which is so pronounced

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<sup>47</sup> Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 159.

<sup>48</sup> Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, p. 75.

<sup>49</sup> Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, p. 79.

and so deeply sympathetic to the alienation, loneliness and pain of others is itself a response to their own personal isolation. And this isolation is projected in the distancing of their authorial “I”, watching, observing and recording but always struggling to enter the “we” of experience, resorting to the “they” of the spectator. This is what Williams means when he talks of the novelist whose method *is* their experience:

It is very complicated once we take its full weight. There is the intense feeling of the isolated individual: isolated in the first instance by the structure of this feeling, because while the personal life is experienced the social life is mainly observed.<sup>50</sup>

There are these two positions: “the intensity of isolated need and desire” and “the inherited sympathy of general observation” and in the best writing the artist is working towards a negotiation of these positions, mediating the divisions between subject and object, the working of private emotion into public experience. In his consideration of Dickens the emphasis is similar:

The city is shown as at once a social fact and a human landscape. What is dramatised in it is a very complex structure of feeling ...The individual moral qualities, still sharply seen, are heard as it were collectively, in the ‘roaring streets’. This is again an advance in consciousness as it is very clearly a gain - now absorbed - in fictional method.<sup>51</sup>

It is not too difficult to see what Williams is getting at here if we return to that romantic and anti-utilitarian view of the nineteenth-century industrial society in which the enduring image of man as machine originated. The mechanistic modes of production forged an atomistic environment which fragmented community, resisted co-operative practices and encouraged statistical and abstracting modes of observation and control in which the individual and the social were constructed as antagonistic rather than indissoluble elements. Out of these conditions came what Williams perceived as the loss and denial of common experience. Under the strain of bourgeois individualism, the great literature of the period struggled to reclaim this experience. To do so it had to negotiate the confident, self-assured and dominant ideology of the age of progress, enlightenment and empire. In order to represent what sympathetic observation could recognise as an “unprecedented dislocating mobile society” the artist had to find a narrative mode that could challenge the “official consciousness” with a literature that was in “the nerves,

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<sup>50</sup> Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, p. 78.

<sup>51</sup> Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, p. 37–40.

the bloodstream, the living fibres of experience” and one which despite its uniqueness “speaks a common experience”. As he writes in the conclusion to *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*:

Much ordinary experience is of course directly reflected, represented, in what is indeed an ideology, what can be called a superstructure. But in any society at all like our own ... there's a very vital experience - social experience - that doesn't get incorporated: that's neglected, ignored, certainly at times repressed; that even when it's taken up, to be processed or to function as an official consciousness, is resistant, lively, still goes its own way, and eventually steps on its shadow - steps, I mean, in such a way that we can see which is shadow and which substance.

It is from this vital area, from this structure of feeling that is lived and experienced but not quite arranged as institutions and ideas, from this common and inalienable life that I think all art is made. And especially these novels, these connecting novels, which come through to where we are just because all that life, that unacknowledged life now so movingly shaped and told, is our own direct and specific and still challenging inheritance.<sup>52</sup>

Here the structure of feeling is specifically related to the emergence of new cultural forms as a struggle for a suitable means of expressing previously unarticulated experience. As such there is a certain clarification in this rendering of the concept over the earlier obliqueness surrounding the term. But even so the privileging of “experience” remains highly contentious, particularly with regard to the high degree of autonomy Williams ascribes to it. To begin with he makes the claim that there is a vital area of social experience that is “resistant” to “incorporation”, and even when drafted into “an official consciousness” it remains independent and “goes its own way”. It is this autonomous common experience which is the source from which “all art is made.”

Now clearly these remarks are a quite calculated response to those who would argue for the all pervasive nature of ideology and who would deny the claims of culture as a viable agent against the dominant structures of power and property. But to imply that “all art” is the consequence of this autonomy seems a rather dubious proposition. If the autonomous element of a structure of feeling represents the locus of all art, then there seems to be a difficulty in the fact that a great deal of what Williams would call art has been produced within the type of “unprecedentedly dislocated” society he perpetually refers to, and in which autonomous communal

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<sup>52</sup> Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, p. 192.

structures have been systematically debilitated. Williams identifies this social dislocation as a reality of domination, and yet at the same time, he wishes to preserve art as a communal and autonomous challenge to its authority. However, by his own account this structure of feeling primarily manifests itself in very specific works of bourgeois realism. As realism is itself a dominant form, this suggests an inherent and privileged relationship between art and the dominant. Williams wants to see the structure of feeling as a common, vital and resistant experience, but he has to reconcile this with his own sense of the difficulty this experience has in registering itself as anything more than an “unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency”.<sup>53</sup> In this respect its autonomy is restricted to the most unspecific silences.

At least part of the problem lies in Williams's monolithic conception of experience. In any class society experiences will be diverse and some less resistant to incorporation than others. In oppressed groups hegemonic practices often result in the very denial of “actual” experience. This is what Williams seems to have in mind in *Writing in Society*:

For although there are undoubtedly major factors in the social structure which are barring intense experience, which are certainly barring self-images of autonomy of being and feeling ... the level of the most authentic protest seems separable from those more local historical structures. They lie very deep within the whole cast of the civilisation which is, for its own deepest reasons and often while denying that it is doing so, repressing intensely realised experiences of any kind.<sup>54</sup>

The repression of experiences has actually been a quite central concern of Williams's work, yet at the same time he has always held fast to the belief that the forces of hegemonic containment, precisely because they are based on the exclusion of certain experiences, cannot draw all forms of social practice, feeling and desire into their field of domination. Those excluded experiences may be rendered silent but never quite redundant. They remain as resonances of discontent, but active enough to issue forth a challenging contradiction between the received and the lived. Now one might expect from a socialist and powerful critic of minority cultural values to find that these experiences are to be located and most active in the popular or proletarian culture of a period, the area where the marginalisation of alternative voices has been particularly profound (as Williams has documented in *The Country and the City*). But as he has pointed out, this has

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<sup>53</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 130.

