Anti-Imperial Literacy, the Humanities, and Universality in Raymond Williams's Late Work

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Introduction

Towards the end of his career, and ultimately of his life, Raymond Williams returned repeatedly to a set of concerns whose interconnection is not immediately apparent upon simple enumeration: the relation of writing to power, the ideology of modernism, anti-imperial resistance, a critique of the nation-state, the history and culture of Wales, a call for a new, collaborative conception of the humanities, and the seemingly obscure term "distance."[1] Together they form a dense web of mutual presupposition which, taken in its totality, amounts to a highly original body of socialist thought that remains of paramount importance. In what follows I attempt to delineate what is at stake in each element and the ways in which they inform one another. I begin by considering the trajectory of the puzzlingly insistent term "distance" throughout Williams's oeuvre, for its various semantic permutations become central to his influential account of modernism. Likewise, his account of modernism connects directly to his reflections on nationalism, the imperial British state and Welsh history. Having elaborated upon these interconnections, and defended Williams against Paul Gilroy's now canonical accusation that his approach to nationalism reproduces the presuppositions of the "new racism," I shall turn to a detailed reading of a remarkable but little-studied presidential address to the Classical Association given by Williams in 1984, and posthumously published as "Writing, Speech and the 'Classical.'"[2] The address combines, in concentrated form, many of the recurring concerns of his late work, and develops a highly suggestive theory of universality. I conclude with some brief remarks that attempt to draw together these separate strands in a more condensed manner so as to articulate the direct relevance of Williams's late work to contemporary movements to "decolonise" the university, and to spell out the Utopian potential of Williams's unique democratic vision.

Distance

[1] I am grateful to Natalya Bekhta and Gero Guttzeit for their comments on an earlier draft.

[2] In Raymond Williams, *What I Came to Say* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 44-56. For Gilroy's critique, see Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002 [1987]), 50-53.

On the last page of Williams's fictional autobiography *Border Country* (1960), Matthew reflects on his life's journey: from the literal train ride he took as a young man leaving the working-class village he had grown up in to travel to university, to his recent return, after the death of his father, to his wife and children: "Only now," he says to his wife Susan, "it seems like the end of exile. Not going back, but the feeling of exile ending. For the distance is measured, and that is what matters. By measuring the distance, we come home."[3] As ever in Williams, "distance" is not simply geographical: it concerns the felt distances, induced by partial or total incorporation into a more powerful class (for which the term "social mobility" is, at best, inaccurate), to what one has previously known and lived. "Distance" also denotes the (apparent) separation of country from city, Wales from England, and one generation from the next. As an economics lecturer working on population movements into the Welsh mining valleys in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, it is Matthew's job to "measure" these movements.[4] "But I have moved myself," says Matthew, "and what is it really that I must measure? The techniques I have learned have the solidity and precision of ice-cubes, while a given temperature is maintained."[5] Matthew knows from his own experience that academic modes of measurement, statistical surveys for example, are themselves symptoms of social distantiation: as cold as ice. His own ways of measuring are "somewhere else altogether, that I can feel but not handle, touch but not grasp," and that is why his research has stalled.[6] By the end of the novel, however, Matthew has found a way to measure the interrelated distances of geography, class and country; the event and aftermath of his father's death have led him through a personal reckoning which, in turn, allows him to find a way back, to reach a way of living that is no longer internally riven but true to the contradictory reality of his own experience. Ending "exile" in this way is entirely different from a simple rejection of one's working-class past and active self-incorporation into the dominant class. Matthew's solution is fully dialectical, tarrying with the negative, immanently working through the maze of determinate material contradictions, whereas simple rejection or repression would be the experiential equivalent of an abstract negation or false transcendence.

While the term distance reappears periodically through all of Williams's work, in the 1980s it recurs with increasing insistence across a range of contexts. In *Culture*, it names a measure of autonomy: "the degree of cultural autonomy of a cultural process is, at a first level,

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[3] Raymond Williams, *Border Country* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2006 [1960]), 436.
[4] Ibid, 4.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

deducible from its practical distance from otherwise organized social relations."[7] In capitalist societies, the "closer" a given practice and its conditions are to those of wage-labour, the more likely it is to reproduce the dominant social relations; inversely, "relative distance is in practice only a definition of marginality."[8] In "Distance," a 1982 article in the *London Review of Books*, Williams critically analyses the "culture of distance" inculcated by television coverage of the Falklands War.[9] The article begins by noting the etymology of "television" from the Greek for "afar." As in *Border Country*, however, this literal spatial distance becomes inseparable from other modalities: the "war of technical distance" (via long-range missiles), the *critical* distance afforded Williams by a short stay in Ireland, and various complex forms of *social* distance. The result is a conception of distance as that which reduces the lived realities of battle to "fantasies of models and of convictions without experience," within which "men and women are reduced to models, figures and the quick [patriotic] cry in the throat."[10] Taken together, it adds up to a new political form that Williams names "constitutional authoritarianism."[11] Its contrary is precisely that fully dialectical mode of immanent reckoning at which Matthew had arrived.[12]

