

the male image of God as the biggest disappointment in her life, etc. Why these wild speculations which all but strip the poet of her essential and mysterious humanity? It is the theme of a book just out, *Lunacy of Light* (Southern Illinois University Press), by one Wendy Baker, that in the poetry of Emily Dickinson all references to light are basically derived from images of male "sun-power" against which a dark female creativity must strive in order to attain a viable identity of the Woman as Poet. One can almost take this as fairly acceptable, but not when it tends to put such an onus on what, in many instances, must have been an ingenuous and candid act of love's élan in Emily's praise of light.

Aside from this, it may be all to the good that feminist criticism has very justifiably appropriated Emily Dickinson to both its own interests and the larger literary interest. It seems obvious that even the best of male criticism on Emily Dickinson has failed to deal adequately with her status —

and indeed her stature — as woman and poet. The woman as writer, and especially as critic, is the new perceptor in a field of letters heretofore the exclusive domain of the male academician. It is no detriment to present feminist criticism, as such, to suggest that much of its excess and rash overstatement will eventually fall by the wayside in a new progression toward a fuller and therefore more humane understanding of great writing and writers. It has already recognized in Emily Dickinson a truly original poetic genius, one of the few women in art who can accommodate such a claim, and it is a tribute to her toughness and strength of mind — as against the myth of her spinsterism — that in the midst of mediocrity around her, she did not go mad for want of recognition among those presumed to be her betters. The fact is she had no peers, let alone betters, and on this particular matter it is an ironic delight that women will have had the last word.

PROPHET OF THE LEFT *by George Watson*

I first met my future colleague Raymond Williams in 1959, when I was a young lecturer in English literature at Cambridge and he still a tutor in adult education in Oxford.

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His best-known book, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958), had just appeared — a late-Marxist interpretation of English intellectual life since the French Revolution — and what I principally remember from that first encounter was his glowing pride in the commercial success of the book which (as he explained) had greatly surprised his publisher, but not himself. "He is taking me to better restaurants for lunch now," he remarked, exuding pleasure.

In the almost-30 years that I knew him, down to his death in January 1988 at the age of 66, that paradoxical note was to be struck again and again: a fierce pride in capitalistic success and its consumer rewards, coupled with a fierce hatred of capitalism itself and its political and cultural pretensions. By mid-career in Cambridge, which he had reached as a Fellow of Jesus College in 1961 (the year *The Long Revolution* appeared), he was to become the proud owner of two country houses — one in England and one in his native mid-Wales — and the talk was much of hi-fi, wall-to-wall carpets, swimming pools, and color TV, while his chief passion seemed to be for American musicals — especially if they starred Sammy Davis Jr. or Doris Day.

But the usual jibes about parlor-socialists do not fit him exactly. He was so utterly open about being rich, as academics go, and about wanting to be richer. In any case there was nothing remotely grand or aristocratic about his style of life, as there was with his friend and rival, the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson. Williams was unpretentiously bourgeois; his talk was of shopping and brand names, not deer-parks and country mansions. Few I have known have enjoyed the delights of the consumer society so much; none, I believe, so frankly. (Indeed, he was fond of telling his Cambridge classes that people often bought things after watching TV commercials; and when their mouths puckered into attitudes of stereotypical disdain, he would add disconcertingly: "And so have I. Often.")

Hollywood might call it *The Williams Story*: from rags to riches and proud of it. It is a story that amply illustrates what

New Yorkers call "making it"; and so many left-wing intellectuals in Britain and elsewhere have made it, in that sense, in the last 30 years, that the tale of the socialist fat cats will some day justify a volume, and perhaps a series. The London theater, for example, is full of them—some of them Williams' pupils. Their moral problems are intriguing. Most, after all, were bourgeois by birth or upbringing. Raymond Williams was not, and his perfectly good claim to proletarian origins is an essential part of his self-image, just as that highly cultivated self-image was an essential part of his career. His books, as reviewers often noticed, are all more or less about himself—a sort of continuous autobiography lightly masked as cultural history. The critical problem by the 1960's, which failed to prove insuperable, was that capitalism was actually not failing. There was nothing much in domestic policy in that age, as in the ages of William Morris or R.H. Tawney, to justify the Marxist myth of proletarian destitution or inevitable class-war. Nor was Britain, or any other West European nation, at war in Vietnam.

These disadvantages were overcome with astonishing ease. The Williams solution was to create a myth of a suffering being, glancing as he went at William Cobbett or Thomas Carlyle or D.H. Lawrence or George Orwell. From behind the sages of the recent past, a new sage was born. Even *Modern Tragedy* (1966), critical history though it is, begins with an account of the author's early life and an obscure reference to the sufferings of his parents in a Welsh village, presumably during the Depression of the 1930's. His first novel and his best, *Border Country*, is similarly autobiographical. There is no Death of the Author here, no mistaking intention. A Williams book is always a book about Williams.

