
Raymond Williams's Time

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Is it time for Raymond Williams? In this essay I attempt to characterise some of Williams's attitudes towards political time and futurity, and to bring them into relation with some of the work in cultural and political theory of the last five years, work in which the philosophy of history and the question of time seem to have begun a remarkable revival. I use this as a way of wondering about the timeliness of Raymond Williams's work — about whether his time is still our time and thus whether that work may yet be *in time* for us.

The imagination of futurity seems always to provoke a reflexive concern with the limits of knowledge and possibility of knowledge about limits; the future is the limit of our knowledge, and yet also the promise of surpassing its present limits. In *Towards 2000*, Raymond Williams suggests another relation between knowledge, futurity and limits. The first and concluding chapters of that work point to what Williams sees as the 'systematic cacophony' of distractions from the business of considering and preparing for a future in which it will have been recognised that there are unsurpassable limits to economic and population growth.¹ Later in the book, Williams writes of the dangerous and artificial limiting of the processes whereby one might generate knowledge and acknowledgement of this limitation; of the 'cultural pessimism' which discourages and deters serious reflection on the future, and the hypnotisation by the seemingly monolithic and unchallengeable forces of global capitalism:

There are very strong reasons why we should challenge what now most controls and constrains us: the idea of such a world as an inevitable future. It is not some unavoidable real world, with its laws of economy and laws of war, that is now blocking us. It is a set of identifiable processes of *realpolitik* and *force majeure*, of nameable agencies of power and capital, distraction and disinformation, and all these interlocking with the embedded short-term pressures and the interwoven subordinations of an adaptive commonsense. (*Towards 2000*, 268).

We can detect in Williams's later writings about the prospects of the 1990s and beyond an interesting vacillation with regard to the question of limits, a vacillation which is the expression of a fundamental dialectic between totalism and wholeness within Williams's conception of freedom, culture and

¹ Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1983), pp. 18-19. References hereafter in the text.

Raymond Williams's Time

community. On the one hand, there is the experience of frustration and limitation which is the effect of the contemporary abandonment of extended forethought or the *longue durée*. What Williams calls the strategy of 'Plan X' — the strategy of the short-term, the percentage politics of crisis-management rather than progress towards long-range objectives — appears to be the absolute opposite of the numbing assimilatory violence of the modern metanarrative, as routinely decried by the skim-readers of Lyotard. Plan X will involve, not universalist enlargement, but universal limitation of expectation and perspective:

This, if we allow it, will be a period in which, after a quarter of a century of both real and manufactured expectations, there will be a long series of harshly administered checks; of deliberately organised reductions of conditions and chances; of intensively prepared emergencies of war and disorder, offering only crude programmes of rearmament, surveillance and mutually hostile controls. It is a sequence which Plan X can live with, and for which it was designed, but which no active and resilient people should be content to live with for long. (*Towards 2000*, 268).

The future that Williams warns against is therefore a future in which futurity itself is indefinitely deferred, in a totalisation of the temporary. However, in contrast to this, the future that Williams wishes to recommend is also characterised by limitation, though of a different kind; for he wishes us to move towards an acceptance of the necessary and unsurpassable limits to growth, along with limits both to production and the prestige of the concept of production. At work here is a complex, and, for Williams, uncharacteristically paradoxical account of the nature of human self-making. Marxism shares with capitalism the sense of the unique human capacity for self-making and self-transcendence. For Marx, the future is the always the place in which and the means by which human beings produce their freedom, by energetically extricating themselves from the unfreedom of history. The future is conceived in such a model both as a necessary actualisation of what is latent in the past and the present, and also as a rupture in the fabric of time. This temporal rupture corresponds closely to the rupture between the human and the natural, in which human beings produce value by intervening in the natural condition of things, subduing and transforming nature for their own purposes. In this account, the future is a product of self-invention through aggressive *intervention*.

