Tenses of Imagination: Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia.

Andrew Milner, ed.

REFERENCES


1 Tenses of Imagination, an anthology of Raymond Williams’s writings on science fiction, utopia and dystopia is the seventh volume in the growing Ralahine Utopian Studies Series. It is also, in my view, something of a treasure. For it not only offers an illuminating compendium of Williams’s most important engagements, critical and creative, with SF, utopia and dystopia, but also furnishes us with a heretofore unavailable account of the long-term significance of these frequently spurned genres and modalities for the evolution of the thought of one of the past century’s leading literary and cultural critics.

2 The volume’s editor, Andrew Milner, has divided Williams’s writings into four parts: the first three are composed of a number of critical essays and interviews, while the fourth includes extracts from two of his rather infrequently read, future-oriented novels, The Volunteers (1978) and The Fight for Manod (1979). Part I, subtitled “left Culturalism” includes five texts published between 1956 and 1971; part II, focusing on “Cultural Materialism” includes another four, spanning the period 1971-1977; and part III, subtitled “(Anti-)Postmodernism”, presents another five texts published between 1978 and 1984.

3 In his concise and informative introduction, Milner explains his principles of periodization, and hence the logic of the volume’s arrangement. “Left culturalism” is associated with the moment of “1956”, itself linked to the formation of the “Old New Left” as a form of compromise between “the left wing of the Labour Party and the
liberalizing wing of the Communist Party” that emerged out of the twin
disappointments of the “suppression of the Hungarian Revolution and the Anglo-
French invasion of Egypt” (1-2). “Cultural Materialism” is associated with the moment
of “1968”, the critique (by the likes of Perry Anderson, Tom Nairn, and others) of the
provincialist nationalism of the Old New Left, the flirtation with a number of
“ultraleftisms”, and the corresponding emphasis on culture as a social and material
productive process, to use Williams's own words (1-3). The final period, that of “(anti)-
postmodernism” relates to the dominant import of globalization and is supposed to
manifest the shift of Williams’s focus to the “new social movements” and to the
question of difference (2). Milner admits that the term “(anti)-postmodernism” is a
little inelegant; I would agree, given the fact that one is not certain whether the prefix
is meant to designate a defining opposition to globalization (which is not always a
central concern in the texts included in the corresponding section) or, rather, a distaste
for the aesthetic of the postmodern (which could only be derived from Williams’s
sparse and highly selective interest in post WW II literature, both in this volume and
elsewhere).

