Review Article

Raymond Williams: "Culture is Ordinary"

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THERE IS SOMETHING CONTRADICTORY about studies of an individual who, as much as any other intellectual over the last thirty years, emphasized the collective nature of ideas, language, and values. Culture for Williams is not, or should not be, what separates people, but what joins them in community. Culture is not for the discerning few, but for the many. It is characterized by esthetic and intellectual scarcity only in its alienated, elitist forms. However, the more Williams contended that "culture is ordinary" — the key theme of his career — the more powerful and unique his own voice seemed to grow.

Perhaps in keeping with his sense of the shared nature of intellectual works, Williams did not write an autobiography. Yet everything he wrote is both strongly personal and in some sense autobiographical. But personal does not mean egocentric: Williams was thoroughly the representative man — voice of the ordinary, voice of the working-class, voice of Wales, voice of British socialism, conscience of Britain and of Europe. He understood that his life mattered because it was ordinary, and representative. He found the ordinary and the collective inscribed in his own experience, and he reinscribed them in his intensely personal but also intensely social books and essays, speeches, and politics. The autobiographical is especially evident in his fiction, beginning with *Border Country* in 1960 through *Loyalties* in 1985. And *Politics and Letters* (1979), containing interviews of Williams by the editors of *New Left Review*, is in effect an autobiography, though organized through

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the questions of others. On occasion, these questions grill for a political correctness Williams could not furnish ("It seems very surprising that you became distant from the Party at that time . . ." [53], for example): the orthodox young generation accusing the graying father-figure of heresy. But *Politics and Letters* is so far the one indispensable book about Williams, offering his own reminiscences and commentaries about his life and work through 1977.

Terry Eagleton's anthology, *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives*, is perhaps not indispensable, but it offers a number of perspective essays by a dozen intellectuals influenced by Williams, including Stuart Hall ("Politics and Letters," a 1980 essay), Edward Said ("Jane Austen and Empire"), and Eagleton himself ("Base and Superstructure in Raymond Williams"). The volume was originally planned as a *Festschrift*, but as Eagleton indicates, it turned into a memorial after Williams's death in January, 1988. For an introduction, Eagleton reprints his memorial essay from *New Left Review* (March-April 1988), in which he did an about-face from his Althusserian strictures against Williams in *Criticism and Ideology* (1976): Williams "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 we had left off" (6). There are good things throughout the volume, including Tony Pinkney on Williams and modernism, Dai Smith on the Welsh connection, Francis Mulhern on *Towards 2000*, Fernando Ferrara on "Williams and the Italian Left," Lisa Jardine and Julia Swindells on Orwell and Williams, and Bernard Sharratt on Williams and drama. There is also a collection of photos by Robin Gable. Some of the pieces are available elsewhere, but are nonetheless good additions to the anthology.

In the foreword to O'Connor's *Raymond Williams: Writing, Culture, Politics*, Eagleton declares: "when the historical record comes to be soberly reviewed, Williams will be accorded the status of the single most masterly, original cultural thinker in Britain of the twentieth century" (vii). Such an assessment may seem hyperbolic, but not if Williams's extraordinary productivity and range

of accomplishment are recognized. As Jan Gorak puts it at the start of *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams*: "From his first public appearance as an editor of *Politics and Letters* to his death in 1988 . . . Williams built up a prodigious and versatile repertoire, appearing as a literary critic, culture critic, theorist, Marxist, dramatist, scriptwriter, television broadcaster, novelist, poet, political pundit, media analyst, Welsh nationalist, and popular moralist. During the 1980s, sales of his books topped the one million mark in Britain alone" (1). How can anyone hope to write a sensible, more or less thorough, and yet introductory account of such a prodigy? Like J. P. Ward before them, O'Connor and Gorak have tried to produce such accounts, but have only partly succeeded.