Like others, Williams sees modernity as the paradoxical institutionalisation of such rupture, as a continuity forged out of repeated spasms of dehiscence. But then, turning this logic against itself, Williams also

Steven Connor

sees the prospect of an intervention, or self-conscious breaking into modernity, which would reverse, and as it were prevent, the very logic of intervention:

The consciousness of the possibilities of intervention, which inaugurated that phase of history which connects to our own time, is now, at a point of great danger, being succeeded by a new consciousness of its full effects ... It is in this new consciousness that we again have an opportunity to make and remake ourselves, by a different kind of intervention. This is no longer the specialised intervention to produce. The very success of the best and most sustainable interventions has made that specialised and overriding drive containable. Where the new intervention comes from is a broader sense of human need and a closer sense of the physical world. The old orientation of raw material for production is rejected, and in its place there is the new orientation of livelihood: of practical, self-managing, self-renewing societies, in which people care first for each other, in a living world. (*Towards 2000*, 265-6)

Such a world is contained in the sense that the drive to reduce everything to the transformative action of force upon various kinds of object, or raw material, is curbed, in the interests of other kinds of relationship, between persons, peoples, and between people and nature. Such a limitation allows wholeness to flourish. Without it, the totalist emphasis on the drive to escape limits is itself a drastic curtailing of human potentiality.

These and other arguments in *Towards 2000* anticipate many of the debates within and against postmodernity on the left. In 1983, Williams had already noticed the currents which would lead to our current discussions of the 'end of history', and the defeat of political utopianism. In recent years, nobody has brooded with more intensity on this notion than Fredric Jameson, though Jameson's analysis is of a kind that I imagine Raymond Williams would have found uncongenial, or even dangerous, in the extent of its resignation to the claustrophobic temporal conditions from which it seeks only at the last possible moment to extricate itself, like the escapologist extracting every last thrill of apprehension from his audience:

What we now begin to feel, therefore — and what begins to emerge as some deeper and more fundamental constitution of postmodernity itself, at least in its temporal dimension — is that henceforth, where everything now submits to the perpetual change of fashion and media image, nothing can change any longer. This is the sense of the revival

Raymond Williams's Time

of that 'end of History' Alexandre Kojève thought he could find in Hegel and Marx.²

What most concerns Jameson is the degree to which such systems not only seem discouragingly immune to innovation or assault, but also appear to interfere with the temporal logic of innovatory or progressive thought:

The persistence of the Same through absolute Difference — the same street with different buildings, the same culture through momentous new sheddings of skin — discredits change, since henceforth the only conceivable radical change would consist in putting an end to change itself. But here the antinomy really does result in the blocking or paralysis of thought, since the impossibility of thinking another system except by way of the cancellation of this one ends up discrediting the Utopian imagination itself, which is fantasized ... as the loss of everything we know experientially, from our libidinal investments to our psychic habits, in particular the artificial excitements of consumption and fashion. (*ST*, 18-19)

Jameson's craving for a coign of vantage from which to view the all-enveloping phenomena of advanced global capitalism, is in a way predicted by Williams's own obstinate determination to continue thinking and desiring against the grain of the present. What Williams does not anticipate is the new sense of guilty paradox attaching to the imagination of futurity. Williams recognises that for these forces to be knowable and nameable is somehow no longer enough to compel a sense of political alternative, and indeed, he comes close to suggesting that their very knowability and nameability may be a way of defeating critique — as though demystification and exposure had begun to have the effect, following some seductive Baudrillardian logic, or logic of seduction, of consolidating what is demystified and exposed. What is important for Williams is that we break off from the stony, Medusan stare of the immovably actual, and look elsewhere, since 'it is not in staring at these blocks that there is any chance of movement past them. They have been named so often that they are not even, for most people, news. The dynamic movement is elsewhere, in the difficult business of gaining confidence in *our own energies and capacities*' (*Towards 2000*, 268).

It is just this strategy which no longer seems viable for Jameson, who has become so convinced of the unavailability of resources against and resistances to contemporary global capitalism which are not themselves part

² Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 19. References hereafter to *ST* in the text.

Steven Connor

of its astonishing Protean repertoire of self-securing quick changes. Consider, for example, Jameson's account of the temporal dynamics of the global economy, in which he finds what he calls 'an effacement of the temporalities that seemed to govern an older period of modernity, of modernism and modernization alike' (*ST*, 19). Modernity, in the form of imperial expansion, brought about a collision between its own linear, irreversible, accelerating time and the more sluggish, recursive temporalities of traditionalism, which could often stand as 'the affirmation of a cultural (and sometimes religious) originality that had the power to resist assimilation by Western modernity and was indeed preferable to it' (*ST*, 19). What has now come about for Jameson is the complete digestion of all such alternative or antimodern temporalities within the time of the modern, such that 'nothing but the modern henceforth exists in Third World societies' (*ST*, 20). For Jameson, this is rather confirmed than contradicted by the hysterically-documented rise of cultural archaisms and atavisms, such as so-called religious fundamentalism, which are the fabrications of a past with which no significant continuity can any longer be claimed.

