R. SHASHIDHAR*

Culture and Society: An Introduction to Raymond Williams

Raymond Williams’ *Culture and Society* appeared in the ideological climate of the cold war and bears all the makes of it. Given the remoteness of that ideological climate—accentuated ironically by the fall of Soviet Russia—and given the present post-Saussurean climate of poststructuralism, it might appear that this text of Williams is rather dated and can have only an academic interest to the students of the leftist writings of Raymond Williams. There are, however, two reasons why I am going back to this text. First, Williams is a thinker whose significance is not sufficiently appreciated in this country. It is rather sad that his seminal contributions were relegated by Althusserian arguments in the Seventies and then by the spate of poststructuralist and Derridean deconstruction. It is often not sufficiently appreciated that Williams addresses these intellectual formations in his later writings, albeit obliquely. My second reason is that where Williams is heard, it is more often as the author of *Culture and Society*, as if his later writings were just an old-style Marxist justification of all that he said in this book. These remarks should not lead one to expect that this article is an overall introduction to the ouvre of Williams. It, rather, a critical presentation of Williams, book mentioned above, which I hope introduces the newcomer to the problems that haunted Williams all his writing life. I have deliberately kept clear of poststructuralist and postcolonial arguments, although the analysis in this essay, I hope, shows where such openings are possible. In the beginning of the essay there are references to certain intellectual formation very specific to the literary-critical world—references to F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot. But I have not taken the trouble of explaining them as I thought that might distract the reader from the general argument. In any case such references are marginal.

Because Williams learnt his bitter lesson from the defeat of the reductive Marxism of the Thirties in the battle for cultural interpretation, his political thinking took a longer time in traversing from its initial ethical preoccupation to its subsequent redefinition

*Reader, Department of Postgraduate Studies and Research in English, Mangalore University Mangalagangothri, Karnataka State.

*Social Scientist*, Vol. 25, Nos. 5–6, May–June 1997
through Marxism which is characteristic of an intellectual's radicalisation. But politics, as we remember, was one of the twin poles of his Romantic anti-capitalist preoccupation. In the journal he started soon after the WW I—Politics and Letters—the other was 'literature'. As a Cambridge School product, literature was important to Williams in two senses: as the received historical 'tradition' it was the significant record of a kind and quality of lived culture which, in its felt lack in the modern times, demanded to be studied, taught and passed on as a guide for any valid social thinking. In the present its value was altogether different. In its encounter with the lived details of life, literature signified in the present a creative exploration by and of consciousness. In this its mode of cognition was held to be qualitatively different and higher than the epistemology of systemic social sciences. By extension literature then stood for 'subjectivity' in all its malleability as it continuously discovered itself, surprised itself, found itself, through; living in the objective world. the objective world itself was not the-given material entity of the Descartean schism: it was, on the other hand, very much an active social world. From Politics and Letters up to the discovery of Gramsci and Goldmann, Williams' problem was how to socially explain this creative consciousness so that it would not be positivistically reduced as the epiphenomenon of some other, usually economic, element of society. Eliot's conservative way out of this problem was through the schism between the anthropological culture as 'a whole way of life' and the redefined Arnoldian culture as the quality of an accomplished and discriminating consciousness. Reductive Marxists in the thirties saw no problem here at all in that the great explanatory formula of base-superstructure had already explained everything and it was only a question of its next 'application'. Most of Williams' holistic writing with reference to literature and other discursive writings up to his confrontation with continental Marxism is taken up with the problem of finding an alternative approach to Eliot and the reductive Marxists. For a long time he tried 'systemic organicism' as a solution—a position by which he came to view society as organically related to familial, communicational, economic, and political systems. It must be added here at once that Williams was not subscribing to the fallacy of 'expressive totality' in this exercise. In the dual attempt to counter the positivistic and mechanistic crudities of English Marxism about creative consciousness and the conservative consecration of elitism, Williams' 'systemic organicism' took on the colours of ethicalism. The politics and cultural criticism of this period following from these concerns and positions require a separate analysis which falls outside
the scope of this article. In this article I want to analyse how Williams constructed creative consciousness in his pre-semiotic period—that is, before his encounter with the continental Marxism and the linguistics of Vygotsky.

We can begin with the important text *Culture and Society*. The gestation of eight years between the publications of 'The Idea of Culture' in 1950 and 'T.S. Eliot on Culture' in 1953, and *Culture and Society* in 1958 confirms Williams' recollection in *Politics and Letters—Interviews with the New Left* that the 'whole process of writing *Culture and Society* was one of almost constant redefinition and reformulation'. Although Williams had welcomed Eliot's emphasis on 'a whole way of life' in the latter's book *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, he had felt that his neo-conservative stance in it as a whole was 'almost calculated to infuriate.' He rightly identified Eliot's work as the paragon of cold-war ideology. In writing *Culture and Society* the question, thus, was whether he 'should write a critique of that ideology in a wholly negative way, which at one time [he] considered or whether the right course was not to recover the true complexity of the tradition it had confiscated—so that the appropriation could be seen for what it was.' The 'initial impetus' of the 'origin' of *Culture and Society* thus goes back to the publication of Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* in 1948, which confirmed for Williams that there was a 'concentration of a kind of social thought around this term which hadn’t before appeared particularly important.' He settled for the second option as 'it allowed [him] to refute the increasing contemporary use of the concept of culture against democracy, socialism, the working class or popular education, in the tradition itself.' Hence the 'primary motivation' of *Culture and Society* was not 'to found a new position;' as 'an oppositional work' it intended 'to counter the appropriation of a long line of thinking about culture to what were by now decisively reactionary positions.'