His justification, perhaps, was that historical objectivity was in any case a bourgeois illusion. In a revealing review of Lionel Trilling's *Beyond Culture* (1966) in the April 15, 1966, *Guardian*, for example, he dismissed Trilling as one who had desperately adhered to the discredited "liberal idea of the self," in an age where individualism had already definitively failed. It had failed, Williams remarks, "because by definition it was open to an infinite extension of other people and classes, who then threatened the learned image of the self," meaning, I suppose, a newly conscious working class and the masses of the Third World. The passage is characteristically vatic, cloudy, and high-minded, as if a superior viewpoint had been effortlessly assumed. The bourgeois illusion, as it emerges, is the illusion of objective knowledge, and Trilling is bracketed with Nietzsche, Frazer, Conrad, Freud, and other deluded liberals. (Not D.H. Lawrence, since Lawrence was then supposed to be of working-class origins and therefore immune to criticism, whatever his debts to Nietzsche and Freud.) Trilling's folly was to suppose that individual mind can achieve truth:

"Culture" is the inevitable and hated social process,
 "mind" is the individual, scrutinizing and separate.
 There can be no such separation between mind
 and culture, except in fantasy; but this fantasy is
 needed [by liberals] to preserve a threatened
 identity.

And every attempt since Matthew Arnold to rationalize

liberal humanism, including Trilling's, "only prolongs the illusion."

That argument already smacks of another age. Indeed the claim that liberal humanism is dead—or for that matter that capitalism is dying—looks so much less plausible in 1988 than it did in 1966 that one realizes how fortunate Williams was to live and write in his time. He was a lucky author. In some ways he knew it, or suspected it. "That is not the way the world is going," I remember him saying as we discussed what Marxists had once supposed to be the inevitable immiseration of the working classes under capitalism and Marx's famous doctrine that revolution would begin in the advanced industrial states. His passionate espousal of Ho Chi Minh, both in print and in noisy demos outside the American Embassy in London—Williams wearing a cloth cap in the crowd in Grosvenor Square to assert his proletarian origins—was not a matter to discuss in his later years, after a united Vietnam had conquered its neighbors and become a Soviet nuclear base. In 1983, when he retired from his chair of drama in Cambridge, in his early 60's, he retired indeed, and his last years were not the most active as an author. His books are still in print (or some of them) and his name still revered by some middle-aged academic critics like Terry Eagleton who were once his pupils. But the world has not gone the way of Marxist prophecy since the 1970's, as he knew. The New Left that sprang into life in the mid-1960's, shortly after he came to teach in Cambridge, and which faded after the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1972, had been his theater; he had taken his chance in it, and starred there. For Williams was that rare thing among drama critics: an actor.

The act had many turns, though they all centered on the claim to proletarian origins and the sanctity of a working-class future announced by Marx and Engels in the 1840's. It called for some performative skills, since the humility of a remote provincial origin bore a little investigation but not a lot. Williams' father was a rail-signalman in Wales, indeed, but in a village only a hundred yards or so from the English border—its local town was Hereford, that comfortable cathedral city—and the boy went to Abergavenny School, a highly reputable place where he was well taught, winning a place at Trinity College, Cambridge, in October 1939. The Cambridge freshman was already a Communist at a time when the Soviet Union was in alliance with Nazism, and his activities in the students' union were devoted to opposing the war against Hitler and supporting the Soviet invasion of Finland. At that time, as I have been told by a contemporary of his, Williams affected an American accent in his union speeches, having seen Hollywood films and fearing that his Welsh accent—or was it Western English?—might be a social disadvantage. So a histrionic talent appeared early. After Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941, he served as an antitank captain in the Guards Armored Division, learning and forgetting (as I remember his telling) a little Japanese in the process, though he was never a linguist and made no claim to know Welsh. After the war he resumed his undergraduate life in Cambridge and completed his degree at a time when the critical prestige of F.R. Leavis was at its height, to become a total and dedicated Leavisite. It was here that the lasting shift from Party Communism to Culture Communism was completed. Some eager but

inexperienced attempts failed to carry the Leavis creed into literary London through editing little journals in the manner of *Scrutiny* (though *Politics & Letters* managed to print an article by George Orwell), and Williams became an extramural tutor in Oxford, Hastings and Oxford again, where his reputation was one of a carefully minimal performance of his duties. (He would give his classes, that is, but seldom linger to converse with students or colleagues.) And so on to a Cambridge college fellowship and a chair . . . Not the worst or direst of careers in a century marked by great catastrophes, but a privileged education and a privileged life ending in affluence. Williams was an insider who always preferred to deny he was that.