But at this point, something strange occurs, though its strangeness is wholly consonant with the squirming temporal logic that governs the contemporary. For, at the point where the last pockets of 'nonmodern residuality' have been completely mopped up, the time of the modern loses all its tension and definition. It turns out in fact that the modern could only be — or remain — modern as long as it was incomplete (as long as it was not yet modern). Once modernity has come into its own, once it has achieved complete dominion, it has already undergone a change into something wholly different, in an unanticipated mutation that is yet the long-prepared fulfilment of the modern as such, the postmodern. To summarise: modern time can only *be* modern as long as it is not yet modern; the moment modernity comes into being, it is already over and done with. The universality of the modern, which looked at one point as though it would mean a dominion of time as such over the telluric resistances and particularities of place, gives way to a homeostatic or spatialised time:

The temporality that modernization promised (in its various capitalist and communist, productivist forms) has been eclipsed to the benefit of a new condition in which that older temporality no longer exists, leaving an appearance of random changes that are mere stasis, a disorder after the end of history. (*ST*, 20)

The stopped or sluggish time of the nonmodern, which used to mark the temporal limit or phobic exterior of modernity, then begins to seep back into it,

Raymond Williams's Time

as modernity, deprived of the possibility of adversary identification against its temporal other, begins to define itself through kinds of mimicry of that other, by busily dismantling or primitivising itself: 'it is as though what used to be characterized as the Third World has entered the interstices of the First one, as the latter also demodernizes and deindustrializes, lending the former colonial otherness something of the centered identity of the former metropolis' (ST, 20). Indeed, in Jameson's analysis, this totalisation begins to leak back into the past, in a remark that suggests that even 'authentic' traditionalism 'was of course a construction in its own right, brought into being as it were, by the very activities of the modernizers themselves' (ST, 19-20).

Jameson wants to retain his conviction that it is possible to know and name the temporality specific to the postmodern, and thus squint round it to see its dark or further side, in adherence to the Hegelian principle which he announces in his preface that knowledge of a limit is always in a certain sense a surpassing of that limit: 'when we identify a boundary or a limit ... we nonetheless modify that limited situation, that situation or experience of absolute limits, ever so slightly by drawing the situation as a whole inside itself and making the limit now part of what it had hitherto limited, and thereby subject to modification in its own turn' (ST, xvi). But this is something very different from the overcoming, or sidestepping of limits proposed by Williams. Where Williams suggests that we avert our gaze from the contemporary, Jameson feels impelled to outstare it, in a Hardy-esque 'full look at the worst', or a 'therapeutic' surrender to the astonishment of a Parmenidean vision in which 'the supreme value of the New and of innovation, as both modernism and modernization grasped it, fades away against a steady stream of momentum and variation that at some outer limit seems stable and motionless' (ST, 17).

The intimation of certain of these epistemological difficulties with respect to the question of time and of limits in Williams's work is also the mark of their neglect, or Williams's deep disinclination to allow politics to surrender to the fascination of paradox. It is as though Jameson had undertaken to act out in his work that great grudge match between Raymond Williams and Jean Baudrillard which somehow never quite came off in real time. For, a couple of years after Williams produced the book that he named *Towards 2000*, Baudrillard was announcing that 'The Year 2000 Has Already Happened', in an essay that argued (though I am not sure that is quite the right word) that the saturation of information and simulation has now cancelled every transcendence, and especially the transcendence of time and futurity:

Progress, history, reason, desire can no longer find their exit velocity. These can no longer snatch themselves from a body too dense, that irresistibly slows their trajectories, that slows time to the point that, as

Steven Connor

of now, the perception, the imagination of the future escapes us. All social, historical, temporal transcendence is absorbed by this mass in its silent immanence.³

A year or so later, Baudrillard was evoking the eerie sense that the present has predigested, not just the future, but its own finality, in the form of 'the pole of reckoning, dénouement and apocalypse', such that we are in the position 'of having extended our own finalities, of having shortcircuited our own perspectives, and of already being in the hereafter, that is, without horizon and without hope'.⁴ We exist in the aftermath of what Baudrillard calls 'the temporal bomb'. 'Where it explodes, everything is suddenly blown into the past ... Look around, this explosion has already occurred'.⁵ Jameson clearly has considerable disagreements with Baudrillard, not least in his heroically counterfactual adherence to the possibility of historical transcendence, but goes much further than Williams ever could in acknowledging the temporal claustrophobia of the present.