<sup>54</sup> Raymond Williams, *Writing in Society*, p. 163.

often been the very area where the straight representation of ideology has been at its most persistent and where “the true reproduction of conscious bourgeois positions” has been uncritically absorbed.<sup>55</sup> Referring to the 1840s Williams argues that while the working class was maturing in terms of social and political consciousness, it remained culturally “subordinate” with even writers “closely associated with the working class political movement carrying out an extraordinary reproduction of bourgeois forms”: “If there are elements of emergence - the discovery of new forms in which the experience of a different class can be expressed - they are right at the edges”.<sup>56</sup>

Williams’s crucial point is that the resistance to the domination of the received ideology is found in its most telling forms not outside the cultural field of domination but within it. As he suggests in relation to the novel, if we could take the canon and its dominant form as a merely imposed ideology, concerned with the isolated meanings and practices of the ruling class which are imposed on others, then it would be “a very much easier thing to overthrow”.<sup>57</sup> What Williams is implying is that the dominant form is not ideologically foolproof, but rather that it contains within its formation a radical suspicion of its own premises, a suspicion reflected in its willingness to engage with newly emerging social forces. Forces which activated an extension of content and forms that could begin to bear the weight of “the pressures and limits, in ways which the simple forms, the simple contents, of mere ideological reproduction never achieve”.<sup>58</sup>

Thus we have to recognise the alternative meanings and values, the alternative opinions and attitudes, even some alternative senses of the world, which can be accommodated and tolerated within a particular effective and dominant culture. This has been much under-emphasised in our notions of a superstructure, and even in some notions of hegemony.<sup>59</sup>

Taking this consideration into account Williams’s counter-hegemonic paradigm sees alternative social experience as both existing outside the dominant cultural field where it is either internally repressed or semantically silenced, *and* inside the dominant culture where it exists as a latent “pre-emergent” radicalism struggling against ideological forms and conventions and striving for articulation.

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<sup>55</sup> Raymond Williams, “Forms of English Fiction in 1848”, *Writing in Society*, p. 165.

<sup>56</sup> Raymond Williams, “Forms of English Fiction in 1848”, *Writing in Society*, p. 153.

<sup>57</sup> Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, p. 39.

<sup>58</sup> Raymond Williams, “Forms of English Fiction in 1848”, *Writing in Society*, p. 165.

<sup>59</sup> Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, p. 39.

However, if the structure of feeling as the conceptual centre of this emergence is to maintain its status as a “common” and widely apprehended experience, then the experience must be of the same general type, somehow able to transcend class differentiations. Yet, to return to the conclusion of *The English Novel*, we can see a troubling linguistic shift in Williams’s definition of experience. Here he makes a highly ambiguous and unclarified distinction between “ordinary experience” and “vital experience” (the latter being a virtual reproduction of the Leavis’s mark of literary quality; the great English novelists all being “distinguished by a vital capacity for experience”).<sup>60</sup> This discrimination between the “vital” and “ordinary” leads at times to a precarious balancing act between what Christopher Prendergast calls “historical boundedness and active agency”.<sup>61</sup> The dilemma inherent in Williams’s position is that what seems ideologically bound as superstructure is “ordinary experience” while “vital experience” is allowed the status of active agency, an agency which is at the heart of great literature, which can distinguish ideological “shadow” from living “substance”. Yet in this respect there is a silent manoeuvring between life and text. The “ordinary” and the “vital” become adjectives dividing experience into the separate domains of the lived and the written, the bridge between the two shrouded in an inarticulate silence of “pre-emergence”. This idealist connection between the vital and the aesthetic creates two significant difficulties for Williams. How can he maintain his position that the structure of feeling is a “common” and communal centre of emergence if its necessary vitality is somehow distant from “ordinary experience”? And secondly, as the structure of feeling is explicitly a literary concept and is only readily identifiable in the literature of a period, then how can Williams avoid the awkward circularity in which literature itself becomes the sole proof of the experience, while paradoxically the truth of the experience is the standard by which the quality of the literature is judged in the first place?

Williams wants to find a mode of analysing aesthetic and material relations which remained wholly internal to the text in order to avoid charges of empirical naivety, yet running in the face of this intent is what has been described as his own “fetishisation” of experience, his persistent appeals to the autobiographical which permeate his work and upon which his analytical insights are given the weight of first-hand experience. It has been his own life, and that of his father’s,

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<sup>60</sup> F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, p. 17.

<sup>61</sup> Christopher Prendergast, “Introduction: Groundings and Emergences”, *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, p. 24.



that support his contention that culture is ordinary, that there was a co-operative community and that tragedy is an everyday affair.

