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The earlier fiction of Raymond Williams

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PART TWO

Chapter Four: The Earlier Fiction of Raymond Williams

The three chapters in this part consider the fictional work of Raymond Williams and principally his last, unfinished work, *People of the Black Mountains*. Williams, as social and cultural critic and as writer of fiction, can be argued to have developed an approach which is both oppositional, in its relation to what he considered to be exploitative social and cultural developments, and socially democratic in the sense that he was constantly seeking to explain and explore complicated issues not merely in relation to his immediate, academic peer group but to a wider audience. The story of his interventions as critic and public intellectual is well known and represented by books such as *Culture and Society* (1957), *The Long Revolution* (1961), and *The Country and the City* (1977), to name three of his most highly regarded contributions in this sphere. His fictional writing is rather less celebrated and has been accorded relatively little attention in terms of full-length studies. The exception to this is the study by Tony Pinkney and some points regarding William's fiction prior to *People of the Black Mountains* will be made with the help of Pinkney's studies of both Williams's and D.H. Lawrence's fiction to be considered in the next section of this chapter.

Williams is generally regarded as one of a handful of key figures in twentieth century British literary and cultural criticism, comparable with D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis or George Orwell. His particular contribution was perhaps that of extending and developing the work of F.R. Leavis in the direction of a broader characterisation of what constitutes culture and a more sharply political analysis of its production and consumption. His work provides a bridge to that of figures of a later generation, such as Terry Eagleton or Stuart Hall. Williams himself is often grouped with Richard Hoggart and E.P. Thompson as one of the founding figures of cultural studies in Britain. He is a writer who, like Lawrence and Hoggart, has his roots in an essentially working-class background but who, like Stuart Hall, a West Indian, or Terry Eagleton, a Mancunian of Irish descent, also comes from an area peripheral to the power-centre of London and its surrounding area. Williams sometimes terms himself a 'Welsh European', a characterisation which has implications in relation to the dominant cultural paradigm of a predominantly southern Englishness. These implications express themselves in terms of a constantly developing enquiry into the possibilities of more fully democratic forms of social and cultural life which involves greater investigation of British relations with Europe and other parts of the world.

In terms of his fictional work, Williams is a writer with relatively clear antecedents who sees himself as part of a discernible line of development in the English (and

Welsh) novel. These include George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence, as well as, to some extent, George Orwell. The 'knowable community' whose implications are explored in *The Country and the City*, the distinction between a critically active relation to the centre and the picture of a quaint provincialism set in aspic in the essay on 'Region and Class in the Novel', as well as a concern with the progressive development of social relations and a creative sense of community through generations born and living in the same area, are all issues raised by both his critical and fictional writing (Williams : 1983). Some parallels might be drawn with other writers. Comparisons with Charles Olson, for instance, become interesting in relation to the placial poetics of *People of the Black Mountains* and will be considered later, but those with the work of Habermas and Lefebvre also merit attention.

Habermas is perhaps not an obvious figure to refer to in terms of preoccupations with space or place, though, as observed earlier, place is often defined in the dictionary in terms of associations with the public square. This aspect of Habermas's thought, the preoccupation with a rigorous definition of social conditions appropriate to the development and maintenance of successful communication, is related to contextual surroundings of actions, including those of speech and other forms of communication. As was also noted earlier, this is a significant aspect of Paul Carter's approach to a politics and poetics of place and equally relevant to that of Arran Gare. The importance Williams attaches to successful communication and to communications systems in general is difficult to overestimate and occurs in his fiction as well as his theory. This is particularly true of *People of the Black Mountains* which is especially concerned with the encounter between different cultures and consequent problems of communication.

The other substantially Marxist thinker with an interest in questions of social space is Lefebvre, whose 'long' history of space as socially produced is of particular relevance when considering a work like *People of the Black Mountains*. Lefebvre's study of the social production of space was published at about the same time as Williams's *The Country and the City*, which also raises substantial questions about the geopolitical nature of literary production in the British context. Like Lefebvre, Williams is a writer from a rural background, one far from overwhelmed by the sophistications of metropolitan-based cultural theorising and, like Lefebvre, a figure whose writings have had a substantial influence on recent generations of British and American social and cultural geographers.