A year later, Williams gave two retirement lectures at Cambridge: "Cambridge English, Past and Present," and "Beyond Cambridge English."[13] The first was his attempt to make clear his own "social and intellectual distance" from so-called "Cambridge English."[14] The second took aim at two formations that Williams saw as interconnected: modernism and "theory" (particularly structuralism). His account of modernism lays the groundwork for the more detailed elaborations to be found in the later essays collected in the posthumously published *The Politics of Modernism*. He views modernism and theory as "major intellectual formations through which the unevenness of literacy and learning has been lived with and either mediated or rationalized."[15] As in the later accounts, Williams stresses modernism's origins in the new social form of the metropolis. He notes that a number of modernist innovators were "immigrants":

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[7] Raymond Williams, *Culture* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1981), 188.
[8] Ibid., 190.
[9] Raymond Williams, "Distance," in *What I Came to Say* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 36.
[10] Ibid., 42, 43.
[11] Ibid., 42. This can perhaps be seen as Williams's variation on Stuart Hall's "authoritarian populism." Cf. Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988).
[12] Arguably, the literary form of this mode would be realism. It is no coincidence that in the same period that "distance" becomes a central term of Williams's theoretical vocabulary, he engaged in several defences of the continued importance and contemporaneity of realism. See, for example, the essays contained in part III of *What I Came to Say*.
[13] Reprinted in Raymond Williams, *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1983).
[14] Ibid., 190.
[15] Ibid., 220.

> Distanced from, though often still preoccupied by, more local cultures, they found the very materials of their work – their language, which writers had once fully shared with others; their visual signs and representations, which shared ways of life had carried – insufficient yet productive in one crucial way: that writers, artists and intellectuals could share this sense of strangeness with others doing their kind of work but who had begun from quite different familiarities. From the initial strangeness what was forged was a specific form of a possible aesthetic universality.[16]

Whereas in previous historical eras such estranged and estranging aesthetic forms could not have achieved cultural dominance, their hegemony was made possible by the "increasingly mobile and dislocated society" embodied in the imperial metropolis.[17]

Williams argues that "theory" – those approaches to culture and society that emerged in one way or another from structuralism – shares with modernism this "deep form": it views society with the "eyes of a stranger."[18] Here, he echoes the earlier remarks in *Border Country*: "I can feel the bracing cold of their inherent distances and impersonalities."[19] Williams does not dispute the explanatory power of structuralist approaches, but argues that the "form and the language" of its explanations "are at a quite exceptional distance from the lives and relationships they address, so that what is reaching furthest into our common life has the mode of a stranger, even the profession of a stranger."[20] There will be more to say below about a puzzling strain of what appears like nativism in Williams's thought, but suffice it to say that the problem as he sees it is that unless the distance between writing, theory and "general life" can be overcome, the hegemony of capital will go unchallenged precisely because even the "most shallow and adaptive forms of commercial popular art" remain closer to people's everyday concerns than the alienated "theory" that imagines itself to be a locus of critique.[21] The same holds true for the most "inertly reproduced traditional art."[22] Maintaining this distance reproduces the unevenness of learning and literacy, condemning the majority to a basic form of alienation from the dominant culture.

Modernism thus begins for Williams in a distance from "general life." As he sees it, as a first break with the dominant culture, this was inevitable. Yet its practitioners then had a choice pertaining directly to the unevenness of learning and literacy: a rejection of the dominant

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[16] Ibid., 222.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 223.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 224.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

culture through an option for the past, for tradition and "clearer authorities and privileges," as a way of stabilizing the unevenness (whether Eliot's "Tradition" – "the many unconscious, the few conscious" –[23] or that, say, of *Scrutiny* with its clerisy of enlightened critics who safeguard the popular vitality of the English tradition on behalf of – or in the place of – the people). Or, alternatively, there existed the minority option of absolute revolution as a way of overcoming the unevenness and structural alienation of literacy, of sublating the distance between culture and everyday life.[24] Williams locates himself firmly in the latter camp, and seems to recognise both a continuation in the present of the necessity to choose between these two options and, more importantly, a possibility for a contemporary way out of the dilemma. For "theory" is not the only collective agent in the present to have inherited this problematic; in the period of the emergence of "interdisciplinarity" as a watchword of higher education, Williams senses new possibilities for "a much wider collaboration of the humanities."[25] Such new work had already begun "on the periphery of the old systems; in some of the new universities, in several polytechnics, in the Open University, and in many practical initiatives beyond the settled institutions."[26] One senses here a moment in British history in which the expansion of various kinds of higher education amongst a widening range of popular strata acted as a potential institutional mediation between "literacy" and the "people" which, in the process, expanded the very nature of literacy as such beyond "literature" to include critical facility with other media.[27] Needless to say, the operations of neoliberalism came to exert a serious power of incorporation upon this brief moment of emergence: the zombie-like managerial incantation of "interdisciplinarity" across all university contexts today stands as a testament to its downfall.