Like culture and community, experience too can be compromised by its homogeneous sense of totality and wholeness. For Williams it is yet another term for the lived quality of indissoluble connections. This is an emphasis on which Stuart Hall has continued to take issue with him:

The ways in which everything appears to interconnect in “experience” can only be a starting point for analysis. One has to “produce the concrete in thought” - that is show ... the concrete experience as the “product of many determinations”. Analysis must deconstruct the “lived wholeness” in order to be able to think its determinate conditions ... And I do think that this confusion, which persists even in Williams’s later work, is predicated on an uninspected notion of “experience” which produced the quite unsatisfactory concept of “a structure of feeling” and which continues to have quite disabling theoretical effects.<sup>62</sup>

As this excerpt from Hall comes from an extended review of *Politics and Letters* it might have been kind of him to refer to Williams’s own expressed doubts about “the ambiguity of my use of experience”.<sup>63</sup> As Williams points out it was a term he borrowed directly from *Scrutiny* conceding that his work has suffered as a consequence of his constant appeal to the notion in order to authenticate his claim for cultural unity:

What I said in effect was that we know this to be so about our own lives  
- hence we can take it as a theoretical assumption.<sup>64</sup>

But along with this concession that he has at times fallen into some of the traps of empiricism in which experience becomes “the deepest field of truth” he also provides a passionate counter-attack against the Althusserian position which regards experience as a primary conceptual tool of ideology.<sup>65</sup> Taking on structuralists and associated anti-subjectivist positions Williams berates those “who affect to doubt the very possibility of an ‘external’ referent”.<sup>66</sup> Arguing that it has always been his position that there is no “natural seeing” and therefore no “unmediated contact with reality” he adopts Timpanaro’s materialist assertion of a pre-cognitive world, of existence and meaning prior to articulation. We must, as he demands, seek a word, a term for all that is

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<sup>62</sup> Stuart Hall, “Politics and Letters”, *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Terry Eagleton, p. 62.

<sup>63</sup> Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 139.

<sup>64</sup> Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 138.

<sup>65</sup> Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 169.

<sup>66</sup> Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 167.

being lived through but “is not fully articulated, all that comes through as disturbance, tension, blockage” and “emotional trouble”, all that “is not fully comfortable in various silences”.<sup>67</sup>

And this position has of late found vocal support from cultural critics who reject the eclipse of the category of experience by structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers, seeking a theoretical space which would allow for the insertion of feeling, desire, emotion and other such experiences into critical discourse. To this effect Williams’s emphasis on experience and feeling as creative impulses within the production of culture, and as a central element in his theory of culture, has been welcomed, applauded for the resistance it offers to the belief that we are all consumed by the relationships of power, property and production. This “radical empiricism” has provided the assumed intangibles of feeling and emotion with a material basis, a “history” and “cognitive dimension” which can not be reduced to the epiphenomena of ideology.<sup>68</sup> In much the same manner Michael Moriarty’s comparative study of Williams and French theory sees the experiential factor in Williams’s structure of feeling as a necessary affirmation of “the intelligibility of history and the forces of desire and revulsion that traverse it”.<sup>69</sup> While recognising the slipperiness of his structure of feeling Cora Kaplan is impressed by his politicising of the “personal” and the radical “subjectivist intensity” his criticism seeks to unearth.<sup>70</sup> Against theory saturated abstractions Williams holds out the possibility of subjective integrity and a viable authorisation of the self.

Elsbeth Probyn in *Sexing the Self* has lauded Williams’s application of the notion of experience as “a major source of inspiration in his work” because of its challenge to anti-subjectivist discourses in allowing an insertion of “the self” into the critical process which transcends the reduction of the critic’s own experience to a dubious “guarantee of authenticity”.<sup>71</sup> In an innovative reconsideration of the common criticism levelled against Williams - that by seeing the term culture epistemologically and ontologically he collapses the distinctions suggested by these

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<sup>67</sup> Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 168.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Milkitsch, “News from Somewhere: Reading Williams’s Readers”, *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, ed. Christopher Prendergast, p. 84–85.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Moriarty, “‘The Longest Cultural Journey’: Raymond Williams and French Theory”, *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, ed. Christopher Prendergast, p. 92.

<sup>70</sup> Cora Kaplan, “‘What We Have Again to Say’: Williams, Feminism, and the 1840s”, *Cultural Materialism: On Raymond Williams*, ed. Christopher Prendergast, p. 232.

<sup>71</sup> Elsbeth Probyn, *Sexing the Self*, p. 16–18.

levels - she applies the epistemological/ontological tension affirmatively to his use of experience. Ontologically she sees it as relating to the “facticity of being in the social” and epistemologically as identifying the “politicisation of experience” so as to “locate and problematise the conditions that articulate individual experiences.” This is not to escape the ideological construction of experience, but conversely to expose and reveal the experience of the constructed “self” in relation to the ontological fact of being. Diana Fuss speaks of this as a “necessary essentialism” in which “we need both to theorise essentialist spaces from which to speak and, simultaneously, to deconstruct these spaces to keep them from solidifying”.<sup>72</sup>

While one never imagines that Williams sees his own subject position as anything like as contingent as the above suggests, his own autobiographical “I” might sit more comfortably within his recourse to experience if it possessed more of this self-reflexive edge. In any case the real problem in Williams’s use of experience is not overcome in these accounts. For despite considerations of the inherent politics of experience and their necessary negotiation in any insertion of the self into cultural discourse, the issue of the relationship between causal determination and experience is left unaddressed. As Probyn remarks, Williams uses experience as a means of questioning the primacy of the economic base in the Marxist formula, but questioning is less than Williams’s intent, for he seeks to override it by dismantling the orthodox notion of the superstructure to which experience is conventionally consigned and to reorientate the concept of experience as a constituent of cultural production which is in effect primary, rather than a secondary consequence of the economic base.

