

# A missed encounter: Raymond Williams and psychoanalysis

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## Summary

Raymond Williams was perhaps the foremost cultural critic in Britain of the post-war period. Yet his work retained a consistent hostility towards what has become a central component of our understanding of the social construction of the subject – the theory of psychoanalysis. This essay traces the terms of Williams's hostility towards psychoanalysis and argues that most of this was the product of a missed encounter with psychoanalysis. It is argued that this missed encounter is all the more surprising given the interest in psychoanalysis shown by predecessors of Williams such as Herbert Read, Alick West and Christopher Caudwell.

## Opsomming

Raymond Williams was miskien die belangrikste kulturele kritikus van die na-oorlogse periode. Tog het sy werk 'n volgehoue vyandigheid gehandhaaf teenoor dit wat 'n sentrale komponent van ons begrip van die sosiale konstruksie van die subjek geword het – die teorie van psigoanalise. Hierdie opstel spoor die terme van Williams se afkeer van psigoanalise na en argumenteer dat dit grotendeels toegeskryf kan word aan 'n versuimde ontmoeting met psigoanalise. Daar word geargumenteer dat hierdie verspeelde ontmoeting des te verbasender is as die belangstelling in psigoanalise deur Williams se voorgangers soos Herbert Read, Alick West en Christopher Caudwell in aanmerking geneem word.

## 1 Introduction

Since his death in February 1988, tributes to the work of the late Raymond Williams have argued for his position as the most important cultural theorist of the past forty years.<sup>1</sup> A notable element of his work has been a consistent hostility towards psychoanalytic theory, and particularly towards the possibilities of its possible conjunction with Marxism. In the wake of the MacCabe affair, Williams relented a little, and was prepared to admit, though still in very guarded terms, that “to our mutual surprize”, there were points of contact between work influenced by psychoanalysis in semiotics, and Williams's own project of a “cultural materialism”. At least both cultural materialism and radical semiotics were equally opposed to the conservatism of English studies at Cambridge whose dominance had been ritually affirmed by the refusal to confirm MacCabe's tenure. “I remember saying that a fully historical semiotics would be very much the same thing as cultural materialism” (Williams, 1984: 210).

In this essay I shall examine the grounds of this hostility in what I see as Williams's opposition to a Freudianism which is partly drawn from the context of debates available to him in the fifties, and is partly his own creation. Like all Freudianisms, it represents a highly selective interpretation of Freud's complex and contradictory work, one which poses as the essential, and

essentially unitary, identity of his thought. I shall argue that in this encounter with Freud, Williams misses an encounter with some of the central elements of the psychoanalytic tradition of enquiry.

In 1979 the *New Left Review* editorial team published a searching series of interviews with Williams, reviewing the whole of his work to date (Williams, 1979). In the course of these discussions, the interviewers note his general hostility towards psychoanalysis and, in particular, the omission of any discussion of Freud in Williams's seminal work of 1958 – *Culture and society 1780–1950* (Williams, 1979: 99).

In response to the *NLR*'s question on why there had been no discussion of psychoanalysis in *Culture and society*, Williams responded by saying that he had written a chapter, "Herbert Read and the British Freudians", but that the publishers refused to include it for reasons of length. "I was so hostile to Read" he notes, "that I was less distressed about that; although I regret it now because it would have been relevant in the sixties, when the whole question of Freud became so important in discussions of art" (Williams, 1979: 99–100).

What is the effect of this strange temporal framing? First of all, the potential interest of psychoanalysis is doubly restricted – to the domain of art, and to the period of the sixties – but more important than this, the encounter with psychoanalysis has literally no time in which to take place. Williams's hostility to Read effectively brackets off psychoanalysis from active consideration; it forestalls the very possibility of any direct encounter. This is the very syntax of the missed encounter. Its effects – as we shall see – are present as a structure of repetition in the body of his work.

Despite the lack of any substantial discussion of psychoanalysis in *Culture and society*, we can reconstruct the major elements of Williams's critique from his remarks in *The long revolution* (Williams, 1975 [1961]). There are two sections in which psychoanalytic theory is discussed – in chapters one and three of part one, "The creative mind", and "Individuals and societies". Having examined his ideas here, we shall then see how they were effected by the "Althusserian revolution" of the seventies, before, in a final moment, examining Williams's construction of Freudianism more deeply, and assessing its place in his work as a whole.

