

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

October 2013 Vol. 4 Issue-V

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## Raymond Williams and Marxist Literary Theory

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When Raymond Williams died 1988, at the age of sixty six, he was the most 'authoritative, consistent and original socialist thinker in the English speaking world' (Blackburn, 1989: 9). He has influenced a generation of students and critics through his work which reflected a variety of preoccupations coupled with an unwavering political commitment. He was a prolific writer who wrote on a wide variety of subjects. Recording his impression on the achievement of Williams, Edward Said in *The Nation* obituary wrote:

To trans-Atlantic readers, the long list of Williams' work has always seemed astounding. Here was a Cambridge Professor of Drama who not only wrote about the entire range of English literature but who established cultural studies at the Pinnacle of humanistic research, film, critical theory, television society and history with prescient authority, and was polemically involved as an unwavering man of the left and artistically involved with literature as novelist (1988:314).

Williams was a leading Marxist thinker who made significant contribution to Marxist literary theory, yet he never called himself a 'Marxist' but preferred the label of 'Socialist' or 'Communist'. When asked if he was a Marxist, he replied: "It doesn't really matter... which label is adopted". However Williams' work undoubtedly belongs to the Marxist tradition in spite of him self. As Terry Eagleton aptly comments: "Any Marxist criticism in England which has shirked taking the pressure of Williams' work will find itself seriously crippled and truncated" (1982:24)

However Williams' engagement with Marxism had always been fraught with dissent. His career is illustrative of his complex relationship with Marxism. He was at once deeply suspicious and critical of some of its basic tenets and yet remained committed to the idea of revolutionary struggle.

Williams was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) as a student at Cambridge, but left it after his return from the war and maintained a critical distance from all kinds of active political involvement. The publication of *Culture and Society* brought him into an active involvement in the political discussion concerning culture. Ever since then, as E.P.Thompson pointed out, he had been moving steadily towards the political left. "A striking feature of Williams' career", wrote Terry Eagleton, "is that he moves steadily further to the political left in a welcome reversal of the usual clichéd trek from youthful radical to middle aged reactionary" (1982:5).

During the sixties Williams came into contact with European Marxist theory. Lucien Goldmann, with whom Williams had a number of discussions when the former visited

Cambridge in 1970, was a major influence. This dialogue with newly available alternative traditions in European Marxism enabled Williams to situate his analysis of culture in the context of European Marxist thought. *Marxism and Literature* records his dialogue with Marxism. Ever since then Williams' work has carried a distinct Marxist emphasis. However commitment to Marxism for Williams was neither conformism nor an acceptance of orthodoxy. He was an incorrigible non-conformist and refused to be silenced in the name of 'Marxian truth'. Eagleton was right in saying that it was not Marxisms which appropriated Williams, but he who "coolly appropriated it" (1989:6).

William was deeply suspicious of all forms of orthodoxies and accepted 'truths'. Theory for him was practice and he never professed anything that did not emerge from 'practice' or 'experience'. He had difficulties in subscribing to Marx's idea of 'base and superstructure'. He sought to redefine this most hallowed concept of Marxism. Marxists thinkers from Engels to Althusser have time and again sought to redefine the concept to exonerate it from the charge of reductionism. Williams has been unique, in rejecting the concept as it has been understood by the Marxist.

The distinction 'base' and 'superstructure', he argued, was reified version of the social process. He argued that the breaking up of social practices into autonomous categories and ascribing casual primacy to some and relegating others to the level of 'effects' was against Marx's emphasis on 'practical consciousness'. The concept, he further said, reduced the "social creation of real men in real relationships". The concept, he further said, reduced the "social creation of real men in real relationships" to mere categories. He attacked the polarization of the lived experience of people into the economic, political and cultural spheres. Instead he spoke of seeing society as an indissoluble process which simultaneously integrated the economic, political and cultural practices.

