

**UTOPIA AND SCIENCE FICTION
IN RAYMOND WILLIAMS**

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This paper is a spin-off, a prequel perhaps, to my *Re-Imagining Cultural Studies*. It deals with material I finally chose to omit from the book - partly for reasons of space, partly to avoid too close an association between it and something so irreparably nerdish (anorakish in the British form) as science fiction or 'SF'. Its title notwithstanding - that was Sage's work, not mine - the book is actually about Raymond Williams. As it says in the blurb - my work, not Sage's - it 'traces the continuing influence on contemporary cultural studies of ... Williams, a theorist whose enduring and original work concerns the materiality of culture itself. The book seeks to restore Williams to a central position in the formation and development of cultural studies.' Raymond Williams was, of course, a significant figure in late twentieth-century intellectual life, not only a pioneer in the early history of what we now know as Cultural Studies, but also a central inspiration for the early British New Left. He was variously - and inaccurately - likened to a British Lukács (Eagleton, 1976, p. 36), a British Bloch (Pinkney, 1989, pp. 28-31) and even 'the British Sartre' (*The Times*). Jürgen Habermas's initial theorisation of the public sphere derived something from Williams's *Culture and Society* (Habermas, 1989, p. 37); Stuart Hall, the Jamaican cultural theorist, cites Williams as 'a major influence' on his 'intellectual and political formation' (Hall, 1993, p. 349); Edward Said, the Palestinian postcolonial theorist, claims to have 'learned so much from Raymond' (Williams and Said, 1989, pp. 181, 192); Stephen Greenblatt, the guru of the New Historicism, recalls with enthusiasm the 'critical subtlety and theoretical intelligence' of Williams's lectures at Cambridge (Greenblatt, 1990, p. 2); Cornel West, the most prominent contemporary exponent of Black Cultural Studies, describes Williams as 'the last of the great European male revolutionary socialist intellectuals' (West, 1995, p. ix). There are Williamsites in Italy (Ferrara, 1989), in Brazil (Cevasco, 2000), even in Australia: not expatriate poms like me, but real Australians like Sylvia Lawson, whose *How Simone de Beauvoir Died in Australia* includes a wonderfully angry chapter on 'How Raymond Williams Died in Australia', organised around the fact that he died on the exact date of the White Australian bicentenary, January 26 1988, and that no Australian newspaper bothered to record his death (Lawson, 2002, pp. 33-65). None of these commentators seems to have made anything at all, however, of Williams's enduring interest in SF. And nor did I in *Re-Imagining Cultural Studies*. But I will now.

Let me begin by defining a few key terms, or at least borrowing a few definitions from Darko Suvin, Professor - Emeritus since 2000 - of Comparative Literature at McGill University in Montreal, Brecht scholar and co-founder of the journal *Science Fiction Studies*. In *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Suvin famously defined SF as an 'estranged' genre, 'distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional "novum" (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic' (Suvin, 1979, p. 63). The point here was to distinguish SF both from naturalistic or 'realist fiction', which has no such novum, and from 'fantasy', where a novum is present, but nonetheless not validated by cognitive logic. Just as famously, but perhaps more controversially, Suvin described utopia as 'the socio-political subgenre of science fiction' (ibid., p. 61), in short, as social-science-fiction. The point here was to present SF as retrospectively 'englobing' earlier forms of utopia and dystopia. Whether we accept this or not, Suvin is surely right to define utopia as an 'imaginary community ... in which human relations are organized more perfectly than in the author's community' (ibid., p. 45). His insistence on the comparative - 'more perfectly, rather than 'perfect' - allows this definition to accommodate Saint-Simon, Wells and Morris as well as Bacon and Fénelon. There are indeed 'perfect utopias, but these are only a limit case, a sub-class of the much wider species of merely more perfect

worlds. Moreover, as we move from utopia to anti-utopia, or dystopia, there are only ever comparatives, since absolute imperfection appears to beggar both description and articulation.

1. Science Fiction and Left Culturalism

In *Re-Imagining Cultural Studies* I argue that we can identify three main ‘phases’ in Williams’s thought, each explicable in terms of its own differentially negotiated settlement between Leavisite literary humanism and some version or another of Marxism, each characterisable in relation to a relatively distinct, consecutive moment in the history of the British New Left. The first such phase is the moment of ‘1956’ (the year of the Hungarian Revolution and the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt) and the foundation of the ‘first New Left’, in which Williams addressed himself to the definition of a third position, a peculiarly British ‘left culturalism’, combining Leavisite aesthetics with socialist politics. His key texts from this period were *Culture and Society 1780-1950* and *The Long Revolution*. Though not his first book, Williams’s intellectual and political reputation was first established by *Culture and Society*. As his biographer, Fred Inglis, observes, it was one of the two ‘sacred texts of this ... new political movement’ (Inglis, 1995, p. 157). Utopia and dystopia figured prominently in the preoccupations of the first British New Left. For the ex-Communist intellectuals associated with *The New Reasoner*, the key theoretical problem was the legacy of Stalinist Marxism, one possible solution the recovery of older utopian socialist traditions. For E.P. Thompson, the historian whose first major work had been a biography of William Morris, this had meant a return to Romanticism, to poetry and to *News from Nowhere* (Thompson, 1955). For many of the younger radicals intrigued by the new popular culture and appalled by Cold War and the threat of nuclear warfare, both George Orwell and his great dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, seemed to offer a more directly contemporary alternative to Stalinism. As Williams would later recall: the ‘New Left respected Orwell directly, especially in its early years’ (Williams, 1971, p. 87).

