Beyond Left-Leavisism

The Critique of Reading and Criticism in Raymond Williams's Earlier Works

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In recent decades, the demise of literary studies and the shift from literature to cultural studies have been emphasized in the field of English studies. Such an opinion seems to be derived from an assumption that a line separating literature and culture can be drawn; however, it goes without saying that we cannot tell literature from culture. Literary criticism in twentieth-century Britain repeatedly problematized this subtle relation between literature and culture; in this sense, the birth of cultural studies is a corollary and there is a historical continuity between them. In order to examine an example of this relation or continuity, I will focus on Raymond Williams, an eminent literary critic and a pioneer of cultural studies. First, I will explore the provenance of Williams's criticism so that we may grasp what he took over from criticism before World War Two and how he developed the inheritance; and then I will particularly examine Reading and Criticism, his first book, published in 1950. This book is a very seminal work, but due attention has scarcely been paid to it. By closely examining this work, I will reevaluate Williams's importance to both literary studies and cultural studies as a pioneer who developed a method of understanding and negotiating the intersection between, to use his most important work's title, culture and society.
F. R. Leavis and the Times of Scrutiny

As Williams puts it, "F. R. Leavis has been largely responsible for the intelligent development of critical analysis as an educational discipline, and to his work, and that of Scrutiny, I am indebted" (Reading and Criticism ix). Scrutiny, first published in 1932, had been "representing a new realization to which any serious effort to perform the function of criticism must be addressed" and had aimed "to make an intelligent critical organ maintain itself by dint of its liveliness" until it came to a close in 1953 ("Valedictory" 317–18). What Leavis meant by "criticism" is literary criticism, because, according to Francis Mulhern, "literature was the main surviving witness of an existential integrity that had disappeared from the social world" which "the automatic tendency of industrial 'civilization'" had undermined, and Leavis thought that "the values of 'culture' in society at large" would be "spontaneously reproduced" by "the function of criticism" (The Moment of "Scrutiny" 76).

In the interwar period, as the title of Leavis's Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture (1930) typically shows, the binary civilization/culture occupied the centre of the discourse of criticism. In this discourse, civilization was connected to the masses, and culture had been corroded by the civilization saturated with problems attendant on the rise of the masses. The masses appeared at the times of the Industrial Revolution; subsequent industrialism and commercialism fostered them. Leavis's view on civilization and culture thus epitomizes such "a specific interpretation of the process of modernity" (Culture/Metaculture 15). This "interpretation" of history is also the basis of Culture and Environment, a widely-read booklet published in 1933; in it, the "momentous change" caused by industrialization is regarded as "vast and terrifying disintegration" and derogatively described as "that which is commonly described as Progress" (87). In Culture and Society (1958), Williams denounces Leavis for having such a false "outline of history" (262). Leavis's lopsided view on history leads to his insistence on "minority culture":

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In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning apprecia-
tion of art and literature depends. [...] They are still a small minority, 
though a larger one, who are capable of endorsing such first-hand judgment 
by genuine personal response. Upon this minority depends our power of 
profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the 
subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. [...] In their keeping ... is 
the language, the changing idiom, upon which fine living depends, and 
without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. By “culture” 
I mean the use of such a language. (Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture 
3–5)

For Leavis, only “a very small minority” can make a proper “judgment by genuine 
personal response” to “art and literature” and appreciate them; therefore, tradition as 
the embodiment of “the finest human experience of the past” depends on such a 
minority. His effort at publishing Scrutiny is to put into practice the “ideas of a small 
but critically active public” playing a significant part in fairly small communities such 
as universities (“Valedictory” 320). Consequently, the scope of his view of culture 
cannot but be contracted. Williams calls Leavis’s insistence “the ‘minority culture’ 
dogma” (Culture and Society 263). To expand the scope of culture was a main task 
before Williams as a critic after Leavis and the Scrutiny school.