This critique of the 'base superstructure' model has led to dissolution of various binary oppositions modeled on the thesis, of which that of 'literature and society' is of special importance. Williams argues for seeing literature primarily a social practice which is specific and situated within a complex of social practices.

His argument for 'connections' and 'relationships' between varied social practices has given rise to the most important of his concepts 'Cultural materialism'. The concept, it is argued, can be seen as an extension of historical materialism to the realm of culture which has been so resistant to such as interpretation. 'Culture', he argues, is itself a material activity and not an effect of superstructure which is caused by the economic base. 'Cultural materialism' has been chiefly responsible for the emergence of 'culture studies' as a distinct discipline in British Universities and also New Historicism in the US. The concept is a crystallization of his arguments about culture over the years since the publication of *Culture and Society* in 1958.

Williams' early work carries the Cambridge English emphasis on 'close reading', and is solely concerned with intense literary analysis. But since the publication of *Culture and Society* Williams has been moving away from close reading of literary texts to the study of a wider field which he called 'culture'. If his later work shows no preoccupation with

the “literary”, it does not necessarily imply that his interest in literature had diminished. On the contrary Williams was steadily engaged in literature, he was novelist himself. The reason why Williams abandoned pure literary studies is because for him literature was not a privileged category but was one among the diverse cultural practices. His persistent argument has been that literary analysis cannot be undertaken in isolation from the issues of culture. And also, he saw ‘literature’ as a construct implicated in historical processes and not a timeless category. The term literature he felt, was a narrow one which privileged some modes of writing as literary and excluded other forms. Instead he preferred the use of the term ‘writing’ to describe all forms of writing – from a scientific paper to a TV script. All kinds of writing according to Williams’ involve the process of composition, selection and exclusion. Even scientific writing, he argued, has to be studied in terms of composition. Williams’ argument was that instead of limiting ourselves to a narrow category called literature which he includes certain privileged forms of writing one must recognize that there exists a completed continuum of creative practices of communications. Since all forms are creative it would be reactionary and elitist to privilege only some as ‘literary’ and thereby tacitly or explicitly devaluing others. This kind of perspective it could be argued tends to lead to a kind of relativism which can always be stretched to any extreme. Yet, Williams feels: “It was necessary to show that all kinds of writing produced meaning and value... by modes of composition and deep conventions of stance and focus” (1976:326).

Communications was Williams’s major preoccupation and he made significant contribution to the study of the media. Even as early as in the 60s Williams envisaged the growing importance of the electronic media in the neo-capitalistic economy. His prognostications about ‘cultural imperialism’ that the satellite communication system would usher are lived realities today. He was also a pioneer in the field of ‘image studies’ that are concerned with the politics of ‘representation’.

A unique feature of Williams is his sublime silence on current literary theory. Though his own arguments were highly theoretical he hardly ever used the word ‘theory’ in the sense current in academic circles. He was not disturbed by the glib talk of post-structuralism. As Terry Eagleton remarks:

He refused to be distracted by the wilder flights of Althusserian or post-structuralist theory and was still there, ready and waiting for us, when some of us younger theorists, sadder and wiser, finally re-emerged from one or two cul-de-sacs to rejoin him where he had left off (Eagleton 1989:6).

Williams was perspicacious in noticing the limitations of theory. It was, he thought, of little use and that it soon led to a closure. His work should not be misunderstood as a result of a mind blissfully ignorant of the contemporary talk; on the contrary it is a response to the pressures from critical theory. Though he never mentions his opponents his arguments are nevertheless directed at them.