Ward's monograph on Williams appeared in 1981 in the Writers of Wales Series produced by the Welsh Arts Council. Its virtues include both brevity and clarity, and Ward offers a fuller account of Williams's Welsh roots than do O'Connor and Gorak. But a great deal happened between 1981 and 1988; it is still happening — the prodigiousness continues — in the form of new books by Williams as well as new ones about him (and more are on the way). Anthologies of Williams's essays uncollected before his death include *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, edited by Robin Gable (Verso, 1989); *What I Came to Say*, edited by Fred Inglis (Hutchinson, 1989); *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, edited by Tony Pinkney (Verso, 1989); and *Raymond Williams on Television*, edited by Alan O'Connor (Routledge, 1989). These books add to Williams's stature and, of course, complicate the writing of biographical and critical introductions.

In several ways, Gorak's and O'Connor's small books are mirror opposites. Gorak writes clearly, summarizes complex ideas succinctly though sometimes reductively, and, while admiring his subject, also vigorously criticizes him for various vaguenesses, inconsistencies, and "alienations." Because of its critical clarity, *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams* provides a useful introduction to most aspects of Williams's career without indulging in hero-worship. Eschewing straightforward biography and, perhaps, introductory summary — "It will be as well to leave this kind of biographical model and start again in another way" (2)

— O'Connor has aimed to produce something deeper, more ambitious than a mere introduction, though the nature of that something remains fuzzy. Partly, it seems to be hero-worship.

Gorak's style is crisp, straightforward; doubts and ambiguities may lurk in Williams's mind, but not in Gorak's — and this is perhaps as it should be in an introduction. Pursuing deeper themes, O'Connor's style is often vague, circuitous, and at once elliptical and repetitious. Whereas Gorak, though admiring Williams, maintains a critical distance from him throughout, the weaker features of O'Connor's style suggest that his study is less critical introduction than hagiography. Not only does O'Connor also admire Williams, he unfortunately imitates some of the worst foibles of Williams's notoriously wooden, often vague prose. In a passage about George Eliot, for instance, O'Connor can think of no better phrase than Williams's "there is then" as a fuzzy substitute for some unspecified causal connection: in Williams's *The English Novel*, writes O'Connor, the argument "is that the novels of George Eliot expanded the community of the novel to include people who actually work in the country. There is then a kind of disruption in the texture of the novel. The new families that are included are shown mainly in direct speech. There are then severe problems of form" (74). O'Connor next quotes a passage from *The English Novel*, which ends with this stylistic gem: "There is then a new kind of break in the texture of the novel . . ." (p. 74). Other aspects of Williams's style that also mark O'Connor's include reliance on the passive voice and frequent use of pronouns without clear antecedents. O'Connor's conclusion contains these elegant sentences: "Hume's philosophical decision, as Williams demonstrates, a choice of style which depends upon and finds expression in certain conventions" (sic; 120), and (the very last sentence): "He writes this [antecedent unclear] but these political intentions and movements write him" (126).

Some of O'Connor's weak writing could have been cured by a vigorous editor; it's too bad the publisher did not provide one, because at his best O'Connor is often perceptive. Just as he seems to imitate the murkier aspects of Williams's often murky prose, so he seems attracted to the more complex, paradoxical, ambiguous, but therefore also interesting aspects of Williams's ideas. He recog-

nizes the importance of the concept of hegemony in Williams's thinking from the time of *Marxism and Literature* (1977) forward, whereas Gorak does not deal with that concept and has more to say about Lucien Goldman than about Antonio Gramsci. O'Connor writes:

> Hegemony can never be expressed as a total system or ideology. It involves relations of domination and subordination produced with and as part of multiple and concrete relationships and processes.... the dominant reality includes *alternatives*, but also *excludes* very many possible practices. The significant and exciting areas for study are often unstable aspects, or the emergence of new areas of practice or production. The openness or multi-voiced character of forms of art are often fertile places to observe this historical dynamic. (115)

O'Connor is also good on the theme of "complex seeing" in Williams; on the importance of "keywords" as both theory and practice; on Williams's "materialist" theory of language; on "subjunctive realism" (124); and perhaps especially on Williams's complex attitudes toward television (as befits a communications professor who has edited *Raymond Williams on Television*). But O'Connor leaves out a great deal: he offers no extended analysis of Williams's fiction, or of *The Country and the City*, or of *Orwell* and *Cobbett*, or of *Culture* (published in North America as *The Sociology of Culture*), or of most of *Writing in Society*. Despite these omissions, O'Connor has compiled the most comprehensive bibliography of writings by and about Williams available — hero-worship has its uses — a bibliography that also appears in Eagleton's anthology.