### **Base and Superstructure**

For Williams the Marxist paradigm of “base and superstructure” has been a major source of irritation. It is against its grain that he has attempted to reformulate a Marxist poetics, to reclaim the formative practices of art from the rarefied sphere of a secondary superstructure in which it seemed to become a reflection or a passive effect of a primary determinant. In Williams’s mind this presented two unfavourable images, the first relegated the importance of culture as a historically determining practice, and the other privileged “economism” as the centre of human affairs. In the face of this, Williams’s task was to break down the rigidity of this structure, to

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<sup>72</sup> Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, p. 118.

reject the primacy given to economic production and to rethink culture in material and still identifiably Marxist terms.

By theorising culture in terms of “production” Williams could formulate a way of thinking about culture that remained within the basic notion of historical materialism, now seeing culture as one of many materially produced determinants, homologous with the economic factor but not finally determined by it. The proof of his proposition could be found, he claimed, in the experience of our own historical lives. Life clearly wasn’t determined solely by economics, there were other factors and we could find them everywhere in our culture, in religious customs, personal relationships, moral codes, and most particularly for Williams in our artworks. In formulating a critical procedure to accommodate this reasoning Williams casually invoked the term “cultural materialism”:

I am concerned also to develop a position which, as a matter of theory, I have arrived at over the years. This differs, at several key points, from what is most widely known as Marxist theory, and even from many of its variants. It is a position which can be briefly described as cultural materialism: a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism. Its details belong to the argument as a whole, but I must say, at this point, that it is, in my view, a Marxist theory.<sup>73</sup>

This is drawn from the opening pages of *Marxism and Literature* where in an autobiographical and somewhat self-congratulatory mode he traces his development through the theoretical difficulties to a time where he can now, with the help of his discovery of eastern European Marxist thinkers, confidently develop his own advancement of Marxist theory. Terry Eagleton has not been so convinced.<sup>74</sup> Responding to Williams’s essay “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory” he is unwilling to concede too much pioneer status to Williams’s argument. After all, he reasons, no serious Marxism ever took the base/superstructure model to be that inflexible, the arrows were not all going the same way, there was always intended to be some reciprocal relationship. The economic base was primary, not exclusively determining, and of course elements of the superstructure like legal, religious or political systems were determining, it’s just that they weren’t always of the first instance, whereas everywhere you looked you saw

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<sup>73</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> Terry Eagleton, “Base and Superstructure in Raymond Williams”, *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Terry Eagleton, p. 165–175.

the economic factor looming large, applying its weight to those other determinations. In this respect Eagleton believes that Williams is merely hitting at a “straw target” in his denunciation of “weak” Marxists who have promoted an unacceptable version of social being’s determination of consciousness. But for Williams the transition from Marx to mainstream Marxism had brought with it a damaging “reflectionist” interpretation of the determining base and the determined superstructure which had been commonly apprehended as “the key to Marxist cultural analysis”.<sup>75</sup>

The problem as Williams saw it was that a vulgarised Marxism had taken the base and superstructure metaphor and reduced it to the representation of “a fixed and definite spatial relationship” which merely echoed the static essentialism of bourgeois assumptions.<sup>76</sup> As such he was eager to reject it, but ironically there is a sense in which he too has been unwittingly captured by its reductive logic. For by asserting the right of culture to stand in the primary ground and be a constituent of history’s making, he actually tends to underscore the significance of economic determination. In the belief that the base and superstructure model was too “static” to accommodate the circumstantial, arbitrary and multifarious patterns of history Williams sought to liberate historical materialism from its economic rationale, but in effect he seems to offer little more than the substitution of “economism” for “culturalism”. The conceptual danger here is that economics and culture appear to be considered as isolable categories, even the antagonists they are in his earlier “culture and society” writing, whereas in the context of determination Williams clearly intends culture to be broadly inclusive, to incorporate rather than to delimit economic determination. The persistence of Williams’s residual organicism is evident. The idea that history is systematically shaped by economic relations contains too much of the mechanical, utilitarian and bourgeois about it for Williams’s comfort. Yet his challenge to it is to resort to that particularly bourgeois notion of culture, and while still palpably drawing on the idealism of its moral and critical resonances, he refashions the term, privileging it as a common, autonomous, constitutive and explicitly material set of practices.

The theoretical problem is that by materialising those practices which are normally considered superstructure, Williams is drawing them into the province of the base as one of many

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<sup>75</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 75.