Ultimately, then, "distance" for Williams consists primarily of two interrelated elements: social alienation and a tendency to abstract from, simplify, or repress the true complexity of social and personal mediations. As in the theory of alienation from Hegel to Marx, such abstractions become socially functional aspects of ruling class power. Literacy is caught in the cross hairs. As will become clearer in Williams's presidential address to the Classical Association, high literacy harbours true anti-authoritarian potential, but its

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[23] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973 [1968]), 204.
[24] These permutations are developed in finer detail in "The Politics of the Avant-Garde" and "The Language of the Avant-Garde." Cf. Williams, *The Politics of Modernism*, 49-80.
[25] Williams, *What I Came to Say*, 46.
[26] Williams, *Writing in Society*, 226.
[27] Williams's general enthusiasm for the Open University was tempered by his perception of its conscious break with the principle of educational self-governance that had informed the Workers' Educational Association in which he had taught in the immediate post-war period. He held that it substituted a form of technocratic populism for genuine democratic "interchange and encounter between the people offering the intellectual disciplines and those using them." Williams, *The Politics of Modernism*, 157.

calculatedly uneven distribution across the social body is a cultural constituent of ruling class power.

Wales, Abstract Universality, and the Culture of Nations

Many of these concerns reappear in slightly altered guise in Williams's writings on nationalism, nation-states and Wales. It is well known that Williams turned increasingly to questions of Welsh history and national identity from the 1970s onwards.[28] Less remarked upon is the continuity between these concerns and his late work on modernism and literacy.[29] A useful distillation of Williams's thinking on nationalism in this period is the chapter "The Culture of Nations" in *Towards 2000* (1983). To return to it in the era of Brexit is to encounter a crystalline account of a set of socio-cultural contradictions that remain uncannily contemporary. There are two main targets of Williams's critique: those who uphold abstract forms of universality as a way of distancing themselves from the immediate particularities of place and nation, and the capitalist state's strategic use of patriotism as a means of hegemonic incorporation.

Abstract universality, for Williams, is a symptom of social alienation in the sense that it mistakes intellectual insight into the supposed universality of humanity as a sufficient means of concretely realising universality in practice:

> It is ineffective and even trivial to come back from a demonstration of the universality of the human species and expect people, from that fact alone, to reorganise their lives by treating all their immediate and actual groupings and relationships as secondary. For the species meaning … is in practice only realised, indeed perhaps in theory only realisable, through significant relationships in which other human beings are present. No abstraction on its own will carry this most specific of all senses. To extend it and to generalise it, in sufficiently practical ways, involves the making of new relationships which are in significant continuity – and not in contradiction – with the more limited relationships through which people do and must live.[30]

Who are the purveyors of such abstract "demonstrations of the universality of the human species"? Williams seems to have three groups in mind: the elite, "relatively detached or

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[28] See Raymond Williams, *Who Speaks for Wales?*, ed. Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), and Hywel Dix, *After Raymond Williams: Cultural Materialism and the Break-Up of Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008).

[29] An exception is Christopher Prendergast, "Nation/*Natio*: Raymond Williams and 'The Culture of Nations'," *Intermédialités / Intermediality*, 1 (2003), 123–138, though he fails even once to mention Williams's reflections on Wales.

[30] Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985 [1983]), 180.

mobile people" who mock modern nationalism and patriotism as backward or primitive;[31] the "minority liberals and socialists, and especially those who by the nature of their work or formation are themselves nationally and internationally mobile, [who] have little experience of those rooted settlements";[32] and, by implication, university intellectuals who, by inheritance or learned class disposition, often overlap with both camps. The argument is thus similar in key respects to Williams's critique of the ideology of modernism. Just as the dislocated and mobile modernists constructed from their shared social alienation an abstract *aesthetic* universality, so internationally mobile liberals and intelligentsia tend towards the attempted, though usually only *intellectual*, construction of an abstract *social* universality. Yet precisely because, like the conservative wing of the modernists before them, they are incapable of reconnecting this universality to ordinary people's everyday lives, they remain trapped in a sphere of alienation: unable to ground their own lives in anything other than a disposition which is often, in reality, a practically-induced class habitus.[33] On Williams's reading, then, abstract universality pertains to the lived and representational modalities of capitalist abstraction; it is an extension of, rather than a challenge to, the rule of capital.

It has been alleged, however, that this logic aligns Williams with post-war proponents of the so-called "new racism," as famously argued by Paul Gilroy in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*. The primary focus of Gilroy's critique is a section in which Williams states that

> it is a serious misunderstanding … to suppose that the problems of social identity are resolved by formal (merely legal) definitions. For unevenly and at times precariously, but always through long experience substantially, an effective awareness of social identity depends on actual and sustained social relationships. To reduce social identity to formal legal definitions, at the level of the state, is to collude in the alienated superficialities of "the nation" which are limited in functional terms of the modern ruling class.[34]

Gilroy draws a direct connection between the logic of this passage and that of Enoch Powell's far-right conceptions of race, national identity and citizenship. If social identity is a product of

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[31] Ibid., 180.
[32] Ibid., 195-6.
[33] The often downright bizarre behaviour of certain representatives of "Remainer" liberalism during the Brexit campaign demonstrates the powerful subjective defence mechanisms caused by clinging tenaciously to such abstractions in the face of concrete realities that reveal one's idealised self-conceptions to be founded on little more than alienated modes of sociality.
[34] Williams, *Towards 2000*, 195.