One might expect *Culture and Society* to echo something of this interest in Morris or in Orwell. And, to some extent, it did. The book is organised into two main parts, dealing respectively with the years 1790 to 1870 and 1914 to 1950, linked by a less substantial treatment of the turn-of-the-century ‘Interregnum’, which clearly failed to engage Williams (Williams, 1963, p. 165). Each of the main parts concluded with a discussion of political writing, the first with Morris, the second with Orwell. But neither *News from Nowhere* nor *Nineteen Eighty-Four* appeared to excited Williams’s interest or sympathy. He saw Morris’s significance in the attempt to attach the general values of the ‘culture and society’ tradition to ‘an actual and growing social force: that of the organized working class’ (ibid., p. 153). But this is more evident in the expressly political essays, he argued, such as *How we Live, and How we might Live* or *A Factory as it might be*, than in the utopian novel, where the weaknesses ‘are active and disabling’ (ibid., p. 159). As for Orwell, if the man had been ‘brave, generous, frank, and good’ (ibid., p. 284), his dystopia nonetheless fully replicated that very minority culture/mass civilization topos which had propelled Williams away from T.S. Eliot and the Leavises. ‘Orwell puts the case in these terms’, Williams concluded, ‘because this is how he really saw present society, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is desperate because Orwell recognized that on such a construction the exile could not win, and then there was no hope at all’ (ibid., p. 283). Hence, the paradox of ‘a humane man who communicated an extreme of inhuman terror; a man committed to decency who actualized a distinctive squalor’ (ibid., p. 277).

This lack of sympathy for Morris’s more explicitly utopian writings and for Orwell’s more explicitly dystopian had been prefigured in a little-known essay Williams published two years

previously in *The Highway*, the journal of the British Workers' Educational Association. The occasion was a critical review of recent SF, entitled simply 'Science Fiction', which to my knowledge has only been republished on one subsequent occasion, in *Science Fiction Studies* shortly after Williams's death. As Patrick Parrinder explained in his introduction to this 1988 republication, the essay combined 'an ideological critique of the genre with some pithily individual observations and an avid curiosity about SF' (Williams, 1988, p. 356). Williams argued that stories of 'a secular paradise of the future' had 'reached their peak' in Morris and that thereafter they had been 'almost entirely converted into their opposites: the stories of a future secular hell' (ibid., p. 357). The 'ideological critique' was directed, in particular, at the recent corruption - literally, the putrefaction - of Morris's utopianism. Its immediate target is presented by three 'putropian' novels: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Here Williams distinguished three main types of contemporary literary SF, which he termed respectively 'Putropia, Doomsday, and Space Anthropology' (ibid., p. 357). By the first, he meant simply dystopian SF of the kind exemplified by Huxley, Orwell and Bradbury, and Zamyatin's *We*; by the second, the kind of fictional catastrophe in which human life itself is extinguished, as in van Vogt's *Dormant*, Latham's *The Xi Effect*, Christopher's *The New Wine* and almost, but not quite, Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*; by the third, 'stories ... which consciously use the SF formula to find what are essentially new tribes, and new patterns of living' (ibid., p. 359).

While cheerfully confessing to an intense dislike of 'most of the examples' of the first two, Williams added that even these were interesting 'because they belong, directly, to a contemporary structure of feeling' (ibid., p. 357). We should note this early use - though not quite the first - of a concept, or at least its term, that would be distinctive to Williams and which would be theorised at length in *The Long Revolution* and in *Marxism and Literature*. The particular structure of feeling that concerned him here, which underlay both putropian and doomsday fictions, was 'that of the isolated intellectual, and of the "masses" who are at best brutish, at worst brutal', in short, the myth of the defence of minority culture against barbarism. The reference to Eliot is made quite explicitly at one point, that to the Leavises clearly implied. These dystopian fictions are often defended as cautionary tales, Williams concedes, but 'they are less warnings about the future ... than about the adequacy of certain types of contemporary feeling'. 'I believe, for my own part', he declared, 'that to think, feel, or even speak of people in terms of "masses" is to make the burning of the books and the destroying of the cities just that much more possible' (ibid., p. 358). As he would soon write in the 'personal conclusion' to *Culture and Society*: 'There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses' (Williams, 1963, p. 289).