<sup>76</sup> Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory”, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, p. 31.

determinants, and the conceptual sense of a superstructure begins to dissolve, for when one arrives at the point where language and consciousness are material forms of production, then what is *not* material? Again the question is one of differentiation. Just as the terms culture and community have become destabilised by Williams's totalising instincts, so his sense of the material suffers in the same way. As Eagleton puts it:

If everything is "material", can the term logically retain any force? From what does it differentiate itself?<sup>77</sup>

The superstructure as such is left to contain only those "material" elements which have been mistakenly considered as "ideal". As a consequence the base and superstructure notion collapses into a totality of material forces, and the sense of some tangible and identifiable determinant collapses with it. What Williams's materialisation of culture gains over the "static" interpretation of determination it loses in specificity. As Eagleton argues in his defence of the classical Marxist position, a theoretically static or "fixed" model of causal determination is not so easily dismissed. As he reminds us, history itself has a certain static dimension and arrested at any juncture reveals a "strikingly monotonous, compulsively repetitive narrative" of "unending, unruptured oppression and exploitation".<sup>78</sup> Undeterred the "homogenising minds of theorists" blind themselves to this "most scandalous of all transhistorical truths." Of course Williams is one of those "homogenising minds" and while it seems unfair of Eagleton to imply that Williams has lost sight of the narrative of exploitation that he himself has outlined so convincingly in the past, there is a sense that his later cultural theory does lose explicit contact with the primacy of this struggle.

As it is Eagleton's argument on the repetitive character of history doesn't really adequately demonstrate the connection between oppression, exploitation and the economic base. It would seem self-evident that oppression and exploitation occur at other than levels directly attributable to economic relations. The type of abuse and exploitation that exists within families, between sexes, and within social and religious institutions are often manifestations of recurring and self-perpetuating power structures. Here the desire for power seems to be motivated more by a complex array of biological, psychological and libidinal impulses than anything that can be tied directly to an economic determinant. It seems feasible to ask whether these impulses do not

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<sup>77</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Base and Superstructure in Raymond Williams", *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Terry Eagleton, p. 169.

<sup>78</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Base and Superstructure in Raymond Williams", *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Terry Eagleton, p. 167.

represent a will to power which reflects itself in the economic structure of society, so that this structure appears as an effect rather than determinant of our individual and social being. Nevertheless what Williams is trying to say, in answer to Eagleton, is that the one-way linearity of economic determinism blinds theorists to the reciprocal character of determination and to the active and formative processes of that which is rendered as a secondary and contingent superstructure.<sup>79</sup> The problem Williams still has is in keeping this sense of the reciprocity and plurality of determinants alive without dispersing and neutralising their agency within a conceptual totality which hides their dialectical character.

Williams has tried to come to terms with this difficulty in his critique of Lukacs's concept of a social "totality". He sees Lukacs's development as going beyond the limitations of the base/superstructure model because it is more sophisticated in its recognition of the complex relationship between the processes that make up the social organisation. But significantly he finds that for all that it gains there is also an apparent and significant loss. For while the idea of a "concrete social whole" may be closer to our reality, at another level it is "withdrawing from the claim that there is any process of determination" which Williams remarks that he personally "would be very unwilling to do."<sup>80</sup> This seems to be a quite strategic attempt to distance himself from the problems of his own position as much as from Lukacs's. Indeed the similarities between Lukacs and Williams have been often noted, and as I have argued in relation to both "community" and "culture", the unrelenting evocation of "wholeness" in Williams's work seems to slide so easily into an indiscriminating sense of "totality" that the complex internal tensions within it seem to be left unidentified.

It was against the formula of base and superstructure that Williams himself had attempted to develop a theory of social totality. Like Lukacs and Goldmann he saw the belief in the dominance of economic activity as a "deformation" that was "the specific characteristic of capitalist society".<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Williams argues that the common assumption surrounding the term "determination" is that of an external authority directing the actions of the subject beyond their control, yet alternatively it contains an association with the setting of "bounds" or "limits" which is not nearly as strong, and which he reads into Engels's famous quote: "We make our history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite assumptions and conditions". These assumptions and conditions are the setting of limits upon what is otherwise the direct human agency upon which we make our own history. This is vital for Williams in that it allows him a Marxist grounding for claiming human autonomy in the affairs of man, and "the existence of the possibility of opposition" in relation to the ideological forces of domination *Marxism and Literature*, p. 83–89.

<sup>80</sup> Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory", *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, p. 36.

<sup>81</sup> Raymond Williams, "Literature and Sociology", *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, p. 21.

For Williams “economism” was a disabling starting point for a Marxist cultural poetics in that its basic proposition seemed unable to account for the more subtle experiences of life or provide sufficiently adequate “accounts of actual consciousness”.<sup>82</sup> Yet the problem Williams faced in theorising a social totality was how to avoid the type of reification that had been the characteristic of those “apparent”, “static” and “false” totalities that he had perceived operating within the dominant culture of literary studies, the most evident and dangerous being the objectifying of literary works into fixed traditions. Williams never successfully negotiated this difficulty. His own version of totality is in fact another version of the “organic community” in that class ruptures and antagonisms are never brought to bear on totality’s conceptual desire to “connect” and make whole.

Williams’s concern for the loss of determination within Lukacs’s model can be turned upon himself. For while warning that ideas of “totality” can allow us to overlook that there are certain determinations within the social structure which can only, in reality, be understood as “expressing and ratifying the domination of a particular class”, it can be recognised that Williams’s theoretical consideration of experience, community, structures of feeling and culture as a “whole way of life” all seem surprisingly reluctant to negotiate the issue of “class”.<sup>83</sup> What is interesting is that when Williams registers his reservations about Lukacs’s “totality” he attempts belatedly to distance himself from any collusion in this habit by positing a notion of determination around the idea of the hegemonic “intentions” of a ruling class:

Intention, the notion of intention, restores the key question, or rather the key emphasis. For while it is true that any society is a complex whole of such practices, it is also true that any society has a specific organisation, a specific structure, and that the principles of this organisation and structure can be seen as directly related to certain social intentions, intentions by which we define the society, intentions which in all our experience have been the rule of a particular class.<sup>84</sup>

It may be one thing to reject the concrete materiality of economic determinism on the grounds of its rigidity, but, in effect, to substitute for it something as materially intangible as class “intention” seems, within the realms of materialism, to be less than satisfactory. What are we to take as the

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<sup>82</sup> Raymond Williams, “Literature and Sociology”, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, p. 19.

