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Division and connection:

Raymond Williams and the literature of displacement

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It has been said that Raymond Williams spent his life trying to escape from the shadow of F.R. Leavis. In truth, there are great similarities between their careers. Each returned to Cambridge after experiencing the brutality and divisions of war, each found Cambridge dominated by the sons of the families who had ruled England for generations, and each sought to redress the balance by producing a radically new way of studying English. But there the similarities end.

Leavis had grown up in Cambridge, where his father had a music shop opposite the gates of Downing, emblazoned with signs that read "Leavis is Music". When he became a member of the university, albeit at first on its margins, he started to create a new kind of ruling elite, one distinguished by the quality of its thought and feeling rather than by its breeding. Williams, by contrast, came to Cambridge not from England but from Wales, and retained the quality not just of a combatant but of an outsider. Leavis, for all his concern with the origins of literature in the common life and speech of the community, finally endorsed a form of academicism which excluded the greater part of society.

Williams worked constantly to break down such boundaries, both by insisting on the truth and value of common experience, and on the necessity for an education which would empower common people to control their own experience. Even when he became a don, a distinguished Professor and Fellow, Williams' continued to speak through his work as an outsider. His work continued to give a voice to the colonised classes and peoples from which his own success had displaced him. He continued to resist any notion of an elite.

From his first book, New Bearings in English Poetry (London, 1932), Leavis tried to incorporate such contemporaries as Eliot and, later, Lawrence in an English tradition which was wider and more humane than the rationality of fashionable intellectualism or the cruder discourses of power. Williams, on the other hand, with his first book, Culture and Society (London, 1958), challenged the whole concept of a tradition as a guarantee or criterion of excellence. Similarly, while Leavis through Scrutiny maintained standards of humanity detached from politics, Williams involved himself editorially in a journal, Politics and Letters, specifically designed to bring the two fields together.

Yet, for all the difference in the direction it took, Williams's work is grounded in two radical qualities that he took from Leavis's teaching. In Modern Tragedy (London, 1966) he extends Leavis's awareness of the relationship of literature to the whole life of the community by showing how the nature of society determines the way in which we perceive tragedy itself.

In The English Novel (London, 1970) and The City and the Country (London, 1973) he examines Leavis's perception of the disintegration of modern life. But whereas Leavis considered this disintegration a necessary consequence of industrialism and urbanization, Williams from the outset recognized that these new conditions could be as much liberating as confining. He conceived his own work as contesting Leavis's position ('Seeing a Man Running', in Denys Thompson (ed.), The Leavises, Cambridge, 1984). The English Novel shows how the language embodies energies which not only dissolve old forms of society and behaviour, but also create new forms and possibilities of thought and feeling. The City and the Country looks beneath the conception of an earlier, organic society to show both the oppression it concealed and the use to which it has been put to deflect criticism of the present away from action and into nostalgia. Williams identified the way the conception of a tradition had itself become an instrument of suppression.

It is this recognition which makes Williams's work useful to the study of new world literatures in English. These are all literatures of displacement, both in the sense that the authors have been displaced in or from their native country and culture, and in the sense that the language they use is itself displaced from its native England. These literatures take three forms, according to the nature of the displacement. On the one hand, there is the literature written in English by Indians, Aborigines or Maoris, who have been displaced in their native countries by white settlers or governors. Then there are literatures like the

West Indian, written in English by people doubly displaced, both from their ancestral country and from their languages. Finally, there are the settler literatures of the displaced Europeans of America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Yet, despite these essential differences, all of these literatures face the same problem of establishing their legitimacy against the English literature they must subvert in order to affirm the legitimacy of the experience of their own people. Williams's emphasis on culture as contestation, and on literature as the ground where we build new traditions, where we produce the new material structures of thought and feeling which sustain and direct our lives, offers a means of understanding these new literatures and the experience they alternatively express or contain. As he has emphasized from The Long Revolution (London, 1961) through to Marxism and Literature (Oxford, 1977), this form of production does not belong to the artist alone, but is the function of "the creative activity of the human mind as such" (Long Revolution, p.25).

The notion of tradition has been destructive to both the production and the understanding of new world literatures. It suggests a metropolitan standard to which everything else must conform, and devalues experience which does not fit this model. It appears in metaphors of growth and development, which suggest that literature -- and, indeed, other forms of expression like film -- in every country must grow from infancy through adolescent rebellion to a maturity of deracinated internationalism. It serves also to conceal the realities of domination and subservience or dependence which characterize the

relationships between the metropolitan centres and colonial or postcolonial economies, and thus distorts the history of the metropolitan cultures themselves. By excluding from its concerns the people, at home and abroad, whose labour produced the structures of imperialism and whose lives were sacrificed to its progress, the dominant tradition of English literature falsifies the history of England.