If Suvin is right that utopia and dystopia are indeed the socio-political subgenres of SF, then Williams seemed to have come dangerously close to rejecting this genre in which he had nonetheless shown an avid interest. Except that there is still the third SF mode, which had inspired his admiration precisely for its capacity to move beyond the then dominant forms of English *Kulturpessimismus*. So he found in James Blish's *A Case of Conscience* - a later version of which won the 1959 Hugo Award - with its 'beautifully imagined tribe' of eight-foot tall, reptilian Lithians, 'a work of genuine imagination, and real intelligence' (Williams, 1988, p. 360). Such preferences as this - for Blish, as against Huxley and Orwell - might seem uncontroversial in contemporary cultural studies, but were clearly quite eccentric to the

academic literary criticism of the 1950s. Moreover, Williams's preference was for Blish, not only against Orwell, but also against Morris. For if dystopianism as putopia constituted an important part of the problem, utopianism was not thereby part of the solution. It is precisely the less than utopian plausibility of Blish's 'human voice, ... far away, among the galaxies' (ibid.) that Williams finds interesting. For the young Williams, utopia was indeed about perfection, dystopia about radical imperfection - secular heavens and secular hells - and neither allowed for the distinctively 'human' voice present in the best of space anthropology.

It is tempting to read this general aversion to utopia and dystopia as a displaced objection to the content of these particular utopias and dystopias. Certainly, Orwell had commanded both his attention and his disagreement. 'I would certainly insist that his conclusions have no general validity', he wrote in *Culture and Society* (Williams, 1963, p. 284). But the argument seems to proceed at a more general level too, where the extremism of the form itself is read as unrealistically anti-human. This is certainly the shape of the argument as it appears in *The Long Revolution*, where SF is again represented by Huxley, Orwell and Bradbury, but here augmented by Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors*, and used as a key element in one of Williams's exercises in literary typology. There have been two main types of realist novel in the twentieth century, he argues, the 'social novel' and the 'personal novel', each of which has 'documentary' and 'formula' sub-types (Williams, 1965, pp. 306, 308). The 'social formula novel' in Williams's schema works by way of the abstraction of a particular pattern from the sum of social experience, accentuating it so as to create a fictional society. The best example of this kind of novel, he observes, is the 'future-story', which is virtually coextensive with 'serious "science fiction"' (ibid., p. 307). This kind of SF is 'lively' because 'about lively social feelings', but lacks both a 'substantial society' and 'substantial persons': 'For the common life is an abstraction, and the personal lives are defined by their function in the formula' (ibid., pp. 307-308). Neither the social nor the personal novel, neither the documentary nor the formula, are at all adequate, Williams concluded. The problem is one of 'balance', he wrote, in terms clearly reminiscent of Leavis - even at one point invoking the 'great tradition' (ibid., p. 314) - and the effort to create such balance is necessary 'if we are to remain creative' (ibid., p. 316).

An obvious objection to this conclusion would be that it illegitimately judges SF according to criteria more appropriate to the realistic 'literary' novel and thus ignores the formal conventions of the genre. In the 1965 edition of *The Long Revolution*, Williams addressed himself to this argument, insisting to the contrary that: 'the form itself, and what "by definition" it "cannot do", must submit to be criticized from a general position in experience' (ibid., p. 387). The implication is striking: that, if only it will try, SF can indeed create both a substantial society and substantial persons. Which returns us, by implication if not expressly, to space anthropology and Blish's Lithians. He would revisit this notion on more than one occasion: in a 1971 column for the BBC's *The Listener*, for example, where he insisted that, for all the patent inadequacies of television SF, the genre had peculiar 'advantages' for the exploration of themes such as 'identity and culture-contact' (Williams, 1989a, p. 144); and more extensively in the various discussions from the late 1970s of the work of Ursula K. Le Guin, the American feminist SF novelist and critic.

2. Science Fiction and Cultural Materialism

The second phase of Williams's work, that of the moment of '1968' and the emergence of a second New Left, was characterised above all by his development of a full-blown theory of 'cultural materialism'. By this, he meant 'a theory of culture as a (social and material) productive process and of specific practices, of "arts", as social uses of material means of production' (Williams, 1980a, p. 243). Here, Williams's engagement with a series of continental European Western Marxisms (Lukács, Goldmann, Althusser, Gramsci) and with various forms of Third Worldist political radicalism, clearly ran parallel to that of the younger generation of radical intellectuals associated with the *New Left Review* under the editorship of Perry Anderson. For Williams, the import was a strange double movement by which, on the one hand, his declared politics acquired a more explicitly 'leftist' - and presumably 'unrealistic' - character; but, on the other, they also became more analytically distinct from his scholarly work, which was itself increasingly understood as 'social-scientific' rather than 'literary-critical' in character. Williams sought to substitute a loosely Gramscian theory of 'hegemony' for Leavisite notions of 'culture' and more orthodoxly Marxist notions of 'ideology'. More generally, he also sought to substitute description and explanation for judgement and canonisation, as the central purposes of analysis. This is what we have come to call 'Cultural Studies' and it is important to note that this move from literary into cultural studies had been occasioned, in part, by an aversion to prescriptive criticism of the Leavisite variety. Hence, his insistence that 'we need not criticism but analysis ... the complex seeing of analysis rather than ... the abstractions of critical classification' (Williams, 1989b, p. 239).