Gorak covers all the major writings O'Connor either omits or barely mentions. Gorak has little to say about Williams on television (O'Connor's forte), but his chapter on Williams's fiction is excellent, providing a balanced, perceptive account of Williams's strengths and weaknesses as a novelist. So, too, are his treatment of Williams's dramas and drama criticism and of his evolving theories from *Culture and Society* through *The Long Revolution* to *The Country and the City*. But Gorak's account of Williams's socialism is disappointing, partly because he seems to agree with Patrick Parrinder that there is a "falling off" in Williams's thinking

between *Culture and Society* in 1958 and *Marxism and Literature* (71-72). The latter book, Gorak says, "remains too drastically abbreviated to be comprehensible" (75), although many readers including myself have comprehended it, despite its idiosyncracies (including, as Gorak notes, Williams's retention of the murky idea of "structures of feeling" alongside ideology and hegemony).

In any case, an even graver deficiency in Gorak's account of Williams's socialism is his almost total lack of attention to Williams's long career as political activist. Nearly all of Gorak's "Socialism" chapter deals with ideas, texts, and Marxist theorists who influenced Williams. O'Connor's "Politics" chapter, despite occasional inaccuracies (Clifford Collins not Henry was one of the co-founders of *Politics & Letters*), is far better in its recognition — celebration, rather — of Williams's long, consistent, brave, and often effective career as an activist — campaigning for nuclear disarmament, for environmental sanity, for social justice and socialism on many fronts. Gorak's inattention here points to a greater weakness in his overarching thesis about Williams's "alien mind." For Gorak, "alienation, rather than national or doctrinal affiliation, supplies the key by which Williams can be unlocked" (8). Despite his evident admiration for Williams, Gorak believes that what that key unlocks is a series of contradictory stances that were ultimately crippling: "Williams's later work suffers from the occupational hazard of the alienated mind, an increasing marginalization" (116).

But isn't it precisely alienation of one sort or another, in varying degrees of intensity, that underlies the creative energy and originality of most great intellectuals and artists, including Williams? The struggle to overcome alienation is the struggle for articulation, for maturity, and sometimes that struggle leads to creative achievement that rewards us all. This is how culture works, its process and meaning, Williams might have said. If he or she is not a mere hireling for governments or corporations, if he or she is worth reading or listening to, any intellectual is by definition alienated from the unthinking, the uninformed, the inert, and, I would add, the reactionary. The type of critical intellectual we most need — and Williams is one of the greatest recent examples — has through the struggle against alienation achieved a "complex seeing" and a

"subjunctive realism" that can show us the collective alternatives we have, our possible futures and therefore our own chances of overcoming alienation. Though Gorak sometimes treats alienation as a kind of negative essence or rock wall with which Williams is forever colliding, at other times he knows better, as in his final sentence: "Those who share Williams's misgivings about a global political and economic system regulated mainly by greed and power, those who look with the same misgivings at a socialism unacquainted with the working classes it originally took to liberate, will hope that his long career in opposition sustains many similar 'journeys of hope'" (25). I agree.

NOTE

[1] Terry Eagleton, ed. *Raymond Williams: Critical Perspectives.* Oxford: Polity Press; Boston: Northeastern UP, 1989, pp. ix, 235. $35.00; Jan Gorak. *The Alien Mind of Raymond Williams.* Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1988, pp. 132. $9.95; Alan O'Connor. *Raymond Williams: Writing, Culture, Politics.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. xi, 180. $39.95; $14.95 pb.