The contradictions multiply. Though a professor of drama, he disliked theater, and I can never forget his astonishment when he heard I had just been to see a play for fun—or the alacrity with which he left a promised performance by an experimental theater company in a Cambridge college because one glance suggested the room was full. Though avowedly a proletarian, his personal manner was faintly grand, almost ducal, and his thick tweeds and garrulous voice suggested a country gentleman. Though proud of his polemics, which were always thick with the promise of an intellectual defiance of established custom and political “challenge” (a very favorite word), his published prose was abstract, bookish, polysyllabic, and eiderdownish, so that one felt less challenged than soothed. The famous parliamentary phrase about being savaged by a dead sheep might have been made for his longer writings. Though radical in curricular terms and hostile to the conventional teaching of English, as he imagined it, he passionately favored an interdisciplinary system that would necessarily involve the subjection of pupil to teacher. And though a successful teacher, he did not exactly teach.

His cult was other. Though he seldom, if ever, stooped to read or mark a student paper, delegating such humble

chores to graduate students, and though he seldom if ever read the drafts of a graduate thesis, being too busy with his own works, he was more often loved than hated, and his students found his personality gratifying. Even those who volunteered the view that he wholly neglected his teaching duties could do so in an indulgent and forgiving tone, as if sheer acquaintance compensated for any dereliction of duty. To ask why is to pose a question at once literary and political. The literary aspect is that Williams, as a Leavisite, never doubted that teaching was a coterie activity in 1945-46, in a fashion total and unquestioning, even picking up his master's habits of style and use of key terms like “central.” Williams' elaborate syntax was Leavis', as Leavis' (in derivation at least) was Henry James's: a system of controlled interpolations suddenly emerging in a resolution which one is given no choice to rebut. As a teacher, I suspect, he knew no other style. Teaching had nothing to do with the passage of information, and little to do with imparting a technique. It was a moral position taken up and struck—“Here I stand . . .”—to be admired and accepted. When Leavis died in Cambridge in 1978, Williams gave an admiring lecture on his dead master in which he concluded that, with all his faults, Leavis compelled admiration because he was *intransigent*. All that is faintly unusual in British academic life, which is marked rather by a continuous readiness to discuss and to argue than by a propensity to pontificate, and I sometimes felt that the life of a French literary *maître* like Jean-Paul Sartre, whom he greatly admired, might have suited Williams better than a life in academia. He sought not the curious or the studious but the admiring. A university is less a place to learn, in his view, than a place to join a side, as he had joined the left and Leavis in their day, to promote a cause. That view found its answering call. Many an adolescent believes there are two kinds of professors—those who merely do the job, year after year, and those who make history. There were acolytes to be had.

The literary aspect was always marginal. The political was plainer, and no one ever doubted that all Williams' preferences arose out of that: his lifelong adoration of the sacred name of socialism. “Nothing matters but the reality of socialism,” as he wrote in an article in 1961, in a phrase suggesting the dedication of an early Jesuit or of the Moslem hordes that swarmed across the Mediterranean in the seventh century. It is understandable if Americans find it hard to understand the moral prestige of the word in western Europe, since no socialist government has ever honored its promise of freedom without poverty, and few enough have succeeded in advancing the living standards of working people. The two Germanies tell another story. Perhaps the question may now be relegated to history, since History (as Marx capitalized the word) has by now so signally failed. More and more parties in Europe called socialist are decaffeinating, so to speak, and abandoning the contents of their Victorian faith; even those in Russia and China are said to be experimenting daringly with private and competitive enterprise. The socialist day is done.

To adolescents of the 1960's, however, no such arguments counted. To be a socialist in that age was to be virtuous; and to incarnate the supposed values of a working class in manner and dress was to invest oneself with a secular

In the forthcoming issue of *Chronicles*:

Victims of Government

“Karl Marx always maintained that capitalists would readily sacrifice family life to the quest for short-term profit, and the great captains of industry seldom disappointed him. In the 1920's, for example, the National Association of Manufacturers struck up an alliance with the National Women's Party, the radical wing of the American feminist movement. Today, they embrace state subsidized day care.”

