

## **'Fiction as Criticism: Criticism as a Whole Way of Life', Tokyo conference, September 2010**

I am haunted by Raymond Williams's images of haunting. The working-class Oxford postgraduate Peter Owen in the novel *Second Generation* refers in a conversation with his supervisor Robert Lane to 'our endless ghost story'; when Nesta Pritchard in *Loyalties* attempts to paint the cloud formation in her Welsh valley, 'it would never come out right. It would either be a muddling haze or then suddenly too substantial. One, she laughed, had been like gauze at a séance; what did they call it, ectoplasm?'; the 58 year-old London academic Matthew Price in *The Fight for Manod* experiences 'a long mourning through all the reaches of his body'; or we might turn to the great ring of fire which keeps the plague at bay at Samain in the year 550 AD in *People of the Black Mountains*: 'Through its night, in all darkness, forces beyond human strength were loose in the land. The other world itself might be seen'. Rich material here, one might think, for a meditation on Williams's novels, but also his cultural criticism more generally, in the light of Derridean 'hauntology'.

We have recently experienced an unexpected but most vigorous manifestation of Raymond Williams's own spirit in Tokyo, where the Raymond Williams 'kenkyukai' or study-group (the academic equivalent of a séance) has embarked upon an intensive study of his works over the last few years, seeing in cultural materialism a possible way beyond the impasses of the post-structuralism that has dominated Japanese literary and cultural thinking for some years now. The group has already, under the entrepreneurial guidance of Professor Yasuo Kawabata, issued the first volume of its journal, *Raymond Williams Studies* (October 2009, ISSN 1884-2771, contents in Japanese). It was certainly a great surprise to me to see the ghost of Williams so powerfully asserting itself in Roland Barthes's *Empire of Signs*; for when I taught out there in the early 1980s all the radical literary intellectuals studied American Literature, which seemed to them to be where the exciting things were happening, while English Literature tended to be the preserve of the more traditionalist Japanese colleagues. So it is quite a turnaround that such energetic rediscovery of the works of the self-declared 'Welsh-European' should have emerged from amongst English Studies academics in early twenty-first-century Japan.

The group's activities came to a focus this September with a conference devoted to Williams's novels (partly pegged around the fact of 2010 being the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Border Country*) at Japan Women's University (JWU) in the delightful neighbourhood of Mejiro in Tokyo. The choice of venue, which was Japan's first-ever university for women on its founding in 1901, might already be thought to pose a tricky question to Williams: what of women in *your* work? But then the choice of his novels as the topic of the event is perhaps itself an implicit answer to that query; for in these writings at least we have a most memorable sequence of vivid Williamsite female figures: Kate Owen, Gwen Vaughan, Nesta Pritchard herself, among others. Five minutes walk away from JWU is the gentle valley of the Kanda river, while many of its taller buildings have spectacular

views of the Tokyo city skyline; so all those archetypal Williams issues of the country and the city were themselves powerfully built into the conference setting too.

The Tokyo Williams group built upon its earlier connections with Swansea University by inviting Professor Dai Smith and Dr Daniel Williams out to their conference, in what was the first trip to Japan for both of them; and though my Welsh credentials are no stronger than having one Welsh grandfather who left the country as early as he possibly could, I joined the team on the strength of my book on Williams's novels for Seren Press in 1991, where I tried out the heuristic thought-experiment of Williams as 'postmodern novelist'. On the other hand, having a Japanese wife and a half-Japanese son, I can offer rather better credentials on that side of things.

Before the conference itself, a preliminary seminar took place on Thursday 23 September in JWU's impressive Centenary Building. Japanese speakers floated issues that had emerged from their group's discussions of Raymond Williams, and Smith, Daniel Williams and Pinkney extemporised responses to them. There was a focus here on the work of the 1950s, with Hideaki Suzuki addressing Williams's response to Matthew Arnold's writings on the State, Takashi Onuki opening up the fascinating issue of 'failure' around Williams's work (both our failure to read him adequately and the thematic issue of failure in his writings themselves), Shintaro Kono discussing *Border Country* as an 'anti-initiation novel' in relation to the tradition of the *Blidungsroman* (middle-class and working-class), and Fuhito Endo offering some trenchant thoughts on psychoanalysis, modernism and D.H. Lawrence.

On Saturday 26 September the conference itself took place, with an encouraging turnout of around 30 Japanese colleagues and postgraduates. After graceful introductions by Professors Kawabata and Kono, Yasuhiro Kondo invoked Fredric Jameson's meditations on dialectics to elucidate the complex meanings of history in *Loyalties*; this is a talented young scholar from whom I am sure we will be hearing a great deal more in the future. He was followed by Yuzo Yamada, who broadened the canvas beyond Williams himself into a more general Japan-Wales literary comparison, as he set the writings of Gwyn Thomas and Michiko Ishimure side by side and reflected intriguingly on the uses of comedy in enduring the unendurable in terms of class oppression or industrial tragedy. This was indeed a welcome expanding of vistas – comedy being an issue that comes through all too infrequently (in either style or content) in Williams himself.

My own paper on 'Fighting for Manod and Nowhere' kicked off the afternoon session. It triangulated the thought of Williams, William Morris and Fredric Jameson around the notion of utopia – particularly Jameson's idea of a 'negative' or non-representational utopia – in relation to *The Fight for Manod* and *News from Nowhere*. Daniel Williams then explored the vexed notion of realism in Williams's criticism and fiction, arguing that in the end for Williams realism is an *effect*, not a form or set of techniques; if it were the latter, then he might indeed be dismissed as nostalgic for its nineteenth-century manifestations, à la Lukács, but if it is instead a cognitive effect, then *any* set of techniques, however experimental,

might be the apt means of achieving that politically desirable outcome. Dai Smith closed the day with a rousing invocation of the industrial history of South Wales and of Raymond Williams's complex relationship to it; but there were also some telling personal anecdotes about Williams mixed in amongst all this, as we should expect from his official biographer. In the course of this talk, Smith produced such impressive physical relics from the Swansea Williams archive as diaries and the notebooks for his novels, so perhaps we should be thinking not of the unsettling ghost or ectoplasmic spirit of Williams with which I opened this report, but of a rather more benign figure called Saint Raymond instead.

I found the whole event deeply invigorating as, I know, did my two Welsh colleagues, and our Japanese hosts were indefatigable in their kindness and hospitality to us. The papers of the conference will be published in English in the second issue of the Tokyo Williams Studies journal (forthcoming, early 2011), so it is good to know that the Japanese Williamsites will thus take their rightful role in the global discussion of Williams's continuing meanings to us. There are speculative plans for the translation of more of his novels into Japanese (*Border Country* already has been), and a return conference has been mooted for Swansea in 2012, at which the Japanese group will hopefully come over en masse. So a spectre – a very vigorous spectre indeed – is now haunting Tokyo, and we can expect in years to come to hear a good deal more from those Japanese colleagues who have so boldly summoned it into being there.

Tony Pinkney, Lancaster University, October 2010