<sup>83</sup> Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory”, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, p. 37.

<sup>84</sup> Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, p. 36.



specifically determining character of “intention”? If it is reducible to a particular class’s intent to “rule” then we are left with very little. The registering of intent within a social totality only confirms the reality of power rather than providing a structural explanation of the forces that produce it. What Williams is trying to do is hold to a notion of totality while mediating its implication of homogeneous integration by paradoxically inserting class interest as its governing and defining component. Yet the more Williams tries to adapt his totalising instincts to allow for a consideration of determination, the more he finds himself returning to an orthodox model of base and superstructure. Williams may have difficulty in considering art and thought as superstructure, but as he admits, if we abandon the superstructural emphasis altogether we, in effect, “fail to recognise reality at all.”<sup>85</sup> This recognition drives him back to the classical position, for he now maintains that certain legal, constitutional, theoretical and ideological apparatuses are superstructures which express and ratify dominant class interests. As such these superstructures are the adjuncts of the primarily determining desire to “rule”. The sense in which they “express” and “ratify” an *a priori* domination suggests their secondary nature. Yet it is absolutely central to Williams’s cultural materialism that laws, constitutions, theories, and ideologies are themselves primary, formative, reality constructing constituents. In trying to maintain a sense of superstructure Williams tends to fall into the “reflectionist” trap of seeing these cultural practices as hand-maidens of power rather than reciprocal determinants, both expressing and producing domination.

It is in this way that Williams appears to be caught between the two poles of Marxist cultural analysis. While he himself belongs to that tradition of “critical” Marxism (rather than official “scientific” Marxism) which re-surfaced the claims of human agency and subjective consciousness, the implied autonomy of this position was vigorously tested by a post-war, post-genocide political fatalism in which ideas of a liberating human agency seemed depressingly futile. This emphasis, most fully articulated by the Frankfurt school, turned towards a critical engagement with the coercive and debilitating power of culture as a comprehensive and incarcerating ideology. The Marxist study of culture had shifted from a more *anticipatory* mode towards a fuller recognition of culture’s ideological *function*, and Williams seems, in this respect, to become theoretically entangled within this movement as he tries to keep both senses alive simultaneously.

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<sup>85</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 108–109.

However, theoretical assistance seemed to offer itself to Williams in the form of Antonio Gramsci's concept of "hegemony". Williams had found that attempts by the likes of Benjamin and Adorno to offer more sophisticated Marxist theories of determination such as "mediation", "typification", "homology" and "correspondence" had tended to reproduce the inherent "dualism" of base and superstructure. But Gramsci's definition of hegemony went beyond this formulaic duality and offered instead a version of determination as a multi-sited micro-political activity. It also offered Williams a distinct advancement on the notion of ideology. The latter had come to be explicitly associated with "fully articulate and systematic forms" of cultural domination, while hegemony, less evident and less abstract, allowed for the "mixed, confused, incomplete, or inarticulate consciousness" of actual people and actual experience in a way that explained more adequately the preservation of a dominant order. Crucially for Williams, Gramsci's concept offered to connect the idea of culture as a "whole social process" with a more acute realisation of "the specific distributions of power and influence" operating within that process. In this respect hegemony went, as Williams argued, beyond the individual limitations of the concepts of "culture" and "ideology", compelling the *anticipatory* and *functional* to face each other so that the ideal of cultural autonomy is confronted by the darker "recognition of dominance and subordination" that operates within the same sphere and is still to be understood as "a whole process". As Andrew Milner remarks:

For Williams, Gramsci's central achievement consists in the articulation of a culturalist sense of the wholeness of culture with a more typically Marxist sense of the interestedness of ideology.<sup>86</sup>

But the coexistence of a specific class "interestedness" and the notion of "wholeness" is still problematic even within Gramsci's interpretation of hegemony. Williams reads hegemony as "a saturation of the whole process of living". But as Douglas Tallack has noticed, he interprets this saturation in an oddly "positive" way.<sup>87</sup> Despite its threatening implications Williams seems lured by the sense of totality it evokes, and which he instinctively seeks. However, Williams's interpretation of Gramsci's hegemony proves to be only another instance of the difficulty he has in reconciling constitutive parts to the conceptual whole. Just as there are radical cultures operating

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<sup>86</sup> Andrew Milner, *Cultural Materialism*, p. 55.