Baudrillard's and Jameson's shared sense of the appropriation of the future by the postmodern present is in some respects also shared by Emmanuel Levinas, whose account of modern temporality is to be found in a couple of essays from the 1980s, 'L'Ancien et le nouveau', first published in 1982, and 'Diachronie et représentation', first published in 1985. Levinas's reading stresses, in traditional wise, the affirmation of freedom from the past that inaugurates the modern: 'Everything is possible and everything is permitted, for nothing, absolutely speaking, precedes this freedom. It is a freedom that does not bow before any factual state, thus negating the 'already done' and living only from the new. But it is a freedom with which no memory interferes, a freedom upon which no past weighs'.⁶ This freedom involves a rupture not just with the past, but with the immediate givens of the present, in a systematised, institutionalised suspicion of the self-evident driven by 'the exigency of an extreme lucidity' (*TO*, 125-6). But, increasingly, the process of this self-reflection, or dehiscence of self-differentiation from the past, or from the past in the present, is itself detemporalised, accelerated to the merest

³ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Year 2000 Has Already Happened' (original title, 'L'An 2000 Ne Passera Plus'), trans. Nai-fei Ding and Kuang-Hsin Chen, in *Body Invaders: Sexuality and the Postmodern Condition*, ed. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1988), p. 38. Translation modified.

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Anorexic Ruins', trans. David Antal, in *Looking Back on the End of the World*, ed. Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), p. 34.

⁵ Baudrillard, p. 34.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 124. References hereafter to *TO* in the text.

Raymond Williams's Time

flicker, in which knowledge and present self-identity annul all possibility of what lies before or beyond them.

As knowledge, thought bears upon the thinkable called being; bearing upon being, it is outside of itself, to be sure, but remains, marvellously, in itself. The exteriority, alterity, or antiquity, of what is 'already there' in the known, is taken up again into immanence: the known is at once *the other* and the *property* of thought. Nothing preexists: one learns as if one *created*. Reminiscence and imagination, secure the synchrony of what, in experience bound to time, was doomed to the difference between the old and the new. The new as modern is the fully arranged state of the world. (*TO*, 125)

Where Hegel claims to hold together history and its transcendence, Levinas argues that the modern, pledged as it appears to be the excitement and emergency of time, in fact abolishes time. The secularising institutional knowledges of modernity thus somersault bizarrely into a mythic or sacred suspension of time:

Does not time itself — which for everyday consciousness bears all events, and renders possible the play of the old and the new, the very aspiration for the new in the aging of all actuality — lose for modern humanity its innovating virtue and its peremptory powers? What can modern humanity expect from a future which it believes is held in the present of its absolute knowledge, where nothing is any longer exterior to consciousness? (*TO*, 126)

For Levinas, the present is stalled because there is no history that it does not consummate, no possible future that it will not have consumed. Levinas calls this modernity, but it corresponds with the condition of achieved modernity that, for Jameson, itself brings about the shift to postmodernity. Once, the present was emptied out by time; now the present is glutted with it. Rather than being the dimensionless membrane that separates times and tenses, the present envelops all times and tenses, the already of the aorist, the projective possibility of the future transformed into the tense of the 'present perfect'. Levinas's account of things resembles Baudrillard's, in the sense that, from now on, in this dispensation of the modern, time cannot move, but only, so to speak, *engorge*. It is the seeming limitlessness of modern self-knowing, or rather, perhaps, the limitation of modern being to the barren lucidity of mere knowing, which actually locks the modern out from the alterity of the future:

Time is not a succession of novelties which are made old and aged, but a history where everything comes and goes into a time

Steven Connor

progressively constituting the truth. It is an edification of the true whose completion is like a novelty which does not pass. The novelty of the modern is not, to be sure, the end of everything unknown, but an epoch where the unknown to be discovered can no longer surprise thought with its new alterity. Thought is already fully conscious of itself and of all the dimensions of what is reasonable in reality. (*TO*, 127)