As a socialist attempt for the counter appropriation of 'a long line' of thinkers *Culture and Society* has occasioned fertile controversy. The historical nature of the book, its polemical conclusion forced by the circumstances of the cold war, and the socialist colour of the whole enterprise have generally blinded the reviewers and critics alike to the semantic fulcrum of *Culture and Society*. In the *Interviews*, for example, which is the most comprehensive discussion of the book to date, no question is asked about Williams, general preoccupation with historical semantics during this time. The *Interviews* do not correctly correlate *Culture and Society* with *Keywords*, except for noting that in comparison 'one absolutely central point comes home much more forcibly in the later book, because of the wider range of the terms discussed. . .' Though substantial work was done 'later', *Keywords*
was essentially a part of *Culture and Society*. Williams confirms this in his 1983 introduction in which the original literary-critical emphasis on language as the expression of meaning is now redefined with reference to 'conflict':

The kind of semantics to which these notes and essays belong is one of the tendencies . . . [which] recognizes, as any study of language must, that there is indeed community between past and present, but also that *community*—that difficult word—is not the only possible description of these relations between past and the present; that there are also radical change, discontinuity and conflict. . . .

Because of this general inattention the Leavisites have generally hurried to point at the socialist 'propaganda' behind the book, while the Marxist critics have, rightly, busied themselves with its idealism. But now a closer look at this idealism is necessitated by Williams' claim, following his reentry into the linguistic realm, that all previous use of the concept of 'sign' has been essentially objectivist idealism.

Before settling down to analyse its semantic foundations, we should first familiarise ourselves with the groundplan of *Culture and Society*. Thematically, it consists of three distinct levels. The first part of the book consists of a historical survey of significant statement on culture. Williams' guiding principle here is that these statements were made as active responses to the pressures of the day. After taking culture as meanings distinguished in response to involving social situations, Williams traces it through the nineteenth century in terms of major issues like Industry, Democracy and Art. This yields three phases—1790–1870, 1870–1914, and 1914–1945. Williams makes this demarcation as preparatory to saying that although 'certain decisive statement stand' prominently from all these periods and phases, 'the world we see through such eyes is not, although it resembles, our world.' Hence whatever holds 'significance' from the 'set of meanings' received from 'the tradition' has to be valued in terms of the present experience. For this we have to 'return them to immediate experience.' This returning of meanings to the 'immediate experience' for testing their significance forms the second level of *Culture and Society*. The terms of reference for this testing return are the 'new problems arising from the development of mass media of communication and the general growth of large-scale organizations'—which we have studied in the last chapter.
The third level of *Culture and Society* is that part of the book in which Williams offers holistic propositions as the ethical imperative issuing from the significance of past meanings tested under the pressures of the present experience. These propositions emerge as 'variations and new definitions' of the idea of culture. They are the by-product of the 'return' made in order to ascertain the present relevance of the received meanings.

Two of the 'questions and objections' raised about the book can be isolated from the *Interviews* for a closer examination of its semantic foundation. I am isolating two of these 'questions and objections' because they bear on the historical-semantic undertaking in *Culture and Society* which corresponds to his political preoccupation with the organicistic 'naive community' of the period. The first of these 'questions and objections' of the interviewers is regarding the distinction Williams maintains between 'politics' and 'social thinking'. The interviewers point to a series of interconnected limitations following from this literary-critical distinction. They relate to the general strategy of *Culture and Society* and its effect on the final outcome at three levels: (a) Despite their 'very explicit and definite and often central view on the politics of the day,' the theme of *Culture and Society* 'appears to be a direct counterposition of the social core of successive thinkers against a mere political surface which can be somehow detached and dismissed.' The distinction posits a contrast 'between truth which is necessarily social, and politics which is a brittle and ephemeral adjunct separable from it;' (b) The setting up of such a contrast comes to have a direct bearing on Williams' own politics in that- the 'general depreciation of politics' betray an 'inadvertent', 'conservative' bias in the balance of 'judgment of particular persons as the central structure of the work, the overall way it is organized,' (c) the separation of social thought from politics of the day excludes 'the middle term of politics,' thereby failing to appreciate that 'the politics of the period cannot be treated as a series of transient judgments of particular episodes that are separable from a deeper social thought.'

The second question relates to the specific epistemology which 'in' forms Williams' distinction between politics and social thinking in which the latter is value-loaded against the former. While the question on epistemology is strategic in so far as it concerns the very structure of the book, the one on the separation of politics and social thinking can be seen as the outcome. The question regarding the 'epistemology', prefigured in the distinction between social thinking and politics, is what I am going to concentrate on below.