## 2 The long revolution

"The creative mind" repeats and amplifies some of Williams's discussion of the "Romantic artist" (Williams, 1958: 48–64). One of the major aims of Williams's cultural theory was to criticise the notion that creativity is the property only of a special kind of person, the artist. Theories of art commonly oppose the "exceptional seeing" of the artist to the "natural seeing" of the ordinary human being. This opposition, argues Williams, has remained constant through the three major epistemological periods of Western culture – the Platonist, the Romantic, and the Modern; and only in the Modern period does it seem possible to do away with it. In the Modern period, writes Williams:

Two strong emphases . . . have been widely made. The growing belief in a simple

kind of materialism, usually accompanied by an explicit denial of any kind of supernatural reality, any reality beyond man's reach, has made room for art in terms of its "reflection of reality" (imitation) or, more subtly, its "organisation of reality" – the artist selects, organizes (Shelley's "synthesis") and thus gives meaning and value. The new psychology, on the other hand, particularly in Freud and Jung, has repeated, in a difficult form, the claim that there is a reality beyond man's reach: the "unconscious". Or rather, beyond man's ordinary reach, and here might be the entry, either for a new science or for a new definition of art. For Freud, the material of art was "phantasy", which he contrasted with "reality". The artist is one who from a certain psychological disposition "turns away from reality . . ." (Williams, 1975: 29–30)

Here Williams quotes a notorious passage from the twenty-third of Freud's *Inroductory lectures* on the psychology of the artist and clinches his negative view of Freud's discussion with a quotation from Herbert Read's *Art and society*. Here Read asserts that the Freudian hypothesis of the unconscious is "necessary to explain that access, that lyrical intuition, which is known as inspiration and which in all ages has been the rare possession of those few individuals we recognize as artists of genius" (1936: 30).

For Williams, then, psychoanalysis, especially in Read's appropriation of it, supports that opposition between "natural seeing" and "exceptional seeing" which he is most concerned to contest. The psychoanalytic theory of art is the major opponent to the materialist theory which Williams wishes to endorse, and which it is the prime task of *The long revolution* to put forward: a theory of art as a creative activity common to all human beings as a constitutive element in their common perceptual and communicative activities.

Williams turns to psychology as a discipline which can offer an explanation of creativity grounded securely in empirical observation, rather than in mere psychoanalytic hypothesis. Its explanation of perception "as a process of the brain and the nervous system" is crucial (1961: 31). The work of the psychologist J.Z. Young is enlisted to support Williams's main claim that creativity is "not merely the artist's activity, but the activity of every human mind" (1961: 33).

Young's emphasis on the centrality of communication must have been particularly attractive to Williams. For Young, "The creative artist is an observer whose brain works in new ways, making it possible for him to convey information to others about matters that were not a subject for communication before. It is by searching for means of communication that we sharpen our powers of observation. The discoveries of artists and scientists are exactly alike in this respect" (1961: 44). Nothing could have better helped Williams in his task of "demystifying" the long Western tradition of the artist's lonely creativity and special revelatory insight.

For what is excluded by these emphases is what Williams sees as the essentially social nature of art. The dominant tradition

tacitly excludes communication, as a social fact. Yet communication is the crux of art, for any adequate description of experience must be more than a simple transmission; it must also include reception and response . . . The discovery of a means of communication is the discovery of a common meaning, and the artist's

function, in many societies, is to be skilled in the means by which this meaning can continue to be experienced and activated . . . Since our way of seeing things is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change. (1961: 46, 47, 55)

This model of “communication” is central to Williams’s arguments here; it represents the first version of that belief in the primacy of culture in social reproduction whose final theoretical form was cultural materialism.

What this model excludes, as Edward Thompson noted in his review of *The long revolution*, is conflict (Thompson, 1961: 33). The connotations of words such as “common” and “sharing”, and the insistence on communication as the very “process of community” work to exclude the negative forces of social conflict and class struggle. On another level, this model of communication excludes the unconscious in its appeal to the benevolent rationality of an ultimate consensus. This model of communication as the instrument of rational consensus necessarily excludes the psychoanalytic conception of language as deeply constitutive of human subjectivity, in all its irrationality, pain and pathos.

In the construction of this argument, we see that Williams shifts his attention from the psychology of the artist to the role of communication in social reproduction. In that shift, psychoanalysis as such is lost. Represented only as offering an insight (anyway to be quickly discarded) into the psychology of the artist, psychoanalysis is given no place in the understanding or theorisation of the model of social reproduction. Given the immense confidence in the transparent rationality of communication, it is unlikely that psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the role of the unconscious in structuring all communication, could have fit in with that model. Just as Williams’s model of communication excluded – as Thompson noted – all problems of ideology, it also excluded all questions of the unconscious. This double-exclusion was to be crucial to Williams’s response to work on psychoanalysis and ideology in the seventies.