The key texts from this period were *The Country and the City* and *Marxism and Literature*, though for our purposes we might add *George Orwell. Marxism and Literature* was 'almost wholly theoretical' in form, to borrow Williams's own description and, as such, had nothing to say about SF nor about any other substantive area of inquiry. But, as he himself insisted, 'every position in it was developed from the detailed practical work that I have previously undertaken, and from the consequent interaction with other ... modes of theoretical assumption and argument' (Williams, 1977, p. 6). And some of this detailed practical work had indeed been concerned with SF. In *The Country and the City*, Williams's concern was with the pastoral and counter-pastoral, but he found examples of each in the future cities of SF. In *George Orwell -* which Williams doesn't actually cite as relevant to *Marxism and Literature* - he had, however, worried away yet again at the precise significance of dystopianism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The essential novelty of Williams's procedure in *The Country and the City* was to compare literary representations with 'questions of historical fact' (Williams, 1973, p. 12), so as to test his texts for the extent to which they misrepresented their contexts. In his treatment of SF, Williams stressed the importance of the city as a site of utopian and dystopian imaginings, emphasising the historical recency of the social experience of the megalopolis. The science-fictional 'experience of the future' came out of an 'experience of the cities', he wrote:

At a crisis of metropolitan experience, stories of the future went through a qualitative change ... traditional models ... were eventually transformed. Man did not go to his destiny, or discover his fortunate place; he saw, in pride or error, his own capacity for collective transformation of himself and his world. (ibid., p. 272)

Williams traced this 'deep transformation' in the first instance to late nineteenth-century London, citing as key examples Morris's *News from Nowhere* and Wells's *A Story of the Days to Come*. But he is clear that the central dynamic extended into the twentieth century, into cities elsewhere and into film as well as the novel, tracing a line of descent from Wells to Lang's *Metropolis* (ibid., pp. 273-274). Williams follows the history of the SF city through Huxley and Orwell, James Thomson, Aldiss and Clarke, Ballard and Miller, Don A. Stuart, Henry Ruttner, E.M. Forster, Robert Abertheney and, once again, James Blish (ibid., pp. 274-277). And he still seemed to prefer Blish to Orwell, specifically the flying cities of *Earthman*, *Come Home* to the 'shabby, ugly, exposed and lonely city' of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (ibid., pp. 277, 275). The comparison is much less pointed, however, than in the earlier formulations. For the intent of the analysis is now not so much to take sides - or at least not immediately so - as to chart and explain the more general movement. 'In a sense,' Williams concluded:

everything about the city - from the magnificent to the apocalyptic - can be believed at once. One source of this unevenness is the complexity of the pressures and problems. But another ... is the abstraction of the city, as a huge isolated problem, and the traditional images have done much to support this. (ibid., p. 278)

A roughly analogous procedure informs the treatment of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in *George Orwell*. Here, he developed what appears to be a more evenhanded account, weighing the novel's strengths against its weaknesses, rather than the author against his text. For Williams, the convincing elements were twofold: the treatment of language on the one hand, and of international power politics on the other (Williams, 1971, pp. 75-76). Against this, the identification of totalitarianism with socialism and the pessimism about human capacity, evident in Winston's loveless relationship with Julia and in the reduction of the people to passive 'proles', amount to a failure of experience. Here, as in *Culture and Society*, Williams concluded that 'the question about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*' is why Orwell should have 'created situations and people that, in comparison with his own written observations, are one-dimensional and determined' (ibid., p. 82). But here the answer is essentially sociological in character:

The central significance is not in the personal contradictions but in the much deeper structures of a society and its literature. In making his projections, Orwell expressed much more than himself. (ibid., p. 83)

Hence, the book's final conclusion that the only 'useful' thing, now, 'is to understand how it happened' (ibid., p. 97).

The aspiration to understand is betrayed, nonetheless, by Williams's aversion to Orwell's 'anti-socialism', which falls far short of the 'complex seeing of analysis'. At one point, Williams chides Orwell thus:

he had the best of reasons ... to know that political police ... were not a socialist or communist invention ... By assigning all modern forms of repression and authoritarian control to a single political tendency, he not only misrepresented it but cut short the kind of analysis that would recognize these inhuman and

destructive forces wherever they appeared ... (ibid., pp. 77-78)

Now the strange thing about this is that, in the immediately preceding paragraph, Williams had quoted from Orwell's letter of 16 June 1949 to the American United Auto Workers Union, to the effect that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was intended 'NOT ... as an attack on Socialism ... but as a show-up of ... perversions ... partly realised in Communism and Fascism' (ibid., p. 77; Orwell, 1970, p. 564).

That is, Orwell had intended neither to represent political police as a 'socialist invention' nor to assign authoritarian control to a 'single political tendency', but rather had assigned it quite expressly to both Communism *and* Fascism, totalitarianisms respectively of the Left and the Right. Williams quotes from the letter with scrupulous accuracy, but nonetheless appears not to hear what it says. And this is so, I suspect, because his private judgements were far more hostile to Orwell and to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* than those actually published in the book. As he would explain to the editors of the *New Left Review* in an interview conducted in 1977: 'I cannot bear much of it now ... its projections of ugliness and hatred ... onto the difficulties of revolution or political change, seem to introduce a period of really decadent bourgeois writing in which the whole status of human beings is reduced ... I am bound to say, I cannot read him now' (Williams, 1979, pp. 391-392). For my part, I am bound to say that this really is left-Leavisite critical frothing at the mouth. But, as we shall see, this would not be Williams's last word on the subject.