4 Part I begins with a brief and little-known essay Williams published in the journal of
the Workers’ Educational Association in 1956, under the simple title “Science Fiction.”
In it, Williams sketches a typology of contemporary versions of SF that comprises
“Putropias” (narratives that testify to the “corruption” of the “Utopian romances”
[15], and their effective inversion into anti-utopian valences), “Doomsday” narratives
(ones focusing on a devastating, planetary catastrophe) and “Space Anthropology”, a
category that includes literary texts that update a residual anthropological language of
cultural thick description in SF terms. In Williams’s view, the first two of these
categories are linked by a shared investment in elitist minoritarianism and, more
broadly, by their uncritical surrender to precisely that which they appear to criticize:
they betray “a particular sterility in social thinking” since they both “use and make a
villain of” the attempt to “know and to control”; and their very affirmation “of the
familiar contemporary myths of humane concern” ends up as means toward a profound
negation of humanism itself (18). The second reading is a comparatively lackluster
section from Williams’s Culture and Society (1958), which focuses on an appraisal of
William Morris, and whose most striking feature is Williams’s statement of his
preference for Morris’s less well-known expository essays over his better-known and
more widely celebrated attempts at literary expression. The selection on Orwell from
the same book which forms the third reading is clearly more engaged and engaging:
Orwell, on whom there is a total of four texts in this volume, is clearly a writer with
whom and against whom Williams defines his own position as a British socialist
intellectual, and the evolving terms of this tense encounter between two models of the
socially committed intelligentsia form one of the most engaging and thought-
provoking aspects of the collection. Two features stand out in this first round of a long-
lasting joust between the two: The first is Williams’s keen insight into the treacherous
principle that informs Orwellian anti-utopianism, one which consists in the active
projection on the future of subjective anxieties in the guise of objective trends which
then “confirm” one’s worst fears in spectral retroaction, thus engendering a series of
paradoxes: a humanism that is only capable of expressing itself via fantasies of
“inhuman terror”, a subjective attachment to decency that turns out to obsess with
moral and physical squalor, a socialism whose most passionate means of expression is
anti-socialist invective, a commitment to equality that ends up surrendering to a
desperate acceptance of “inherent inequality, inescapable class difference” (34). The second is Williams’s equally perceptive, and particularly nuanced and sensitive, analysis of exile as a subjective and psychological condition that accounts for Orwell’s enigmatically driven anti-utopianism more convincingly than some arbitrarily presumed hatred of socialism: “when the exile speaks of liberty, he is in a curiously ambiguous position, for while the rights in question may be called individual, the condition of their guarantee is social. The exile, because of his own personal position, cannot finally believe in any social guarantee: to him, because this is the pattern of his own living, almost all association is suspect [...] to the exile [...] society as such is totalitarian; he cannot commit himself, he is bound to stay out” (39). The fourth reading is a section from *The Long Revolution* (1961) on “The Future Story as Social Formula Novel”, in which Williams introduces a revised topography of the place of SF within the literary spectrum, seeing it as effectively coextensive with the “formula” sub-type of the “social novel”, particularly with that type of “social formula novel” which involves a future-projected account of society (arguably, Williams’s own *The Volunteers* and *The Fight for Manod* are illustrations of this kind of novelistic type). Particularly significant here is Williams’s dynamic understanding of “realism” as a mode committed to the “living tension” (50) that arises out of continual collective efforts to establish “reality”, ones that in periods “of exceptional growth” may include “characteristic” kinds of “failure and breakdown” (49). The section’s last selection is a brief essay written for BBC’s *The Listener* (1971), in which Williams engages with the modalities of horror in British television SF.

Part II opens with a second essay on *1984*, this time from Williams’s book-length study of Orwell (*George Orwell*, 1971). Milner’s short introductory note suggests that the newer text evinces “an apparently more even-handed account of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*” than that of *Culture and Society* by dwelling “on the novel’s strengths against its weakness, rather than the author against his text” (57). But the actual reading of the extract included here suggests otherwise: it is, if anything, far more systematically damming of the blindness, short-sightedness and one-dimensionality of Orwell’s responses to his historical moment, and it certainly conveys analytical priority to modes of authorial self-fashioning throughout. Williams rails against the novel’s identification of totalitarianism with socialism (59) (without thereby identifying the former with “communism”, as Milner does [58]—he simply admits its relevance for the Soviet authoritarian state of the 1930s); he accuses Orwell of neglecting to register any of the global instances of democratic socialist resistance and of failing to see the possibility of an “affluent capitalism” wherein the multinational corporation plays as significant a role as the national state (60); he charges him with a “stale revolutionary romanticism” that reduces future hope to a section of the population that Orwell himself actively dehumanizes into the *proles* (61); he blames him for succumbing to a provincialist and effectively nationalist idealization of an immaculately “English” life threatened by the excesses of totalitarian theorizing (65); he takes him to task for his singular incapacity to imaginatively “realize the full life of another” except by absorbing such an other back into the solipsism of a “private landscape” (68); finally, he highlights Orwell’s astounding failure to understand the complex and ambiguous dynamics of the relationship between a capitalism he prematurely saw as doomed and a democracy whose ability to subsist—however contradictorily—far beyond the pastures of socialist egalitarianism he severely underestimated (69-71).
The next selection, “The City and the Future” comes from 1973’s *The Country and the City* and focuses on the metropolitan theme in utopian and SF fiction, including that of Morris and Wells. Williams sees such fiction as centrally inspired by the misery of urban, metropolitan life and by “the socialist movement that emerged as a response to it” (75), and the shift from Morris’s “idyllic” vision of London to Wells’s apocalyptic one is explained in terms of a number of emerging social questions centering on population and food, land-use and pollution, and physical mass attack, including, of course, bombing (78). The eighth selection, and the third in this section, is a short extract from Williams’s 1977 interview with the *New Left Review*’s Perry Anderson, Anthony Barnett, and Francis Mulhern; its subject is, once again, Orwell. An equally brief segment on Morris follows as the last reading of the second section, and it is here, and in criticism of Morris’s tendency to associate future socialism with a drastic process of social simplification that Williams introduces the oft-repeated idea that “the break towards socialism can only be toward an unimaginably greater complexity” (88).