In his novel Second Generation (London, 1964) Williams explores the task facing the intellectual in a post-colonial industrial society. His protagonist, Peter Owen, works his way through to the point where he recognizes that his task is to clear away the rubble of deception where he finds himself, in England. By refusing the neo-colonial seductions of embroiling himself in other peoples' struggles, he leaves them with their integrity. At the same time, he finds his own freedom by abandoning the intended academic career which one part of Oxford offers him, and instead taking his learning back to the other part of Oxford, the motor-works where his father and uncle have had jobs for thirty years and which provides the productive base on which the games and rituals of the academic world depend.

A quarter of a century after its publication, this ending of the novel in the return of the intellectual to work with his hands appears romantic, and it is significant that Williams did not choose this path himself, although he shared the background and origins of the Owen family. The book is important, however, not so much for its resolution as for its recognition of the

displacement and division which diminishes the lives of both Peter Owen and his parents. It shows, on the one hand, the way the long struggle of Peter's father as a committed unionist reduces his capacity to live his full humanity, and thus thwarts the hopes once held for organized labour:

For ironically, the worst men in the party were the ones like Harold who had somehow got through. They bore all the marks of that unacknowledged contract. When they put on the businesslike glasses, and the dark suit and the familiar way with papers, they lost, almost always, their own real values, but still had the narrowness, the suspicion, the crippling lack of any real education. To look back over these years was to realize how swiftly and silently the idea of a new politics had been changed and dragged back. Whatever their origins, the men of the agendas and the accommodations were back in control. (p.94)

Similarly, however, Peter Owen recognizes the delusions of the supposedly committed academic in the person of Arthur Dean, to whom Peter's mother turns in search of the fulness of life neither her husband Harold nor her domestic duties can offer. She also comes to recognize that that understanding Dean appears to offer is itself built on a lie, a separation from the experience of others:

In part, at least, it must be the result of his work. Every kind of job shaped a man, and sometimes crippled him. She tried to think of Arthur's real situation. To know more, almost always, than the people who came to him, if only because he had been he had been learning it longer. To have to mark people, and grade them, summing them up, through the relaxed conversational teaching, as possible firsts, poor seconds, straight thirds. And then to know, from sheer repetition and the obligation to correct, the most common errors so quickly that they were hardly even errors but the expected material he must work with. None of this could be easily set aside in the rest of his life, where he might be wrong and in any case had to deal with his equals. The pleasanter he was, the more easily and tactfully he made allowances, the more intolerable the relationship became. (p.96)

The Owens are all displaced people. They have no tradition to sustain them, so they must start where they are. For the mother, this is a return to her family, to her own people. For Peter, it is the motor-works, but he does not start there from the same point as his father had, for he carries with him both his father's experience and his own learning. He has the potential to change the system which dominates their lives because, returning from a Wales which offers him a past but cannot give him a present, he has recognized in the image of the motor traffic and the industrial works which finally sustain it an image of the system which denies people wholeness, allowing them to live only in fragments of time:

There was an obvious strangeness in the fact of traffic. The approaching headlights, the amber indicator, the high bulk of a lorry: these were the facts with which consciousness had to deal. Dipping his own headlights, as a line of cars passed, he remembered a definition of consciousness, in the report of an experiment: its elements were flashing lights, reactions, learned signals, learned patterns. He remembered his own strangeness, but also his sense of renewal and discovery, when he had gone with Gwyn into High Wood, and the common light had grown through the darkness. But now, passing houses along the road, the occasional glimpse of a lighted room -- a woman getting up to draw the curtains, a child alone at a piano -- came through in the separate field: momentarily flashed on a screen, within the shape of the lighted window. As in the traffic, most people were known in these isolated images, with a quick decision on relevance to oneself, in the rapidly changing series.

Peter wondered how deeply he had been formed by this world. That he could now be conscious of it suggested some failure in himself, which seemed to isolate him. Yet he knew he was in fact not alone; the adjustment was nowhere perfect. The general movement seemed clear and confident, through a conventional world. But the individual movements, individually seen, were almost always uncertain, unfinished. The general voice was confident, moving from point to point, but the personal voices, when they could be plainly heard, were uncertain, inarticulate, struggling still with original experience. The acknowledgement of another world was continually made, at the edges of the ordinary network.