For the moment, let us turn from the dystopian pole to the utopian, so as to consider Williams's developing response to *News from Nowhere*. Both in *The Highway* and in *Culture and Society*, he had found Morris's utopia almost as unsatisfactory as Orwell's dystopia. He would repeat something of this criticism in the interviews with *New Left Review*, where he described Morris's treatment of the 'discontinuity' between the real world and his fictional utopia as generating an 'untenable' notion of 'social simplicity' (ibid., pp. 128-129). In the same interview, however, Williams also announced his intention to look again at representations of utopian discontinuity in Morris, Wells and in 'subsequent attempts in science fiction'. The tone was less than optimistic: 'I would hope to be able to find, but ... rather expect I shall not find, that I could revise my judgement' on utopianism (ibid., p. 128). The result of this inquiry - announced in two essays which date from the year immediately following the publication of *Marxism and Literature* - would prove less predictable than Williams had anticipated.

3. Science Fiction and Postmodernism

The third and final phase of Williams's work, that produced mainly during the 1980s, is best characterised by his developing engagement with the globalisation of corporate capitalism and with the promise of a postmodern radicalism centred around the new social movements. The key text here is the 1983 reworking of the long revolution analysis, *Towards 2000*, not by any standards a work of science fiction, but nonetheless, as its title suggests, an exercise in futurology. Here, Williams coined the term 'Plan X' to describe the 'new politics of strategic advantage' characteristic of the late-capitalist political-economy. This is what we have since learned to name as 'globalisation', the politics of the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Economic Forum. Williams's own description of such 'X

Planning' remains startlingly prescient:

their real politics and planning are ... centred on ... an acceptance of the indefinite continuation of extreme crisis and extreme danger ... there will be a long series of harshly administered checks; of deliberately organised reductions of conditions and chances; of intensively prepared emergencies of war and disorder ...
(Williams, 1983, pp. 244, 268)

Against this, he pitted the labour movements, of course, but no longer the labour parties, which merely 'reproduce the existing definitions of issues and interests' (ibid., p. 250); and also the new social movements - the peace movement, the ecology movement, the feminist movement, and the movement of 'oppositional culture' - his additional 'resources for a journey of hope' beyond capitalism (ibid., pp. 249-250). Two decades later, the analysis stands up remarkably well, though the X Planners have proven stronger, and the opposition weaker, than Williams had hoped. But, as Francis Mulhern observes, *Towards 2000* is still 'actual and exemplary' in its 'commitment to the renewal of rational historical imagination' (Mulhern, 1998, p. 115).

Such questions of rational futurological imagination had been broached previously, however, in his two 1978 discussions of science fiction: 'Utopia and Science Fiction', first published in *Science Fiction Studies*; and 'The Tenses of Imagination', originally presented as lectures at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth; and in his only SF novel, *The Volunteers*, which dates from the same year. The first of the essays is clearly Williams's major theoretical statement on SF. Here, he expanded on the notion, originally broached in *The Country and the City*, that SF represented a distinctly modern form of utopia and dystopia. There are four characteristic types of each, he argued: the paradise or hell, the positively or negatively externally-altered world, the positive or negative willed transformation and the positive or negative technological transformation. The latter two are the more characteristically utopian/dystopian modes, he concluded, especially in SF, because transformation is normally more important than mere otherness (Williams, 1980b, pp. 196-199). Moreover, he was now clear that utopia and dystopia were comparative rather than absolute categories, dealing respectively with 'a happier life' and 'a more wretched kind of life' (ibid., p. 196).

Borrowing Abensour's distinction between 'systematic' and 'heuristic' utopias, that is, those focussed respectively on alternative organisational models and on alternative values (Abensour, 1973), Williams cast new light on the old controversy between Bellamy and Morris. If Bellamy's *Looking Backward* had been an essentially systematic utopia, Williams observed, *News from Nowhere* is a 'generous but sentimental heuristic transformation' (Williams, 1980b, pp. 202-204). Thus far, the argument runs much as in *Culture and Society*. The difference, however, is in the insistence on what is properly 'emergent' in Morris: 'the crucial insertion of the *transition to utopia*' as something 'fought for' (ibid., p. 204). At this point, the heuristic becomes distinctly unsentimental. Much the same occurs in Wells, moreover, and it is in relation to these willed transformations to utopia, Williams continued, that the dystopias of Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell need be situated. Orwell's 1984 is neither more nor less plausible than Morris's 2003, he argued, but the latter's fictional revolution of 1952 is more plausible than either: 'because its energy flows both ways, forward and back, ... its issue ... can go either way'. For Williams, this kind of openness - when the 'subjunctive is a true subjunctive, rather than a displaced indicative'

- powerfully calls into question 'the now dominant mode of dystopia' represented paradigmatically in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (ibid., p. 208).