For Jameson and Levinas, in their different ways, the urgency of utopian thinking is no longer directed, as it might have been in earlier, more revolutionary epochs, against the constraints of the past as they bore upon the present. If modernity is inaugurated with the intense libidinalisation of the future, then the predicament of the postmodern might be seen to lie in the fact that the future has been so thoroughly colonised and its resources exhausted in advance. Brian Aldiss has a science fiction story called *Dracula Unbound*, in which Bram Stoker's text is rewritten in temporal terms; the story imagines a race of energy-hungry vampires in the far future who have time-travelling powers, and rake back and forth through history, draining away its stocks of life-force.⁷ In a ghastly inversion of this scenario, the postmodern present becomes distended with the energies imbibed from the future, such that the future itself becomes an emaciated and bloodless husk. In any case, the problem for the postmodern then appears to be not how to liberate oneself from the past into the future, but how to liberate or conserve the future from the rapacious chronophagy of the present. The future must be husbanded, in a kind of temporal ecologism, preserved in its indeterminate possibility, by not being drawn on by the present, or drawn into it. The future can be, in a sense must be, surmised or indicated, but may never be specified or precisely figured. The future that emerges for Jameson is therefore a kind of algebraic ghost, whose necessity can be assumed but whose forms cannot be made visible — perhaps like the astronomers' projection of the existence of the ninth planet which was not in fact verified by visual observation until 1930 (with the qualification that this unseen future reveals itself according to the logic of catastrophic reversal rather than extrapolation from known laws and tendencies). Jameson's future is thus both a necessity and a negativity, and the work of *The Seeds of Time* is 'to suggest an outside and an unrepresentable exterior to many of the issues that seem most crucial in contemporary (that is to say postmodern) debate. The future lies entangled in that unrepresentable outside like so many linked genetic messages' (*ST*, xiii).

In urging us to defy the ban on long-range social thinking and imagining, Williams may be seen as refusing a certain interdiction of the future

⁷ Brian Aldiss, *Dracula Unbound* (London: Grafton, 1991).

Raymond Williams's Time

that has become general in much left cultural theory, and *Towards 2000* may be said to have offered a preemptive warning against just such an interdiction. Thus, Terry Eagleton, for example, identifies a tradition of Marxist anti-utopianism which he equates with the Judaic ban on idolatry or articulation of the name of God. Those who are lured into utopianism, or political soothsaying, he writes, 'are fetishists, unable to endure the intolerable vision of the future's essential openness, its radical indeterminacy; instead they seek to plug that painful vacancy with some consoling determinateness'.⁸

We might connect this with a tendency within philosophical thinking about the future more generally to focus on the necessary imperfection or openness of the future — not, as might once have been the case in the mode of mere acknowledgement or acceptance, but in the mode of admonition or exhortation, as for example in Derrida's enthusiastic early evocations of a future which 'can only be anticipated in the form of absolute danger ... [and which] can therefore only announce or *present* itself in the form of monstrosity', or in Geoffrey Bennington's more qualified sense — itself derived partly from Derrida's later reflections on time — of the 'future imperfect'.⁹ Terry Eagleton audaciously characterises Marxism not as a way of deriving a necessary future from the past and the present, but as a way of unlocking us from the absolutely determined futures that the past and the present seek to enforce, as a way of preserving 'the future's essential openness, its radical indeterminacy'.¹⁰ However, the indeterminacy of the future must be grasped dialectically, which is to say, it cannot be purely or absolutely other, or wholly disconnected from us, since such absolute otherness always in fact secretly emanates from the deepest desires of the present. The future as absolute utopia, absolutely disconnected from the present is always therefore a narcissistic continuation of that present: 'Fetishist future-gazing imagines that we could model the freedoms relevant to a realm beyond necessity on the kingdom of necessity itself; in doing so, it ties us even more deeply to "pre-history", in dreaming of an escape from it'.¹¹ An authentic indeterminacy, so to speak, must in some paradoxical way arise out of the transformation of determinate conditions in the present. The resolution of this paradox for Eagleton, or at least the enactment of its form, is to be found in Marx's *18th Brumaire*, which insists that we can never predict the content of a post-revolutionary future, only the preconditions which might

⁸ Terry Eagleton, 'Marxism and the Future of Criticism', in *Writing the Future*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 177.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 5; Geoffrey Bennington, 'Towards a Criticism of the Future', in Wood, *Writing the Future*, p. 28.

¹⁰ Eagleton, p. 177.

¹¹ Eagleton, p. 179.

project us into it.

