I.

Introduction

Profound Ambivalence and Radical Ambiguity

Raymond Williams has been acclaimed as "the most eminent humanist writer on the theory and internal relations of the concept 'culture' that contemporary British society has produced."[1] Without apparent contradiction other admirers have confidently celebrated him as the most profound "Marxist" thinker in this field. The radical ambiguity of Williams is revealed in the equal plausibility of these testimonies. All his adult life he lived and worked between the counter claims of humanist culture and Marxist materialism. In many respects his critical project has been shaped by the desire to reconcile their differences. With guarded anticipation he has looked to the emergence of a socialist communitarian state, yet for the most part visualising its fulfilment in the liberal humanist gradualism of his "long revolution". Critically he aimed to inhabit a mediatory position between the conservative and often reactionary "grand narrative" of culture and a revolutionary politics in which culture was mechanistically reduced to a superstructural effect of economic primacy. Upon such precarious terrain he has struggled for critical balance, insistently placing his faith in the social feasibility of "unity" and "wholeness", a drawing back to the centre as he seeks to write the practice of collaboration and cooperation through the ideals of culture and community.

There is a particular moment in *Politics and Letters* when Williams considers his own "profoundly ambivalent" response to the standing monuments of western civilisation. Drawing on the analogy of the great mediaeval and Gothic cathedrals, Williams talks of his dual reaction to their impressive architectural and engineering achievements, the sense they convey of the creative power and potential of man, the appearance of infinite possibility. And then disturbing this impression is his own sobering awareness of the morally questionable foundation upon which these structures were laid. He expresses a pressing difficulty in reconciling the aesthetic splendour of the churches with the degree of human exploitation that went into their production.

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[1] J.P. Ward, *Raymond Williams*, p. 1.

Impressive to the eye these towering stone edifices weighed heavily on his historical consciousness, built as they were on the backs of those who never dwelled themselves in houses of stone:

> I am very powerfully moved by the early churches, by the great cathedrals, and yet if I do not see the weight of them on man, I don't altogether know how to be a socialist in the area where I work. If I were a manual worker this would not be the same sort of problem. But to me it is a problem: I feel that weight, as I feel the weight of those country houses. Who has not admired the admirable architecture or furniture to be found among them? But if we acknowledge them as a contribution, we must also at the same time acknowledge them as an obstacle.[2]

So much of the particular character of Williams's writing is embodied in this passage. The confident assertion immediately followed by the wary disclaimer, the conviction of the general point and then the personal uncertainty, the nagging existential anxiety in which the recurring assertions of the "I" become the subtle expression of self-conscious doubt, that troubled sense of identity and the uncertainty of his relationship to others. Just as there is the critical problem of evaluating the "contribution" of the churches and country houses while identifying the common experience which "feels" their weight as an "obstacle", there is also the expression of that personalised problem of how to be a socialist in his field, of how to attain an affinity with the labourer while writing for an academic public within an academic establishment. The dichotomies between Marxism and humanism seem always to be the intellectual correspondence to a personal narrative. His early attempts to mediate between a high culture and the multitude who felt the weight of its cultural authority are often underwritten by a desire to reconcile the conflicting aspects of his own social formation. He is, as Terry Eagleton once remarked, "a character within his own drama", a drama in which he seeks to unify the patrician role of cultural critic with that of the Welsh working-class socialist.[3]

It is this dual experience that is reflected in his negotiation of the "contribution" which is learned and the "obstacle" which is remembered, the acquired academic knowledge resting uncomfortably with his own traces of an alternative experience which surfaces as the dialectical pattern of his critical thought. Contribution and obstacle can express themselves in the stronger

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[2] Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 309.
[3] Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 23.

terms of power and oppression, and as Williams has insisted, any adequate appreciation of the high moments of a culture must be measured off against the less admirable material history which produced it. Recalling Walter Benjamin's appeal for a "materialistic deliverance from myth" Williams strives for what Forest Pyle describes as "a materialistic deliverance of culture".[4]

It is the moral character of culture that Williams is intent on testing, the circumstances surrounding its production, the real terms we must apply to its appreciation. And it is Williams's strength as a critic that he never allows us to forget that such cultural monuments can appear to us as abstracted iconic representations in which the human burden of their production and their questionable social function are obscured. As heritage these buildings express the vitality of their forms and the history of their ideas, but in their material history they have also been a central site of a living community of diverse and connecting experience. The cathedrals and country houses were built upon the labour and resources of a people who were then ruled by the institutions they housed. What is coming through in Williams's meditation upon the "problem" of the churches is this sense of conflict between the idea of culture as power and the idea of a community as a subject of power. Within this construction culture and community seem at odds with each other, participants and adversaries upon the site of class conflict.

However, when Raymond Williams first took up the notions of culture and community his observations were not of this type. Much of his academic work was directed away from such conspiratorial conclusions, and aimed towards a conciliatory and reciprocating partnership between the two concepts. Alan O'Connor has described it as a "complex sense of the active making of community" in coexistence with his programatic "history of cultural forms".[5] The terms, he saw, could be linked and interwoven by their shared association with the idea of the "common". Culture was "ordinary" Williams would say; it belonged to a whole life and was not a sole possession of an elite minority. Community was the model life of a unified culture, built on cooperative and democratic values. The working towards a common culture was also a working towards true community. As Pyle has suggested, for Williams community became "culture's narrative":

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[4] Forest Pyle, "Raymond Williams and the Inhuman Limits of Culture", *Views Beyond the Border Country*, p. 260.
[5] Alan O'Connor, *Raymond Williams: Writing, Culture, Politics*, p. ix.

> The function of culture in Williams is invariably linked to the possibility of "community", to the prospect that a common existence - a shared subject position "we" - can be formed or recovered from the reified social relations of the present, that culture can, in other words, make the communal body of a people.[6]

The ideas of culture and community are absolutely central to Williams's work, yet, despite the concreteness which he has often granted them, they persist in being difficult and often intangible concepts. They have been used in the name of many causes, evoked numerous referents and being affirmed by diverse politics. Possessing so many prospective meanings and applications they, far from been self-evident signifiers, become themselves a subject of discursive inquiry, self-reflexively encoding their own problem of meaning. Williams's development as a critic and theorist can be read in his progression from a fairly naive enlistment of the terms to an increasingly complex engagement with their shifting and nebulous significance.

In his early work Williams seems only latently aware of the political agency of the terms. He shows signs of real confusion as he uncomfortably strives to utilise the concepts to forge a socialist poetics, only to find himself seriously disabled by a received interpretation of cultural values and their invocation of the "natural" order of pre-modern community. Williams wants to activate the terms, to divert the traditions of culture and community into the intellectual path leading towards the recognition of our "culture in common", a forward step on the longest road towards the egalitarian community of his desired socialist state. Yet, ironically, he finds himself constantly foiled by the deeper political ideology which has already attached itself to his terms. What he had inherited from the English literary and critical tradition on culture and community was often, even in its apparent or localised radicalism, underpinned by an ultimately conservative philosophy. The attraction this tradition held for Williams was due to the way the ideas of culture and community had been used as a powerful critique against the pervasiveness of a bourgeois ideology and its mechanistic and utilitarian rationale. Williams, sharing this tradition's disdain for a rapacious economic individualism, drew enthusiastically on the ideas of culture and community as antagonists of capitalism. It is easy enough to imagine a young Williams being ideologically "incorporated" by powerful luminaries like Lawrence, Eliot, and Leavis, who were the most contemporary conveyers of these positions. On the subject of culture their

[6] Forest Pyle, "Raymond Williams and the Inhuman Limits of Culture", *Views Beyond the Border Country*, p. 264–65.

influence can be readily understood, but what is more surprising is the way the early Williams takes on board much of their conception of community. Williams, it appears, did not exactly come to Cambridge fully armed with a fixed idea of community. His initial critical engagement with the concept is a reproduction of the Leavisian notion of an "organic" community of a pre-industrial past. Williams's early writing acquiesces in the idealisation of the natural and connecting relationships of this community. The problem he faces in accepting such a position is that while the organic ideal had served as the basis for a critique of capitalism, it had been most particularly used in attacks against the industrial age and the new "unnatural" relations that it fostered, relations which manifested themselves in the "levelling" tendencies of the revolutionary spirit. In other words culture and community were persistently upheld as ideals "against" democracy, yet Williams's taking up of these ideals is for quite the opposite reasons: the extension rather than denial of democratic values. This ambiguity creates awkward tensions in his early criticism, for while he approves of the organic critique of capitalism, he sees democracy as a "response" to capitalism rather than an unwanted consequence of its anarchic nature.

Williams initially sought to take these generally conservative applications of culture and community and reposition them so that they could serve as a lineage of thought able to be enlisted in the name of a progressive movement leading towards his own elaboration of a socialist critique of culture. His conciliatory stance and desire for a bipartisan and totalised vision of a culture appears unduly conservative for a writer of his political sensibilities. As Jan Gorak has remarked, Williams's "assessment of the propaganda for culture" often proceeds in "the best traditions of liberal sympathy."[7] However, as Williams himself would insist, his own critical project needs to be assessed in relation to the specific conditions of its production. When he embarked on his critical career after World War II there appear to have been immense difficulties for a socialist in even entering the field of cultural and literary criticism with any substantial credibility.