But this re-evaluation of Morris is not quite Williams's last word on utopianism, for he also points to a parallel openness at work in a more immediately contemporary novel, Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, which had won the 1975 Hugo Award. Her anarcho-feminist Anarres is a getaway, rather than a transformation, Williams observed, but 'an open utopia', nonetheless, 'shifted, deliberately, from its achieved harmonious condition', thereby 'depriving utopia of its classical end of struggle, its image of perpetual harmony and rest' (ibid., pp. 211-212). And in its very realism this openness represented a 'strengthening' of the utopian impulse, he continued, which 'now warily, self-questioningly, and setting its own limits, renews itself' (ibid., p. 212). He makes an analogous point in the second essay. At an important stage in certain kinds of future story, he observed, 'a writer sits and *thinks*; assembles and deploys variables ... when even the factors are only partly known ... and when their interaction ... is quite radically uncertain.' Such is the case with *The Dispossessed*, for here: 'there is evidence ... of deliberate and sustained thought about possible futures' (Williams, 1984, p. 266). His point is that Le Guin's thinking is deliberate and sustained, rather than 'sentimental'; and directed toward the possible, rather than the 'untenable'. What had been a moment only in Morris - essentially chapters XVII and XVIII of *News from Nowhere* - thus informs the whole life of Le Guin's 'Odonian' utopia.

Williams's interest in Le Guin warrants three further observations. First, it should be apparent that this enthusiasm for 'realistic' utopias and utopian 'realism' clearly rehearses his earlier sympathy for space anthropology. In 1956, he had conceived the latter as quite distinct from utopia and dystopia. By 1978, however, he had come to realise that utopian plausibility required something very much like it. It is a truism, but nonetheless true, that Le Guin's Hainish novels exhibit an extraordinary richness of precisely such 'anthropological' detail, in their treatment of myth and language, kinship, child-rearing, and so on. If that is perhaps less true of *The Dispossessed* than of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Word for World is Forest* or *The Telling*, it is still clearly this very quality which makes Anarres so believable. Second, Williams's sense of what was different about *The Dispossessed* - and what would be different about his own *The Volunteers* - interestingly prefigured what Lyman Tower Sargent, Raffaella Baccolini, Tom Moylan and others would later write about the 'critical dystopias' of late twentieth-century SF (Sargent, 1994; Baccolini, 2000; Moylan, 2000). What Moylan says of critical dystopia in general is true both of Williams's reading of Le Guin and of *The Volunteers* itself:

they burrow within the dystopian tradition in order to bring utopian and dystopian tendencies to bear on their exposé of the present moment and their explorations of new forms of oppositional agency ... Albeit generally, and stubbornly, utopian, they do not go easily toward that better world. Rather, they linger in the terrors of the present even as they exemplify what is needed to transform it. (Moylan, 2000, pp. 198-199)

Third, we should note that, unlike *News from Nowhere* or *A Story of the Days to Come* - or indeed Gethen in *The Left Hand of Darkness* - Anarres is unambiguously feminist, if not unambiguously utopian. Now, Williams's own sexual politics were hardly feminist. As one of his former students, Morag Shiach, wryly observed: 'Feminists can find much of use to them in

the work of Raymond Williams; they cannot, however, find many women' (Shiach, 1995, p. 51). But in his later years, he had at least begun to make more sympathetic noises: in *Politics and Letters*, he conceded that it had been both a political weakness and an intellectual failing 'not to confront the problem' of gender (Williams, 1979, p. 150); and in *Towards 2000*, he included feminism amongst his resources of hope. No doubt, the wider feminist movement had itself compelled some of this belated attention. It is possible, however, that Odonian Anarres had also played some small part of its own.

If Anarres is distinctly 'postmodern' in its 'realism' and in its anarcho-feminist politics, then Le Guin's Urras possesses a correspondingly 'late capitalist' character: not so much dystopian as 'non-utopian', in Williams's phrase, 'sensually overwhelming' in its 'abundance, ... affluence, ... vitality', but with an 'underside' of the 'repressed and rejected' (Williams, 1980b, p. 210). These are what Ann Kaplan would later term the 'twin faces postmodernism', respectively, the 'utopian' and the 'commercial' (Kaplan, 1988, p. 4). Interestingly, these same twin faces also structure both the futurology in *Towards 2000* and the fictional world of *The Volunteers*. Williams's eventual reputation will no doubt depend on his academic and scholarly work, perhaps even his political involvement, rather than on his novels (seven, counting *People of the Black Mountain* as two) or television plays. This does not seem to have been his own view, however, and, whatever we might make of his Welsh trilogy or *Loyalties*, *The Volunteers* still seems to me an interesting novel.

He thought of it as a 'political thriller', rather than SF, and even insisted he had 'no direct experience' of writing the latter (Williams, 1984, p. 265). Yet his recollection of wanting 'to write a political novel set in the 1980s' (Williams, 1979, p. 296), that is, in what was then the near-future, marks it out as the kind of future story he closely associated with SF in *The Long Revolution*. According to Suvin's definitions, at any rate, it is very obviously SF and, ironically enough, SF written precisely in the dystopian mode. For it is organised around the sociopolitical novum of a complete ideological and organisational collapse of the British Labour Party into X-Planning and coalition government with the Conservatives. This novum is set within a changed technological landscape: a jet from London to Cardiff, an 'air-taxi' to St Fagans, coin-operated 'seat-screens' in station waiting-rooms (Williams, 1978, pp. 9, 10, 188). As Tony Pinkney observes, *The Volunteers* is 'packed with gadgetry' and SF is the genre 'that in its heart of hearts it truly aspired to' (Pinkney, 1991, p. 93). But, as with Orwell's telescreens or Huxley's feelies, these technological devices remain narratively subordinate to the hegemonic sociopolitical novum.