And yet, collectively, this network was the reality; here, and here only, was a society confirmed. Beyond the traffic was the works and its network, itself operating within the same kind of experience. An extraordinary priority had been given to it, in the economy and the society. This was normally understood as the priority of the machine, but it was no longer only this. What was central now was the fact of the traffic: its kind of signal, its inherent visions of what people were like and the ways to react to them. Everyone knew, in a private way, how much was left out, by these familiar definitions, yet still, in common practice, they seemed daily more absolute and more relevant. This was the network by which the society lived, and through which it moved and communicated. The rest, ineradicably, was private. (pp.233-349).

As he explains to his supervisor, another renowned but hollow radical, the only way to overcome the divisions is to enter the network of people's lives, to rediscover and activate the connections, and so empower them to make their own history:

"- - - The connections are deeper than we ever suspected: between work and living, between families, between cities. You surrendered by breaking the connections, or by letting them atrophy. We shall try not to do that, in this generation. We shall hold to the connections and ride our history." (p.253)

In thus resolving to ride his own history rather than to play the academic game, Peter discovers his own freedom. Later, he symbolically offers the same freedom to Okoi, the African leader to whom he is introduced at a party and whom he refuses to use as an object of his own radical ambitions, as a substitute for dealing with his own situation.

Williams's novel is in itself a form of new literature, a work which deals with people displaced by industrialism from their origins and separated from control over their lives by the class system. In rejecting an academic career -- at least for the time -- Peter Owen refuses to be part of the dominant

tradition, choosing instead the more difficult task of making his own. This is the choice facing any writer in a new literature, in the writing of displaced people. The reality of their situation is displacement and division, from themselves, from their own people and from the centres of political, economic and cultural power. The temptation -- demonstrated all too often in the politics as well as the writings of new nations in Africa and elsewhere -- is to join these centres, to become part of the dominant culture.

S.C. Harrex and Guy Amirthanayagam, in the introduction to Only Connect, their collection of work from new world literatures, (Adelaide and Honolulu, 1981) start from T.S. Eliot's proposition that all writing belongs within a single tradition, and his definition of this tradition as being the literature of Europe since Homer. They point out, however, that Eliot and Pound themselves quickly moved to Asian traditions in their attempt to remedy what they saw as the collapse of European cultural standards. Harrex and Amirthanayagam find in the writing of the east a necessary mirror to the Europe which had purported to colonise these supposedly backward cultures.

These authors suggest that the continuing problem of post colonial writers is to restore the sense of home. This cannot be achieved by returning to the past, for that is irrevocably lost. Raja Rao's protagonist in The Serpent and the Rope wanders between India and Europe in search of the timeless Brahmin, but is at home in neither, finding himself ultimately only at the

very tip of India where the waters of three worlds mingle. Witi Ihimaera and D.S.Long, in the introduction to their anthology of Maori writing, Into the World of Light (Auckland, 1982) describe the identity the Maoris derive back through the legends of the long canoes through to the mythical beginnings of Maui, the ocean and the people, but Ihimaera, in his collection The New Net Goes Fishing (Auckland, 1971), describes how this tradition must be remade in the urban lives of Maoris today. With much more anger, Kevin Gilbert introduces Inside Black Australia (Ringwood, 1988), his collection of Aboriginal writing, with an account of the crimes against his people which separate them from their land and their past. None of these writers can rest in a tradition; they are all determined to start from the present to make tradition anew.

This remaking of tradition, taking possession of the text and revealing its meanings for readers today, is the continuing aim of Williams's work, in literary and social criticism and in the fiction in which he remakes the text of the lives of the people displaced by the industrial revolution and by the education system it generated. He escapes the shadow of Leavis by rejecting the project of placing the literary work, and using the literary work instead to place the reader, or rather to empower readers to make their own place in their world, to establish their own connections. This is a task he shares not only with writers of displacement, but also with teachers of a generation displaced by a post-industrial and post-colonial world.

It is easy, particularly in a dependent culture like Australia, for literary studies to become merely another form of alienation -- from family, from the community, from society. Even when successful, they can become just a form of compensatory activity. It is more difficult, but more important -- particularly when governments are attempting to harness all education to national rather than community objectives -- to design literary studies which will enable students to appropriate literature for their own use -- or, to use Williams's own phrase, to engage them in literature as an emancipatory rather than either an acculturating or a compensatory activity. If they are to find the liberation described by Peter Owen, they must learn to resist rather than appreciate the power of word and text so that they can use this power to free themselves from its domination.