Returning from the war in 1945 Williams was gradually confronted by a series of political setbacks for the left. The failure of the post-war British Labour Government to implement any long term socialist reforms and the priority it gave to the military alliance with the USA, along

[7] Jan Gorak, *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams*, p. 53.

with the use of troops to dismantle local strikes, shattered what remained of his earlier hopes:

> This was a time, remember, when the expectations of a labour government, which had been the whole perspective of my childhood, had not just been disappointed but actively repulsed.[8]

The left was in disarray. By his own account there was a growing awareness that intellectuals were moving towards a more conservative political position. Those who remained on the left seemed wearied and reluctant to renew old associations. Williams has described his own experience as one of writing from a position of deep isolation.[9] In this respect he was a critic without school or heritage. As Eagleton has written in *Criticism and Ideology*, "the ethos of thirties criticism, compounded as it was of vulgar Marxism, bourgeois empiricism and Romantic idealism could yield him almost nothing."[10] The failings of the pre-war Marxists had left him devoid of a language through which to speak, and the next twenty years were to see him practically rebuild one for his own purposes. The fifties also provided substantial problems in respect to the "actually existing socialism" of Eastern Europe which was causing immense ideological difficulties for western left-wing intellectuals as the strict cultural dogmatism of Zhdanovism was received with an increasing degree of repugnance. At the same time the relative post-war affluence of the English working-class and the effects of near full-employment and higher wages were doing nothing to suggest that industrial capitalism was on the verge of collapsing. Combined with the overly-simplistic interpretation of Marxism which he had inherited, his position and deepest beliefs became increasingly threatened:

> With a majority of people opting, in politics clearly, in everyday practice more substantially, for consumer capitalism, it was hard to hang on.[11]

The difficulties of this period are made clear by E.P. Thompson who felt the same kinds of pressures:

> Raymond Williams stayed in the field. I find it difficult to convey the sheer intellectual endurance which this must have entailed. Looking back, I can see the point at which I simply disengaged from the contest; and I can recall friends who were actually broken by the experience of this period. There were so many ways to retire — into mere apathy, into

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[8] Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton, "The Politics of Hope: An Interview", *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, p. 176–183.

[9] Williams gives a full account of the difficulties of this period in the biographical section of *Politics and Letters*.

[10] Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. 21.

[11] Raymond Williams, "Notes on Marxism in Britain Since 1945", *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, p. 241.

> erudite specialisms, into the defensive rhetoric of Communist dogma, into Parliament or antique shops or academic careerism.[12]

As Thompson has pointed out, some insight into the stress of this time - and also, perhaps, into Williams's own sense of isolation - may be found in the conclusion to his essay on Orwell:

> We have to understand how the instincts of humanity can break down under pressure into an inhuman paradox; how a great and humane tradition can seem at times, to all of us, to disintegrate into a caustic dust.[13]

Within this environment Williams found himself unable and unwilling to launch the type of Marxist critique of culture that Thompson had appealed for, in which culture is considered not in the politically neutral terms of a "whole way of life" but in the polemical spirit of "a whole way of struggle". Williams has argued that such a position was inappropriate in the fifties, a "very base period, which appeared to have neutralised and incorporated many of the very institutions of struggle to which appeal was being made."[14] He has described Thompson's position as belonging to the "heroic periods of struggle in history", while his concern is with such periods as his own in which conflict was being expressed in terms other than explicit struggle. Such a climate seemed to compel Williams to pursue an agenda that was more circumspect than grand.

If Williams was ambivalent regarding the relative contributions and obstacles of a dominant enlightenment culture, he has also had persistent difficulties regarding an orthodox Marxist perspective. While he could recognise the "contribution" of its materialist and historical emphasis, he was reluctant to embrace what he saw as the "obstacle" of its stress on economic primacy. J.P. Ward refers to "the profound ambivalence Williams was for many years to feel ... toward accepting the Marxist intellectual tradition as a satisfactory way of interpreting social and cultural existence."[15] Reacting against this economism and its inflexible rendering of the processes of history, Williams sought to imbue a Marxist interpretation of "determinism" with a humanist cultural perspective, and to invigorate the sense of human agency within "historical materialism". From the beginning he envisaged this agency, not in terms of individual contribution, but as a general response in language, which he saw as the fullest embodiment of human community.

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[12] E.P. Thompson, "The Long Revolution", *New Left Review*, No. 9 May/June, 1961, p. 27.
[13] Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 294.
[14] Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 135–136.
[15] J.P. Ward, *Raymond Williams*, p. 24.

It is generally accepted that the structure of Williams's *oeuvre* reflects a progression from a liberal perspective towards a stronger commitment to Marxism. However, the character of his work never confirms that he has happily arrived at Marxism. At times it seems that he refashions Marxism to fit his own requirements, arbitrarily drawing its vocabulary and concerns into his own idiosyncratic orbit. His career seldom suggests a steady sense of development, but appears to be both a movement forward and a constant writing back and adjustment of his earlier positions, striving after a stable critical position on the one hand while persistently investigating the inherent instability of his own terms of reference on the other. Williams's implementation of culture and community reflects this type of constant oscillation and realignment. He can be guilty of the type of conceptual abstraction that he rejects in others, yet his search for more tangible and empirically available definitions of culture and community is constantly confronted by his own troubled awareness of the inherently unstable nature of these terms. While he persisted in offering culture and community as his "resources of hope" he simultaneously identifies them as the ideologically loaded adjutants of a dominant order. As such they become part of his general exploration into the political character of signifying practices. Although he continued throughout his career to rely on culture and community as foundational paradigms, he also expressed an exasperation with their bewildering resistance to definition. On culture he has thrown his arms in the air:

> the number of times I've wished that I had never heard of the damned word. I have become more aware of its difficulties, not less, as I have gone on.[16]

Community is a word which has led him to reflect

> that it is unusable as a term that enables one to make distinctions: one is never certain exactly to which formation the notion is referring. It was when I suddenly realised that no one ever used 'community' in a hostile sense that I saw how dangerous it was.[17]

Yet an awareness of these difficulties and dangers is never enough to deter Williams from investing a deep psychological reliance in their referential appeal. And what I hope to make clear beyond the personal struggle Williams must undergo in order to reconcile his own ambivalence and

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[16] Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 154.
[17] Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 119.

ambiguity regarding culture and community is the more general political paradox encoded in these paradigmatic terms. For what becomes evident is that the ideas of culture and community have become politically incorporated concepts, incorporated in a strangely bipartisan manner, so that while they may offer sustenance to a socialist politics in which the communal values of a working class culture are celebrated, they can also offer a heritage amenable to a conservative politics which seeks to preserve the status of a dominant minority as the guardians of culture and the subservience of a people to the patriotic ideal of the nation-state as community.

In this respect the terms themselves appear as the servants of two warring masters, attending to the ideological fantasies of both left and right politics. Historically the preservation of a dominant minority has relied on the authority and prestige of its connection to the "high" culture of its epoch. Yet this authority must brace itself to resist the challenge of popular, mass or radical cultures, and look with grave suspicion at the emergence of localised and militant sub-cultures expressing the dissent of youth, race and gender. Here "Culture" learns to fear "culture". In much the same way community has provided a conceptual basis for an alternative to aggressive individualism and undemocratic structures, while at the same time metaphorically abetting the jingoistic fanfare of nationalism through the moral imperative of service to the greater whole. In the name of service to the nation the claims of a disempowered class are subordinated to the perceived threat of a common enemy. This particular idea of "common" service to the state and its relation to the homogeneous ideal of a localised and binding community is part of the linguistic paradox of the term, for the implied "inclusiveness" of community is founded upon the necessary identification of the "other", which by definition, it must "exclude".

It is in this sense that culture and community serve as "double-sided" signifiers, containing both a utopian moment Williams can endorse as an emerging radicalism as well as an ideological function aiding the legitimation of the tyranny of a dominant class. As such Williams's critical project can be read as the struggle to reappropriate his principal "keywords" from a persuasive ideology which has stamped its mark so decisively upon these terms. Yet while his ground-clearing operation works to expose the conservative politics of closure that has attached itself to culture and community, the engagement itself is constantly fraught with the risk of epistemological

contamination and an unconscious complicity in accepting the values which underpin the conservative vocabulary. Such is the ideological complexity of culture and community that Williams, despite the radical accents of his critique, often fails to finally extricate his own thinking from the prevailing assumptions of his critical inheritance. This tension forms the basis of Williams's self-imposed dialectic in which he appears constantly embroiled in a process in which every detection of the insidiousness of cultural domination is mediated by the self-discovery of his own susceptibility to a reflexive reproduction of its values and which ultimately disables his establishment of a socialist poetics.

In light of the impressive corpus of Williams's writing I have necessarily concentrated on a limited selection of his works. In order to convey a sense of the development and maturation of his position a chronological procedure has its obvious advantages, though from the outset it must be made clear that no unambiguous linearity can be derived from this writer whose range of critical interests often overlap so that positions which have apparently been forsaken return to form the basis of later fields of inquiry. Indicative of the difficulty of cataloguing Williams's career are the tortured attempts by critics to divide his work into early, middle and late periods. Further complicating such retrospective categorising is the fact that Williams is a palpably "oppositional" thinker and his projects, rather than being determined by a desire for incremental continuity, are driven by an adversarial tendency that seeks to respond to the immediate threat of new orthodoxies and the agendas they have set.

The works to be examined in detail are *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, *Culture and Society*, *Modern Tragedy*, *The Country and the City* and *Marxism and Literature*. In considering these texts I will also draw on particular essays which have been compiled in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, *Writing in Society*, *Resources of Hope* and *The Politics of Modernism*. In concluding I aim to provide a brief analysis of Williams's fiction and its relationship to his general critical project.