Theories like formalism, structuralism, and post-structuralism, he argued, are alike in their rejection of history and exclusion of ‘intention’. A rejection of history, for him, was

also a rejection of the possibility of its being changed. He also viewed the current preoccupation with the 'text' as an escape from commitment and purpose. A text according to him is an 'isolated object to be construed and discoursed upon: once from the pulpits, now from the seminar desk' and " what was being excluded, from this work reduced to the status of text or of text as critical device, was the socially and historically specifiable agency of its making"(1990:172)

Williams sees no great difference between the New critics' arguments about the 'Verbal icon' and the 'New Theorists' preoccupation with the 'text', for both according to him reduce 'practice' to an 'object'. The exclusion of 'practice' or 'historically specifiable agency', Williams argues, is an argument for the status quo as it excludes the possibility of change. John Fekete has aptly expressed this aspect of modern theory in *The Structural Allegory*:

The variants of this language paradigm offer a definition of human life that invites us to be satisfied with the brute factuality of the multiplicity and serial succession of symbolic and institutional systems, whose significance we have no standard to evaluate and about which nothing can or need be done(1990:173)

Williams argued that the preoccupation with 'language paradigm' has declined to 'mere play' and 'multiple games'. He objected to the 'endless deferment of meaning' and 'word play' (Though he welcomed the radical implications of Derrida's hermeneutics he was critical of the Yale Deconstructionists' appropriation of Derrida that depoliticized his theory). Meanings and values, he argued are created by 'real human beings in real social relations'. Meaning is condensed practice and to that extent changeable. Since meaning is created by men in definite socio-historical contexts it can also be changed through practice.

Unlike many theorists, Williams was an intensely political man. Edward Said had once remarked that Williams was a 'reflective critic' rather than a committed revolutionary like Lukacs (1982:232). Williams's long career of political commitment ironically contradicts Said's comment. However the epithet 'reflective' can be used with great justification to describe the work of many contemporary theorists. Williams's work emerged from his involvement in the struggle for Welsh nationalism and socialist politics. He was the founder of Socialist society in 1981 and identified himself with radical groups and movements from anti Vietnam campaign to socialist oppositions in Eastern Europe.

At a time when the British Left faced a grave crisis following the developments in Eastern Europe Williams advocated a broad based political association of the Left which would shun orthodoxy and evolve alternative practices to grapple with the altered political reality.

The importance of Williams' literary criticism, says Evans Watkins, is his refusal to recognize the traditional division of 'extrinsic' and 'intrinsic' in the study of literature.

He also rejected the 'literature and society' approach. Williams saw literature as a 'practice' involving 'real men' under definite social relations and not as a mere reflection of an already given reality or an autonomous 'category'. He was critical of the formalist and poststructuralist reduction of literature into an object. Instead he inaugurated an approach that would view literature as an inalienable part of the complex social process called 'culture', without reducing its specificity.

The concept 'structure of feeling' which he invented is extremely useful in seeing works of art in their relation to social totality.

Another important feature of his criticism is an emphasis on the 'specificity of experience'. In fact this particular emphasis came under heavy fire from his critics. Meanings and values, he argued, are created by active human beings in specific contexts; they are in Saidian sense "worldly". These meanings created by distinct people in specific historic-cultural contexts cannot be explained by a readymade, monolithic and pseudoscientific theory which, with great impudence, tends to subsume the 'lived experience' of various people under an abstraction.

Williams was a Marxist humanist in the sense that he believed in the capacity of man to alter his conditions of existence. At a time when post-structuralists preferred to speak in terms of 'de-centering' man, Williams was preoccupied with human agency and the role of the active subject in history. Unlike many of his contemporaries for whom meanings and values were impossible, he saw them as constitutive practices which can be altered by men to the extent which they have created them. This was not facile utopianism but a conviction that emerged from active political commitment.

His work is marked by an openness of approach, he never admitted any closure. In his Introduction to *Keywords* Williams wrote:

My publishers have been good enough to include some blank pages, not only for the convenience of making notes, but as a sign that the enquiry remains open, and the author will welcome all amendments, corrections and additions (1982:26)

This was the spirit of his inquiry. Williams leaves us with many questions concerning culture, which need further elaboration and enquiry, but as Robin Blackburn has observed, Williams has also left us with "many pointers as to where the answers may lie" (1989:23).

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