<sup>87</sup> Douglas Tallack, ed. *Critical Theory: A Reader*, p. 274.

within the culture as a whole, so there are “counter-hegemonic” practices operating within what Williams generalises as the “*wholeness* of the process” of hegemony. Williams actually expresses an awareness of the danger of hegemony sliding into the realm of a “totalising abstraction” in the very moment of doing so. In offering a self-defence against this tendency he characteristically draws on the active sense of “process”. Hegemony, as such, is never in danger of becoming a static abstraction because it is always undertaking the process of its own making, renewal, recreation, defence, and modification. It is in this sense continually responding to that which challenges and resists it. As Williams says:

The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society.<sup>88</sup>

Of course Williams welcomes the liberating prospects of counter-hegemony, particularly as it accords with his own emergent “structure of feeling”, but the problem is evident, for if as Williams says here, that hegemony is neither “total or exclusive” and is susceptible to challenges by that consciousness which remains “outside” hegemonic domination, then how does it viably maintain that sense of completeness and wholeness which Williams ascribes to it.<sup>89</sup> The inference is that totalities become abstract through reification, but as long as Williams can keep the sense of “process” alive, his own totalisations are for him both relevant and critically imperative. Again there is the sense that, even in this late theoretical work, Williams has not finally divested his critical thinking of an “organic” epistemology.

Nevertheless hegemony offered Williams a certain theoretical sustenance, for it broke dramatically from the prevalent notion of the systemic structure of ideology. Hegemony opened the field of determination to address not only institutional forms and practices but the subtle entities of consciousness, internalised feeling and emotional experience which had been categorised by Marxist thinking as an effect of “social being” in the production of the class subject. But if counter-hegemonic practices can be activated then consciousness must be

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<sup>88</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 113.

<sup>89</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 113. As Tallack writes, “Counter-hegemonic thinking has considerable potential, but if it is adopted it throws up one particular problem for Marxism: if a local focus is adopted to demonstrate that hegemony is not total, it is not at all clear that the micro-politics that can be recovered can ever come together in a coherent manner capable of opposing, in more general ways, the ruling class.” *Critical Theory: A Reader*, p. 275.

potentially capable of some degree of effective autonomy and independence from domination. As such it can begin to exert pressures upon the dominant structures and to actively create new definitions of the real. Through practices which articulate this consciousness, elements often deemed as passive superstructure can be seen as formative and determining. By rethinking these practices as material in their own right Williams can hold to the central Marxist concept of material determination. It is just that now culture and its practices are seen as being substantially material.

While Terry Eagleton finds Williams's notion of cultural materialism of considerable value for its important work in reconceptualising culture, that persistent preserve of idealist thought which is always "most ideologically resistant to a materialist redefinition", he nevertheless denies any claim for it as a "rival" or "alternative" to the basic Marxist conception of historical materialism.<sup>90</sup> He sees it as a descriptive rather than explanatory concept, serving only to correct in materialist terms what has been otherwise "misperceived" as "ideal" or "immaterial".<sup>91</sup> Yet Williams's "position" has in fairness more to offer than this. To begin with cultural materialism is not intended as an alternative to historical materialism, it is meant as "a theory of the specificities of material culture within historical materialism."<sup>92</sup> Its value is not just in correcting "misperceived" idealisms, but of demonstrating the manner in which certain cultural practices challenge incorporation and resist the full determination of power. Cultural materialism aims to provide historical materialism with a theory of the counter-hegemonic, to demonstrate how in works of art "relative autonomy" actually manifests itself in mediating normative assumptions of reality. It also attempts to establish a critical methodology by which the study of culture might best be approached by a materialist critic, and of how the resistances of idealist thought may be effectively circumvented.

In general *Marxism and Literature*, the work in which Williams first outlines cultural materialism, never quite lives up to the ultra-left radicalism accorded it by critics.<sup>93</sup> Williams

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<sup>90</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Base and Superstructure in Raymond Williams", *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Terry Eagleton, p. 169.

<sup>91</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Base and Superstructure in Raymond Williams", *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Terry Eagleton, p. 168.

<sup>92</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 5.

<sup>93</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 5.

has stated that the book represents a succession of “clearing operations” aimed at freeing up the field of culture from the hegemonic restraints of bourgeois thought. Yet it seems that the more Williams seeks to reveal culture’s autonomy, the more thoroughly the vestiges of bourgeois ideology pursue him into the heart of his own discourse. Finally a full materialisation of culture, free from its commitments to a dominant order, requires nothing less than a fundamental repudiation of the received notions of “literature” and “criticism” themselves. The radicalism of this position perhaps lies more in the fact that Williams has invested so much in these concepts himself, than in its polemical strike against the privileged status and ideological interests of the “literary” and “critical”. In general the work represents a systematic theoretical extension of Williams’s ongoing engagement with the subjective assumptions and cultural appropriation of the dominant class and its literary academy. It is by any account a difficult and highly theoretical work but it still reveals a thinker that has not finally freed himself from the type of institutional habits that he so assiduously challenges. The fact that “culture” itself, hardly a term freed from bourgeois complicity, is still maintained and privileged by Williams while he denounces literature and criticism is obviously a problem in the first instance.

Williams’s argument against the concept of literature is that it has been overly honoured as “full, central, immediate human experience” while the concepts that might test its authenticity such as politics, sociology and ideology are downgraded “as merely the hardened outer shells compared with the living experience of literature.”<sup>94</sup> He claims that this has led to an ideological construction of literature in which “the actual lived experiences of society and history are seen as less particular and immediate than those of literature.”<sup>95</sup> He argues that the historical experience within literature has perpetually been masked by its dependent generic categories such as, “myth, “romance”, “fiction”, “realist fiction”, “epic”, “lyric” and “autobiography”, to the point where literature becomes so self-sustaining and internalised that “it can hardly be examined or questioned at all from outside.”<sup>96</sup> Yet there appears to be a certain disingenuousness in his attack on literary

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<sup>94</sup> The interviewers of *Politics and Letters* see *Marxism and Literature* as “veering towards a radicalism of the ultra-left”. p. 324. Graeme Turner considers it to be a “coming out” in which Williams “finally admits the usefulness of Marxism”. *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, p. 65. Also cited in Andrew Milner’s *Cultural Materialism*, p. 44–45. Milner believes that Raymond O’Connor’s identification of the book’s “fundamental theoretical continuity” with Williams’s general body of work is the appropriate emphasis.