"long experience," asks Gilroy, "how long is long enough to become a genuine Brit?"[35] Williams has minimized "the specificities of nationalism and ideologies of national identity" and diverted attention from "analysis of the political processes by which national and social identities have become aligned."[36] Ultimately, Williams's critique of the merely legal definition of national identity is said to underestimate the extent to which the contradictions surrounding citizenship remain important constituents of the political field: "Where racial oppression is practised with the connivance of legal institutions – the police and the courts – national and legal subjectivity will also become the focus of political antagonism."[37] Williams's argument amounts to "an apparent endorsement of the presuppositions of the new racism."[38]

I shall not rehearse here Daniel Williams's powerful rebuttal of these accusations, but I would like briefly to reconstruct what I take to be the actual "presuppositions" of Raymond Williams's work in general, and then move on to exemplifications of these presuppositions in his writings on Wales and the nation-state.[39] I should stress initially, however, that Williams does indeed consistently underestimate the extent to which racism is structurally constitutive of British social identity. Just as his theory of "cultural materialism" was an attempt to apply historical materialist principles to those areas of analysis – culture and the arts – of which historical materialism's own conception remained residually idealist, so one might challenge Williams's own views of "race" and "racism" as themselves insufficiently materialist and institutional. Yet there is a major difference between this kind of (immanent) critique and the quite serious misreading that aligns Williams with Powell from whom, as Williams himself might have said, his distance was absolute. First and foremost, Gilroy simply elides the fact that Williams was a Welsh socialist from the "border country" whose earliest lived experiences were of a society characterised by a fundamental geopolitical, class, linguistic, and social complexity that his later work would raise to a methodological principle.[40] Indeed, Williams's basic conception of social ontology always presupposes two interconnecting levels: a present in which a totality of potentially infinite social relationships, values and activities intersect, and an attempted integration of this present into a selective tradition, which is active within it and

[35] Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black*, 51.
[36] Ibid., 52.
[37] Ibid, 53.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Daniel Williams, "Introduction," in *Who Speaks for Wales?*, xxxvi-xxxix.
[40] Cf. Daniel Williams: "[Gilroy] never registers the fact that Williams was Welsh at all. Williams is forced to wear an English mask…." Daniel Williams, *Wales Unchained: Literature, Politics and Identity in the American Century* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015), 98.

attempts to suture it to a selected past as a way of ratifying the prevailing socio-political order.[41] Williams's is also a processual social ontology that is deeply averse to reified "images" of society that work, in his view, both to deny and control true social complexity.[42] Williams's signature method, time and again, is to tackle ideologically dominant "images" of society – country and city, nation-state, mode of production, economy – and to identify the ways in which they simplify an actually existing complexity. He then shows that this operation of imagistic simplification is intrinsic to the hegemony of the dominant order. Crucially, he shows that resisting the dominant order on the ground of its own simplified images of the social totality is a fatal mistake for the Left because it risks incorporation into that very order and because the social breadth and energy of its counter-hegemonic strategy will be limited. As he writes in *The Long Revolution*, "the alternative society that is proposed must be in wider terms [than those of its opponents], if it is to generate the full energies necessary for its creation."[43] Complexity is thus an intrinsic element of both Williams's critical method and his political vision.[44]

In his writings on Wales and the nation-state, Williams combines his critique of "distance" with his habitual methodological emphasis upon complexity. In both "The Culture of Nations" and "Wales and England" he opposes reductive, state-backed selective traditions of patriotism by emphasising the millennia-long history of the British Isles in all its true complexity – what he calls "a long process of successive conquests and repressions but also of successive supersessions and relative integrations."[45] In doing so, he seeks to reinstate the real, historical complexities of mobility, ethnicity, and the long sequence of historical rulers and victims (the one often dialectically reversing into the other).[46] His real opponent is the contemporary British *state*, and by extension those who "mistake the state for the real identity, or the projections for the people."[47] This is no coincidence: ever attentive to symbols or buildings of power and authority, in this late period Williams became increasingly attentive to

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[41] I have developed these ideas on Williams's social ontology at greater length in Daniel Hartley, "On Raymond Williams: Complexity, Immanence, and the Long Revolution." *Mediations*, 30.1 (Fall 2016), 39-60.
[42] "Images of Society" is the title of chapter 4 of *The Long Revolution*.
[43] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965 [1961]), 131.
[44] "It is also only in very complex ways, and by moving confidently towards very complex societies, that we can begin that construction of many socialisms which will liberate and draw upon our real and now threatened energies." In Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with "New Left Review"* (London: NLB, 1979), 437.
[45] Williams, *Towards 2000*, 193-4.
[46] See in particular Williams, *Towards 2000*, 193-4, and Williams, *What I Came to Say*, 64-7. The latter is a good example of Williams's total contempt for any conception of national identity premised upon ethnic homogeneity.
[47] Williams, *What I Came to Say*, 66. In *Politics and Letters* (1979), Williams claimed that "[t]he most welcome single introduction into Marxist thought of the last decade has been the decisive re-entry of the problem of the capitalist state" (120).