Williams does, however, return to the question of the relation between psychoanalysis and cultural reproduction in chapter three of part one, “Individuals and societies”.

For any analysis of cultural reproduction, “the relationship between an individual and his society is evident and crucial” (Williams, 1961: 89). Yet such analysis is made difficult by the fact that descriptions of this relation are deeply embedded in our language and when we “examine actual relationships, we start from the descriptions we have learned” (1961: 89). Williams argues that such descriptions already contain interpretations of the social experience to which they refer; the existence of these implicit interpretations can effectively block new analysis. Current descriptions of “the individual and society” represent just such a blockage. For Williams, the present is a moment of crisis in which “there is so high a tension between experience and description that we are forced to examine the descriptions, and to seek

beyond them for new descriptions, not so much as a matter of theory but as literally a problem of behaviour" (1961: 89–90).

Williams adopts his now familiar method of "historical semantics", examining the different uses of the word "individual" on record. The major change occurs with "the beginnings of a capitalist economy" (1961: 93) when the concept of the individual shifts decisively from its medieval sense of "inseparable from the community" to a new sense of separate from the community: "In essence it is the abstraction of the individual from the complex of relationships by which he had hitherto been normally defined" (1961: 93). Williams argues that Freudian theory reinforces this crucial separation by assuming

a basic division between the individual and society, and hence basic division between the individual and such mediating forms as "community", or "class", which are seen simply as social agents which operate on the individual. Man, the "bare human being", has certain fundamental drives which are also fundamentally anti-social. Some of these society must restrain; others it must refine and divert into socially acceptable or valuable channels. Society is a mechanism of restraint and diversion, and civilization is the product, through "sublimation", of suppressed natural impulses. Man as a bare human being is thus fundamentally alienated from society, and the best that can be hoped for is a reasonably adjusted balance between the conflicting needs of individual and society, the process of sublimation being the mechanism of balance, and breakdown being due to faulty adjustment of this kind. (1961: 96)

A striking feature of this account is that no specific Freudian text is referred to as the source for this representation of the theory. Could the lack of any specific reference here be an example of the ways in which the very availability of a description works to block analysis? I think that such a blockage is indeed implied by the virtually immediate correction that Williams needs to make:

Yet if Freud's account of the individual and society is, in its basic terms, merely an item in an old tradition, his actual inquiries led to a highly significant emphasis on relationships. Indeed he introduced, in a wholly new way, a new mediating term, the family, and this remarkably extended the study of actual social growth. (1961: 96)

This correction leads to a new formulation of what needs to be rejected; no longer "Freud's account" as such, but rather "dogmatic Freudianism": "In dogmatic Freudianism very little of interest to the study of social relationships has emerged, since such relationships are always construed as of secondary importance (1961: 96).

The question for the reader is what particular version of Freud's work does this "dogmatic Freudianism" represent? Freud's reflections on the psychology of the artist were represented in a version drawn from the work of Herbert Read; or rather, as we shall see, from a highly selective account of Read's version of Freud's views. What is the source – since no direct reference is made to Freud here – for this version of dogmatic Freudianism? Two major sources for Williams's criticism here can be identified. The first is the work of

Marxist critics such as Christopher Caudwell; and the second, the work of the “culture school” of psychoanalysis, represented in *The long revolution* by Erich Fromm.<sup>2</sup>

The starting-point for Fromm’s own theories was precisely the rejection of what he saw as Freud’s undue reliance, in his social thought, on the theory of instincts, or biological drives. As well as endorsing this criticism, Williams emphasises the significance of Fromm’s work on the “social character”. “This offers”, writes Williams, “to describe the process by which social behaviour becomes part of an individual personality: not by regular processes of restraint and diversion, as in Freud, but by a shaping process which can include many kinds of relationship” (1961: 96–97). However, Williams is also careful to avoid the conservative implications of Fromm’s theory when he adds that this “learned relatedness . . . can correspond with the current social character, or can diverge from it” (1961: 97).

In this whole account, we can see, with perhaps a certain irony, that Williams has fallen prey to a number of pre-existing descriptions of Freud’s work which actually work to block his own engagement with it. Various forms of second-hand Freudianism consistently get in the way of any direct encounter with Freud’s own work. Again and again a certain image of Freudianism is stronger than any evidence of a particular reading of Freud’s own works. Once again, a possible encounter has been missed. The dogmas of a second-hand ego-psychology take the place of any direct encounter with Freud’s own writings.