The novel begins *in media res*, on 9 July 1987 - *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had begun on 4 April 1984 - with news of an attempted assassination of Edmund Buxton, Secretary of State for Wales, 'shot as a murderer and as an enemy of the people' by the volunteer, 'Marcus' (Williams, 1978, pp. 104, 5, 32). Lewis Redfern, the novel's narrator and central protagonist; 'Marcus' and his comrades; Mark Evans, the onetime Labour junior minister turned NGO organiser; the secret 'Volunteers' with whom he is involved: all share connections with seventies 'utopian' activism. But, by virtue of these very connections, Redfern has now become a 'consultant analyst' for 'Insatel', a global satellite TV station, specialising in spectacle and news, 'tin gods of the open sky', as a critic describes it (*ibid.*, pp. 6, 154). Geo-spatially, the novel is structured around this opposition between hi-tech, global capitalism and its ruined and impoverished localities, from

Wales to East Africa. In Williams's 1987, Wales enjoys pseudo self-government through a Welsh Senate, but its finances are firmly controlled by the 'Financial Commission', represented by Buxton, also a former Labour minister, but now in the service of the coalition. 'So it is not his inherited class', Redfern tells us, 'that has produced his undoubted authoritarian character. He is that now more dangerous kind of man, whose authority and whose ruthlessness derive from his absolute belief in his models' (ibid., p. 12). In short, he is an X-Planner. He is also widely suspected of having ordered in the strike-breaking troops who shot and killed Gareth Powell, a picketing loader, at Pontyrhiw Power Depot. Hence, the 'murderer' charge.

Redfern's assignment is Buxton's shooting, but the investigation leads back to Powell's, to Evans and to the Volunteers. The cynical journalist as hardboiled detective, Redfern makes use of his own radical connections to unravel what is, at one level, a mystery story. But it is also at least as good an attempt at postmodern 'cognitive mapping' as that Jameson found in Gibson's *Neuromancer* (Jameson, 1991, pp. 54, 38). Provided with proof both that Buxton was indeed personally responsible for ordering in the Army, and that Evans is indeed a Volunteer, Redfern is forced to choose between his profession and his erstwhile political allegiances. He resigns, goes into hiding and finally gives evidence against Buxton at the Pontyrhiw Inquiry. As Pinkney notes, there are interesting parallels between Williams's Lewis Redfern and Ridley Scott's Rick Deckard in *Blade Runner*: both are eventually turned into that which they hunt (Pinkney, 1991, 104-105). Though Pinkney fails to notice this, both also provide their respective texts with the occasion for an ambiguously optimistic resolution. For though Redfern testifies to the Inquiry, he neither joins the underground, nor comes to identify with his ancestral Welshness, nor even accepts the lift to the station offered by Powell's brother-in-law, Bob James. 'No thanks, Bob,' Redfern replies in the novel's closing line, 'I'll find my own way back.' (Williams, 1978, p. 208)

4. 1987 in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

This qualified hope, this realism of purpose, even in a darkening future - and Williams was clear that the future imagined in this novel 'is not a desirable one, but it is a perfectly possible one' (Williams, 1979, p. 301) - provided the dystopian counterpart to what he had found in Le Guin's ambiguous utopia. It would also provide a benchmark by which to measure *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in his third and last approach, first published in 1984 itself, as an afterword to the second edition of *Orwell*. Here, Williams began by observing that the novel had three distinct layers: an 'infrastructure', where the hero-victim moves through a degraded world in search of a better life; a 'structure of argument' concerning the nature of the fictional society; and a 'superstructure' of fantasy, satire and parody which renders this society ludicrous and absurd (Williams, 1991, pp. 95-96). Williams's main interest was in the second layer, which he saw as comprising three main themes: the division of the world into super-states; their internal organisation along totalitarian lines; and the crucial significance to the latter of media manipulation through 'thought control' (ibid., p. 99). He is clear, as he had not been in the first edition, that these societies have 'developed beyond both capitalism and socialism' and that the novel is not therefore 'anti-socialist'. Indeed, he requotes exactly the same passage from the United Auto Workers Union letter, so as to insist that:

what is being described ... is not only a universal danger but a universal process ...

He saw the super-states, the spy states, and the majority populations controlled by induced ideas as the way *the world* was going ... This is a much harder position than any simple anti-socialism or anti-communism. (ibid., p. 101)

Indeed it is and Williams was right to recognise it as such, as he had failed to do in previous accounts.