It is in his early work on drama that Williams begins to promote the relationship between a vital and productive culture and the ideal of a community of shared values. Profoundly influenced by the cultural positions of T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis Williams attempts to examine modern

drama as both a reflection and symptom of the cultural barrenness seen to accompany the rise of the industrial society. Seeing this corruption of culture as most evident in what he perceives to be the debasement of our common language, Williams argues that the inadequacy of contemporary speech retarded the artist's endeavour to dramatically realise the actual complexity of lived experience. This has compelled playwrights from Ibsen onwards to experiment with the development of forms which could transcend the limitations of the modern idiom. The nature of these formal experiments has made them accessible to a limited, rather specialised, audience, and consequently the broader "social" reference and communal character of a popular theatre has been diminished. Williams's discourse on the poverty of the common language may be questionable but it allows him a position from which he can lay blame for this cultural decline on the stultifying effects of "bourgeois" culture and the dehumanising labour processes of industrial production. The difficulty of this position is that it is predicated upon the assumption that in a pre-industrial past there was a complexly homogeneous culture to which industrial society could be unfavourably compared. This older world fostered a more diverse and refined common speech and allowed for an unambiguous relationship between artist and public, a "community of sensibility" unfettered by the intrusions and exclusions of hardening classist cultural distinctions. This adherence to the myth of an organic order preceding the atomistic effects of the capitalist epoch sees Williams ensnared in the moral and cultural schema of conservative criticism. Adopting a stance by which the key to addressing the decline of contemporary culture lies in a recovery of the past, he consequently creates a substantial difficulty for any conceptualisation of an emancipatory cultural politics emanating from the conditions of the present. At this point Williams's rather undefined political radicalism seems burdened by the general implication of his argument that we must go back before we can go forward.

Williams attempts to negotiate this dilemma more effectively in *Culture and Society*, but even here his recognition of the appropriation of culture and community by largely reactionary positions never finally allows him to break free of the deep and subtle ideological permutations of the ideas themselves. Attempting to radicalise the English "culture and society" tradition so that he can establish an intellectual inheritance leading to his own evocation of a democratic socialist culture, Williams's mediation of bourgeois radicalism produces a strangely neutral, almost apolitical, mode of critical inquiry. Sympathetic to the high-culturalists of the tradition

he unfolds, Williams tends to reproduce their mandarin sensibilities and olympian rhetoric. This habit of unconscious imitation along with his acceptance of the cultural primacy of the literary text leads him into a critical cul-de-sac in which he is unable, despite his now declared allegiance to socialism, to consider amongst the cultural responses to industrialisation the long material history of working class dissent, protest and struggle. Because this history falls outside the "literary" record of the period Williams denies himself access to it and consequently further perpetuates the marginalisation of this experience, an experience which has more claim upon the "common" culture than the ambiguous bourgeois critique of industrial capitalism. Paradoxically when Williams concludes his account by offering the social panacea of a "community of culture" he is clearly drawing on an idealised co-operative and collective working class culture that he has largely ignored in the general body of his book.

In the final pages of *Culture and Society* Williams somewhat uneasily recognises that the notion of community carries with it not only an affirmative sense of social solidarity but a disturbing association with the ideology of service. This more sombre reflection on community permeates Williams's argument in the politically decisive encounter of *Modern Tragedy.* Here Williams aggressively responds to what he takes to be the ideologically motivated "essentialism" of tragedy's critical reception in which a social and material reading of the text is relegated in favour of its interpretation as an archetypal conflict between the will of an exceptional individual and a finally determining metaphysical order. Just as Williams had directed his attention against the appropriation of culture by minority interests, so he now sees a critical conservatism enlisting tragic drama as an aesthetic of the *status-quo.* As an art form tragedy embodied the philosophical proposition of a universal human destiny in which the struggle to determine our own history is rendered futile in the face of an unknown cosmos. For Williams tragedy's conventional restoration of the "natural" and "divinely sanctioned" order once the crisis of the tragic rupture had been overcome could too easily be turned to support the political legitimation of the existing power structure. In his account he calls for a broader contextualisation of the idea of the tragic in which the catastrophes, suffering and alienation of our own epoch can be read as tragedy without necessarily conforming to the strict textual criteria set down by the critical academy. It is in this respect that Williams laments the tragedy of our non-community, but significantly the melancholy burden of this absence bears down on his critique so that he is at least momentarily unable to

consider a prospective and affirmative community. It is as if in the writing of *Modern Tragedy* he personally succumbs to the fatalism of the tragic form, for his attempt to establish the celebration of human struggle as the common link between community and tragedy encounters serious difficulties. He cannot finally resolve what he takes to be the redemptive capacity of community with tragedy's aesthetic of defeated aspirations. He cannot theorise the redemptive tragedy.

The evocation of community in Williams's work on tragedy carries the weight of a Marxist eschatology in which community becomes the idealised "end" of human conflict rather than a tangible social practice from which a future may be shaped. It is this characteristic abstraction of community which Williams attempts to negotiate in his most acclaimed work *The Country and the City.* Here he first begins to cast a seed of doubt over the immanence of community, finally questioning the historical basis for the existence of what he takes to be a "genuine community". His own deconstruction of the fabled pastoral settlements of literary representation locates the site of the "organic community" in the sentimental recollections of a host of writers for whom this lost world lies just over the last horizon. Williams's account watches this idealised past move back through successive generations of scribes on an historical "escalator" travelling beyond Eden. Yet, even in recognising the mythology, the ambivalence and ambiguity of Williams's position persists. For while he provides a stringent critique of the "organic community" and reveals its "charter of explicit social reaction" his own nostalgia for the Welsh community of his youth makes him complicit in the promotion of the myth he is otherwise at pains to reject. Indeed it is this residual organicism which persistently determines Williams's critical judgements and which encroaches upon his desire to rigorously materialise the long rural history of "the permanently cheated".

In fact the deep and sentimental affinity Williams has with rural working community actually creates a perverse antagonism in his response to the experience of urbanisation which he tends to view in the romantic vein of a descent into hell. Consequently, as I will argue, this anti-urban prejudice directs him to demonise the populace of the "unknowable community" of the city while privileging the more transparent relations of the pastoral village. In this regard Williams is making a type of moral distinction between kinds of experience which is itself informed by a

dubious abstraction of the notion of community. By offering counter-interpretations of the role of community in Dickens, Eliot, Hardy and Lawrence I will demonstrate the manner in which Williams's criticism is subject to the reductive distinctions of his own version of the *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* worlds of Ferdinand Tönnies. Williams's privileging of "rural" community over that of "urban" society demonstrates a certain naivety, an unwillingness to explore the exclusionary consequences of valuing community. For community tends to ratify an ideal that enforces homogeneity, produces conformity and constricts or expels those experienced as different. By largely ignoring the darker consequences of communal discipline Williams is always in danger of succumbing to the ideological prestige of community without comprehensively interrogating the paradoxical and multivalent nature of the term. Enticed by the communal promise of a "social bond" Williams runs the risk of becoming yet another author of the phantasm of the lost community.

The general difficulty Williams faces in sustaining his communal ideal is exacerbated by the immense reliance he places upon the conceptual and metaphorical sense of "the whole". In this regard both culture and community become images of harmonic integration alluding to the social possibility of a homogeneous, unitary, totalised human experience. They are receptacles for the evocation of our "common life", an ideal Williams holds fast to despite the difficulty encountered in reconciling it with that other persistent narrative of ongoing human struggle, conflict and alienation. The difficulty with Williams's vision of "totality" is that it tends to diminish the presence of the divisive structure of power within its collective synthesis. Here the Marxist notions of incorporation, hegemony, ideology and even class seem to lose much of their political potency. Indeed it is in the name of a holistic perception of culture that Williams has found himself arguing against much of what he took to be orthodox Marxism. In writing *Marxism and Literature* Williams, in a somewhat characteristic gambit, simultaneously reinforces his Marxist bearings while provocatively contesting some of its fundamental premises. Rejecting what he saw as the linearity of the Marxist "base and superstructure" model and the "reflectionism" of its discourse on ideology, Williams sought to reclaim the status of culture from the Marxist paradigm in which it was perceived as a superstructural effect of a primarily determining economic base. By attempting to establish the "material" constitution of culture he proposed to clarify its own productive character. Coining the term "cultural materialism" he sought to elaborate a critical

procedure in which "emergent" forms of cultural production could be seen to operate within dominant forms, offering a counter-hegemonic challenge to the closure of their ideological assumptions. In this sense Williams looked to the radical moment of culture finding in the literature of a period the expression of a deeply held communal feeling, a "structure of feeling" which demanded new forms to represent a "knowable" experience beyond the static conventions of the "known". Williams, more by will than theoretical adroitness, attempts to construct a radical cultural poetics, but sustaining such a programme within his totalising framework continues to be doggedly problematic. Not the less for the fact that his reflexive reliance on the transcendent capacity of the communal must inevitably confront the culture of his own times, a period in which his integrative vision is being contested by the modernist voice of "the new conformists" whose politics violate the sanctity with which he favours connection and continuity.

In closing with an account of Williams's fiction I hope to draw a parallel between the strategic dilemmas he negotiated as a cultural critic and the structural difficulties he confronted as a novelist. Just as Williams's residual organicism underpins his own desire to conceptualise an homogeneous totality in the face of a world insistently defining itself in forms which register its bleakness, confusion and anxiety, so his fiction labours under the strain of providing a unified narrative structure for the representation of a modern experience largely felt as personal alienation. The dramatic content of Williams's novels, which never drifts far from the psycho-autobiographical, is shaped by a dialectical tension in which the narrative intent of the realist writer to connect a wider social life with the closest personal experience contests with the deeply self-conscious detachment and internalised angst of his central characters. In one sense this represents the defining paradox of Williams's work, for he cannot finally reconcile his longing for narrative wholeness with the juxtaposed disconnection of the damaged psyches of his protagonists. What comes through is the painful breakdown of community, a loss beyond retrieval, and in this respect Williams's work offers surprisingly little hope for the future, as if, finally, he too has become unwillingly subject to the dystopic metaphors of modernism.