In order to scrutinize the differential continuity from Leavis to Williams, it 
would be useful to refer to Perry Anderson’s informative essay “Components of the 
National Culture,” which first appeared in New Left Review in 1968. He explicates 
the characteristics of post-war British culture as follows:

Britain [...] never produced either a classical sociology or a national Marxism. British culture was consequently characterized by an absent centre. For both historical materialism and classical sociology [...] were totalizing enterprises—attempts to capture the “structure of structures,” the articulation of 
the social whole itself. (56)
Anderson points out that British intellectual history had lacked "totalizing enterprises" such as Marxism and sociology, and fallen short of "the articulation of the social whole." Therefore, he identifies the way for the New Left generation to pursue as socialist and sociological practice, and mentions Williams's *Culture and Society* as "the most influential socialist work of the past decade" (49). What is notable in Anderson's argument is that he regards literary criticism as a "displaced home of the totality" (96). This means that literary criticism in Britain, in lieu of Marxism and sociology, was supposed to take the responsibility for the totalizing "articulation of the social whole." Leavis's criticism was representative of the "displaced home of the totality" and regarded as a totalizing attempt at capturing and articulating "the social whole." However, Anderson argues, Leavis fell into a predicament, because, albeit being "significantly affected by Marxism" (100), he repudiated it and persisted in literature's superiority over it. His negation of Marxism is "a pity," as Williams puts it, because Leavis "knows more than any Marxist[...] about the real relation between art and experience" but "they know more than he does about modern English society" ("Culture is Ordinary" 9). Leavis's problem is, as Williams's comment suggests, that his "genuine personal response" to art fails to connect to or to interact with the issues of "modern English society," though his criticism aims at totality.

Reading and Criticism

In the late 1940s and the early 1950s, Williams was engaged in criticism under the great influence of Leavis and the *Scrutiny* school; this is why Williams's use of terms and idioms is similar to Leavis's. In *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952), Williams claims his method to be "literary criticism," which "is of the kind based on demonstrated judgments from texts[...] known in England as practical criticism" (12). This equation of his method with "practical criticism" and this assertion that his approach is based on "demonstrated judgments from texts" do not mean that Williams gives priority to literature over history and society. What we have to note is that the "practical criticism" was not necessarily indifferent to social matters: as I. A. Richards put
it, the practical criticism "might be compared to a loom on which it is supposed to re-weave some ravelled parts of our civilization" (vii). In Reading and Criticism, Williams is engaged in the "practical criticism" whose starting point is the close reading of the text and whose end is to reconsider the relation between literature and society. Although the passage I quoted from Drama from Ibsen to Eliot was taken from its revised edition published in 1968, his method of criticism shown in his first published book was the fundamental basis of Williams's criticism and, though modulated and modified with the changes of the times, continued to be the principle of his works.

The importance of Williams's aim in Reading and Criticism lies in his connecting the act of reading to people's active commitment to the cultural environment. What he tries to show is not a unilateral influence of the cultural milieu upon people but the interrelation between them. Quoting T. S. Eliot, Williams writes: "Mr T. S. Eliot has written that 'every vital development of language is also a development of feeling.' The converse would seem to be also true. The crude or vague language [...] subsists [...] on crudity and imprecision of feeling" (italics original; 17). And then Williams contends that the state of language is to be affected by "habits of reading" (17), and that "an adequate examination of literature" requires "a preliminary examination of our everyday habits of reading" (19). Literature is primarily concerned with the relation between people and their use of language through the act of reading, and feeling affects and is affected by this relation. Reading is, therefore, a pivotal act of individual agency producing effects on the cultural ambient. "Feeling" is of course one of the most important keywords of Williams's work. This "feeling" is not as nuanced and complex as the "structure of feeling," a noted critical concept which Williams used first in Preface to Film in 1954. Yet, this "feeling" is of considerable significance in that it designates not only people's perception, which is conditioned by language in a society, but also a possibility to affect the language which conditions, and is conditioned by, the society. In addition, what we must note here is that Williams quotes Eliot. In the late 1940s and the early 1950s, Eliot's opinion on culture held an influential, problematic position by the publishing of Notes towards the
Definition of Culture in 1948, which, Williams concedes, was "[t]he initial impetus" for his writing Culture and Society, and which endorsed his notion concerning "the concentration of a kind of social thought around this term [culture] which hadn't before appeared particularly important" (Politics and Letters 97).