4.1. Tony Pinkney: D.H. Lawrence, Raymond Williams

As with the cultural theorists considered in the first part of this thesis, Tony Pinkney will be considered here as a writer of significance in his own right. In his studies of D.H. Lawrence and in particular of Raymond Williams, Pinkney, a critic notably associated with the development of ecological or 'eco-criticism' in Britain, as well as with the work of another early 'green' socialist, William Morris, indicates a strong

interest in issues pertaining to space and place. In *D.H. Lawrence* (1990) this takes the form of a focus on the socio-political significance of the regional element in Lawrence's earlier fiction up to and including *The Rainbow*. Heidegger is not mentioned as an influence on Pinkney's own work. Nor is he included as a thinker whose attitudes might be compared with those of Lawrence, though an approach reminiscent of Heidegger's emphasis on 'nearness' emerges in Pinkney's analysis of Lawrence's first novel, *The White Peacock*. Pinkney sees Lawrence as divided between a powerfully sensual and local celebration of the work and life of a local, regional England and a more distanced, imperial, British stance. Pinkney associates the latter with the 'better self' of the more conservative Matthew Arnold. This distinction is further developed in his reading of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* where he suggests that the books represent two kinds of modernism. The earlier book is associated with the gothic and with the earlier, more socialist and expressive phase of Bauhaus architectural design and thinking. Particularly significant in this respect is the space of the cathedral in *The Rainbow*. The cathedral and the character of Ursula are seen as representative of a fluid, 'female', localised, gothic line of modernism in contrast to the emergence of a dry, hard, international and classicist line represented by various writers, from Pound and the Imagists through Hemingway and Joyce, to Beckett and even Deleuze and Guattari. *Women in Love* is seen as Lawrence's attempt to come to terms with and critique this latter tendency, though Pinkney regards the later work as succumbing to much more than resisting it. There is much in Pinkney's argument which is reminiscent of the attacks of Colin McCabe (1979) and others on classic English realism and on finding an effective alliance between Marxist and post-structuralist perspectives on literary and cultural production. Pinkney concludes with a positive reckoning of Lawrence's lasting contribution to the unending 'anti-classicist struggle' and Derrida's notion of phallogocentrism is enlisted in that struggle in the last pages of the book. Even here, though, Pinkney continues to focus on Lawrence's writing in relation to the earth and to architecture as well as to questions of textuality and political allegiance.

The monograph on Lawrence is a provocative piece of work which is, in some senses, about a great deal more than Lawrence in its advocacy of a sensually enhanced, socialist politics of locality. This attention to questions of place and building is further developed in the book on Williams. The introductory section makes a number of basic claims: firstly, that Williams can be seen as a postmodern as much as, or perhaps more than, a realist novelist; secondly, that he is both '...the most determinedly local and formidably international of writers' (Pinkney 1991:11); thirdly, that his fiction deserves far more attention and careful critical analysis than it has so far received.

Pinkney's analysis of Williams's first novel, *Border Country* (1960) focuses on a number of ways in which time and space are presented. The difference of rhythms between London and the area of the country to which Will returns is noted and is suggestive of Lefebvre's notion of rhythm analysis. The eventual move towards long-duration rhythms in *People of the Black Mountains* is also noted. This is a char-

acteristic it shares with *The Rainbow*, the novel which Pinkney sees as Lawrence's most positive achievement.

Another series of concepts which Pinkney introduces towards the beginning of his analysis are those of 'habitation' and 'centering'. The first is derived from J.P. Ward's earlier study* of Williams which also concentrates, in ways which Williams develops, on the significance of 'small human actions and gestures' (*quoted in Pinkney 1991:22). Pinkney observes here both an attention to details of places and actions of this kind and the resonance of words like 'centred', 'easy' and 'settlement' in Williams's work. He notes that Williams intuitively probes the shifting, complex and disturbing relations between different spaces and their various boundaries. The space which Pinkney examines in *Border Country* is that of rooms and its carceral and cancerous nature in a novel where '(...) rooms in general haunt its imagination.' (31). This last comment also serves to indicate how Pinkney emphasises the way in which, despite the presence of a pedagogical element ('The novel seems, almost, to be administering to us a lesson in 'the theory of rooms...'(31)), much of the effectiveness of Williams' writing in relation to space and place operates at an intuitive, unconscious level.