An investigation of Williams's critical reliance on the concepts of culture and community and the alterations in their emphasis and significance which attend his development serve as a specific key to interpreting the general problematics surrounding his attempt to develop a socialist

cultural poetics. In taking his favoured terms to be a resource he could deploy in the name of a radical social practice Williams had to divest culture and community of the ideological heritage which had subtly directed their meaning to legitimate the interests of a dominant order. In attempting to reorientate their significance in order to convey their liberating potential he found himself negotiating a semantic minefield in which his gestures towards their anticipatory appeal had to do constant battle with the apparent ease by which they could be incorporated as functionaries of a persuasive ideology in which they pay lip-service to collective unity in order to mask the felt experience of social divisiveness. It is the intention of my thesis to pursue an inquiry into Williams's implementation of these terms, to designate their critical attributes and theoretical disablement within his work and to reveal the profound ambivalence and radical uncertainty of his personal project.

II.

Naturalism: Cultural Decline and Community of Expression

In seeking the dialectical origin of Raymond Williams's critical development it might not be necessary to look beyond his own admission that the two primary agents of his own conditions of production have been F.R. Leavis and Karl Marx. So forceful have these influences been that at any single point in his career a critic can locate the signs of dialectical anxiety in Williams's negotiation of the rival claims and powerful presence of these ideological antagonists. Yet it is conventional to interpret Williams's critical maturation as a relatively linear progression from one pole of wisdom towards the other. A reading of his earliest professional writing on drama and a consideration of his last full book *Marxism and Literature* lends credence to the view that Williams's work has quite systematically directed itself away from the Leavisian influence towards the development of a critique that would allow him the title of Marxist in both politics and criticism. However, the impression that Williams had finally freed himself from Leavis's intellectual authority can be queried by noting the manner in which even his later writings continue to engage with the problems of culture and community, an emphasis which he had adopted directly from Leavis, and which in turn had been borrowed from T.S. Eliot. While Leavis may not have even recognised his own terms as Williams came to use them, wondering what they now had to do with literature at all, Marx, one imagines, would have been equally frustrated by the engendered procrastination within Williams's own gradualist concept of a "long revolution" which refused to divorce itself completely from an idealist humanism. Clearly Williams's first excursions into the field of culture and community possessed little of Marx and, rather too often, merely duplicated the Leavisian line:

> ... at all times, the community between artist and audience which seems to matter is the community of sensibility. The artist's sensibility - his capacity for experience, his ways of thinking, feeling, and conjunction - will often be finer and more developed than that of the mean of his audience. But if his sensibility is at least of the same kind, communication is possible. Where his sensibility is of the same kind, his language and the language of his audience will be closely and organically related; the common language will be the expression of the common sensibility. There is no such sensibility today. The pressure of a mechanical environment has dictated mechanical ways of thought, feeling and conjunction, which artists, and a few of like temper, reject only by conscious resistance and great labour. That is why all serious literature

> in our own period tends to become a minority literature (although the minority is capable of extension and in my view has no social correlative).[1]

There is perhaps no other paragraph in all of Williams's writing that more clearly illustrates the influence that Leavis has had on his younger Cambridge colleague. Under cross-examination by the interviewers of the *New Left Review* Williams concedes that the passage is, indeed, "a virtual reproduction of Leavis".[2] Taken from the introduction to *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* it is indicative of the type of tensions which characterise his formative thinking and early work. Alongside the Leavisian rhetoric and the high aesthetic values of the academy is Williams's own reserved qualification that "the minority" is not an absolute, but capable of enlargement. This prospective "extension" of minority values is a personal amendment in the name of democratising culture, yet is also indicative of the ongoing difficulties Williams was bound to confront. For while the denial of a "social correlative" in the formation of a minority culture is intended to leave the door ajar for any who seek to enter, it can have the retrogressive effect of disguising or denying the explicit fact of the role of class in the determination of cultural dominance. Intended to offer the possibility of an egalitarian culture, this parenthetical afterword is the subordinate clause in what is otherwise an affirmation of the Leavisian emphasis on "community", "sensibility", "experience", "organic relations" and the "conscious resistance" of a cultural elite, as well as the ubiquitous attack on the "mechanical environment" of the industrial age. Against the finality of Leavis's vision of cultural decline, the young Williams could, at best, only seek to extend the hand of the spirit of critical refinement in accordance with a "from the top down" humanism which could facilitate the dissemination of canonised cultural values from the spiritual centre of knowledge and power.

Culture in this formulation, rather than being the totalising concept of social organisation and practice, or even the on-going process towards an ideal state, is a more fragile commodity, Arnoldian in the sense of being "the best that has been thought and written" and which must be protected against the intrusion of utilitarian, mechanical and rationalising institutional processes.

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[1] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, p. 31.

[2] Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 194. Williams's debt to Eliot, Leavis and the work of *Scrutiny*, and their responsility "for the intelligent development of critical analysis as an educational discipline", is clearly acknowledged in his "Preface" to *Reading and Criticism*. p. ix.

The implication of Williams's troubled acquiescence in this position is that he is led, somewhat surprisingly, to confirm the belief that the living experience of the contemporary popular majority has nothing of serious value to contribute to the culture as a whole, either in terms of values or aesthetic practices. As this is a position Williams would, in time, argue strenuously against in taking up an increasingly radical and leftist cultural stance, we can gain a sense of the magnitude of the critical impediments and prejudices he would have to unravel and negotiate in order to liberate himself from the mannerisms and methodology received from his own critical training.

Constantly embroiled in the tensions and contradictions between his socialist political consciousness, his enthusiasm for bourgeois aesthetics and his personal reverence for Eliot and Leavis, Williams's formative criticism demonstrates a notable absence of any Marxist cultural critique by which he could even effectively begin to counter the immense influence of the inherently conservative epistemological bearings of the high-priests of cultural sanctity. As Williams has conceded, for a surprisingly long period he was quite unable to even see the contradictions between the critical method he was willingly adopting and the politics of a revolutionary socialism for which he otherwise seemed to stand.

His faltering attempts to reconcile these ideological polarities led to the description of his work as a "Left-Leavisism", a title he has been at some pains to deny, though one which nevertheless is an entirely appropriate definition of his early critical projects. Williams's attraction to Eliot and Leavis is partially the result of misinterpreting their apparent radicalism. For the cultural elitists and the socialists, somewhat paradoxically, shared a common ground in their mutual abhorrence of Benthamite utility, coercive forms of consumerism and the dehumanised life of industrial mechanisation. While Williams warmed to the dissenting voices of these powerful cultural luminaries he was initially oblivious to the manner in which their moral and cultural schema could render him the victim of an ideological capture in which his socialist instincts for an egalitarian and communitarian culture could not be advanced through criticism without serious confusion and contradiction.

It seems particularly revealing that Williams's first critical subject was Henrik Ibsen, a writer whose work he characterised by its central concern with the issue of "inheritance" as a blockage

capable of frustrating the desire for personal liberation and autonomy. Williams applies this recurring motif in Ibsen's plays to the author's personal struggle to liberate himself from the dramatic conventions of the romantic melodrama he inherited. Yet in this there is an ironic parallel with Williams's own received critical "inheritance", which, possessing substantial conventions of its own, impeded his desire to unify an emancipatory politics with a rigorous critical programme which he did not immediately recognise as an inherently conservative critical agenda.

The contradiction is most apparent in Williams's early consideration of "community". Seeking to explain "minority culture" as an inevitable response to the deepening social division resulting from the utilitarian atomisation of industrial society, Williams adopted what initially appealed to him as a subversive element in the criticism of Eliot and Leavis; the notion of a "community of sensibility". Uncritically accepting the dubious cultural plurality accorded to the Elizabethan age in which that period's apparent diversity and manifold variety of experience allowed for an organic relationship between the individual artist and the common audience, Williams takes the lead from his mentors and enlists this positive ideal as a gauge by which we might interpret our own cultural and aesthetic decline. The mechanical nature of the new social environment has destroyed "community of expression" and created, in its place, mechanical "ways of thought, feeling and conjunction".[3] This is a position which we now habitually consign to the conservative thesis of cultural deracination, yet in defence of Williams even the European Marxists such as Adorno and Benjamin were expressing the demise of "traditional" culture in much the same terms. While perhaps more famous for his celebration of the avant-garde and cinema as representatives of the revolutionary potential of new technology in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Benjamin, in his later essay "The Storyteller" laments the "diminished communicability of experience" which has "removed narrative from the realm of living speech". It is this loss of organic forms, of "unrenewable structures of meaning and experience" which is seen as symptomatic of the crisis of modernity.[4]

For both Benjamin and Williams, a mechanical habit of living has produced a mechanised mode of speech, modern experience erasing the organic rhythm that connected life and language

[3] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot,* p. 31.
[4] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller", *Illuminations.* p. 87–93.

during the cultural high points of earlier pre-industrial epochs. As they argue, our present epoch, with its emphasis on specialisation, lacks the necessary diversity and breadth of experience to keep the language vital, and has produced as a consequence an increasingly one-dimensional language.