### 3 Politics and letters

In *Marxism and literature* Williams recorded his sense of excitement at contact with newly available work by Lukács, Sartre, Goldmann and Althusser, and the Frankfurt School (Williams, 1977: 4–5). How did this effect his view on psychoanalysis? In Britain in particular, the seventies saw, under the aegis of the journal *Screen*, a whole new attempted synthesis of Marxism and psychoanalysis in the work of the “radical semioticians”.<sup>3</sup> As I argue elsewhere, *Marxism and literature* represents Williams’s response to these new developments (Higgins, 1986). What effect did this new work have on Williams’s views regarding psychoanalysis in particular?

In the *New Left Review* interviews, Williams is questioned concerning psychoanalysis on a number of occasions. Is there any evidence of a more direct encounter with psychoanalysis in the seventies than in the missed encounter of the fifties?

From the evidence of *Politics and letters*, very little. Many of the criticisms made in *The long revolution* are repeated, though with some changes of emphasis; while at other points, Williams draws on work by other critics (Timpanaro 1976; Volosinov 1976) to shore up his existing criticisms.<sup>4</sup> On the central question – “What is your view of attempts to conjoin psychoanalysis with Marxism?” – Williams’s reply is courteous but negative:

I do not want to reserve Marxism from what I think is a major challenge to it – the importance of fundamental human drives which are not an idealist human

nature, but which are simply biological, material conditions. But I don't think that Freudian instinct theory, or the notion of genotypes by which Caudwell was briefly very taken, provide a possible basis for an explanation of this area that has been unexplored in historical-materialist terms. I have never felt that Freud and Marx could be combined in that way. There can be no useful compromise between a description of basic realities as ahistorical and universal and a description of them as diversely created or modified by a changing human history. Though the biological data may indeed be universal, our relevant actions are *biological and cultural*, and neither can be reduced to the other. (Williams, 1979: 183–84)

What is striking here is Williams's emphasis on the biological status of Freud's theories – drawn, as we have seen, from the work of “culture school” critics such as Fromm, endorsed as we shall see by Marxists such as Caudwell. But can this account of Freudianism really be useful against the Freudianism of the Althusserian seventies? Does the charge that “There can be no useful compromise between a description of basic realities as ahistorical and universal and a description of them as diversely created or modified by changing human history” really address the new version of Freudianism proposed by Althusser and following the lines of Lacan's momentous “rereading” of Freud? The answer is, I think, no; the conceptual spaces proposed by the Freudianism which Williams criticises, and the new Freudianism of the Lacanian school are incommensurable.

When Williams asks, “Was I wrong to have referred to Freud mainly in terms of the later works? Surely it is in these that his more general propositions about human history, about the character of civilization, or about the nature of art are to be found” (1979: 333), the answer from a radical semiotician would be that he *was* wrong. The starting-point of the Lacanian/Althusserian intervention was decisively *not* the application of the later “instinct theory” to questions of cultural history. Christian Metz – who may be regarded for our purposes as the prototype of the radical semiotician – provides an exemplary response to this question. As he points out in his now classic essay, “The imaginary signifier” (Metz, 1974):

when we turn to the works Freud saw as plainly sociological or ethnological . . . [t]heir very object might seem to make such studies more important to our semiological perspective . . . than the works of “pure” metapsychology. However, ethnologists often say that the opposite is the case (and I think so too); even if Freud's theory is one of the great permanent inspirations of their labours, the specifically ethnological works are the least useful to them. Basically this is not all that surprising: Freud's discovery in its breadth is of concern to virtually all fields of knowledge, but only if it is suitably articulated with the data and exigencies peculiar to each of them, and notably to those whose object is directly social; nothing guarantees that the “discoverer” (the father), just because he is the discoverer, should be best placed to carry out this readjustment in domains of which he had sometimes no fundamental knowledge . . . It is at this weak point that the “psychologism” to be found in Freud (but not in his central discoveries) and for which he has been justly criticised, bursts through. (Metz, 1982: 23–4)

Williams's criticism may have succeeded in identifying in its own terms just

such a weak spot; but it did not begin to meet the new dimensions of Freud's thought highlighted by Lacan's intervention, or present in the work of those who, like Metz, adopted or adapted Lacan's ideas. Williams's criticism effectively belongs to an entirely different conceptual universe from the one in which the new attempts to conjoin Marxism and psychoanalysis were formed, and to which Althusser's work gave the main impetus (Althusser, 1964 and 1970; Hirst, 1979; Sprinker, 1987; Elliot, 1987; Higgins 1988). There is then a major and ultimately disabling conceptual slippage in Williams's criticisms of these attempts. A whole dimension of assessment – that which belongs to the metapsychological theory and concerns the construction of the subject in language – is absent, is never encountered as such.