Compared with all this, Williams's reflections on modernity and futurity may strike us as at once refreshingly robust and alarmingly rustic. At the beginning of *Towards 2000*, Williams distinguishes two different kinds of utopian thinking, the systematic and the heuristic, the first of which aims at specifying the conditions of a utopia, and the second more generally at educating desire towards utopia. The first of these, for all the notorious difficulties it always encounters, is praised by Williams for the fact that it is 'a kind of whole analysis and whole constructive formation' (*Towards 2000*, 14). Now the word 'wholeness' deserves the Williams keyword treatment, so central is it to Williams's conception of culture, value and the responsibilities of analysis. For the analyst, 'wholeness' means inclusiveness, the refusal of fixation or arbitrary selectiveness in the treatment of social formations — the refusal, for instance, to separate the products of high culture from the political and economic conditions obtaining elsewhere in the culture. It means attention to that 'whole way of life' which Williams had famously identified as the primary meaning of the word 'culture'. But wholeness also signifies a particular value, or a particular way of looking at a culture. To analyse a particular social order, and to speculate meaningfully about its future, it is necessary, not merely to be inclusive, but also to specify what Williams calls (with breathtaking composure) 'the real order of determination between different kinds of activity' in any particular social formation (*Towards 2000*, 15). Wholeness here means more than wide attentiveness, it means an adhesion to the principle of determining integration within any particular order, a commitment to understand what makes a particular society unique. What is more, defining the determining principles of integration at any one moment allows one to define historical movement; spatial or synchronic wholeness rounding itself into temporal or diachronic continuity; to understand how a social order is internally integrated is simultaneously to grasp where it is headed. It is because of this that Williams, like Eagleton, judges systematic utopias as deficient, for in such utopias 'wholeness is essentially *projected*, to another place or time' (*Towards 2000*, 15). What is required is to retain the impulse to wholeness without the accompanying projection, or without the failure of integration that cuts off the satisfactory future from the dubious present. The vision of wholeness must itself be solidary with the unsatisfactory actual.

This association between spatial wholeness and temporal continuity appears in some of Williams's later, and too long deferred discussions of modernism and postmodernism. In the lecture 'When Was Modernism', as skilfully reconstructed by Fred Inglis, that heads Tony Pinkney's edition of *The Politics of Modernism*, Williams offers an analysis which appears to confirm

Raymond Williams's Time

this link between the wholeness of the moment and the wholeness of duration. Modernism, for Williams, is an immense abstraction, a fixation upon the narrow experience of a small group of metropolitan intellectuals who have in common only their abstract sense of disconnection. The principle of dislocation itself becomes a principle of integration, with the canonisation of modernism in new international capitalism. The disconnection of modernism from a wider, more differentiated modernity also deprives modernism of any meaningful posterity: "Modernism" is confined to this highly selective field and denied to everything else in an act of pure ideology, whose first, unconscious irony is that, absurdly, it stops history dead. Modernism being the terminus, everything afterwards is counted out of development. It is *after*, stuck in the post.¹² Williams believes that it will not be possible to move on in any significant way from modernism, until its own larger context has been reconstructed. One must find the future in the neglected past:

If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of *post*-modernism, then we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition which may address itself not to this by now exploitable because quite inhuman rewriting of the past but, for all our sakes, to a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again.¹³

Could we be assured that this final formulation represents Williams's own formulation of the problem of modernism — and it may now be impossible to be so assured — it would be worth while spending a little more time considering the significance of what seems on the face of it a remarkable sleight of hand practised in the glide between two ideas of wholeness, from the ideal of a kind of statistical or methodological completeness which would try to see modernism in a wider historical frame, to the possibility of reconnection to a future 'in which community may be imagined again'. Wholeness as a regulative ideal of cultural analysis becomes the guarantee of the desirable wholeness of a particular way of life. It may perhaps be unfair to attribute this way of arguing to Williams, whose later work is often warier and more defended against watery wish-fulfilment of this kind. But what we read in 'When Was Modernism' does seem to reproduce the definitional dither to be found in *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*. The chapter entitled 'The Analysis of Culture' in the latter hesitates, disastrously in my view, between an anthropological view of culture as a whole way of life ('social

¹² 'When Was Modernism', in *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. Tony Pinkney (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 34-5.

¹³ Williams, 'When was Modernism', p. 35.