In the case of Williams the echoes of Leavis and Eliot are audible, and when one considers how unquestionably he accepts their position, and how easily this position becomes reactionary - a preference for the past as a denial of the present - an even stronger impression is gained of the intellectual struggle Williams had to undergo in order to loosen the ideological bindings of his mentors' self-assured moral vision. For while Williams may have inherited much that was useful from Eliot and Leavis, he also unfortunately allowed aspects of his predecessors' questionable elitism to permeate his own discourse. Elitism and disparaging patronage are more comfortably suited to those who wear them by habit, and, along the way, have made some claim for their own authority. It seems one thing for T.S. Eliot to sit in judgement of the barrenness of his contemporary culture and its language, another for a young socialist to pronounce that the common contemporary language is largely "incapable of expressing anything in any degree complex".[5]

While Eliot seems to provide much of the cultural impetus informing Williams's early work, it is Leavis who is the primary source of his critical method. As Williams points out in his introduction to *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, his own work is an attempt to provide a detailed textual analysis in the manner of *Scrutiny*, treating drama in the way the Cambridge writers around Leavis had approached poetry and the novel, and extending the range of their critical programme into the relatively neglected field of nineteenth and twentieth-century drama:

> This book, in addition to its main objects, is intended, therefore, as a working experiment in the application of practical criticism methods to modern dramatic literature.[6]

Along with the procedure of "practical criticism" came a legacy of received values and aesthetic judgements which usurped or at least derailed any substantive political orientation within Williams's early work. The extension of the Leavisite emphasis on the primacy of language into

[5] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, p. 30.
[6] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, p. 14.

the field of drama was immediately complicated by the fact that the majority of drama is written for public performance. It can be convincingly argued that through the kinetic arts of the theatre written language is given its physical correlative and drama achieves the most complete expression of its form. Williams, however, while claiming that "no separation of drama and literature is reasonable" goes on to vigorously defend the primacy of "literary" language over the "subordinate" practices of stage-craft, believing that such practices are in themselves developed in order to overcome the void left by the contemporary impoverishment of language.

Despite claiming that his early interest in the drama was partially related to the fact that "dramatic forms are appropriated publicly and collectively", this "social" aspect of drama is undermined by his continual insistence on final authorial control.[7] Accepting the status of the "fixed" text (a practical critical insistence on the primacy of the text) Williams argues that the actor, director or designer of the drama is "creative" only in the degree of fidelity they can achieve in relation to the "essential form" of the text, and in "the degree of exactly realised understanding of the finalised expression of the original artist".[8] Williams is unwilling to see the relation between language and the non-verbal aspects of theatre as interdependent parts of a totalised form, for his argument revolves around the contemporary dissipation of such organic processes. This he claims is the problem of modern drama; it has become symptomatic of the damaging specialisation of the productive processes of an industrial age. Oddly, it appears that Williams's critical procedure and its own specialised concern with language possesses just the type of atomising rationale he is suspicious of in modern drama.

Williams's critique, like that of his mentors, is geared towards a confirmation of contemporary social crisis, a crisis which he defines as "the dramatist's abdication of authority" at the hands of bourgeois theatrical conventions which attempt to mask the poverty of contemporary speech. There are clearly problems here, for Williams is minimising the potential for drama to be a socially collaborative practice. Language as the raw material of theatre must, by his definition, encode a specific meaning, fixed in time and space, and closed to the creative act of interpretation. In this sense, language, as the expression of meaning, is a matter purely of transmission and not

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[7] Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 189.
[8] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, p. 35.

also dependent on the critical act of reception. Here Williams tends to fall captive to the supposition that there is but a single "essential" reading of a text, and actors, directors and all those involved in theatrical production are merely instrumental mediums for the technical representation of this essential quality.

A related problem of the privileging of the written text is that the concentration on verbal structure comes at the expense of any contextual analysis beyond a generalised denunciation of industrialisation, so that the material determinants of the text are left largely unaddressed. In this respect Williams's study of drama tends to become a primarily aesthetic consideration so that "experience" itself can be reduced to the expression of "symbols in the literary pattern" or as Jan Gorak puts it, "a value to be embodied in precise and proper language".[9]

Williams implies that the loss of sensibility and shared feeling in this period has precipitated and perpetuated a sharp division between "serious" drama and the language of contemporary life. Yeats is the principal influence on his thinking in this regard, having made the claim that modern naturalistic speech precluded the expression of beauty and passion and was rendered incapable of conveying profound moral seriousness. It was Yeats who had also made the connection with Ibsen, recognising the latter's attempt to overcome the problem by inventing a "conventional rhetoric".[10] The "convention" Ibsen was developing was the creation of an illusion of *ex tempore* speech. Williams's reluctance to embrace the value of this convention is particularly revealing. He is concerned that the illusion of actors speaking in an everyday manner, "*as if they were not being overheard*" detracts from the presence and authority of the playwright within the actual performance:

> It is easy, in fact, to forget the author, and to forget, even, that the words which the actors speak are words which have been arranged by him into a deliberate literary form.[11]

Far from pronouncing the "death of the author" Williams wants the playwright to loom large, like a puppeteer who keeps the strings visible so that the audience will always remain conscious of his manipulative touch, rather than being seduced by the play of his marionettes. Williams

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[9] Jan Gorak, *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams*, p. 25.
[10] See F.R. Leavis, "Tragedy and the 'Medium'", *The Common Pursuit*, p. 131.
[11] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, p. 25.

seems concerned that the illusion of naturalism will facilitate the audience's suspension of disbelief, so that the play will create the effect of "life" rather than an authorial organisation of words and actions. It is a puzzling position for it is difficult to see the tendency to "forget the author" as a dramatic failing, indeed it seems to be the ideal dramatic effect: the on-stage creation of a living experience that does not feel the weight of its pre-determined organisation. From one point of view Williams's strange disapproval of "illusion" in the theatre supports J.P. Ward's remark that there is something very "undramatic about Williams's dramatic preoccupations".[12] It may be argued that Williams is prescient in ushering forth a theatre of self-conscious, self-reflexive drama in which the means of construction are intentionally revealed to facilitate critical inquiry rather than passive spectatorship. Certainly these are the terms by which he would later valorise Brecht. But this type of consideration could never be fruitfully accommodated while Williams held fast to the specifically literary mode of "practical criticism".

In *Politics and Letters* Williams defends his use of "practical criticism" as being "unconventional" and not in accordance with the Cambridge manner in which critical response is inseparable from aesthetic evaluation.[13] He makes the claim that his analysis of Ibsen is "scarcely concerned with response at all".[14] Yet this is difficult to accept. Generally, the implicit sense that Ibsen's work often fails because it cannot achieve the type of linguistic intensity Williams attributes to verse drama, is a value-laden criterion which precludes close attention to the early "naturalist" plays. They are dismissed out of hand. *An Enemy of the People* has little but "lively listening" to recommend it and is "not offered as anything more than a polemic". *The Pillars of the Community* is "crude", "extremely immature" and, condemned by its comparison to "a detective story", is merely the result of "skilful carpentry". Perversely it has a plot which is apparently "extraordinarily complicated" while at the same time "excluding any real complexity".[15]

In one important sense Williams's unwillingness to engage with these works, which stand at the vanguard of the naturalist experiment, is also the result of his critical inheritance. As Gorak suggests:

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[12] J.P. Ward, *Raymond Williams*, p. 28. At one point in *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, Williams suggests that the irony of the phrase, "the illusion of reality" is the final condemning judgement of naturalism. p. 26.

[13] Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 193.

[14] Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 193.

[15] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, p. 75–86.

> By applying Leavisian criteria to literature that will not bear that kind of close verbal scrutiny, Williams alienates himself from the very canon he seeks to reexamine.[16]

For while these plays cannot be reached within the terms of a nostalgia for a "community of expression" and a highly refined dramatic language, they offer extremely fertile ground for a materialist critique of the politics of community. In both plays, beyond the intrigue of their melodramatic plot, there is a broad thematic concern with both the nature of "community" and its relationship to verbal "expression". Against the organic idealism and academic mythology of the notion of community Ibsen posits a contemporary world in which the cynicism of *Realpolitik*, economic determination, moral bankruptcy, self-serving authority and social conformity are given an immediate and localised referent, unfettered by the obligation to confirm the timeless universality or essentialism of the human condition. Unlike much of the drama that preceded it, naturalism no longer allowed the vicious and destructive the mitigating defence of poetic resonance in iambic pentameter.

What Ibsen presents in his earliest naturalist drama is not an organic "community of sensibility" but a contemporary community of "insensibility", and in this respect his naturalist plays seem to reinforce Williams's thesis that the effects of mechanisation have produced a nullity of feeling as the general community becomes guilelessly manipulated by the charisma of authority. Williams however, is deterred from any consideration of Ibsen's representation of the communal effects of an impoverished culture. It is important to him only in the sense that a debased life precipitates a debased drama, because the language of this culture is incapable in his mind of rendering a suitably poetic realisation of life. For Williams this makes these plays only didactic and declamatory, lacking the verbal artistry that could give them the penetrating complexity of "critique". The problem is again the result of Williams's adopted insistence on the primacy of language. He dismisses Ibsen's naturalism on the basis of its linguistic inadequacy, but this is to see language solely in its "aesthetic" capacity, and relating more to the idea of the poetic sublime than to its material and functional application within our culture. What Ibsen is providing in both *The Pillars of the Community* and *An Enemy of the People* is an indictment of the hollow and vacuous nature of high rhetoric. The grandiloquence of political cant is exposed as an

[16] Jan Gorak, *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams*, p. 24.

insidious mode of manipulation and domination. The material function of language and its relation to power is a principal concern. For it is in the name of the "common good" that individual power is effectively ratified. Community is the lie upon which power is preserved.

> Bernick: ... truth - truth which, until tonight, has been utterly and in every way alien to our community.[17]

> Lona Hessel: Then it is for the sake of the community that you have maintained your position these fifteen years upon a lie?[18]

> Dr. Stockmann: What does the destruction of a community matter, if it lives on lies![19]

> Dr. Stockmann: ... the whole fabric of our civic community is founded on the pestiferous soil of falsehood.[20]

In exposing the duplicity of language, particularly as an agent of political posturing, Ibsen focuses very directly on the multivalent abstractions of the term "community". In *The Pillars of the Community* he employs the term on more than fifty occasions, and through such laboured repetition the term ceases to be grounded in any empirical certitude, but becomes a chimera, a non-entity. Even at the purely rhetorical level its meaning is evasive as its oscillates between the political distinctions of egalitarian organisation and a paternalist conception of the "social contract". Common welfare is the ground which is simultaneously extolled and evaded by the protagonists through their insistent recourse to the idea of community. *The Pillars of the Community* actually opens with such a dialogical encounter:

> Krap: You must not use your own time to make the men useless in working hours. Last Saturday you were talking to them of the harm that would be done to the workmen by our new machines and the new working methods at the yard. What makes you do that?
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> Aune: I do it for the good of the community.
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> Krap: That's curious, because Mr Bernick says it's disorganising the community.