However, I shall not be dealing with 'epistemology' proper. By observing the three levels in the construction of *Culture and Society* we can conclude that in drawing the historical lineage of culture-
society thinkers Williams employs a kind of ‘epistemology’ of the human-social reality which is to be properly called ‘historical hermeneutics’. That is, instead of an ‘epistemology’ which he would have seen as an a priori privileging of the categorical over the reality of the human-social ‘experience’ as it emerges from the pores and pressures of ‘immediate’ living as the ground for his distinctions. In other words he employs the notion of the literary-critical organic community and its category of ‘experience’ as the distinguishing guide. This then was ‘discovered’ by Williams in the ‘texts’ of the nineteenth-century culturalists on the literary-critical basis of language as the solution of the idealist community. Williams tries to convince us all through the book that such a reality is not available to rational ‘abstraction’ and that any hope of understanding it lies in ‘returning’ the significant statements received from the past instances of that ‘lived’ reality to the ‘immediate’ living of our own times. Such a concept of reality as the hermeneutic dialectic between the past and the present explains Williams’ statement, ‘Somewhere, in the world of human thinking coming down to us from our predecessors, the necessary insights, the fruitful bearings, exist. But to keep them where they belong, in direct touch with our experience, is a constant struggle.’

Though its connections with literary criticism are obvious, the familiarity of some of the phrases should not blind us to the development Culture and Society achieves in this argument. The substitution of the literary-critical text by history itself as an anthropological text is a continuation of latencies present in some of his earlier dramatic criticism, where the preoccupation with the productional conventions was dragging him more and more out into historical and ideological criticism. What happens in such a substitution is obvious. If the lack of the concept of civil society forces Williams to conceptualise it as systemic organicism, the resultant lack of the concept of class struggle in the field of culture forces him to conceptualise writing as the hermeneutic record of ‘immediate’ living. We will now see how Williams does this.

The first and the major part of Culture and Society is the ‘study of actual individual statements and contributions’ which records and analyses the major statements about culture. Although Williams expresses his commitment in broad terms ‘to the study of actual language: that is to say, to the words and sequences of words which particular men and women have used in trying to give meaning to their experience,’ the literary-critical background leads to him to a particular ‘tradition’ of thinkers. More than the criterion that informs the selection of thinkers, what is noticeable is the distinction
of 'abstracted problems' and 'statements by individuals.' Williams distinguishes between abstraction and concreteness in his study of individual statements on the basis of 'response'—that is, by taking an extracted semantic pattern of key words as the existential-seismic record of responses to involving social situations: 'Our meaning of culture is a response to the events which our meanings of industry and democracy most evidently define.' I shall discuss below the method used by Williams 'to distinguish the [cultural] meanings' and 'to relate them to their sources and effects.' I have called this method, for the sake of convenience, the 'context-content' method.

Historical hermeneutics appears in Williams' attempt to construct reality historically on the basis of language. It is signalled in the very beginning of *Culture and Society* where he states the familiar literary-critical necessity to distinguish between experiential and political statements. Thus, if a representative passage is to be selected from *Culture and Society*, it would certainly be the one used in the *Interviews* in which Williams defends Burke's anti-democratic sentiments:

> The correctness of these ideas is not at first in question; and their truth is not, at first, to be assessed by their usefulness in historical understanding or in political insight. Burke's writing is an articulated experience, and as such has a validity which can survive even the demolition of its general conclusions.

The interviewers point out that in the passage 'there seems to be an opposition between the truth of ideas as usually understood—the sort that help us to understand history or politics—and a deeper or more durable experience that does not necessarily correspond to any kind of ordinary discursive truth.' This opposition noted by the editors between the experiential consciousness as the guarantee of the social reality and its subsequent rational and analytical abstraction is quite familiar to us by now from the analysis of *Politics and Letters* and 'The Idea of Culture.' In fact the experiential immunity to ideology that Williams is claiming here for Burke is a form of the continued expression of the Romantic anti-capitalist categories which Williams was yet to resolve into what he had then called a 'synthesis'. The dichotomy between the so called experiential concreteness of the personal statement and its analytical or rational abstraction in social sciences was what Williams had in mind when he wrote in *Politics and Letters* that various facets of 'politics' and 'letters' need to be urgently resolved into a synthesis of 'human and material richness.' The distinction between 'politics' in the historical 'contexts' and the supposed 'deeper' contents of social thinking, and the semantic basis through which a specific reality is constructed to accommodate both can be brought under analytical focus by reconstructing the method...
employed by Williams in the description and analysis of the historical formation of the concept ‘culture’.