The effects of this absence is most apparent in the *Keywords* entry on “the unconscious”, where Williams unashamedly assimilates the Freudian theory of the unconscious to Jung's notion of “collective unconscious” (an assimilation to be found in Read and the other British Freudians) (Williams, 1976: 270–73). On this issue, the *NLR* take Williams severely to task:

When you speak of the unconscious, it is as if it were a reserved sector, a special enclave, which can be created by certain kinds of social prohibitions, whereas for Freud it is coextensive with the conscious. The effect of your account of unconscious processes is to reduce their qualitative significance enormously, by comparison with that of Freud for whom the unconscious is an active structure which is at work in everything that we do. The idea of the unconscious as a central psychological structure is separable from the particular map Freud drew of it, which is often very crude. Would you assent to it as such? (Williams, 1979: 182)

Williams's brief reply – “Sure, that is a more acceptable way of putting it” is in fact evasive. It is not simply that the *NLR* have come up with a more acceptable formulation; it is that Williams's criticisms are addressed to a completely different conceptual space. The potentially decisive encounter over this key word is missed entirely.

The absence of this dimension not only vitiates Williams's criticisms of Freudianism (he is attacking a different conceptual entity, a different form of Freudianism); it also makes necessary a fundamental reassessment of the ways in which radical semiotics and cultural materialism might converge. What is absent from Williams's account of Freud is then the understanding of Freudian theory as a theory of the constitution of the human subject in and through language, with its consequent emphasis on the constitutive discourses of human social life. Such an account would seem to be an essential component of any cultural materialism.

In the seventies, the missed encounter between Williams and psychoanalysis is due to the conceptually different – and incompatible – versions of Freudianism involved. Williams's Freudianism remains deeply tied to his thinking in the fifties, even though it is clarified at times by his new readings of Timpanaro and Volosinov.

Next, we shall examine the ways in which this missed encounter over the social construction of the human subject was already missed in the version of

Freudianism constructed by Williams from the materials available to him in the fifties from his reading of Read and the British Freudians – Freudians who were also Marxists.

#### 4 Herbert Read and the British Marxists

Herbert Read (1893–1968) has been a relatively neglected figure in the history of twentieth-century literary and cultural criticism. Williams, as we have seen, omits discussion of him from the seminal *Culture and society*; while the substantial studies of Mulhern (1979) and Baldick (1983) – perhaps on that account – contain little or no discussion of his work. In his encyclopaedic survey, René Wellek suggests “One could dismiss him as an eclectic, a designation he accepted gladly,” (Wellek, 1987: 138). Eclectic Read certainly was, with numerous studies in art, literature, politics and aesthetics to his credit; but there was nonetheless a consistent thread of interest tying his various works together. This continuity was given by Read’s firm belief in the necessity for cultural and literary critics to come to terms with psychoanalysis. From his early essay, “Psycho-analysis and criticism” (1924) to the republication of *Art and society* in 1967, Read consistently argued that psychoanalysis should become a part of the resources of literary criticism and cultural education. As he put it in his essay “The nature of criticism”: “I cannot conceive how the critic can avoid a dependence on general psychology” (Read, 1938: 23); and for literary criticism such a liaison was essential:

Any attempt to raise literary criticism above the vague level of emotional appreciation through the incorporation of scientific elements is sure to meet with opposition, not only from the great majority of critics, who depend on their emotions, but also from more serious people who imagine that the prescribed boundaries of decent critical activity are being broken down. (Read, 1938: 124)

Read’s interest in and grasp of developments in psychoanalytic theory through the twenties and thirties cannot be denied; but his application of that theory to the interpretation of literary texts seems often now obtuse, and to belong largely to a discredited psychobiography.

To a critic like Williams, trained in the Leavisite arts of practical criticism, Read’s work must have sounded unconvincing, and undoubtedly a large part of Williams’s hostility to Read was just that annoyance generated by the general application of a theory to the interpretation of a text. But the method of practical criticism – especially in the analysis of discursive writing – also had its limitations. As Williams himself had noted, as early as *Reading and criticism* in 1950, judgements based on the selection of “representative” passages could be very misleading (1979: 237).<sup>5</sup> In classic “prac. crit.” style, Williams, in *The long revolution*, takes just one passage from Read as the basis for his rejection of Read’s arguments. What is the effect of this selection on the understanding of psychoanalysis in *The long revolution*?