It is the essays included in the third section which constitute the book’s most challenging and thought-provoking part: the density and quality of insights on genre, ideology, social history, political contradictions and political potentialities is, even at the distance of more than three decades, breathtaking—testimony, to be sure, to Williams’s rare perspicacity as a literary and cultural critic. In the first of the essays, the now canonical “Utopia and Science Fiction” (1978), Williams introduces his influential typology of “paradise”, “externally altered world”, “willed transformation” and “technological transformation” as dimensions of the “utopian mode”, usefully extracting from each a corresponding “negative”, and hence a corresponding typology of dystopias (95). Of considerable importance here is Williams’s insistence on the “variability of the utopian situation, the utopian impulse, and the utopian result” (98), which leads him into a critique of the monolithic opposition of “scientific” and “utopian” in Engels, but also into a nuanced understanding of the fundamental political differences in different utopianisms (More’s and Bacon’s in the early modern period, for instance, or Bellamy’s and Morris’s in the late nineteenth century). With remarkable equipoise, Williams suggests that the two structural possibilities of the “heuristic utopia” and the “systematic utopia”—already present in the division between Bellamy’s and Morris’s understandings of “socialism”—each possess their own strengths and weaknesses (103) and that the essential problem in the twentieth century lies elsewhere, namely in the fact that “under the pressures of consumer capitalism and of monopoly socialism” the possibility of a holding onto both becomes drastically weakened; “self-realization and self-fulfilment” are seen as impossible “in relationship or in society” and enabled only by “breakaway” or “escape” (106). Williams’s immediate response to the significance of Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*—a text that is recognized as triggering a “general renewal of a form of utopian thinking” after “so long a dystopian interval” (111)— is revealing of his exceptional critical acumen, as is his remark that Le Guin’s refusal to identify her utopia with fertility, prosperity or social vitality is of the essence as a critical intervention in an only partially reanimated utopian tradition.

Though perhaps less known, “The Tenses of Imagination” (1978) is also an outstanding piece of literary and genre criticism and deserves to lend its title to the volume itself. In it, Williams broaches the relationship between SF and “future fiction” and his well-known notion of “structure of feeling”, leading us into a rigorous and highly revealing interrogation of the valences of futurity as a tense of the imagination. Williams’s
argument here is that there is a significant difference between the customary use of the term “imagination” to connote an exercise in speculation or anticipation of the future which frequently, if not always, reproduces “existing structures in externally altered circumstances” (122) and that “deliberate and sustained thought about possible futures” which both precedes and succeeds “the discovery of a structure of feeling” which is “in its turn a form of recognition” (122) (Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* and Williams’s own future fictions serving as instances of the latter). In the latter case, Williams suggests, writing becomes a way of feeling one’s way around “something fully knowable but not yet known” (121)—a means, we might say, not to futurology but to what Fredric Jameson called “cognitive mapping” (the contradistinction of imagination and fancy in the latter’s *Archaeologies of the Future* comes to mind as a vital parallel reading to what Williams carefully unpacks here). In “Beyond Actually Existing Socialism”, a review of Rudolph Bahro’s *Die Alternative* (1977) which Williams wrote for the *New Left Review* in 1980, one has the opportunity to appraise the significance of East European dissidence for Williams’s own western Marxism, particularly his engagement with a British hope in “cultural revolution” that he sees Bahro simultaneously advocating as counterpart to the desiccation of the political under the statification (and stultification) of the socialist project. The essay brims with insight and verve, largely as a result of Williams’s clearly sympathetic reception of Bahro’s work: we are presented with an analytical exposition of the reasons why one has to agree with the seemingly paradoxical proposition that what must be asserted about communism is not its necessity but its possibility (34); a thorough critique of the inadequacies and hypocrisies of western parliamentarianism as adequate alternative to Soviet “totalitarianism” (140-141); an exposition of the structural necessity, precisely for this reason, of a politically decisive “cultural revolution” on both sides of the East-West divide (142-145); and a discussion of the socialist need for a rethinking of the concept of class itself (145-147).