Steven Connor

culture' as Williams calls it) and an organicist view of culture as embodied in the selective expression of wholeness in particular artefacts ('ideal culture').¹⁴ In any case, the arguments of the essay also cohere with the ending of *Towards 2000*, which similarly rotates the ideal of a whole analysis of the historical moment into a promise of historical continuation and continuity: the possibility of 'making and sharing' an analysis of our contemporary predicament has been, writes Williams, 'from the beginning, the sense and the impulse of the long revolution' (*Towards 2000*, 269). The contrast is therefore stark between Jameson and Williams; where for Jameson the future is the 'unrepresentable exterior' of the contemporary, for Williams, it is the logical extension of seeing the present and its determining past steadily and whole.

I want in the concluding part of this essay, and in obedience to the requirements of anagnorisis of this kind of investigation, to unveil my own version of a politics of time. My readers will be less than dumbfounded perhaps to hear that this consists of an optimal synthesis of the two politicotemporal sensibilities that I have, no doubt grotesquely, personified in the names of Williams and Jameson.

Raymond Williams's time is not our time; because Williams's work is lodged in and speaks to its own moment, it does not I think respond very adequately to the complexities and convolutions of our contemporary sense of time. In particular, the demand that a socialist politics be linked to a vision of temporal wholeness seems now like an unhelpful and even sentimental homogenisation. The charge could not be that Williams is regressive or crudely programmatic, since he did more in his life than most to show what a complicated thing socialism would have to be if it were ever to come about. But it is true that, for Williams, possessing the future for socialism, or making a socialist future available means an act of temporal synthesis or synchronisation which contemporary cultural developments, not least technological ones, make implausible and reductive. Jameson, on the other hand, though apparently more sensitive than Williams to the paradoxical nature of time and duration in the postmodern, and certainly more alive to the clashing and commingling of different national and cultural temporalities consequent upon colonialism, decolonisation and the recolonisations of global capitalism, is also guilty of a style of analysis which significantly flattens and formalises contemporary conditions. Faced with the accelerating complexity of time in the contemporary world, Jameson as it were speeds up or fast-forwards his analysis to the point at which it yields the stillness or invariance of a system in which mutation is so ceaseless and ubiquitous that difference is abolished. Under these circumstances, it is possible to conceive of things

¹⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 57-8.

Raymond Williams's Time

proceeding otherwise, of the liberation of an indeterminate future, only in the purifying modes of catastrophe, or collapse, or ecstasy. The future becomes no more, and no less, than alterity as such: the breaking in of the inconceivable, the surpassing of knowledge, the dissolution of the subject. In the desolate messianics which Derrida has recently been deriving from Heidegger and Levinas, for example, justice is not to be identified with the positive promotion or preservation of known goods, or prevention of known evils, but only with the keeping at bay of anything 'which, rightly or wrongly, is thought of as obstructing the horizon, or simply forming a horizon (the word means *limit*) for the absolute coming of what is completely other, for the future itself'.¹⁵

Central to the Jamesonian analysis of postmodern times and time in the postmodern, and to that of others too, is the strange convolution whereby time, which had previously been the neutral continuum within which activities of production, distribution and exchange took place, has been drawn into exchange. Time is now a commodity like anything else, and gains in time or speed (for example turnover time) are entirely equivalent to material gains. Time is stockpiled, invested, expended, speculated upon. One of the most important ways in which this is effected in cultural terms is by means of the technologies of storage, reproduction, replication and transmission which are at the heart of the information industries; film, tape, video, TV, and the various media of digital conversion. All this seems to amount to a saturation of the present, traditionally the thinnest and most insubstantial of tenses, by the stored-up potential of imaged and imagined pasts, alternative presents, and virtual futures. The seemingly limitless cultural archive made available by such technologies can be read as an abolition or flattening of history, the replacement of duration, sequence and development with repetition, recursion and instantaneity: this is Baudrillard's reading of the fate of history, as it is Jameson's, in his famous 1984 essay 'Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism'. Surprisingly, it also appears to be Derrida's reading of the processes whereby time is currently fabricated by the agencies of the printed and electronic media, which he has summarised with the term 'actuvirtuality'.¹⁶

But the ending of a certain temporal regime, or dominant mode of historical imagining, should not be mistaken for the collapse of time altogether; there are other alternatives than the rolling river or the stopped clock. I want to suggest that we begin to grasp contemporary culture as the culture of interruptions, by which I mean a culture characterised more by the effect of rhythms and temporalities cutting across and into each other, than by the

¹⁵ 'The Deconstruction of Actuality: An Interview With Jacques Derrida', trans. Jonathan Rée, *Radical Philosophy*, 68 (1994), p. 36.