the material and institutional embodiments of colonial rule, perhaps inspired in part (but only in part) by Michael Hechter's influential *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1960*.[48] When Williams speaks of the state in "Wales and England," published in 1983, it is "alien" not simply in the Hegelian or Marxist sense, but as the literal embodiment of foreign rule:

> English law and political administration were ruthlessly imposed, within an increasingly centralised 'British' state. The Welsh language was made the object of systematic discrimination and, where necessary, repression. Succeeding phases of a dominant Welsh landowning class were successfully Anglicised and either physically or politically drawn away to the English centre. Anglicising institutions, from the boroughs to the grammar schools, were successfully implanted. All these processes can properly be seen as forms of political and cultural colonisation.[49]

Finally, English capital penetrated Wales's relatively underdeveloped economy in a manner that closely resembles what Samir Amin has called the "internal disarticulation" of colonial economies: "Lines of communication … were driven through Wales on bearings evidently determined by the shape of the larger economy and trading system … Few of these were ever related to the internal needs of Wales, as a developing country or … to the customs and needs of the traditional rural economy."[50] In the same period in which Williams penned the chapter "The Culture of Nations," then, he increasingly saw himself as a Welshman writing from within the history of Wales's cultural, political and economic colonisation. While most historians would now firmly reject this account of Welsh history – preferring to see it as a "dependent periphery" rather than a colony in the strict sense – it is surely significant when evaluating Williams's reflections on the British state and national identity.[51]

In his view it was the integration of Wales into Britain's imperial economy that generated both resistance (from the Merthyr Rising to the Rebecca Riots) and three successive and overlapping modes of incorporation: the ideology of Empire (with the Welsh becoming "avid contributors to the British imperial project"),[52] the ideology and organisation of Liberalism,

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[48] Williams mentions Hechter in *What I Came to Say*, 73.
[49] Ibid., 70.
[50] Ibid., 70. Cf. Hamza Alavi's description of the effect of British capitalist penetration into the Indian colonial economy: "[t]he specific structural features of the colonial agrarian economy are formed precisely by virtue of the fact that Imperial capital disarticulates the internal economy of the colony … and integrates the internally disarticulated segments of the colonial economy externally into the metropolitan economy." Hamza Alavi, "India and the Colonial Mode of Production," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 10, no. 33/35 (1975), 1235–1262.
[51] See Chris Williams, "Problematizing Wales: An Exploration in Historiography and Postcoloniality," in *Postcolonial Wales*, ed. Jane Aaron and Chris Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), 3-22.
[52] Daniel Williams, "Introduction," xxx.

and the ideology and organisation of Labourism.[53] Within and against these modes of incorporation into British hegemony, Welsh social identity tended to go one of two ways: to a residual nationalism that asserted "a received, traditional and unproblematic identity" or to "pseudo-modernist rejections of the specificities of Welshness" (an extension of his critique of both liberal and modernist universalities).[54] Williams's own preference was for the "painful recognition of real dislocations, discontinuities, [and] problematic identities" embodied in an emergent "anti-nationalist nationalism" opposed to a "centralised state."[55] Just as Roberto Schwarz would later connect the internal dislocations of Brazilian culture to its status as a dependent periphery of the capitalist world-system, so Williams extends an emphasis on discontinuity that had characterised all of his major work to date by insisting on locating the core of Welsh culture in "the complex of forced and acquired discontinuities," of "certain autonomies hard won within a subordination."[56] In a crucial argument, he directly counterposes the actuality of Welsh cultural dislocation to the "version of cultural nationalism, in which the continuity and inner essence of a people is discovered in a (selective) version of its 'national' literature," and which he sees as itself "one of the strongest and least noticed English influences on Welsh thought."[57] In other words, "continuity" and "essence" are not only rejected by Williams but are seen to be the *very ideological modality of English hegemony*.

Returning to Gilroy's accusations, we can now offer a more specific defence of Williams's argument. Contrary to Gilroy's account, Williams states very clearly the necessity of "asserting the need for equality and protection within the laws" and the "most active legal (and communal) defence of dislocated and exposed groups and minorities."[58] Yet to reduce social identity to formal legal definitions is to remain trapped within the functional abstractions of the imperial state, which are themselves the geopolitical modalities of capital.[59] The state performs a short-circuit between the most immediate bonds of neighbours and family with the artificial totality of the nation-state form. It is "abstract" precisely because it leaps over all

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[53] Williams, *What I Came to Say*, 71.
[54] Ibid., 72.
[55] Ibid., 72.
[56] Ibid., 68. I have tried elsewhere to connect Schwarz's essays on stylistic discontinuity in the Brazilian novel to Williams's reflections on similar tensions in the history of English prose. See Daniel Hartley, "Combined and Uneven Styles in the Modern World-System: Stylistic Ideology in José de Alencar, Machado de Assis and Thomas Hardy," *European Journal of English Studies*, 20:3 (2016), 222-235.
[57] Williams, *What I Came to Say*, 67-8.
[58] Williams, *Towards 2000*, 195.
[59] That said, I recognise the validity of Francis Mulhern's response to Williams's argument, that the nations produced through the expansion of capitalism are "more than flag-bedecked marketplaces … They are collective identifications with strong supports in economic, cultural and political histories; they are, as much as any competing formation, 'communities.'" Quoted in Daniel Williams, "Introduction," xxxvi.