The passage Williams chooses from Read’s *Art and society* (1936) deals with the question of the psychology of the artist, and suggests that psychoanalysis can help to better understand the nature and origin of the artist’s

special inspiration. It is certainly correct to say that one of the major emphases Read gives in his work is to the potential that psychoanalysis has for understanding “problems connected with the personality of the poet, the technique of poetry, and the appreciation of a poem (Read, 1938: 13). But it is not the only emphasis. He states quite categorically that both individual psychology and group psychology have much to contribute to the understanding of art (Read, 1936: 83), Williams’s act of selection diminishes – or perhaps better, elides – Read’s commitment to the social understanding of art.

This selective reading is all the more striking when one considers the coincidence between Read’s vocabulary and Williams’s when it comes to understanding the social function of art and the relations between the artist and the community to which he belongs. Read writes:

The work of art, as we have seen, has its immediate origin in the consciousness of an individual; it only acquires full significance, however, to the extent that it is integrated with the general culture of a people or period. There are two factors in every artistic situation: the will of an individual and the requirements of a community. The individual can, and does, create a work of art for himself; but he can reach the full satisfaction which comes from the creation of a work of art if he can persuade the community to accept his creation. (Read, 1936: 83)

Does this not echo “the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings” which Williams had made the central feature of his account of communication? In establishing the importance of community, Read goes on to say: “But normally the community does not sit in conscious judgement over works of art; it accepts or rejects them because they make an appeal as objects either good to use or pleasant to contemplate” (Read, 1936: 38). What is present in Read’s, and absent from Williams’s account of “the process of community” is, precisely, the unconscious.

The crucial unconscious agency, in this regard, is the super-ego. Read sums up Freud’s psychic topography in the following terms:

For obviously the work of art has correspondences with each region of the mind. *It derives its energy, its irrationality and its mysterious power from the id, which is to be regarded as the source of what we usually call inspiration. It is given formal synthesis and unity by the ego; and finally it may be assimilated to those ideologies or spiritual aspirations which are the peculiar creation of the super-ego.* (1936: 91–2; Read’s emphasis)

Williams’s account ignores this fundamental splitting of the subject between the three psychic agencies of id, ego and super-ego and, in so doing, elides the possible connections between psychoanalytic theory and social theory which Read, for one, was eager to encourage.

Williams was not alone in criticising Read’s work, but it is instructive to compare the terms of his critique with those of another Marxist writer who was alert to the potential significance of psychoanalysis for Marxism.

In *Crisis and criticism* (1937) Alick West devotes an entire chapter to Herbert Read, paying particular attention to Read’s promotion of surrealism.<sup>6</sup> West locates Read’s enthusiasm for surrealism as a component of his Freudianism. For Read, the artist has “a more immediate and free intercourse

with the unconscious" (1937: 51) and this openness to the unconscious is what (supposedly) typifies surrealism. West is particularly concerned to argue against the revolutionary claims of surrealism, which he sees as a form of bourgeois idealism.

Surrealism can then believe that if we think and feel differently in relation to reality, we create a new super-reality, because there is a new element in the synthesis of the world in itself and our relation to it. Then, insisting that it is materialistic in its recognition of the independent existence of the material world and that there is nothing metaphysical about its superreality, it says that through the creation of a new superreality it changes reality. It believes that by interpreting the world differently, we can change it. Think, and reality will obey. (1937: 59)

For West, the problem with surrealism is that though it accepts the importance of understanding the relations between the human subject, thought and the world, it crucially misunderstands those relations by placing human subjectivity in a position of instrumental agency somewhere outside the social world:

It requires to be emphasised that the individual mind, in such social isolation, is a fiction like God. The kind of thought which directly or indirectly exalts individuality as something which can be contraposed to society, or considers any human activity in terms of personality alone . . . is suffering under the same delusion as the more openly religious thought. It takes particular consciousness of social relations for the relations themselves. The individual in such thinking stands, not for the individual as a distinct, physical person, but for the social relations which result in the conception of the individual. (1937: 52)

What I find crucial here is the emphasis in West's account on the importance of the social constitution of the individual mind. Both surrealism and Read himself may be criticised for a mistaken appropriation of psychoanalysis; but their very mistake implies that an improved form of Freudianism might have a great deal to contribute to the Marxist understanding of social reproduction. There is no evidence to suggest that Williams saw any such implication as present in their work; nor even in any of the more explicit statements of West's fellow-Marxist, Christopher Caudwell.