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[17] Henrik Ibsen, *The Pillars of the Community*, p. 131.
[18] Henrik Ibsen, *The Pillars of the Community*, p. 80.
[19] Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*, p. 223.
[20] Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*, p. 214.

> Aune: My community is not Mr. Bernick's, Mr. Krap! As President of the Industrial Association, I must —
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> Krap: You are first and foremost the head of Mr Bernick's shipbuilding yard; and, before everything else, you have to do your duty to the community known as the firm of Bernick and Co.; that is what every one of us lives for.[21]

Immediately we are confronted by two opposing notions of what constitutes "community" and what, in actuality, can be taken to represent the "common good". In this class-conscious opening, Ibsen is directly undermining the notion of the community as an insoluble whole, exposing its fractured nature, internal conflict and antagonisms. Against the myth of mutual welfare and concord, Ibsen clearly establishes the material reality of a community of economic interests, the community of "Bernick and Co.". Upon this declaration, Bernick's repetitive claim that he strives only to serve the community contains an obvious irony.

Karsten Bernick, a shipbuilder and leading administrator in his town, has built his position of civil prominence by masking the indiscretions of his youth. By establishing himself as the first man of his community, he is able to manipulate the affairs of state and commercial expansion to his own advantage. When relations return to the town, knowing the truth of Bernick's past, his fear of exposure drives him to orchestrate the sinking of the ship, the "Indian Girl", which will send his secret and all the innocents who sail aboard her to the ocean floor. Only chance saves Bernick from such a crime, but what is particularly significant is that the means by which he disguises his hypocrisy, and the means by which he achieves redemption, are both the result of his ability to invoke the name of community in order to deflect the reality of his own self-interest, greed and egoism. He is able to manage this through the artifice of speech-making, through his ability to draw on a plethora of moral and political platitudes which extol the virtues of community, and to which those under his influence respond like Pavlov's dog.

Bernick's self-justifying rhetoric is based upon the premise that his personal ruin will also precipitate the ruin of the community as a whole, and that as a creative and visionary empire-builder his success is, in the long term, the success of all. Yet this dialectic between self and society takes on more complex configurations. For Bernick speaks of himself as a servant of the

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[21] Henrik Ibsen, *The Pillars of the Community*, p. 26.

community only in public life. At the personal and private level he considers himself to be a victim of the restrictive and repressive nature of its stagnant conformism:

> Bernick: ... you have no idea how indescribably alone I am here, in this narrow stunted community; how each year I have had to relinquish more and more of my right to a full and satisfying life. ... Do you know what we are — we who are counted the pillars of community? We are the tools of that community, neither more nor less.[22]

Here the bourgeois claim for the free expansion of the individual unfettered by a torpid environment is utilised by Bernick as a defence of his mendacity and corruption, but it is also clear that Bernick himself has consciously fostered this puritanically "moral community" in order to preserve the economically favourable *status-quo*, which in fact places severe and debilitating constraints upon others. As Bernick devises plans to monopolise the new railway, in the next room Rörland reads to the women of the Bernick circle by narrating from a book entitled *Woman as the Servant of the Community* and sermonising on the deplorable "revolutionary audacity" of the new "impatient age". This is an ideological position which Bernick fully endorses in respect to others, while reserving for himself the autonomy he sees as the necessary entitlement of the visionary capitalist.

When negotiating with the working class activist Aune, Bernick threatens him with dismissal, reminding him that "the individual must be sacrificed to the general welfare", but Aune has already recognised that Bernick's idea of the general welfare is built solely upon the idea of subordinate service, devoid of any reciprocal sense of moral duty:

> Aune: ... You often speak, sir, about the consideration we owe to the community; it seems to me, however, that the community has its duties too.[23]

That Bernick is providentially saved from committing the atrocity he designed and is able, upon public confession, to redeem himself, is one of Ibsen's bitterest ironies. The myth of a melodramatic "poetic justice" is put to rest. In making his reckoning with the community Bernick admits "that a craving for power, influence and position" has been "the moving spirit" of his actions, yet he also attempts to mitigate his folly by claiming that he preserved the lie because he

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[22] Henrik Ibsen, *The Pillars of the Community*, p. 120.
[23] Henrik Ibsen, *The Pillars of the Community*, p. 55.

"feared the tendency of the community to espy unclean motives behind everything a prominent man undertakes". That he has himself provided proof that they have every justification for doing so escapes him. By appearing to offer the community a gift (railway land shares) that he has actually stolen from them, Bernick easily manipulates the populace and restores his condition without significant loss. Even the worldly Lona appears to utter the play's final lines without conscious irony:

> The spirits of truth and freedom - these are the pillars of the community.[24]

An Enemy of the People bears a structural similarity to its predecessor in that it too exposes the use of the concept of community as a mask to disguise the corrupt and polluted nature of the body politic. The quandary of self and society are represented in the rivalry between the Stockmann brothers. Mayor Stockmann, like Bernick, builds personal power in the name of community, is willing to risk lives in order to advance economic prospects, and suppresses the truth in order to achieve his desired ends. Initially his brother Dr. Stockmann, a man of ideals, appears to be his antithesis. Discovering that the water supply facilitating the town's proposed health spa is contaminated, the Doctor revels in the service that he has performed for his native town and fellow citizens. His brother, in order to protect the capital investment, attempts to conceal the truth by orchestrating a cover-up and accusing Dr. Stockmann of malice, indicting him as an "enemy to the community". Somewhat to the gratification of his ego the Doctor finds his ensuing stand against his brother's authority encouragingly supported by the "independent" press and the "liberal majority", who begin to draw the analogy between the contaminated "artery of the town's life-blood" and the corruption of the town's civic administration. Yet the "bond of brotherhood" and "revolutionary" rhetoric of the radical faction are immediately dissipated as the Mayor enlists the forces of capital against them. The representatives of the "liberal majority" are entirely callow and the "free press" dependent on the patronage of those they seek to overthrow. Both groups are revealed to be passive appendages of the dominant power structure as they betray the increasingly isolated Dr. Stockmann in the name of their "duty to the community".

Initially the Doctor appears as the tragic hero of the action, but his final speech at the public meeting he has called reveals a far more ambiguous figure. When he finds that his final attempt

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[24] Henrik Ibsen, *The Pillars of the Community*, p. 137.

to declare the truth has been stage-managed against him, his own frustrations reveal a political disposition that ceases to speak in the name of the community he has professed to champion. Under pressure, and feeling the tide of events going against him, his rhetorical outpouring and heated verbosity produce a highly autocratic bearing in which his democratic pretensions and sense of common welfare disintegrates into a fascist diatribe. Now it is the Doctor who takes up the role of the visionary who is blocked by the will of a repressive community:

> Dr. Stockmann: ... It is the majority in our community that denies me my freedom and seeks to prevent my speaking the truth.[25]

Rather than the forces of a corrupt administration, it is now "the masses, the majority ... that poisons the sources of our moral life".[26] Hyperbolic and petulant Stockmann's enlightened liberalism descends into an aggressive cultural elitism which ridicules the "foul lie" that

> ...the common folk, the ignorant and incomplete element in the community, have the same right to pronounce judgement and to approve, to direct and to govern, as the isolated, intellectually superior personalities in it.[27]

Stockman, expressing outrage at the insolence of the "mere brutes" becomes increasingly anarchic in recommending a final solution:

> All who live by lies ought to be exterminated like vermin! ...I shall say from the bottom of my heart: Let the whole country perish, let all these people be exterminated! [28]

The longer Stockmann proceeds the more meaningless and futile his cause becomes. His rhetorical flamboyance degenerates into bitter morass and he achieves no redeeming pathos. His language is essentially empty, even the extremist positions have little behind them than the intent to offend. The irony is that, in one sense, he has also declared himself "an enemy of the people". The notion of community has, in the end, been no less an abstraction for Dr. Stockmann than for the liberal majority, the "free press" and Mayor Stockmann.

The paradox in Williams's critique is that while he laments the inability of Ibsen's conversational dialogue to provide sufficient dramatic intensity, Ibsen himself is offering a critique

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[25] Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People,* p. 217.
[26] Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People,* p. 218.
[27] Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People,* p. 219.
[28] Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People,* p. 224.

of the emptiness of a self-consciously dramatic oratory. Both see the problem in terms of "limited expression", but for Williams the limit is an aesthetic shortcoming in Ibsen's naturalism, while the playwright is representing the duplicitous nature of language and the limits upon its ability to express truth. Ibsen is confronting the contemporary crisis of community, a crisis which Williams himself would later describe as the "tragedy of non-communication".[29] In effect Ibsen was developing a dramatic mode of realist critique while Williams remained locked in the cultural myth of community and can only lament the absence of a more poetic age in which, as Ibsen ironically remarked, people apparently spoke "the language of Gods".