intermediate-level social bonds or geopolitical mediations such as town, place, region, and country; in doing so, it constitutes a ruling, "distanced" institution. Williams shows that it is capitalism that is the principal force of social dislocation, but that by reproducing selective traditions of cultural nationalism (itself, as we have seen, the hegemonic form of the British nation-state), state institutions – not least schools – are able to suture the individual-family unit to the abstraction of the nation-state within a falsely continuous whole. To fight battles of social belonging solely at the level of legal rights and citizenship is to remain incorporated into the state's hegemony. A *socialist* strategy must instead learn from the painful experiences of discontinuity embodied in Welsh history, connecting the "complex actualities of settled but then dislocated and relocated communities" to the "practical formation of social identity" as a lived reality in the present.[60] It must work, in other words, towards new, more complex forms of self-governing societies beyond the alienating form of the nation-state.

Humanitas, Anti-Imperialism, and Substantive Universality

In this light, it is significant that Williams's 1984 presidential address to the Classical Association pivots on Tacitus's literary rendering of a speech by Calgacus, a Celtic chieftain of the Caledonian Confederacy who fought the imperial Roman army in northern Scotland in AD 83/4. Williams notes in "The Culture of Nations" that "it is a common ruling-class cultural habit, carefully extended by most schools, to identify with the Roman imperial invaders of Britain against what are called the mere 'native tribes.'"[61] His address is thus, at one level, a continuation of his sustained critique of the British state, now under the guise of the classics. Somewhat more surprising, however, given his trenchant critique of abstract universality in his other writings of the period, is Williams's subtle attempt to develop an alternative version of universality grounded in anti-imperial humanism. The result is a highly original fusion of anti-imperialism with a democratic conception of literacy that extends his calls of the same period for a "new humanities." *Humanitas* thus becomes the site of a struggle on three fronts: against the British state, against empire, and against the privatisation of literacy.

Williams begins the talk by noting that the "classical" has been associated, historically, both with the practice of writing and with the facts of educational and civil authority. It has gone hand in hand with what he calls a "distancing education," that is (as we have seen), historically specific education systems that effect an artificial separation between "high

[60] Ibid., 196.s
[61] Williams, *Towards 2000*, 194.

literacy" and the world of "everyday labour."[62] Yet Williams then goes on to observe that there is a danger that (justified) resentment of such systems might eventually lead to rejecting or diminishing the skills and materials traditionally identified with them (i.e., high literacy). He rejects the position of those who defy such attitudes only by setting themselves up as what he calls – tellingly, given what follows – the "last bastion of civilisation" against "the barbarian onslaught."[63] The barbarians in this analogy are precisely those wider popular forces now beginning to infiltrate the British university system. Channelling the cautious optimism of this popular turn in higher education, Williams calls for "a much wider collaboration of the humanities than has yet been realised" so as to rethink what the traditions of learning and literacy really are, and from this to find new directions for an extending practice.[64]

Williams then moves on to a brief reflection on the reductive representation of Britons – "the troop of frenzied women and the Druids lifting up their hands to heaven and pouring forth dreadful imprecations" – in Tacitus' *Annals*.[65] This argument echoes his earlier condemnation of the British press's distanced representations of the screaming Argentinian crowds during the Falklands War. His point here, though, is to draw attention to the ways in which Roman soldiers, who committed systematic violence, are usually seen as representatives of true civilisation whilst the Britons are seen as barbarians: the truth is precisely the inverse. The Britons enjoyed "a distinctive native culture, with its own highly organised order of scholars, philosophers, poets and priests."[66] What they lacked was *writing*, and those social orders that have developed literacy tend to enjoy disproportionate historical advantages. Echoing Walter Benjamin's dictum that there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism, Williams states: "It is a terrible irony that writing, until our own century incomparably the greatest skill of accurate record, should so often, within the realities of historical conquest and repression, have become a medium of obscurantism and falsification."[67] Williams has turned the tables: those elite humanist educators who set themselves up as the last bastion of civilisation within the British university are unveiled as the unwitting heirs of a violent and barbaric imperial history. The task will then be to construct a version of literacy that can extricate itself from this past and deploy its full democratic potential.

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[62] Williams, *What I Came to Say*, 46.
[63] Ibid., 45.
[64] Ibid., 46.
[65] Ibid., 47.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., 48.

It is at this point that Williams turns to the centrepiece of the talk: his remarkable reading of Calgacus's speech in chapter 30 of Tacitus's *Agricola*. The speech denounces imperialism "in words," Williams writes, "of a concentrated power which I find without equal: indeed in what can be properly called a classical statement of human values."[68] In this sentence Williams is consciously aligning the classical itself with the anti-imperial resistors of Roman supremacy. The most powerful passage of the speech, in Williams's eyes, refers to the Romans as *raptores orbis*: plunderers of the earth or *brigands du monde* (in the French translation Williams quotes). "They plunder, they butcher, they ravish, and call it by the lying name of 'empire,'" announces Calgacus, "[t]hey make a desert and call it 'peace.'"[69] To which Williams responds: "here are the received conditions of civilisation, ordered government and peace, seen as covering, with false names, the real practices of theft, massacre and rape."[70] Unlike the distanced representation of the Britons in the *Annals*, Calgacus's speech consists of a "close, sinewy, classical statement of the virtues of civilisation – liberty, community, justice, a plain-living self-respect – and these brought to a climax within the terrible necessity of opposing their destroyers."[71] These values will form the substantial basis of Williams's alternative conception of universality.