—from “Charity Begins at Home: The Family and the Welfare State” by Allan Carlson

sanctity. The New Left sage of that era was a haloed being in a priestless age—an age hungry for faith but incapable of faith in anything beyond the stars. The religious analogy is in some way uncomfortably accurate: by the 1970's the New Left was as quarrelsome in its internal relations as the early Church. Williams suffered from such quarrels, some of which were severely personal. Others were principled, as in his genuine horror of drugs, which he always refused to countenance, or his views about sex, which may be assumed to have been similarly old-fashioned since he was a good family man. "They have made a false connection," he once told me sadly of his followers when they refused to work for the local Labour candidate unless he pledged to support the legalization of pot. Drugs make for acquiescence, he explained, and are therefore socially conservative. I thought this one of his better arguments, and we were more often in agreement than either of us expected or sought. There were some positions he would not yield—not even for popularity.

Nonetheless, popularity, even sainthood, was plainly the goal of his professional life.

Perhaps my most vivid memory of him was his sitting with raised hand at a departmental meeting in about 1968, when a motion inane even by the standards of the time was under discussion. Alone among senior members he supported it—because the young did—and when his hand alone went up in its favor he turned to them with a defiant expression that said only one thing: "I, and I alone, am on your side." That was before the internecine era of the New Left had begun, and before his life had been saddened by the drift of student opinion away from revolution in the early 1970's, even from reform. He had been the Pied Piper of Hamelin, for a brief and heady instant, and he had loved it. But the Pied Piper of the old story led the young into a cave where they disappeared—all but one who was lame and one who was blind—and in the Children's Crusade of 1212 those who reached the sea were sold into slavery to the Moors. Nothing as dramatic as that happened to the acolytes of the New Left. They vanished, indeed, but not into slavery. They have comfortable jobs. Williams' influence, before it faded, was not vicious. It even stretched to the United States, where he publicly declined a rich post at an eastern university—I remember his eyes watering with desire as he spoke of the salary and free secretarial help that might have been his—on the grounds that he would not live in a nation fighting the Vietcong. For years he was London correspondent of *The Nation*. He lectured at Bremen University, too, notoriously the most Marxist institution of higher learning in the German Federal Republic. Forget what followed, then. He had his day.

He never lost faith. But his faith, or succession of faiths, became progressively harder to maintain, even to a mind always more convenient than rigorous. He had moved from the Communist Party to F.R. Leavis to the fierce but faintly nebulous nonparty Marxisms of the New Left, and so to an increasingly abstract belief in "structures of feeling"—the phase, derivative as it was, was one he always claimed as his own—and on to ever more abstract forms of cultural history, weak on fact but full of vague and virtuous imaginings. Though a professor he was never exactly a scholar, and one cannot easily imagine him with a learned

Poem

by Walter Albert Mahler

Never go home in the winter, friend,
when your roving days are done.
Go home in the spring with the lilacs
and the warmth of a noonday sun.

Never go home to a world grown grey
in the blast of the winter's gale,
when the earth is a hard and stubborn thing
and men walk stiff and pale.

Never go home in the winter, friend,
when the skies are a leaden pall.
Go home in the spring with the lilacs
or never go home at all.

journal in his hand or an archive at his fingertips, so that the usual tests of academic merit seem irrelevant to his case. His tone was moral, not factual. He was a sage and a prophet.

But his contradictions remain, a fascinating exercise for inquiry. A prophet of rural values, he would drive into the middle of Cambridge to walk in the city botanical gardens, since he found them more agreeable than the countryside around his village home. I never saw him walk, at least far, and he once told me wonderingly that he had never driven through Cambridge without seeing me on foot there. It was right of him to feel puzzled that the Marxian analysis of bourgeois values fails to fit my own case, but I do not know that he ever troubled to consider that it also failed to fit his.

His disdain for Trilling revealed a deeper contradiction. It is this: If, as he claimed in his 1966 review of Trilling, there can be no separation between mind and culture—if all mind is the creature of the culture that made it—then it is not an objection to Trilling's view, or any other, to say that it can offer no rational explanation of itself. No view could, if that were true. The terms of individualist philosophy seemed hopelessly self-contradictory to Williams, but the contradiction was his and not theirs. "Every attempt to rationalize them, to alter the superficial terms, only prolongs the illusion," as he put it grandly, calling for a "rational discourse of sustained argument" in favor of civilization. But all that is self-refuting. For if no mind can be separated from its culture, then the rational argument that Williams demanded, being itself a product of mind, could not be separated. And if it is an objection to an argument to say that it cannot be separated from the culture that sustained and made it, then it is an objection to all the arguments that there are or could ever be. Including Marxism, of course, which arose out of the highly special culture of the early industrial revolution in Europe. If all ideologies are false, then Marxism is false. But Williams believed that all ideologies are false, and that Marxism is true.

But then it was the hallmark of the New Left world, now remote enough to be identified and delimited, that it made for easy arguments and encouraged a retreat from debate when debate grew too hard to bear.