Significantly there is no nostalgia for a lost community in these plays, no sentimental longing for an "organic community". The "community of sensibility" that Williams evokes is never hinted at as existing in a recent past, even though the pressures of rapid industrial expansion are experienced in both plays. Both throw out a challenge to the type of critique Williams is engaging in. The concept of community, the role and use of language, the question of social amelioration, the crisis of industrialisation, the formation of an aggressive and acquisitive bourgeois class are all salient elements of Ibsen's drama, but Williams's hands appear tied in relation to naturalism and he declines to embrace these concerns. It is to the early "verse" drama of *Peer Gynt* and Ibsen's later, more modernist and existentialist, work that he finds the type of aesthetic satisfaction he seeks in the dramatic form. He applauds Ibsen's movement towards expressionistic technique and what he sees as its decisive break from naturalism's romantic inheritance and bourgeois conventions. Yet it is questionable as to whether the later work of Ibsen actually achieves the type of ideological break Williams claims. The stress on the individual in conflict with socially determined forces and the quest for a personal liberation against environmental constraint remains central to Ibsen's work. Philosophically his plays continue to extol an anti-communitarian individualism. For Ibsen all movements are inherently compromised by their collective aspirations, and all such aspirations, including community, are seen as the enemies of freedom and encroach on the natural liberties of man.[30] In this respect the community is an indirect collaborator in the oppression of the tragic individual. As such the "the essential tragedy" of the general human situation is rather exclusively the domain of that sensitive, isolated individual

[29] Raymond Williams, "Afterword to Modern Tragedy", *The Politics of Modernism*, p. 103.
[30] Robert S. Brustein, *Theatre of Revolt*, p. 39.

who we are asked to sympathise with in their struggle against a life-denying community. A position Williams would later define as the "bastard of the enlightenment".[31]

There is a latent sense in *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* that Williams is disguising a political disappointment behind his disregard for Ibsen's social plays on aesthetic grounds. Certainly he would have to severely mediate such aesthetic values in order to accommodate and celebrate the achievement of the proletarian plays he finds politically favourable. The position becomes clearer in the light of Williams's consideration of two other naturalist playwrights: Gerhart Hauptmann and John M. Synge. In Hauptmann's *The Weavers* Williams finds a drama that breaks from the naturalist preoccupation with the family and personal relationships, and explores a life outside of the confines of the middle-class living room:

> *The Weavers* was different; not only did it go outside the bourgeois world ... it went outside the limited group of persons and attempted to deal with a community. Further, it was not merely a community, in the older sense, with which Hauptmann was concerned, but a *class*.[32]

Suddenly, "community" and "class" enter into Williams's critical framework as a relevant material concern, while in his lengthy discussion of earlier writers (not only Ibsen but also Strindberg and Chekhov) such a vocabulary had been notably absent. A similar shift in emphasis exists in Williams's examination of Synge's work in which he now finds an authentic representation of the "living processes of a community".[33] Williams saw such processes as embodied in the language and capable of achieving a fully realised "community of expression", allowing for the representation of a "common emotional process" rather than a subjectivised depiction of individual experience. Previously Williams's consideration of the naturalist drama had been socially and historically inarticulate, his concern being solely textual. Now in Hauptmann's play the theme is found to be "the social condition of a body of people"; the action is "the class articulate in revolt". Williams maintains his concern with language but now, far from extolling the poetic merits of verse drama, he canonises Hauptmann's play for its linguistic innovation, its utilisation of a "choral" mode of speech that, according to Williams, produces a means of realising the depersonalised voice of a collective consciousness.

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[31] Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, p. 69.
[32] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, p. 193.
[33] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, p. 171.

By crediting Hauptmann with achieving this "community of expression" Williams implies that *The Weavers* articulates a common apprehension of experience belonging to an homogeneous class. Here Williams demonstrates his susceptibility to the myth of the "organic community", a susceptibility which leads him to voluntarily ignore the textual evidence of Hauptmann's play. The plot itself is particularly simple. A community of fustian weavers are suffering severe exploitation at the hands of their employer. The weavers, broken and harassed, are stirred to action by the young agitator Baeker and the returned soldier Jaeger. Incited by the sense of finally determining their own actions and the intoxicating effect of liberation this temporarily provides, the weavers riot and the play ends with their early success in ransacking the property of the owners and driving away the first advances of the militia who have been called out to suppress their rebellion.

Williams argues that the play offers a departure from "the complex interaction of individuals, on which the romantic plot rested". Its concern, he claims, is with the representation of a wider community experience. But what Hauptmann himself seems so intent on revealing is the corrosive effects of scarcity upon that community, so that solidarity is seen to give way under the pressure of individual needs, a pressure which undermines the integrative homogeneity that Williams valorises in the working class community. Illustrating the divisive antagonisms of sub-classes existing within the generalised notion of a common people, Hauptmann depicts the ragman attacking the coffin-making joiner, the weaver vilifying the peasant, the smith indicting the local policemen, the working class tories denouncing the rebels, until finally, in absolute desperation, and driven by hunger, rebellion produces a type of anarchic indifference which becomes the tragic and murderous expression of their common oppression. Apart from the ambiguous solidarity momentarily achieved in the fervour of drunken revolt, the general effect is one of social fragmentation.

Consequently it is difficult to accept Williams's version that the play represents the action of a community "*as a whole*", or even that it provides the "impersonal expression" of a particular "class". Williams considers the impersonal voice of a class to be most dramatically effective in the play's first act. The act itself is a very short one and the majority of the dialogue is spoken by Manager Pfiefer and the obese factory owner Herr Dreissiger who provides an extended

monologue (in the manner of Bernick and Stockmann). What Williams seems to have in mind in relation to choral speech is Hauptmann's occasional insertion of rudimentary dialogue amongst his italicised stage directions, of which the following is the most prominent instance:

> *A movement begins among the weavers like that of school-children when the teacher has left the class-room. They stretch and straighten themselves, they whisper, step from one foot to another, and in a few seconds there is a loud and general conversation.*
>
> *Various weavers and weaver women:*
>
> *'It's as he said.'*
>
> *'It's nothing new here that people faint from hunger.'*
>
> *'God knows what'll happen in the winter if they go on cutting our pay.*
>
> *'It's a bad year for potatoes.'*
>
> *'Nothing will change until we are all flat on our backs'*[34]

Its italicised division from the dialogue proper suggests that it is intended to be little more than incidental background noise for the more immediate personalised dialogue. It is also significant that this cowering milieu who "have much in common", have very little in common with the rebellious heroes of the drama. The weavers are "half-dwarfish" "sunken-chested", "broken" and "harassed". Red Baeker, who makes the first stand against the injustice, is "exceptionally strong", "unconstrained" and "impudent". He is exceptional, confronting as others dissemble, speaking out while others remain paralysed with fear. While his speech possesses a heavy, mocking irony, those around him have been reduced to a more mechanical chorus than Williams has in mind:

> Several voices: 'Yes , yes , Herr Dreissiger!'
>
> Several voices: 'No, Herr Dreissiger!'
>
> Very many voices: 'Yes, Herr Dreissiger'.

While Baeker embodies the spirit of dissent, it is the swaggering Moritz Jaeger, returning from his experience of the outside world, "well fed", clothed "like a Prince" and speaking "like a gentleman" who adopts the role of the demagogue. Like Baeker he is not quite of the community, both possessing an air of unrestricted mobility. Their characterisation bears a strong comparison

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[34] Gerhart Hauptmann, *The Weavers*, p. 14–15.

with Shearer West's definition of a melodramatic stereotype:

> The character types of melodrama could be recognised as soon as they walked on the stage by their dress, gait, accent, name or demeanour; their affiliation on the side of good or evil within this ethical fantasy world was clearly defined.[35]

Both Baeker and Jaeger are exceptional or uncommon "types" expressing themselves in a manner that is idiosyncratic and clearly individuated from the "choral" voice of a "class articulate in revolt". Williams's emphasis on the choral form stays within the terms of his high culture evaluation of naturalism because he can make a latent aesthetic correlation with the role of the chorus in classical Greek tragedy, but it is difficult to reconcile this with his assertion that Hauptmann's language is "authentically realistic". Here Williams seems to be conceding that contemporary spoken language has at least the advantages of reality and authenticity, a claim he could never uphold in the name of a verse drama, which at this point is Williams's preferred medium. The issue becomes somewhat confused when Williams is unable to locate any salient example of Hauptmann's apparently Laurentian "impersonality and control", "a quality, unfortunately, that one cannot represent adequately by quotation", it being a matter of "general key and tone".[36] Practical criticism seems unable to apprehend this subtlety of key and tone, though there is a problem of translation here that the Cambridge criticism was never intended to address. According to Warren Maurer, Hauptmann first wrote the play "in the impenetrable dialect of the Eulenbirge and then translated in a more widely accessible version, tinged with the Silesian dialect" before the play was translated again into English. Hauptmann himself saw his knowledge of the dialect as an essential precondition of the play's creation:

> I could write *The Weavers* ... because ... I knew the folk dialect. I would, I decided, introduce it into [serious] literature ... I wanted to return to dialect its dignity".[37]

Hauptmann may have achieved his ambition but such a thing, with its particularly localised reference, could never have been adequately translated into the English Williams was reading.

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[35] Shearer West, The construction of social type: caricature, ethnography and Jewish physiognomy in *fin-de-siecle* melodrama", *Nineteenth Century Theatre.* Vol. 21, No.1, Summer '93. p. 5.

[36] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot,* p. 196.

[37] Gerhart Hauptmann, *Sämtliche Werke,* ed. Hans-Egon Hass. Frankfurt: Propyläen, 1962. P.1078–79. Cited in Warren R. Maurer's, *Understanding Gerhart Hauptmann*, p. 46.

When Williams makes claims for the authenticity of key and tone we can only speculate as to how close he is to the "final authority" of the author.