Yet it is of the nature of universality to exceed any given instance. Calgacus's speech is inserted in the midst of what is, in effect, a eulogy to the Roman general Agricola, but what impresses Williams most is precisely its power to surpass its occasion. He notes the various expert interpretations of this impression – for example that Tacitus is merely flexing his oratorical muscles,[72] or perhaps trying to embody what were now seen to be the old senatorial virtues against the tyranny and corruption of the empire from which Agricola had suffered. Yet Williams claims that the actual speech ultimately surpasses these contextual determinants: it is a "universal statement against the whole project that was the reputed glory of Rome"; it has echoes in early Welsh poetry where "the sad sound of a different idea of humanity, including the experience of humanity in defeat," was registered.[73] The question of universality is thus

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[68] Ibid., 49.
[69] Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany*, trans. Anthony R. Birley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22.
[70] Williams, *What I Came to Say*, 49.
[71] Ibid., 50.
[72] This is, in effect, Auerbach's reading of Percennius's speech in the *Annals*, which gives voice to the soldiers' grievances: "The grand style of historiography requires grandiloquent speeches, which as a rule are fictitious. Their function is graphic dramatization (*illustratio*) of a given occurrence, or at times the presentation of great political or moral ideas; in either case they are intended as the rhetorical bravura pieces of the presentation." Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003 [1946]), 39.
[73] Williams, *What I Came to Say*, 50.

bound up with that of the word *humanitas*, which is usually translated as "civilisation" or "culture." Williams notes the cynically incisive observation in a different passage in the *Agricola* in which Tacitus describes the Romans' strategic use of soft power (or cultural imperialism) as a way of incorporating the Britons into Roman hegemony:

> The result was that those who just lately had been rejecting the Roman tongue now conceived a desire for eloquence. Thus even our style of dress came into favour and the toga was everywhere to be seen. Gradually, too, they went astray into the allurements of evil ways, colonnades and warm baths and elegant banquets. The Britons, who had had no experience of this, called it 'civilization' [*humanitas*], although it was a part of their enslavement.[74]

Just as Williams had criticised nationalist essentialism as itself the hegemonic form of the British state, so he singles out Tacitus's matter-of-fact statement that *humanitas*, in the narrow sense of an imposed culture, was a tool of Roman imperial hegemony. Likewise, just as Williams in his earlier work had reconfigured "culture" as an ordinary, democratic phenomenon opposed to ruling class dominance, so here he makes a case for a "wider *humanitas*, against a powerful war-machine and a display of material wealth and skill, which we can at least temporarily extract."[75] *Humanitas* thus splits into three: the dominant Roman ego-ideal of "civilisation," the cynical form of Roman colonial hegemony, and a set of universal values inseparable from anti-imperial resistance.

It is at this point that Williams turns specifically to questions of literary composition. As a way of articulating the singularity of Calgacus's speech, Williams draws on a little explored but major aspect of his life's work: the relationship between speech and writing, not least in drama.[76] It is precisely the dramatic mode that holds the key to the ambiguous status of the speech within the context of the *Agricola* as a whole:

> For while it will not do to extract the speech as an absolute condemnation of imperialism, it will not do either to dissolve it into a eulogistic narration. What the dramatic mode made possible, in what has to be seen as a major cultural liberation, was what in fact we find here: a narration, a speech, of a number of voices; thus inherently,

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[74] Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany*, 17.
[75] Williams, *What I Came to Say*, 51.
[76] The best-known texts are *Drama in Performance* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991 [1954]), and *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht,* 2nd revised ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 [1968]). In *Writing in Society* Williams published "On Dramatic Dialogue and Monologue (Particularly in Shakespeare)," based on seminars he had been teaching at Cambridge from 1980-1983. He also deals in detail with the problem of the incorporation of working-class speech into the novel in "Notes on English Prose 1780-1950," first published in 1969 but reprinted in *Writing in Society*. I have written at length on Williams's theory of prose and his approach to speech in naturalist drama in *The Politics of Style: Towards a Marxist Poetics* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017), chaps 4 and 5.