A polemical work which seeks to ‘recover’ or reappropriate the social reference of a category by taking it back to a critical point in its temporal journey may be expected to have a ‘method’, a working principle whereby not only ‘the social’ is understood in a specific way, but also ‘related’ as the reference of the category in question. But to speak of a ‘methodology’ of Culture and Society would be anomalous to the original spirit in which it was conceived by Williams. Instead he speaks of ‘terms of reference’:

My terms of reference then are not only to distinguish the meanings but to relate them to their sources and effects. I shall try to do this by examining, not a series of abstracted problems, but a series of statements by individuals. It is not only that, by temperament and training, I find more meaning in this kind of personally verified statement than in a system of significant abstractions. It is also that, in a theme of this kind, I feel myself committed to the study of actual language: that is to say, to the words and sequences of words which particular men and women have used in trying to give meaning to their experience.30

‘Significant abstractions’ was also the diagnostic phrase in literary criticism for the chronic ‘logical rigidity’ and ‘abstract rationalism’ from which the methodologies of the social-sciences were seen to be suffering. The ‘terms of reference’ for Williams, then, are a series of personal statements—the context in which they were offered and their subsequent ‘effects’—true to the ‘private meaning’ and ‘public fact’ concern of the editors of Politics and Letters. In practice this meant running the conceptual diversity of a semantic unit along with the social context—seen as its ‘source’ of evolution—as interrelated sequences. Given Williams’ literary-critical ‘temperament and training’ at this time, any other conceptual or analytical mode of enquiry should naturally have appeared ‘methodological’ in its worst sense. Hence the introductory distancing: ‘But, as a method of inquiry, I have not chosen to list certain topics, and to assemble summaries of particular statements on them.’31 This is entirely in keeping with the spirit of the ‘sociological’ interests of Scrutineers who were one in hostility towards sociology as the ‘quotation-lifting’ ‘background’ study.

Williams’ ‘terms of reference’ involves a tactics of distinguishing meanings and relating them to their ‘sources’ and ‘effects’. In general terms the tactics can be seen as one of relating the ‘content’ of a
personal statement to its historical 'context'. The problem was how to construct the facticity of history, of 'a whole way of life', as 'internal' to 'value'; to reconcile the analytical realm of facts with the active world of the subject. Here the idealism of organic 'experience' provided a solution by enabling an extension of 'experience' to cover the social facts themselves. Having done this, Williams then added the dialectics of process and relations to it, although the word itself was anathema at that time as it suggested the natural-scientific overtones of Engels' *Dialectics of Nature*.

We can see how Williams works out his solution. An initial sequence of events, subsequently recognizable as a context in a historical distance, is shown to beget a sequence of responses which can also be historically objectified as the responsive content, an argument or a position. The content, which was 'then' a process of meaning-in-the-making but 'now' a recognizable body of arguments, is inherited in a subsequently changed context. Now, the effort to understand this received content in response to the changed initial context necessitates a further change in the inherited content. The process can thus continue *ad infinitum*, such that the received-changed meaning always undergoes further mutations in response to the changed and changing context in which it is received and continued as responsive understanding. But Williams, to be sure, does not offer changes in contexts and contents as separate and separable temporal instances. The dynamic relation between them is not only processual, but also mutually interactive and involving.

This can be illustrated by examples from *Culture and Society*. Burke's response was contextual. But the historical context was not static; it was a situation on the move—an industrialising and democratising country where these 'forces' were accelerating even as Burke was articulating his response: 'And even while Burke was writing, the great tide of economic change was flowing strongly, carrying with it many of the political changes against which he was concerned to argue.' The content of Burke was not, similarly, an instance but a continual accretion which only became a body of writing retrospectively in terms of the now historically objectified context. Thus the content of Burke's experience of an initial context—'an experience of stability, containing imperfections, but not essentially threatened,' changes, not at some instance in time, but processually, in the course of response itself. As 'the current of change swelled,' Burke's 'affirmation became a desperate defence.'

From the initial sequence of context and content certain major 'terms' are seen to precipitate into a 'pattern' or 'structure' of key words in terms of which the subsequent social thinking, albeit with local variations, largely proceeds. In *Culture and Society* Williams' 'effects' referred to above largely consist of locating the relay points in the 'tradition' of the 'distinguished' meanings. Southey and Owen, the
Romantic artists, Bentham, Coleridge, Carlyle . . . each inherits certain meanings and perspectives through a set of 'key words' from which they try to build up a discourse in response; and responsive to the changed and changing situations of his own times. The working principle of *Culture and Society* may thus be seen to contain an historical element (the context, the 'source'), a linguistic element (the content, the received personal statements from which the subsequent thinkers, including Williams, distinguish meanings by practising it 'relevantly' in the present) and, as the middle term, an existential element, the element of consciousness; which 'responds' to the immediate context of experience through inherited keywords (the element of 'experience'). If this working principle is accepted as valid, one can then see *Culture and Society* as a series of essays; on individual thinkers in which this principle is assumed as the inherent connecting term. The historical connection between the figures in the book thus has a demonstrable relation to literary criticism—the periodic generational submission of the received meanings to their experience. Leavis had developed the earlier idealist dynamics of Eliot's history of literary tradition to argue that literary statements are more than personal and literary insofar as they are present heuristic activities undertaken within the flux of experience under the supervision of and submission to the 'Tradition'. The significant difference is a vague sense of ideology which lurks through *Culture; and Society* which Williams could not have negotiated, given his organic experientialism. For what comes out in the semantic dialectic is the gradual defensive slide in the concept of culture from an original holistic emphasis to the cold-war elitism. As Williams did not have Marx's concept of civil society, he failed to see that the original holistic emphasis in the idea of culture was as much ideological as the subsequent consecration of it in an elitist shrine by its high priest Eliot. By his unwitting subscription to the literary-critical framework, Williams relayed on its organicist language-consciousness equation. He shares its idealistic position in positing that consciousness is the centralising interpreter and the prescriber of ethical standards. He also shares its organicist position in reformulating its standard that language is the organic callous secreted in the above process of consciousness.