Which is not to suggest that Williams is here uncritical of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Rather, he subjected it to much the same mode of analysis as that deployed in *The Country and the City*, comparing Orwell's projections, as developed both in the novel and in the political essays, with the real world that eventuated in the post-Second World War period. Unitary super-states did not emerge, Williams points out, only superpowers and their attendant military alliances; the arms race between these superpowers generated affluence and technological innovation, rather than the stagnation and poverty envisaged by Orwell; and the superpowers were often resisted, both by local tradition in the metropolitan heartlands and by national-liberation movements in the former colonial periphery (ibid., pp. 106-110). More fundamentally, what Orwell had most failed to anticipate was the 'spectacular capitalist boom', which falsified 'virtually every element of the specific prediction' (ibid., p. 117). Here, Williams revisited his own earlier charge that Orwell had 'specialised' the argument about totalitarianism to the socialist tradition. Here, however, he adds the important and paradoxical parenthesis: 'by his own choice, though he protested against it' (ibid., p. 119). If this still seems not quite right - where exactly was the choice? - it does suggest a more developed sense of Orwell's political vision.

Williams quotes extensively from Orwell's 1946 essay on James Burnham - which he ignored in the first edition of *Orwell* - so as to situate the novel in a very precise politico-intellectual context. Like Burnham, Orwell had believed capitalism finished, unlike Burnham he hoped to see it replaced by democratic socialism, but like Burnham he also acknowledged the strong possibility that quasi-socialist rhetoric would be used to legitimise 'managerial revolution' and bureaucratic dictatorship. Burnham anticipated this prospect with some relish, Orwell with much fear. Hence, the latter's insistence, both with and against Burnham, that: 'the question is whether capitalism, now obviously doomed, is to give way to oligarchy or to true democracy' (Orwell, 1970, p. 198). This, then, was for Williams Orwell's crucial mistake: to have imagined capitalism already beaten and, hence, the central issue as that between different 'socialisms'. As it turned out, the real 'question' would be that of a resurgent capitalism, re-legitimised by post-war affluence, and radically oligarchic in its own later responses to the renewed depression and unemployment of the last quarter of the century. What really survives, Williams concluded, was 'Orwell's understanding of propaganda and thought control' (Williams, 1991, p. 120), even though the thought-controllers would be press lords and film magnates rather than totalitarian ideologues.

In effect, Williams had pitted his own futurology against Orwell's, *Towards 2000* against *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

The national and international monetary institutions, with their counterparts in the giant paranational corporations, ... established a ... practical and ideological dominance which so far from being shaken by the first decade of depression ... was actually reinforced by it

... Internally and externally they had all the features of a true oligarchy ... 'centralisation' is not just an old socialist nostrum but ... a practical process of ever-larger and more concentrated capitalist corporations and money markets. (ibid., p. 117)

This seems to me exactly right, not only as an account of how late capitalism actually works, but also as a way into understanding why *Nineteen Eighty-Four* seems so dated, by comparison with Huxley's *Brave New World*, for example. From *Alien* and *Blade Runner*, through cyberpunk, to Kim Stanley Robinson and David Cronenberg, the more persuasive near-future science fictions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have taken, as their central thematic, precisely that collusion between state power and transnational corporate-media capital, which Williams himself had targetted fictionally in *The Volunteers* and politically in *Towards 2000*.

Williams also turned the essay on Burnham against the novel in what would turn out to be his own last word on dystopia. He repeats the earlier argument that, in its very hopelessness, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had killed hope; that its warnings against totalitarianism were themselves so totalitarian that, 'in the very absoluteness of the fiction', it became 'an imaginative submission to its inevitability' (ibid., pp. 125-126). But here he adds that Orwell himself rejected precisely this kind of submission before power in Burnham. 'Burnham never stops to ask *why* people want power', Orwell had written: 'He seems to assume that power hunger ... is a natural instinct that does not have to be explained' (Orwell, 1970, p. 211). This is exactly O'Brien's answer to Winston in Room 101, Williams comments, the only answer available anywhere in the novel:

This is the terrifying irrationalism of the climax of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and it is not easy, within the pity and the terror, to persist with the real and Orwell's own question. (Williams, 1991, p. 124)

'There *are* reasons', Williams continues, 'as outside the fiction Orwell well knew' (ibid., p. 125), and these reasons must be sought for and distinguished, the good from the bad, the better from the worse, so as to avert the brute cynicism of Burnham's attempt 'to discredit all actual political beliefs and aspirations' (ibid., p. 124).

Williams's last reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is clearly richer than its predecessors: it combined a developed understanding of the novel's workings as a text with an expanded sense of its socio-political and intertextual contexts. In thirty years of occasional writing about science fiction, Williams had learnt to substitute the complex seeing of analysis for moralistic criticism; and to situate texts in their material and intellectual contexts. He had come to understand the kind of honourable personal motives and socially effective structures of feeling that underpinned both utopian and dystopian forms. He had come to realise that neither was inherently antithetical to the space anthropology he admired in Blish and, more importantly, in Le Guin. But his suspicion of radical dystopia remained essentially unchanged: without resistance, without 'realism', without the 'true subjunctive', dystopia will still kill hope, as surely as the unrealistic utopia will fail to inspire it. Two decades further into the gathering gloom of neo-liberalism, in a world desperately in need of 'realistic' resources of hope, who are we to disagree with him?

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