> in its multivocal character, a way of presenting voices, which while they speak have their own and temporarily absolute power, but which because other voices will speak have to be gathered, finally, into a whole action.[77]

This is a key move because it suggests, without ever stating it, that the radical universality of *humanitas* is *formed*. Williams acknowledges the substantial universality of Calgacus's speech – the values of "liberty, community, justice, a plain-living self-respect" – but refuses to separate it from the forms and conventions through which it is articulated. This is a highly original argument because it suggests that it is high literacy that enables the identification and limitations of such forms and conventions, and by extension that *high literacy is internal to the construction of critical universality*. Consequently, rather than being seen as that which is *opposed* to demotic orality – as by elitists who write off the modern oral forms of radio, cinema and television as so many barbarian instances of vulgar mass culture – true literacy should be seen as that which complements and comprehends it:

> It is high literacy which shows us the remarkable diversity – literally as wide as the world – of the meanings and values which these works carry …and one which is not to be reduced to plausible singularities of consideration or conclusion, or to the use of literature, in some highly selective tradition, to ratify the habits of some temporary or self-interested group. … It is high literacy, finally, which calls the bluffs of authority, since it is a condition of all its practical work that it questions sources, closely examines offered authenticities, reads contextually and comparatively, identifies conventions to determine meanings: habits of mind which are all against, or should be all against, any and every pronunciation of a singular or assembled authority.[78]

Williams has prised high literacy from authority's grip and trained its guns back on the citadels of British Rome. In doing so, he allies it with the restoration of a "remarkable diversity" that resists the selective traditions of empire and, later, the imperial nation-state.

Conclusion: For a Democratic and Decolonised Humanities

To the minority cosmopolitanisms of modernism and liberalism, premised upon an elite privatisation of literacy, Williams opposes the democratic actualisation of high literacy. To the abstract humanity of liberalism and empire, he opposes a substantive, formally embodied universality embedded in democratic anti-imperialism. To the abstract legal identities of the

[77] Williams, *What I Came to Say*, 52.
[78] Ibid., 54-5.

British state he opposes the lived, practical formation of new social identities combined with new political geographies. What would it mean to inherit these ideas today? High literacy, as Williams understands it, presupposes the democratisation of the skills of critical reading, writing and speaking – and, by extension, of the university as such. While no historically existing university has even remotely approached genuine democracy, the contemporary neoliberal university offers a particularly egregious case of the privatisation of high literacy, not least in a period when "humanities" departments are often the prime target of financial cuts and are classed – and priced – as a luxury for an elite minority of middle-class students. The social distancing of higher education, then, has been achieved in tandem with a severe reduction in that other meaning of "distance": the distance of social autonomy. The university system is now so "close" to the dominant social relations of capitalist society – in land ownership, financialisation, and the precarity of labour contracts – as to be an almost direct embodiment of it.

Yet Williams was also writing partly to convince those scholars who saw themselves as the last bastion of civilisation – the defenders of high literacy against the incoming demotic hoards, intent on studying the vulgar arts of TV, cinema, and popular culture – that such new scholarship was in fact an extension of, rather than a threat to, high literacy. The same argument must be made today in relation to popular calls for the "decolonisation" of the university. Decried by the dominant order as the latest invasion of the barbarians, these developments would have been wholeheartedly welcomed by Williams for two reasons. Firstly, they democratise critical literacy and extend it into new areas that are central to the formation of new social identities: curriculum-formation, architecture, history, memorial culture – to name but a few. Indeed, in terms of curriculum-formation in particular, we are, in effect, witnessing courageous attempts to reinstate the principle that Williams himself found so important in the Workers' Educational Association: democratic control over what is taught. Secondly, if schools and universities are key operators of the ideological suture between the individual-family unit and the abstraction of the nation-state, then decolonising the university is a powerful way of dismantling the everyday hegemony and selective traditions of the state. The very process of decolonising curricula and universities, if taken seriously, will thus almost inevitably entail a re-evaluation and extension of "high literacy" itself; at every step, it will be faced by powerful opposition that will attempt either to crush it or, more likely, to incorporate those elements of the movements that extend its hegemony while maintaining its basic operations.

Yet these remarks only partially hint at the ambitious socialist vision that lurks in Williams's late work. I shall conclude by spelling out what I take to be its true Utopian potential, and in so doing will risk a more speculative language than Williams might have approved. The central idea implied by Williams's late work is that substantive universality, precisely because it is formed (i.e., is formalized in given genres and representational conventions), can only become substantive to the extent that high literacy is itself universalised and democratised. (The extent to which the previous sentence sounds suspiciously like an incipient idealism is a measure of our alienated, idealist conception of literacy). Anti-imperial *humanitas* thus requires, for its substantive social realisation, a supersession of the structural unevenness of literacy and learning associated by Williams with modernism and "theory," such that an expanded, anti-authoritarian literacy can become actualised in ordinary everyday life. To pose the problem in this way is to connect it to that broader historical process known as "cultural revolution" (one thinks, for instance, of Cuba's heroic literacy campaign, though compared to Williams's implicit vision this would constitute merely the zero degree of literacy in its true sense). To use a term developed earlier in Williams's career, it would require the communalisation of the "means of communication."[79] Given, however, that most cultural forms innate to class society also embody its alienations and class divisions, the universalisation of true literacy as an institutional precondition of social universality would also require the invention of new forms to embody new social relations. As such, there is no guarantee that universality will not substantively alter as its material formalisations undergo further transformations. And at this point we have reached something like the Absolute of Williams's thought: a fully actual democracy, speaking, writing, thinking and reading itself in all its true complexity.

[79] This vision is spelled out very clearly in Raymond Williams, "Means of Communication as Means of Production," in *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 2005 [1980]), 57.