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Maurice Cowling, Leavis and Raymond Williams

Maurice Cowling's *Raymond Williams in Retrospect*¹ is a wide-ranging survey of one of the most influential Marxist academics of the 20th century by a distinguished Conservative thinker. It combines an informative overview of Williams's career with a harsh but fair assessment of the nature and impact of his work. Cowling's perspective throughout is broadly political. The biographical sketch neatly highlights the different phases of Williams's rise from early beginnings as the son of a railway signalman in a Welsh border village to the elite world of Cambridge and eventual appointment to a Chair in that ancient university, shrewdly noting the "guilt at his elevation", which led him to subsequently denounce the scholarship "ladder of opportunity" he had climbed as a capitalist subterfuge to "sweeten the poison of hierarchy". This outline of William's life is accompanied by an account of the development of his thought: the anti-capitalism of *Culture and Society*, where he warns of a "sullenness" and "withdrawal" that will lead to the "unofficial democracy" of the "armed revolt" unless the newspapers, radio and television are deprived of their "dominative character" as instruments of class exploitation; the unconvincing and largely derivative attempt to rescue Marx from the reductionism of the base and superstructure model of society in *Marxism and Literature* and the vacuous recommendations of public ownership and control of the media in *The Long Revolution*; the endorsement of revolution, in "the dense, coded prose" of *Modern Tragedy*, which represents a "circuitous but indubitably evil attempt to encourage the young to think of violence as morally acceptable". Cowling sums up Williams's work as "intellectually without power", and describes his distinction as "an originality of manner", observing that "his achievement was to deploy ordinariness and reasonableness in recommending opinions that were neither ordinary nor reasonable and...became entirely unreasonable in response to the nightmare of abnormality that swept the universities of the Western world". The justice of this pejorative allusion to Williams's influence on the so called student revolution will be readily granted by anyone who remembers the crudeness and immaturity that characterized every aspect of the movement.

¹ *The New Criterion*: Vol. 8 (1989–1990)
<http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/08feb90/cowling.htm>

However, there is another, less acceptable, side to the piece that appears in its insistent efforts to associate Williams's views with Leavis. The supposed connection between the two is not so much argued as insinuated in a softening-up process of nods and winks. Cowling casually speaks of Williams expounding "that trust in culture and mistrust of capitalism, and that belief in D.H. Lawrence, which some Marxists and ex-Marxists shared with the followers of F.R. Leavis". Again, Williams is said to have infused "the ageing socialism of the 1950s" with "a Luddite or Leavisite version of the resentments of the 1930s". The *coup de grace* is delivered in the penultimate paragraph, where Cowling scornfully dismisses Leavis's "pretence that critical discrimination was not political", and proposes that "Williams is best understood as the politicizer of Leavis, as the man who...brought him out of the closet and converted 'critical discrimination' into a set of Marxist slogans". It is not simply the journalistic infelicity of "brought out of the closet", which suggests a tabloid exposé of an unsavoury affair, that makes this mode of expression objectionable. Leavis repeatedly insists that criticism is an autonomous discipline and irreducible to politics or any other form of thought. To call this a pretence with the air of unmasking a piece of insidious deception is to compound a misrepresentation with an unjust accusation of intellectual dishonesty.

Cowling's remarks are an uncritical re-statement of the misreading of Leavis that Williams's *Culture and Society* disseminates. Williams's tactic in that work is to pretend that Leavis's condemnation of the anti-cultural tendency of industrial civilization is an attack on capitalism. This allows him to appropriate Leavis's culture as a vehicle for promoting his own Marxist agenda. Cowling backs Williams bid to take over Leavis by presenting them as sharing a mutual "trust in culture, and mistrust of capitalism", in a picture that falsely combines their respective positions. If this composite falsehood is deconstructed, the two truths that remain are Leavis's trust in culture and Williams's mistrust of capitalism. Culture, in Leavis's sense, does not exist for Williams, except as a device to be exploited for political ends. Nor is Leavis's culture opposed to capitalism, but to the reductive materialism that is common to capitalist and communist societies in the industrialised world.

Culture, for Leavis, is an impartial measure of human fineness in every area of life, which has no sectarian or factional commitments. It is the product of a historical tradition, embedded in the common language, that conserves "the finest human experience of the past", providing a "currency of criteria and basic valuations" on which "the possibilities of fine living at any time" depend. Literature and literary criticism are the growing tip of this unspecialised mode of discourse. Their function is the adjustment and correction of conventional usage in response to the changing conditions of human life through "a many-sided exchange" that maintains the continuity of the cultural tradition, keeping "alive...the standards that order the finer living of an age, the sense that this is

worth more than that, this rather than that is the direction to go, that the centre is here rather than there” transmitted by “the changing idiom upon which fine living depends and without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent”².

What Leavis’s analysis of industrial civilisation calls attention to is the progressive replacement of the normative and spiritual understanding that culture provides by a materialism that offers “simplifying and reductive criteria of human nature and human good”³. The reduction of human life to material progress manifests itself as a pervasive tendency to assimilate the evaluative vocabulary of culture to the language of subjective likings and inclinations or private choices. As a result of this relativization of cultural values, literature and literary criticism, their highest expression, cease to have any intrinsic connection with a shared human life. Hence the emergence of that aestheticism, exemplified *par excellence* by the theory of Significant Form, that presents literary activity as an esoteric game without relevance to actual living. Its counterpart is the didacticism of Williams and Cowling, who regard critical discrimination as a form of persuasion which has no τέλος of its own but merely facilitates the ends of other activities, such as politics. Both positions reflect the breakdown of cultural continuity to which Leavis’s work points.

Cowling’s critique of Williams is seriously weakened by the fundamental scepticism about culture that leads both men to regard critical discrimination as politics in disguise. The hostility he displays to Williams’s revolutionism is justified. However, the positives he offers, vaguely hinted at in his talk of “the solidarity of twentieth-century English society” that “monarchy and two world wars had created”, are not, as they stand in his essay, impressive. Divorced from cultural values and the free play of the disinterested critical intelligence, it is difficult to see that they amount to anything more than an inert appeal to the *status quo*. A real understanding of the significance of the revolutionary movement that Williams influence encouraged requires the cultural context that Leavis’s work insists on, and which “‘one kind of conservative thinker’ and ‘one kind of socialist thinker’” deny.⁴

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² F.R. Leavis, *For Continuity*, Cambridge 1933, P.15.

³ F.R. Leavis, *Lectures in America*, London 1969, P.21.

⁴ I am indebted to John Tasker for bringing Cowling’s essay to my attention.