For RWF Event 31st August

Daniel Hartley on Facebook/Twitter – 31/8/2021

Today is the centenary of Raymond Williams's birth. His ideas, and contempt for the ruling class, continue to sustain me - even (perhaps especially) in moments of personal crisis. In fact, Williams was in many ways one of the great theoreticians of crisis, of those moments of breakdown and decision which occur in any life, when you must decide not only what you live for but also the ideas, feelings, relationships and resources that you can or cannot live from: "There are ideas, and ways of thinking," he wrote, "with the seeds of life in them, and there are others, perhaps deep in our minds, that contain the seeds of a general death." When he returned from the war to Cambridge, he worked obsessively on a thesis on Ibsen, in whose work he located a structure of feeling that was his own in that period, and which would prevent him from taking the rightward turn that many erstwhile comrades of the 1930s would subsequently perform: "although everybody is defeated in his work," he told the NLR interviewers in 1979, "the defeat never cancels the validity of the impulse that moved him; yet that the defeat has occurred is also crucial."

Williams would transpose many insights from his work on drama into theoretical concepts, not least that of "structure of feeling", which developed largely out of his work on problems of speech in naturalist drama - the fact that a register of everyday verisimilitude struggles to attain the full range of human emotion at moments of dramatic intensity. Many of the deepest motivations and feelings are left unsaid, merely hinted at or transferred onto all-encompassing symbols. These unspoken depths are often the locations of our deepest commitments, such that to ignore them (as he accused much orthodox Marxist theory of having done) is to risk political defeat.

Where F. R. Leavis wrote Thomas Hardy out of the "great tradition" of the English novel, satisfying himself with quoting Henry James's condescending aside on "the good little Thomas Hardy" whose Tess of the D'Urbervilles is "chock full of faults and falsity", Williams saw in the unevenness and discontinuities of Hardy's style linguistic traces of a class-divided language and society. His writing was split between an educated idiom with which he could think but not feel, and a customary style rooted in the rural working class whose affective depths he channelled, but which was inadequate for advanced intellectual speculation. Anyone who has moved between working-class and bourgeois worlds will know the internal divisions and crises it can bring about.

Williams thought in crisis. In a chapter on "Culture" in 1977 - a term he spent his life redefining - he notes the "hesitation, before what seems the richness of developed theory and the fullness of achieved practice [...] It is literally a moment of crisis: a jolt in experience, a break in the sense of history." It is in breaches of the dominant order, often more felt than understood, that new social forces and ideas can emerge. So on Williams's 100th birthday, we go with him once more unto the breach.

Sharon’s notes:

* ‘There are ideas, and ways of thinking, with the seeds of life in them, and there are others, perhaps deep in our minds, with the seeds of a general death. Our measure of success in recognizing these kinds, and in naming them making possible their common recognition, may be literally the measure of our future.’ Raymond Williams, Culture and Society (London: The Hogarth Press, 1993), p. 338.
* To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing - Raymond Williams, Resources of Hope (published posthumously in 1989), p. 118
* Adult education is not about: “remedying deficit, making up for inadequate educational resources in the wider society”. Nor is it primarily a response to “meeting new needs of the society”. It has to be more than “the bottle with the message in it, bobbing on the tides and waves of history” …But, instead, should be about making learning “part of the process of social change itself” (Williams, 1983)
* ‘Williams emphasises the need for a socialist strategy which could overcome the limitations of representative democracy and move towards forms of direct democracy, decentralisation, and self-management’ (From Phil O’Brien – A Century of Raymond Williams, Tribune, 31/8/2021).
* In this work Williams described adult education as a struggle between three traditions, all battling for supremacy. These were ‘the old humanist’ tradition, ‘the industrial trainer’ and ‘the democratic educator’. In Williams’ definition, the ‘industrial trainer’ concept is associated with the need for skilled, pliant workers operating in a marketplace and the ‘old humanist’ concept is perhaps the more traditional model, particularly associated with university education, with its focus on high culture, intellectual rigour and anti-utilitarianism. The sociologist Michael Rustin described it in the following way: “The ‘old humanist’ conception aimed to preserve the values of ‘culture’ against both industrial materialism, and the corruptions and dilutions of commercial mass culture” (Rustin, 2016, p. 148). Finally, the ‘democratic educator’ concept, associated most closely with the political Left, the post-war labour movement and the social democratic welfare state, called for education for as many people as possible, through numerous public means, and supported by the state.