<sup>95</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 45.

<sup>96</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 46.

canons since he has been one of those critics Kiernan Ryan describes as having a certain “parasitic” relation to canonical appeal.<sup>97</sup> Certainly Williams has played his own part in privileging the generic category of “realist fiction” and indeed his own schema and selection of authors for *The English Novel* reveal a virtual reproduction of Leavis’s *The Great Tradition*. Williams, who has always concerned himself with “serious” and “great” literature, can hardly, at this point, comfortably disassociate himself from the rhetoric he denounces. For how is one to easily distinguish between his critique of the prioritising of literature as “full, central, immediate human experience” and his own personal insistence on its “whole”, “vital”, “lived experience”.

Williams’s disfavour with the term “criticism” follows a similar strain. As the interviewers of *New Left Review* point out, he calls for a “significant rejection of the habit (or right or duty) of judgment” claiming that such judgement is open to a subjectivist and value laden relativism that often disguises itself as an objective categorical response in a “naked relation” to the text.<sup>98</sup> Against this habit, which had infused the work of the American New Criticism and Structuralism, Williams posited a type of analysis that was less absorbed with value, less inclined to look at the practice of writing from “above”, and more concerned with getting “inside” the process and examining the relations between a text and its conditions of production, and then to assess the nature of the critical judgements made about it in the light of the conditions in which the judgements were made. This is what Williams offered as cultural materialism, a dual consideration of a particular work and the response to it, both analysed in terms of the social and ideological conditions in which they were subsequently produced, and then all seen as a process within the diachronic development of historically and materially produced forms of writing.

This model has been attractive to a group of leftist British writers who have formed a loose confederation under the banner of “cultural materialists”, though they have tended to concentrate their attentions upon the Elizabethan and Jacobean epochs, foregoing the broader historical sweep which Williams seems to have in mind and of which his own work is a primary instance. In *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Jonathan Dollimore outlines its objective as “a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and

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<sup>97</sup> Kiernan Ryan, ed. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader*, p. xviii.

<sup>98</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, p. 76.

textual analysis” with its contributors all taking up Williams’s crusade to reclaim culture from a dominant social group who have made it the means of their own legitimation.<sup>99</sup> Yet surprisingly, in the “Afterword” to the book, written by Williams, he keeps a wary and sceptical distance from those that have taken up his mantle, perhaps concerned at what appears to be their overly anxious politicised readings that divide Shakespeare’s work down the middle between accounts of its radical subversion, or, that failing, its authoritarian containment.

Like the American “New Historicists”, for whom Williams is an almost obligatory reference, their British counterparts draw heavily on both Marx and Foucault. It is from the latter that they see the determination of power as encircling and pervasive but of unspecific origin. And in this respect Williams suits their purposes having laid down a critical foundation for their reading of power as determining and hegemony as finite. Williams has opened up the ground for their exploration of ideological forms and their decentring of its thematic unity as they explore the subversions, fissures, silences and historical contingencies of the text.

The counter-hegemonic prospects which have attracted his followers, and which are deemed to play a determining role in our history, are not readily identified by Williams. They are taken to be social practices, subject to historical variation but activated from within the dominant culture where access to the governing discourses, forms and institutions is available. For it is through these dominant forms and their cultural prestige that the alternative voices of the perennially excluded can become “knowable”. Williams’s attempt to theorise the counter-hegemonic led to his division of culture into “dominant”, “residual” and “emergent” categories. The residual relates to those practices still operating within a particular social structure, belonging to some previous social formation but still maintained for the sake of the appearance of stability within a dominant culture. Williams cites certain religious practices and values as an instance of his meaning. But it is the emergent that is of real interest to Williams for it is here that he finds the ground of oppositional forms that may challenge the authority of the dominant, for as he says, “no dominant culture, in reality exhausts the full range of human practice, human energy, human intention”. Some of these emergent forms resist incorporation and are capable of producing

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<sup>99</sup> Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds. *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, p. vii.

“political and ultimately revolutionary practice”<sup>100</sup>:

But our hardest task, theoretically, is to find a non-metaphysical and non-subjectivist explanation of emergent cultural practice.<sup>101</sup>

There is the strong sense that the difficulty of the task has claimed Williams himself. For it has been the specific culture of literature that he has always looked to as a site of emergent practice, but in his late work he clearly turns away from the specialised consideration of fiction and drama. This is in part a response to his rejection of critical “judgement”, partly a reaction to the post-structuralist dictum that there was no appreciable life outside the text, that all was textual, and which has driven him as a consequence to turn the full force of his attention to registering the experiential realities of a social and political world. But the notion of emergence also created an immense personal difficulty for Williams. For a celebration of the counter-hegemonic potential of emergence had to be reconciled with a modernity in which what was actually emerging seemed only to be new forms of domination and the politics of “the new conformists”.

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<sup>100</sup> Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, p. 42.

<sup>101</sup> Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, p. 42.