At the same time the trend towards objective analysis is also apparent in Williams' historical semantics. By his dramatic criticism he had come to know what he would later call in *Marxism and Literature* the historical process of the formation of the 'form' itself. That is, what the later generation would recognise as a 'form' or genre is nothing but the objective establishment of certain conventions to
represent a specific social experience. This is already evident in *Culture and Society*, in the introduction Williams writes about the new words that entered into the vocabulary after the industrial revolution, 'There is in fact a general pattern of change in these words, and this can be used as a special kind of map by which it is possible to look again at those wider changes in life and thought to which the changes in language evidently refer.' He also refers to a 'structure of meanings' which has close affinities with his concept, 'structure of feeling, which he had already articulated by this time.

Williams was instinctively correct in seeing semantics as the crucial clue for the concept of 'culture'. For all his objective concerns in *Culture and Society*, where exactly did then the argument go wrong? A crucial hint is present in this line: 'The area of culture, . . . is usually proportionate to the area of a language rather than to the area of a class.' We can find him restating this almost a decade later:

... if: . . . meanings and values are widely, not sectionally, created *(and the example that one used in the first instance was that of language, which is no individual's creation, although certain individuals extend and deepen its possibilities)*, then one had to talk about the general fact of a community of culture. . . .

Within this depoliticised and organic concept of language, the concept of dialectics between the past and the present was first stated in the 1953 essay 'The Idea of Culture':

The history of a word is in the series of meanings which a dictionary defines; the relevance of a word is in common language. The dictionary indicates a contemporary scheme of the past; the active word, in speech or in writing, indicates all that has become present. To distinguish the interaction is to distinguish a tradition—a mode of history; and then in experience we set a value on the tradition—a mode of criticism. The continuing process, and consequent decisions, are then the matter of action in society.

The absence in these analyses is the central Marxist concept of class struggle and class conflict. It was E.P. Thompson who first pointed out the tendency of Williams' 'quantitative narrative' to pass by 'a number of questions highly relevant to the historian of the working-class movement.' Williams failed to recognise the existence of a category of people called 'intellectuals' who exhibit their class allegiances in matters of cultural production. Consequently he took language as a sort of organic index of an equally organic entity called 'society'. No doubt the cultural discourse he sketched in *Culture and Society* did register changes in society. But the important question was from whose *point of view*?
Criticism from the left is almost unanimously agreed that the ethical and phenomenological sublimation of the structures of civil society and politics is due to the lack of a radical tradition. This is an entirely acceptable description. In fact the word 'contrasts' with which Culture and Society begins shows starkly Williams' distance from Marxism. Marx himself had used this word—'significant' word, to borrow one of Williams' favourite words from this book—in a different sense. For his distinctions and relations Williams introduces in the beginning of the book two very determining and contrastive pair of thinkers. Burke and Cobbett; are presented as belonging to the decisive moments in the history of the formulation of the idea of culture. According to him this is not only the period in which 'we find the long effort to compose a general attitude towards the new forces of industrialism and democracy,' but also the period in which the 'major analysis is undertaken and the major opinions and descriptions emerge'. In beginning with the period of Industrial Revolution Williams does not give us either an analysis of capitalism or its relations of production. On the other hand, the book begins with a phenomenological account of the 'contrastive' mood which 'epitomises,' in his view, 'the habit of thinking of the early industrial generations.' Burke and Cobbett, Southey and Owen epitomize for Williams the mood of contrast of the period. This contrast in the milieu had been noted by Marx himself in his speech delivered on the occasion of the anniversary of the Chartist 'People's Paper' in April 1856. It is very likely that Williams had known this through one of his sources, Klingender's Marxism and Modern Art where Marx's speech is quoted. Referring to the Carlylean 'signs of time' Marx had remarked,

There is one great fact characteristic of this our nineteenth century; a fact which no party dares deny. On the one hand there have started into life industrial and scientific forces which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors of the latter times of the Roman Empire. In our days, every thing seems pregnant with its contrary: Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The new fangled sources of wealth, by some strange, weird spell, are turned into sources of want. . . . At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our inventions and progress seem to result in
endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force.  

But Marx had not stopped short at taking note of the anti-capitalist antinomies. After naming them he had shrewdly distinguished his; own diagnosis from that of others:

this antagonism between the productive forces and social relations of our epoch is a fact, palpable, overwhelming, and not to be controverted. Some may wail over it; others may wish to get rid of modern arts in order to get rid of modern conflicts. Or they may imagine that so signal a progress in industry wants to be completed by as signal a regress in politics. For our part, we do not mistake the shape of the shrewd spirit that continues to mark all these contradictions. We know that to work well the new-fangled forces of society, they only want to be mastered by new-fangled men—and such are the working men. . . .