The analysis of *Border Country* emphasises questions of movement and repression (a significant aspect of Deleuze and Guattari's work). While Pinkney notes that there is a distinct contrast between the charted, impersonal mobility of the metropolis and the easier, more centred and personable movements of Will's home area, he points out that negative forms of social space can occur anywhere. He makes an interesting distinction between active and passive spaces presented in the novel and the ways in which the still image of a landscape can produce a dead and contagious 'anti-space' (37–8). There is a constant attempt to challenge the still, fettered representation of the rural with the more active, historicised presentation of a constantly, if slowly, developing relation between land and people, most satisfactorily approached, in terms of form, in Williams' last novel, Pinkney claims(51–52). At this point, he refers us to de Certeau's notion of the tour in contrast to the map and also notes the plural and contested nature of histories in Williams's fiction, another significant point of comparison with de Certeau:

All these voices, styles, forms, all these *histories*, jostle for predominance in a novel whose own grand historical project, the recovery of a past both personal and social, will grant them each their appointed place and locality, valid in its own overarching temporal framework. (37)

Rather as in Arran Gare's vision of an international community sensitive to difference and region at various levels and of various kinds, there is an emphasis on the crowded space of plurality in Williams's narrative. The notion of a recovery of the past suggests Benjamin in his comments in the fifth and sixth sections on *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (Benjamin 1992: 247). The notion of appointed place is perhaps in danger of suggesting that there is a fixed place for every one. This is reminiscent of Pinkney's polemical stance against certain forms of modernism in

favour of a sensual immediacy of relation to the environment, an approach which, as observed earlier, needs to be treated with a degree of caution. Gare's approach to a grand narrative in this respect is inspired as much by aspects of process philosophy as by socialist visions of unalienated labour.

A socialist critique of the inadequacies of dominant forms of social organization and cultural reproduction is fundamental to Williams as well as Pinkney. *Second Generation* (1964), Williams' Oxford novel, is one which, as Pinkney notes, focuses especially on questions of alienated labour and a culturally emptied and functionally exploitative space of living. In such circumstances, even in the later part of the twentieth century, the opposition to the dominant social forces which impose such conditions can be almost as devoid of humanity as the system they oppose. Again, one aspect of hope in a considerably bleak novel which Pinkney attends to in his analysis is that of meaningfully inhabited place; 'From the beginning, the novel asks what kind of feasible human habitation, what kind of *place*, could we imagine, desire and struggle for in this space-ridden culture.' (Pinkney : 57). Here, Pinkney reverses the positive-negative valency accorded to 'space' and 'place' (albeit in inverted commas) by de Certeau, again indicating a tendency towards a more Heideggerean authenticity of habitation. His favoured and frequently quoted source tends to be Bachelard, particularly the Bachelard of *The Poetics of Space*, the ' (...) Bachelardian craving for a more radical kind of curling, an ontologically deep kind of inhabiting.' (60) The last phrase in this sentence is again reminiscent of Heidegger, though radical curling might suggest something of Paul Carter's poetics with their emphasis on the advantages of the curvilinear. Pinkney's analysis of Williams' second novel focuses particularly on the dis-orientated, dis-located, denuded and fragmented body. Hands are seen not only in terms of the metonymy for members of a work force but even in terms of Williams' memory of his own hairy hands in comparison to those of the more middle-class Leavis (68).

The analysis of Williams' next two novels focuses on their proximity in form to that of the popular thriller. This is perhaps particularly the case with *The Volunteers* (1978), which takes the form of a political thriller, but *The Fight For Manod* (1979), as Pinkney observes, also contains elements of other forms of popular fiction, such as sci-fi, horror and gothic fiction. The central theme is that of proposals for a new town in an area in danger of extinction due to depopulation. One of the main characters, Matthew Price, the main character in *Border Country*, older now, has to mediate between various approaches, most of them vitiated by scepticism and cynicism. The novel, as Pinkney observes, is close to being apocalyptic. It is also a novel about building; Pinkney notes several parallels with the work of Ibsen, particularly *The Master Builder*. The themes of gothic and building emerge in Pinkney's analysis of *The Rainbow* but here the emphasis is on horror and apocalypse rather than hope — a modality also present, if in rather more ironic vein, in Iain Sinclair's work, as we shall see in the third part of this book. Pinkney observes that both of these novels have the character of 'limit-texts' where Williams challenges the boundaries of more conventional notions of what constitutes a serious or popular genre novel (Pinkney 1991:71).