Christopher Caudwell shared with Alick West and Herbert Read a critical interest in Freud's ideas. His most substantial account of psychoanalysis is to be found in the essay "Freud: a study in bourgeois psychology" in *Studies in a dying culture* (Caudwell, 1971 [1938]), a book Williams was reading during the composition of *The long revolution* (Williams, 1979: 127). Williams had discussed Caudwell's work in *Culture and society*, though in a notoriously negative fashion. There is little in this discussion which reflects Caudwell's interests in psychoanalysis. Let us examine the terms of Williams's appropriation of Caudwell's ideas in *The long revolution*; we shall see once again that Williams gives a highly selective account!

Caudwell sees Freud as a pioneer of scientific psychology, but one caught in a primitive semi-magical framework of explanation (compare Williams's comments on psychoanalysis as a "mythology of the eternal drives" in *Politics*

and letters, 1979: 334). To a large extent, Caudwell attributes this failing to Freud's class position and perspective, which he identifies in the following terms:

This class outlook affects his psychology through certain implicit assumptions from which he starts . . . These implicit assumptions are firstly that the consciousness of men is *sui generis*, unfolding like a flower from the seed instead of being a primarily social creation, and secondly that there is a source of free action in the individual, the "free will", the "wish", or the "instincts", which is only free in proportion to the extent to which it is unrestrained by social influences. These two assumptions are of vital importance for psychology, and just because they are implicit, they act like buried magnets, distorting all Freud's psychology and making it an unreal kind of a science tainted with wish-fulfilment. (Caudwell, 1971: 160–161)

Against this distorted science, Caudwell proposes the terms of a potentially materialist psychology, one which would place greater emphasis on the psychologically formative role of the social in the formation of the human subject: "The organism never behaves alone; there is always an 'other', the environment, which is a party to its behaviour. Moreover the environment too has its history, for it is subject to time." (1971: 175). The crucial lack in bourgeois psychology is the failure to recognise the importance of the social. There is, in Freudianism, a disabling absence of sociological analysis: "As it happens, no modern school of psychology has ever studied social relations as primary, as conditioning the consciousness which is generated by them" (1971: 177).

We can easily see in Caudwell's remarks many of the formulations Williams was to use in *The long revolution*: "The bourgeois philosopher is unable to rise above the standpoint of the individual in civil society" (1971: 162); "Unable to see psychology causally simply because they cannot see it sociologically, Freudianism can attain to no psychology beyond bourgeois psychology. They never advance beyond the view-point of the 'individual in civil society'" (1971: 187). However, a central thrust of Caudwell's arguments is not present in Williams, namely, how important a materialist psychology might be for the better understanding of ideological mechanisms. This latter emphasis is particularly evident in Caudwell's *Illusion and reality* (Caudwell, 1958 [1937]).

Here Caudwell reiterates his criticism of Freud's project, but argues in addition for the necessity to produce a social understanding of the psyche:

Consciousness, which in the broadest sense (including therefore the subconscious, which is also the product of modified instinct), is a social product. It is not merely that consciousness has a social component. The construction of consciousness is the socialising of the psyche. (Caudwell, 1958: 163)

Once again, what is absent from Williams's account is any recognition of the potential explanatory value of psychoanalysis in regard to the most basic questions of ideology. These questions were not to re-emerge in British Marxism until the 1970s. At least a part of that submergence is due to the

virtually unquestioned authority, influence and prestige of Williams's views for British Marxists in the sixties.

What, then, has emerged from our investigation of Williams's engagement with and hostility towards psychoanalysis? We have examined three areas of potential engagement, and seen that each represented a missed encounter, though in different ways. We saw how Williams based his criticisms in *The long revolution* on a second-hand Freudianism, never encountering Freud's work as such; and how, in the seventies, despite Williams's eagerness to confront psychoanalysis, particularly on questions of ideology, he failed to establish the common conceptual space necessary for such an encounter. Finally, we have seen that these missed encounters were all prefigured in Williams's highly selective reading of Read, West and Caudwell – a reading which effectively refused to recognise the interest and importance of psychoanalysis for the understanding (to adapt Caudwell's phrase) of "the construction of consciousness in the socialising of the psyche" – precisely the question which was to be raised in the seventies.