Williams begins his own contrastive account in a different manner. In contrast to Marx's antagonism between productive forces and social relations' he chose to provide a historical analysis of the phenomenology of the contrastive 'mood.' Williams points to 'the association of Burke and Cobbett, through Windham.' He claims that this personal association 'serves as an introduction to the more important association' which is not adequately recognised by conventional historical accounts which pigeonhole them into conservative and radical camps respectively. The 'more important association', based on 'experience', is said to be indicative of a social reality that is generally overlooked by the historians: 'In the convulsion of England by the struggle for political democracy and the progress of the Industrial Revolution, many voices were raised in condemnation of the new developments, in the terms and accents of an older England'.

In thus taking cultural discourse as the organic effusion of a total social experience Williams failed to understand that

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, as control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.

As a result, the material history of conflict and struggles is processed in the culturalised historiography of Williams. The language paradigm which allows Williams to see it as the existential solution of the objective and subjective; factors corrodes the political structure of the
society. What becomes apparent in Williams’ strategy of relating contents of personal statements to historical contexts is the unstated and continuously maintained argument against their positivistic reduction to a causal, necessary, and one-to-one relationship. As a maintained distance from the—then reductive—Marxist practice of reading cultural statements as the direct distillation of economic factors, this was perhaps a necessary gesture. But in trying to overcome the positivistic limitations of reductive Marxism, Williams, in turn, bypasses important questions regarding the relation of two different contexts in history. The initial limitation is the concept of history itself. The Crocean historiography by which the real structure and movement of the civil society is ethically reduced to moments of ‘consent’ presides over Williams’ reappropriation of the cultural tradition. As I remarked above, if the lack of the concept of civil society forces Williams to conceptualise it as systemic organicism, the resultant lack of the concept of class struggle in the field of culture forces him to conceptualise writing as the hermeneutic record of ‘immediate’ living.

This limits Williams’ treatment of cultural contents in a number of ways. The absence of the concept of civil society primarily affects the criteria by which the thinkers are selected for scrutiny. The historical-hermeneutic attitude to culture as the lived reality that is accessible only in its ‘realisation’ in the present imposes, by necessity, the literary-critical selectivity. The selected passages are then offered as representative of an individual and his body of writing. Further, the absence of the concept of civil society deprives Williams of a radical conception of class. This leads him to accept individual statements on an Arnoldian basis as the ‘best that is said and thought’. As examined in the case of Burke, the contents are accepted phenomenologically at the individual and ethically at the social level. As a result the contexts are thoroughly depoliticised. While Williams is capable of isolating historical-existential contexts by the advantage of retrospective analysis, he does not explain how such contexts change or processually graduate into the next instance. Therefore, contexts are separated from each other only in terms of the successive phases of cultural discourse on them. Instead of providing an historical account of contexts by negotiating how change occurs in them, Williams dissolves them into a series of moral postulates of the contents of his figures. For example, Williams constantly refers to changed and changing ‘circumstances’ and ‘conditions’ and, because of the inability to see dynamic connections between contexts, we are never told how this happens. One realises at this stage that Williams still has problems
with the dynamics of change, a problem which he shared as the coeditor of Politics and Letters in pigeon-holding 'contemporary fact' to 'rational change' and 'private meaning' to 'evolutionary social change.' Change is inevitably reduced to the level of meaning: 'The forces which have changed and are still changing our world are indeed industry and democracy. Understanding of this change, this long revolution lies at a level of meaning which it is not easy to reach.'

The choice of the word 'forces' to describe the agency of change is significant. Democracy and Industry are denoted here as 'forces' as if they are physical entities acting from outside. This can be compared with the plural 'we' in Williams' reference to culture. Indeed this is an unconscious reproduction of the romantic anti-capitalist antinomy between 'culture' and 'civilisation'. The dichotomy first grasped in Politics and Letters between 'private meaning' and 'public fact' receives a differential statement in Culture and Society in that Williams can now see a historical and social relationship between 'changed social structure and changed social-feelings' in a mutually involving and interactive way; but while he can talk of 'patterns of change' in his key words, he cannot account for the changed social structure.

Social change in this account gets reduced a scenario of shifting phenomena which are in their process responsively arrested and articulated. Thus Williams' contexts are severely limited. His historical contexts are elaborate restatements of their own phenomenological accounts as they appear in the texture of the contents of his figures. In other words, he creates pseudo contexts by extracting phenomenal accounts of history from the personal statements of his figures. Since these accounts are already ideological versions, they corroborate in establishing the validity of the 'social thinking' of his figures over what might then be dubbed as superficial and evanescent 'politics'. Historical-material contexts become merely the inside out versions of the 'experience' of social change as registered phenomenally in the personal statements. This results in the evacuation of either the empirical or theoretical details of the social agency of change. The evacuated reality then presents itself as the terms of 'immediate experience' to which figures in the book constantly surrender their inherited meanings and significances to derive their contemporary relevance. As a result one constantly faces two modes of social reality. On the one hand there is reality as the meaning-in-the-making—the phenomenal and the experiential in the process of getting articulated as staged response. This is the existential reality which accounts for the 'complexity' of cultural response at any given moment. About Burke and Cobbett we are told that

The growth of the new society was so confusing, even to the best minds, that positions were drawn up in terms of inherited categories, which then revealed unsuspected and even opposing implications. There was much overlapping, even in the opposite
positions of a Cobbett and a Burke, and the continuing attack on Utilitarianism and on the driving philosophy of the new industrialism was to make many more strange affiliations. . .52