Williams's last two novels, *Loyalties* (1985) and *People of the Black Mountains* (1989) have a more pronounced historical content. Pinkney comments on Williams's own tendency to agree rather too readily, in an interview with Michael Ignatieff, with the hypothetical charge that his characters are rather less convincing psychologically than they are historically and politically (110). This he sees as supporting his notion that Williams himself had a tendency to take his fictional work rather less seriously than it merited. *Loyalties* deals with divisions in British culture which are social as much as geographical, following the diverging careers and affiliations of a generation closely parallel to Williams' own. Pinkney is again interested in gothic and grotesque elements in the novel and focuses on the figure of Nesta, the wife of the central working class male figure, the 'real' as opposed to natural father of her son Gwyn. Nesta is an 'amateur' painter, who is revealed as considerably talented and Pinkney discusses one of the most powerful scenes in the book where she shows Gwyn a picture of Bert she made shortly after he had been seriously injured in real fighting, as opposed to the spying of some of her more educated friends. The following passage describes the painting:

It was immediately Bert: the face was never in doubt. The oils were streaked and dabbed to the domination of the jagged eye; hard, pitted lines of grey and silver and purple pulling down the socket. The whole face, under the cropped hair, was distorted around these lines which pulled from the dark hollow. Angry streaks of crimson and purple pulled beyond the hard shoulder (...) It was terrible beyond any likeness, as if the already damaged face was still being broken and pulled apart, as all the lines seemed to move. (Williams 1989: 345)

Pinkney makes a number of points about the relation of this scene and its use of portraits to other gothic texts, such as *Jane Eyre* or *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, but pays less attention to the way in which the painting acts as a profound point of communication between not merely painter but also mother and son — two generations again. Gwyn reacts inadequately to the painting, judging it in formal terms rather than in those of the human suffering which his mother represents and almost reproduces aurally in her grotesque scream of anguish at his response. Nesta insists, with embarrassing directness on the painful reality of human experience which art can and should represent. There is no question here of painting for painting's sake, the picture is an expressive vehicle of communication and it is Nesta, the older, symbolic nature of whose name Pinkney notes, and who perhaps more than anyone in the novel delivers the truth of the experiences and divisions that it witnesses (Pinkney 1991: 115–117).

Pinkney devotes a considerable part of his analysis to the final novel, *People of the Black Mountains*. Many of the themes already covered -building, habitation, the gothic and the grotesque appear. Place rather than space is again focused on, as he notes that: 'In every generation... a conflict is fought out between those for whom place is the ultimate value and those for whom it is a Gothic catacomb, frustrating what they see as their authentic life elsewhere'. (128)

This contested sense of place partly occurs in relation to another battle, between the narratives of science and tradition, and Pinkney is equally interested in the narra-

tive complexity of this novel, seeing it as an example of what Linda Hutcheon, in *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, terms 'historiographic metafiction' (Hutcheon : 1988). Among the characteristics referred to is the interweaving of individual stories with the framing interludes of 'Glyn to Elis', but also the way in which stories and histories are constantly discussed and questioned in the novel. This is a characteristic approached in similar fashion by Arran Gare, who, like Pinkney, focuses on the substantive effects of narratives on cultural change and reproduction.

Also relevant here is the way in which the novel itself is very clearly and self-consciously a form of history-writing, one which benefits from comparison with other attempts to do the same thing in more directly poetic form, as in Olson's *The Maximus Poems*. Williams' novel might be seen as a form of postmodern *Mabinogion* in certain respects, although, as with other inheritors of the traditions of Taliesin and Aneurin (Basil Bunting, like Olson, strongly influenced by Pound, comes to mind as much as anyone more immediately Welsh or Brythonic), the comparison will have little purchase without a strong sense of its current relevance.

Pinkney's approach to Williams' fiction draws attention to the powerful, if often unconscious, nature of its spatial perceptions but at times is connected to a poetics and politics of sensual locality which needs to be treated with a certain degree of caution in terms of its proximity to more nostalgic and reactionary approaches. The approach presented in relation to *People of the Black Mountains* in the next two chapters will include consideration of his comments on that novel, but also attempt to relate the novel to a broader series of theoretical perspectives.