¹⁶ 'The Deconstruction of Actuality: An Interview With Jacques Derrida', pp. 28-30.

Steven Connor

dominance of any single temporal regime, whether it be the teleological uncoiling of the metanarrative, or the ruthless scheduling of time characteristic of modern work-discipline; not the contemporary, then, but what I suggest we call the contemporality of the contemporary. Under such conditions, it is unhelpful to think in terms of the simple antagonism of progressive, or Western, or modern time, and premodern, monumental or recursive time. Peter Osborne has usefully pointed up the necessity of attending to ‘the *noncontemporaneity of geographically diverse but chronologically simultaneous times*’, and the advantages of ‘the complex and differential temporality of conjunctural analysis’.¹⁷ However, I find the tripartite scheme of temporalities to which Osborne appears to accede unhelpfully cramping; this scheme distinguishes only between objective or cosmological time (the time of nature), lived or phenomenological time (individual time experience) and intersubjective or social time (the time of history).¹⁸ Just as individual lives are made up of an ensemble of different durations, periodicities, and rates of elapse, the complex synthesis of which is perhaps all we mean when we use the term the ‘subject’, so any political collectivity, especially in our contemporary world, is an unstably synthesised ensemble of different temporalities.

Among the different orders of temporality — different speeds, scales, shapes, rhythms and durations — which both traverse and are gathered into the lives of individuals and collectivities might be the following:

- cosmological, or planetary time: the *longue durée*, perhaps the longest of them all, measuring the movement from the origins of the physical universe, including the lifespan of the planet which is now intersecting alarmingly with our own individual lifespans;
- biological time: the time of individual bodily maturation and decay, and the rates and rhythms of reproduction, especially as these are controlled and transformed by ritual or technological means;
- religious or sacred time: the still powerful calendars of redemption and renewal offered by official and unofficial religions;
- public time: for example in the schedules and synchronicities of labour in school and workplace, as well as the professional rhythms of law, education, finance;
- media time: the orderings of timetables and flows, in print and televisual

¹⁷ Peter Osborne, ‘Modernity is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological, Category: Notes on the Dialectics of Differential Historical Time’, in *Postmodernism and the Re-reading of Modernity*, ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 32, 37.

¹⁸ Peter Osborne, ‘The Politics of Time’, *Radical Philosophy*, 68 (1994), p. 4. See, too, his *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995).

Raymond Williams's Time

- media, for example in the viewing units analysed by Williams, but also in their mimicry of other temporalities, and their capacity to intervene in other temporalities;
- the time of information: the increasingly shortening time of the circulation of information, and its capacity both to simulate and alter the rate of elapse of other temporalities; as well as the hitherto unprecedented, and still undeveloped power of stockpiling time, or putting it into exchange;
 - leisure time: the more or less formal orderings of 'free time', not only in their coordination with other temporalities, but also in their intertranslatability (for the internet-addict, for example, the time of leisure is scarcely to be distinguished from information time);
 - political time: the durations and periodicities of institutions and political processes
 - popular time: the time of festivities, memorials and anniversaries, as it is variously conjoined with the calendar of public or official memory.

We must add to these the metatemporalities, or concrete composites which determine the relations *between* these temporalities, their ratios, and rates of exchange. If we can include in this last, most important of categories, the different ensembles of temporal orderings that we call 'cultures', then it will become clear that, not merely temporalities, but the modes of metatemporal syncopation and aggregation are themselves subject to syncopation and aggregation. It is here that the importance of technology seems to lie. Far from flattening all these orders into simultaneity, or mere interchangeability, the new technologies of transmission and reproduction are likely to precipitate new complexities and interrelations. Far from being the mirror in which time dissolves, technology is already the switchboard or medium of exchange between different temporalities.

Socialism, or the politics of reaffirmed community is not to be guaranteed either by the temporal wholeness promised by Williams, or by the rattled, overtotalising logic of catastrophe suggested in the politics of time of Jameson or Derrida. Of course, socialism may not be guaranteeable by anything at all, let alone the relative sophistication of its politics of time. But I think that, in order to grasp and inhabit the conditions of contemporaneity that I have attempted to evoke, the politics of collectivity must learn to live within conditions of syncopation rather than synthesis, and to establish a relation to its times, not of knowledge, but rather of acknowledgement.

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