The caution one is being given here is that it is easy to iron out the complexity of this existential reality through retrospective analytical procedures. In the case of Burke, Williams persuades us that 'the flux of history and judgement' is easily overlooked when we try to set him 'against the subsequent 'known march'.53 On the other hand there is the second reality, the reality of the factual and the analytical mode as given in the history of ideas, etymology and to some extent, as Williams seems to suggest, Marxism itself. The transformation and limiting of the objective criteria of social history into shifting phenomena arrested; in response, its reintroduction to validate personal statements from which they were extracted texturally set up a gap between the evacuated empirical details of the agency of change and the ethical emphasis; on the existential aspects of reality. In other words the fact/value dichotomy beyond which Williams set out to go in his original aspiration to find alternatives to positivism reappears. The value in question here being the distinction of lived quality, it goes without saying that Williams is restating a literary-critical emphasis.54 Williams himself best describes this 'as the result of [his] literary training': 'The hard-learnt procedure of literary judgment was a kind of suspension before experience'.55 The literary-critical distinction of culture as the heuristic response to the contingent material facts of social life sets up language as the repository of such a culture to be internally realised. Further, since such an expressive and encultured language was seen as emaciated by the industrial mentality, received literature inevitably became the bastion of culture. Looked at from this angle, it can indeed be argued that Williams is not only taking literary-critical habits across to historical facts, but doing something fundamentally different. He is just shifting the object of literary-critical analysis from belles-lettres to Romantic anti-capitalist texts. In doing so Williams unconsciously supposes that the relation of these texts to history is the same as the relation of literary texts. He thus overlooks the fact that in social discourses people are mediated by definite material factors and are not pure ethical beings. It is because of this that Culture and Society becomes, in the words of Thompson, a procession of disembodied voices.56 Thus although the book is given the inclusive title Culture and Society, 'society' itself does not figure in the book in any real sense. The actual material matrix of 'society' is phenomenologically processed by Williams as an
ethical-cultural preoccupation of his figures, so that society in 'culture and society' becomes a cultural 'common field', a common preoccupation. Culture now becomes the area of ethical concern while civilisation becomes the realm of the material forces. As Williams himself puts it, 'the mistake follows from the original strategy of the book, which is the recovery of a very specific tradition. The result was to project back the appearance of a coherent discourse, which prevented [him] from fully re-engaging successive thinkers with their history.'

Positivist derivations of reductive Marxism, foreclosing culture and the conception of meaning as an active historical process, an activity of human agency forced Williams to the opposite extreme of interpreting meanings as ethical and personal responses. Thompson formulated this Williamsian hesitancy before the-then discredited Marxism as follows:

the major intellectual socialist tradition in this country was so contaminated that Williams could not hope to contest with reaction at all unless he dissociated himself from it: the follies of proletcult, the stridency and crude class reductionism which passed for Marxist criticism in some circles, the mixture of quantitative rhetoric and guilty causism which accompanied apologetics for Zhdanovism—all these seemed to have corroded even the vocabulary of socialism. With a compromised tradition at his back, and with a broken vocabulary in his hands, he did the only thing that was left to him: he took over the vocabulary of his opponents, followed them into the heart of their own arguments, and fought them to a standstill in their own terms.

According to Thompson this accounts in the main for the prominent shortcomings of both Culture and Society and The Long Revolution—the 'tone' which induces in the reader a feeling of being 'offered a procession of disembodied voices,' the suppression of two cultures into one of a 'tradition' of 'genuine communication' and the offering of 'abstract social forces' through the 'collective "we" of an established culture.' Thompson points out that in the fifties Williams fought a lonely battle against 'the pressures of a decade,' against, that is, the liberal-conservative consensus, from which he 'did not emerge unmarked'. Thompson fell that Williams had 'accepted to some degree his opponent's way of seeing the problem, and ha[d] followed them into their own areas of concern, while at the same time neglecting other problems and approaches which have been the particular concern of the socialist tradition'. Nothing expresses this general lack of a radical tradition better than Williams' own comment about Culture and Society.
the origins of the book lie in ideas of either explicitly conservative or contradictory thinkers in the nineteenth century—but conservatives who, at the point of irruption of a qualitatively new social order put many of the right questions to it but of course came out with wrong answers—or people with whom [he] shared certain impulses, like Leavis, moving towards explicitly reactionary positions in the twentieth century.62

REFERENCES

1. In *Culture and Society* Caudwell represented for Williams the vulgarity of base-superstructure reduction. After the paternalistic recognition that 'His theories and outlines; have been widely learned' Williams had felt that he had 'little to say, of actual literature, that is even interesting.' Williams then expresses his practical-critical dissatisfaction about Caudwell's 'account of the development of mediaeval into Elizabethan drama' and his 'paraphrase of the 'sleep' line from *Macbeth* — positions highly reminiscent of L.C. Knights' Scrutiny work. [*Culture and Society*, p.268. Hereinafter CS]. In the *Interviews* Williams corrects his literary-critical and pre-semiotic animosity towards Caudwell. He said, 'I rejected Illusion and Reality in such a peremptory way in *Culture and Society* because I took it in the terms in which it was presented. . . . You must remember that I was then a very sharp practical critic and it provoked that professional response in me. . . . I should have realized that his pressure was greater than mine.' [*Politics and Letters: Interviews with the New Left*, p. 127.] Williams recognized that Caudwell, however crudely, was searching for materialistic explanations for language and consciousness.