To what can this series of "missed encounters" be attributed? What made Williams so hostile towards psychoanalysis; what were the historical pressures which shaped that hostility? Perhaps the understanding of this lies in part at least in the ambivalent nature of Williams's relations to the discipline of English. The aversion to Freud may be seen as almost a constitutive feature of the English studies which nourished Williams's intellectual growth; it is an irony that despite Williams's opposition to the dominant forms of English studies, he should have retained their hostility to psychoanalysis, perhaps to the extent of damaging the explanatory reach and power of his own cultural materialism.<sup>7</sup> Of course, just such a blindness is testimony to what Williams was willing to acknowledge – in consciously non-Freudian terms – as the pressures of alignment:

Marxism, more clearly than any other kind of thinking, has shown us that we are in fact aligned long before we realize we are aligned. For we are born into a social situation, into social relationships, into a family, all of which have formed what we can later abstract as ourselves as individuals. Much of this formation occurs before we can be conscious of any individuality. Indeed the consciousness of individuality is often the consciousness of all those elements of our formation, yet this can never be complete. (Williams, 1989: 85)

Marxism, or Freudianism? Williams's deliberate attribution of these insights to Marxism indicates yet another instance of what we have seen as an opposition between the two in his work. It is now high time to give up that opposition; or, if it has already been given up in practice, to be more fully aware in any assessment of Williams's work of that repetition of a missed encounter which characterises his relations to psychoanalysis.

## Notes

1. See, for instance, Terry Eagleton and Frank Kermode in *The Independent*, January 28; Fred Inglis, *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, February 5; Stuart

- Hall, *The New Statesman*, February 5; and in the U.S.A., E.P. Thompson and Edward Said in the April issue of *The Nation*. See also the articles by Robin Blackburn and Terry Eagleton in *New Left Review* No 168, March-April 1988. For a report on the “Raymond Williams: Towards 2000” memorial forum, organised by the British Film Institute, see my “Raymond Williams 1921–1988” in *Pretexts* Vol. 1 No. 1 Winter 1989, pp. 79–91.
2. Fromm’s work was already criticised from a left-wing perspective by Herbert Marcuse in his *Eros and civilisation* (1955), but Williams seems to have been unaware of Marcuse’s work – and the related work of the Frankfurt school – until the late sixties. See Williams’s “On reading Marcuse” in *The Cambridge Review* 90 (30 May 1969) pp. 366–8. A useful survey of the political implications of various forms of Freudianism is that of Stephen Frosch (1987).
  3. An introduction to the concerns of the “radical semioticians” – with all the failings of a polemical manifesto – is *Language and materialism* by R. Coward and J. Ellis (1977). See also C. MacCabe (1979), S. Heath (1981), and, more recently, T. de Lauretis’s *Alice doesn’t* (1984), for interesting examples of this kind of work.
  4. Williams refers to the same passage from the *Introductory lectures* when he says: “Freud’s account of art, in particular, struck me as extraordinary. It presents the artist as someone who is unable to satisfy his real impulses, which are in Freud’s version an absolute catalogue of the philistine conditions of male bourgeois society: a very unfortunate result for women – what does the woman artist do? These impulses are then gratified through the circuitous route of sublimation in works of art. The whole theory is profoundly reductive – if only because, from my position, it already specializes out art too much.” And again, he criticises the notion of “sublimation” as a social mechanism of balance and the whole “bourgeois” tenor of Freud’s discussion: “The idea that this fundamental human associative activity, which in the course of history has developed into so many remarkable and powerful forms, represents the result of some crude frustration is not very serious thinking. The whole conception of the social order as a merely negative system of constraints and inhibitions belongs to the most classic bourgeois theory, to which I am naturally very hostile” (1979: 331–333). (See also 1979: 167, 181, 260 and 340.)
  5. For a stimulating challenge to the methodology of Williams’s “historical semantics”, see Skinner’s critique, “Language and social change” in Tully (1988).
  6. See Pechy (1985) for an account of West’s influence on Williams.
  7. Chris Baldick argues, in his excellent *The social mission of English criticism 1848–1932* that “Freud’s work could not be assimilated lest it undermine some of that criticism’s most essential categories . . . [including the] conception of unbroken and exclusive identity between the mind and its surrounding cultural influences” (Baldick, 1983: 217). Terry Eagleton has long argued that Williams’s understanding of the base superstructure model is severely damaged by Williams’s reliance on an unexamined notion of “experience” (Eagleton, 1978: 22, 32, 41–2): this criticism is discussed at length in *Politics and letters* (1979: 156–172) in relation to Williams’s notion of a “structure of feeling”.

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