The problem of language and community is also central to Williams's analysis of John Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World.* Like Hauptmann, Synge is credited with raising a common language to the level of the poetic, and as in *The Weavers* the action of Synge's play is set amidst an environment of cultural deprivation. This relationship between a poetic language and an impoverished environment puts a strain on Williams's contention that the inadequacies of the common language are related to "the lack of certain qualities of living, certain capacities for experience", by which he is suggesting a direct correlation between the quality of life experienced by a community and the relative richness or poverty of its language.[38] Again Williams's stress is on the "organic" nature of this socio-lingual axis, presupposing a rather seamless connection between the qualitative assessment of the living condition of a community and the aesthetic potential of that community. His position becomes somewhat difficult to sustain when considering the work of John Synge.

Ostensibly Synge's work appears to embody the aesthetic criteria Williams has laid down for the drama, and there is no surprise in hearing him pronounce Yeats's protege as "undoubtedly the most remarkable English speaking prose dramatist of the century".[39] Such a response coincides with his assurance that Synge's drama is founded upon "the living processes of a community" and is expressed in a rich, "organic language akin in process to poetry". In fact Synge's own theories on the drama and the role of language have clearly influenced Williams. In the "Preface" to *The Playboy of the Western World* Synge writes:

> All art is a collaboration, and there is little doubt that in the happy ages of literature, striking and beautiful phrases were as ready to the storyteller's or playwright's hand, as the rich cloaks and dresses of his time. It is probable that when the Elizabethan dramatist took his ink-horn and sat down to his work that he used many phrases that he had just heard ... This matter, I think, is of importance, for in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words ... In the modern literature of towns ... Ibsen and Zola [are] dealing with the reality

[38] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot,* p. 32.
[39] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot,* p. 173.

> of life in joyless and pallid words ... In Ireland for a few years more ... those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the spring-time of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks.[40]

The emphasis on the Elizabethan period, the importance placed upon the "common" interests of life, the negative appraisal of Ibsen and naturalism, and a belief that the modern urban world, divorced from the "happy ages of literature", has closed itself off to the possibilities of poetic representation, foreshadow Williams's own thinking at this time. Reinforcing the similarity is the idea of an organic community of Irish peasantry which is implicit within Synge's conception of a national drama. And it is here that a real difficulty becomes apparent, for it seems certain that the greater part of the poetic effect of Synge's language is to be found in its particularly "Irish" idiom, an idiom in which a dominant English language is embellished and coloured by the remnant of a suppressed and consequently residual Gaelic lyricism. The results may be aesthetically fruitful, but surely the history of Anglo-Irish relations from the sixteenth century onwards casts grave doubts concerning the appropriateness of the term "organic" as a means of describing the relation between an Irish peasantry and the English language that they speak. The term "organic" suggests a natural communal affiliation that diverts attention from the bloody and repressive nature of imperial conflict. As the language was largely enforced upon a subjugated people as a result of a cultural and geographical expansion, the perception of this relationship as "organic" has the effect of involuntarily legitimating or naturalising the sovereignty of the coloniser and the means by which the language came to be imposed upon the nation. Even to point to the fact that the Irish have subverted this received language as an effective means of maintaining an independent national identity does not restore the validity of the organic association Williams makes, which seems to forget that what is fondly described as an Irish lilt is also a distant echo of a vanquished culture.

As Edward Said has pointed out, the sense of a people as subordinate dependants, and of their conquerors as "distant repositories of the Word", is rendered with subtle conviction by Joyce's Stephen Dedalus as he confronts the English director of studies:

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[40] John M. Synge, "Preface", *The Playboy of the Western World,* published in *Classic Irish Drama,* ed. W.A. Armstrong, p. 71–72.

> The language we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted his words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.[41]

There is of course an unavoidable irony in Stephen Dedalus's "eloquent" consideration of the hegemonic influence of the English language. It may be "foreign", but neither Dedalus nor his maker appears to fret in the shadow of this "so familiar and so foreign" language. The passage, nevertheless, does undermine the implied "naturalness" which is at the heart of the theory of organic relationships. As a Welsh national Williams's emphasis on organic relationships is another instance of his adoption of an intellectual legacy that seems wholly inappropriate for the expression of his own profound concerns.

The practical consequences of this contradiction are apparent in Williams's response to *The Playboy of the Western World* in which he perceptively identifies the dual nature of the imagination. In Synge's terms the imagination, like the language and the pre-industrial manner of living, is part of an organic complex and given wholly positive associations:

> In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery, and magnificent, and tender.[42]

Williams deviates from Synge in this respect, acknowledging that the poetic imagination is capable of both "liberating" as well as producing "deceptive fantasy". This acceptance of the illusory capacity of the imagination internally challenges Williams's own utopian view of the organic community by urging the recognition that the Irish peasantry, far from living in pastoral harmony, were in need of either liberation or deceptive fantasy. Synge's peasant community is a world locked in superstition, fear, and ignorance, and is suffering from a cultural deprivation in which the impending forces of English law and Roman Catholicism oppress the psyche of the community to the extent that any perceived sign of resistance or deviation from the passive acceptance of the prescribed dictates is given mythical status. Pegeen laments the loss of her heroes:

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[41] James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. As cited in Edward Said's, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 270.

[42] John M. Synge, "Preface", *The Playboy of the Western World*, published in *Classic Irish Drama*, ed. W.A. Armstrong, p. 72.

> Where now will you meet the like of Daneen Sullivan knocked the eye from a peeler; or Marcus Quin, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes ... Where will you find the likes of them, I'm saying?[43]

And we find that Sara Tansey has once "yoked the ass cart and drove ten miles" to set her eyes on "the man bit the yellow lady's nostril on the northern shore".[44] Such "heroics" are elevated as a reaction to the general air of submission and fear that exists as a normative condition of this community and which is illustrated by the emasculated Shawn, who is the embodiment of this fear:

> Oh, Father Reilly, and the saints of God, where will I hide myself today.[45]

Shawn's fear is comprehensive, but it finds its fullest expression in his apprehension towards the "Cardinals of Rome" while Pegeen sees more cause for alarm in the presence of an army of occupation:

> and the thousand militia - bad cess to them! - walking idle through the land.[46]

One of the real achievements of Synge's writing is that the weight of cultural oppression upon his peasant community is so subtly transmitted. Unlike Hauptmann there is nothing declaratory about his manner of presentation. In *The Weavers* people talk directly about their poverty and their inability to feed their children. There is an awkwardness about this expression of the obvious, whereas in Synge's play oppression exists as a generalised condition, so widely understood that it is no topic of conversation, but rather a part of the general and accepted framework within which these people exist. It is a state of being that is undergoing the processes of naturalisation. The level of fear and subjugation is represented by the community's enthusiastic, almost reverential, response to the arrival of the "outlaw" Christy Mahon, the poet-hero who becomes identified with the legendary Celtic heroes of the epic cycles of Cuchullain and Finn,

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[43] John M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World,* p. 180.
[44] John M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World,* p. 210.
[45] John M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World,* p. 184.
[46] John M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World,* p. 183. "Bad cess to them" can generally be translated as *may evil befall,* but it does have a specifically Irish application where it refers to forced "military exactions". *Oxford English Dictionary.*

and far removed from their own frightened response to the "queer fellow, going mad or getting his death, maybe, in the gripe of the ditch".[47]

In this respect there is little correspondence between the quality of the lived experience and the quality of the language spoken. In fact a deep incongruity exists between the richness of the speech and the cultural impoverishment of the social existence, an impoverishment in which fantasy becomes a symptom of defeated desires. The "poet's talking" does not offer "liberation" to the community, only a temporary hiatus from the realisation of the tragic. Christy Mahon is a giant-killer only in the eyes of the crest-fallen and the romantic imaginings of the young women. As Williams suggests, the crime of parricide provides the illusion of heroism only when "nourished and raised to the heights by a community where the mythology of force is dominant" yet when the divergence between the "gallous story" which liberates the spirit and the brutality of the "dirty deed" which disgusts it, becomes evident, Christy's fall from grace brings about the self-realisation that it was actually his own "poet's talking" that gave him his heroic status within the community.[48]

Poetry liberates Christy Mahon, but it is an individualised solution. Once he is equipped with the realisation of his powers he plans to "go romancing through a romping lifetime from this hour to the dawning of the judgement day". In the typical fashion of the hero of other western worlds, he denies the claims of the community and sets off into the unknown. The community has been the making of him, but only as far as they distinguished the "daring fellow" from themselves.

Significantly Williams added an important paragraph to his account of Synge when he reprinted the extended version of his work on drama in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* in 1968:

> It is not only Christy who is transformed; the community itself has made something. Their "hero" may go from them, but he is their creation - "the only Playboy of the Western World". A starved community - and this is the irony but also, unconsciously, the cruelty of the action - has at once alienated and launched its destructive and confusing fantasy. The fantastic deception is separated from them; lost to them; gone out into romance. It is a bitter comment on the poverty, which required other experience and other actions. It is also a bitter comment, as we now

[47] John M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World*, p. 183.
[48] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot*, p. 181.

> look back, on the real relation between the Irish drama and the Irish people of this period. What the writers found, in their own medium, was "richness, but the richness was a function of a more pressing poverty, and this was at times idealised, at times compounded; in *The Playboy* faced but then confidently superseded: the poverty and the fantasy, always so closely related, seen now as bitterly nourishing each other; grasped and projected into an exiled orbit.[49]

The change in emphasis is clear. This later version now recognises the historical and material conditions of the play's content as well as the historical and material conditions of its creation and production. Williams is by now open to a consideration of the "starved community", its "destructive and confusing fantasy" and the idealisation of its poverty as a bitter nourishment. However, before Williams could fully recognise the tragic implications of community he would have to engage with the ambiguity of his own metaphorical reliance on the harmonic notion of the "organic" which had been handed down to him from the English heritage he defined as the "culture and society" tradition.

[49] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht,* p. 148.