2. See Long Revolution, p. 137f (Hereinafter L.R).
3. p. 97. Hereinafter referred to as PLINL in the notes and as Interviews in the text.
5. PLINL, p. 96–98.
8. Ibid, pp. 97 and 98.
9. See PLINL, p. 175. The interviewers remark, '... in the twenty years between the writing of the two books [*Culture and Society* and *Keywords*] your ideas obviously altered and developed. *Keywords* takes the principle of looking at changes of historical meaning much further and more systematically than *Culture and Society*.' Even though they go on to enquire, 'Were you influenced by or interested in other kinds of linguistic study in the interim, which had a direct bearing on *keywords*?' the idealist language paradigm on which Williams constructed his social reality in *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution* are not considered.
10. PLINL, p. 176.
11. *Keywords*, p. 23 (Hereafter KW)
14. CS, p. 287.
15. CS, p. 287.
AN INTRODUCTION TO RAYMOND WILLIAMS 51

17. PLINL, p.98f.
18. Ibid, p.100.
21. PLINL, pp. 108 and 107
23. CS, p. 18.
24. CS, p. 18.
27. CS, p.18.
29. PLINL, p.120.
30. CS, p. 18.
31. CS, p. 18.
32. CS, p.30.
33. CS, p.30.
34. See Marxism and Literature (hereafter ML) p. 191: 'This whole range of conscious, half-conscious, and often apparently instinctive shaping—in an intricate complex of already materialized and materializing forms—is the activation of a social semiotic and communicative process, more deliberate, more complex, and more subtle in literary creation than in everyday expression but in it through a major area of direct (specifically addressed) speech and writing. Over this whole range, from the most indifferent adoption of an established relational linguistic form to the most worked and reworked newly possible form, the ultimately formative moment is the material articulation, the activation and generation of shared sounds and words'.
35. CS, p. 13.
41. CS, p. 286.
42. CS, p. 23.
44. Karl Marx quoted in Klingender, Ibid, p.29.
46. CS, p. 23.
47. Cs, p. 23. Williams' insistence on 'personal association' typically Cambridgean in one sense. This is ostensibly a Lawrencian mode intended to undercut retrospective analytical abstraction. See Leavis' recollection of Wittgenstein ['Memories of Wittgenstein' in F.R. Leavis, The Critic as Anti-Philosopher, ed. G. Singh, London, Chatto and Windus, 1982, pp. 129–145]; Williams' on method in highlighting the 'experience' in Hume ['David Hume: Reasoning and Experience', in CS, p. 121–141.]; or his description of Elizabeth Gaskell's letters: 'Yet the collection is worth having and reading, just because so many of the letters are ordinary: an example and a reminder of the experience from which she wrote, and from which she drew all her values: an experience of work and help and the ties of love and relationship, which (when it intersected with early industrial capitalism) made her the necessary and crucial witness.' [Raymond Williams, 'Ordinary Letters', rev. of The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, (ed. by J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard, Manchester, Manchester Univer. Press) New Society, VIII, 218 (1 Dec 1966), p. 844.
50. CS, p. 321.
51. CS, p. 17.
52. CS, p. 38.
53. CS, p. 31.
54. see PLINL, pp. 122–123 where Williams says, ‘There is a sense in which the composition of a specific individual at any point of time is irreducible to what may nevertheless be more important questions about him—the degree to which he represented something, whether he did more harm than good, whether he was right or wrong. I probably valued this sense the more than I don’t think it is a relationship that is sustainable with a piece of writing, but one could imagine such a relationship with an irreducible instance from a period of the past which was otherwise inaccessible to one; not when the parties had separated out and the full tendencies of opinion had settled, but when these were actually interacting and contradicting each other within an individual mind. I think I have always had a stronger sense of the inherent contradictions and confusions within the actual process of somebody’s work than another kind of account which summarize its overall product and say that is what the person stood for.’
55. PLINL, p. 21.
57. PLINL, p. 108.
59. Ibid, pp. 24–27
60. Ibid, p. 28.
61. Ibid, p. 29.
62. PLINL, p. 109. Williams’ ‘right questions’ and ‘wrong answers’ is an angled reference to the social formation noted by Marx and Engels in the Manifesto: ‘This [petty-bourgeois] school of socialism dissected with great acuteness the contradictions in the conditions of modern production. It laid bare the hypocritical apologies of economists. It proved, incontrovertibly, the disastrous effects of machinery and division of labour, the concentration of capital and land in a few hands, overproduction and crises; it pointed out the inevitable ruin of the petty bourgeois and peasant, the misery of the proletarian, the anarchy in production, the crying inequalities in the distribution of wealth, the industrial war of extermination between nations, the dissolution of old moral bonds, of the old family relations, of the old nationalities.'
In its positive aims, however, . . . it is both reactionary and utopian.' [Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. by Martin Milligan, New York, Prometheus Books, p. 234.]