It is of course well known that the future Bahro and Williams were struggling for—one that would involve a revitalization of the socialist project in the East and a simultaneous socialist turn in Western Europe—did not come to pass. Williams was far too subtle a critic of his times (and not simply of its literature) to have missed the rising significance of what would come to pass, at least in his own society: neoliberalism. His extraordinarily astute diagnosis of its precepts, logic and mechanisms remains valid for our own moment, when the cure that is offered for the ills bequeathed by neoliberal policy is, astoundingly, more neoliberal policy. It is worth quoting Williams somewhat extensively in this regard: “Plan X [his intriguingly SF term for the neoliberal agenda] has read the future as the certainty of a decline in capitalist profitability [...] its people have not only a familiar hard drive, but one which is genuinely combined with a rational analysis of the future of capitalism and of its unavoidable requirements. In this kind of combination, Plan X people resemble the hardest kinds of revolutionary, who drive through at any cost to their perceived objectives. But the difference of Plan X from revolution is that no transformed society, no lasting liberation seriously enters these new calculations” (152). In the last of the essays in this third and most distinguished part of the collection, Williams returns for one last time to Orwell, having proven himself a rather more astute prophet of the future than his long-time silent interlocutor and antagonist in the ranks of British socialist intellectuals: perhaps not accidentally, the emphasis is on a detailed discussion of the causes of prognostic failure in Orwell’s reading of his own times, one that this time makes much of Orwell’s
unresolved relations to James Burnham’s conservative *realpolitik* in *The Struggle for the World*. It is revealing of Williams’s extraordinary integrity as an intellectual that despite the multitude of his critical forays on Orwell he never repeats himself and never simply recycles old arguments: there is, in each of the texts included here, a genuine effort to rethink the problem from the start that conveys to the reader that something altogether different from personal obsession is at stake. Williams is profoundly interested in what enables or disables an intellectual from reading the signs of his or her times, and in the immensely complex role of personality, experience, ideology, and secondary influences in shaping the ways in which intellectuals manage to grasp or to fail to grasp the significance of their own historical moment. Despite the frequently negative quality of his appraisals, Williams does not “use” Orwell as a polemical target; he thinks with and against him at the same time, in a genuine effort to finally *surpass* the horizon of his thinking, which, it might be said, is also the horizon of all anti-utopianism in the name of anti-totalitarian sensibility.

The collection closes with two relatively brief selections from Williams’s “future fictions”, whose interest, in my view, lies as much in their generic identity as “limit-texts” tracing the boundary lines between political realism and SF (216) as in their subtle and insistent exploration of the problem of left-wing cooption into the state-corporate complex, one evidenced in the ambivalent relations formed by their respective protagonists with media spectacle and state bureaucracy respectively.

In all, this is a remarkable collection, almost impeccably edited and proofread, and one can only be grateful to Milner for his intelligent selection and the conscientiousness of his editorial labors, even if one disagrees with his occasional judgments on the material (ironically, I tend to find myself critical of his critical stance toward Williams’s own criticism of Orwell, which I find neither unwarranted nor short of profound literary insight). It is a work I can only enthusiastically recommend to anyone still committed to the “education of desire” in a politically emancipatory direction, and to any reader, lay or scholarly, interested in learning from the best of the critical humanist tradition of the past century.

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**AUTHOR**

**ANTONIS BALASOPOULOS**

University of Cyprus