In Notes towards the Definition of Culture, Eliot observes that "there is an aspect in which we can see a religion as the whole way of life of a people [...] and that way of life is also its culture" (italics original; 31). Thus, Eliot equates the "whole way of life" with culture, and similarly, the "whole way of life" is, for Williams, the very key phrase for his definition of culture. As to the "feeling" and the "whole way of life," it seems that both Eliot and Williams say the same thing, but there is a crucial difference between their contentions. Just before the previous quotation, Eliot says that "people are unconscious of both their culture and their religion" (31). It follows that, for Eliot, culture is essentially concerned not so much with what people consciously committed themselves to as with what is beyond people's conscious commitment. However, Eliot contends that "the culture-making groups" are to "bring about a further development of the culture in organic complexity: culture at a more conscious level" (37). This remark seems to contradict his claim that culture "is conceived as the creation of the society as a whole" (37), but those who develop culture are separate from those "people" who are unconscious of it. Terry Eagleton points out that "[i]f the minority and the masses share common values," for Eliot, "they do so at different levels of consciousness" (The Idea of Culture 117). Eliot's view can be regarded as a kind of organicist body politics: the conscious elites develop culture and control the unconscious "people." He affirms the body politics: "[T]he whole of the population should 'take an active part in cultural activities'—not all in the same activities or on the same level" (38). When Eliot says "every vital development of language is also a development of feeling," it is the elites who actively commit themselves to "language" in order to maintain the standards of culture. In contrast, by underlining the word "feeling," Williams brings to light the unconscious aspect which Eliot precludes from the "culture-making" process. "Feeling" is, as we have seen, essentially concerned with the relation of people to language whether they are
conscious or unconscious of it; "feeling" is, as it were, the nexus which connects people's personal act of reading to their commitment to the "cultural-making" process.

Williams's criticism is based on the binary of the personal and the social, or, to use the titular phrase of a chapter in *The Long Revolution* (1961), that of individuals and societies. However, this is not a binary "opposition" but an interplay between the personal and the social. In *Reading and Criticism*, Williams reconsiders this binary, and discusses the question of what literary standards are. Answering that "[t]hey are literature itself," Williams explains that "one makes local valuations, and proceeds to form these into more general valuations which one is consistently concerned to refine" (26). Here, we also see the binary of the local and the general, and yet, for Williams, it is not a binary opposition either. That the binary is not an opposition means that the local always leads to the general and the general essentially presupposes the local. This argument concerning the local/general or the personal/social binary can be regarded as a basis on which Williams constructs a more refined principle of reading and criticism in *The Long Revolution*: "Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life, yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms" (305). Williams confirms this interacting relation between personal and general in terms of the problem of reading and evaluation:

One wishes to read adequately, and to set one's reading in order with relation to one's personal experience and to the experience of the culture to which one belongs. The basic standards one seeks are those traditional valuations which have been re-created in one's own direct experience. (*Reading and Criticism* 26)

Williams, like Leavis, emphasizes a crucial role of the personal experience. The personal experience must be linked to "the culture to which one belongs," and yet this culture should not be the minority culture but be the culture as a whole way of life in the broadest sense. Adequate evaluation subsists in this relation between the personal
act of reading and the culture as a whole; and the relation is mediated by language. Here, Williams quotes George Orwell's argument that literary criticism is nothing but a "judgment [which] consists in trumping up a set of rules to justify an instinctive preference" without "any external reference," and contends that "a significant reference of literary value is not likely to be external" (italics original; 27). Since reading is the response to language which mediates the "personal experience" of literature and the "experience of the culture," and valuations are made within this interrelation, standards are not introduced from without but conceived of as internal. "Only by receiving the text in all its complexity," as Edward Said argues in an essay, in which he refers to Williams, "can one move from the specific to the general. [...] Thus a close reading of a literary text [...] will gradually locate the text in its time as part of a whole network of relationships whose outlines and influence play an informing role in the text" (italics original; 62).

Moreover, the standards continue to be renewed and modified by the interaction between the culture which language embodies and the culture which the reader contemporarily experiences; criticism thus becomes the space of historicity where the culture of the text and that of the reader intersect. This insight into historicity is the basis of Williams's thought on the active position of literary criticism in relation to culture and society. In "The Idea of Culture" (1953), he writes: "To distinguish the interaction is to distinguish a tradition—a mode of history; and then in experience we set a value on the tradition—a mode of criticism. The continuing process, and the consequent decisions, are then the matter of action in society" (242). For Williams, responding to literature is responding to historicity, culture, and society; he writes:

Criticism, we may note in conclusion, is essentially a social activity. It begins in individual response and judgment, needing the qualities of feeling, flexibility, and good faith. [...] But its standards of value, if it is to acquire meaning, must be ultimately matters of agreement between many people: values which are instinct in the culture of a society. [...] The development we should desire must be the growth of such groups as may serve
for continuity in the values of criticism, while sufficiently in touch with contemporary living to be able to convert what might otherwise be a set of conventional rules into an organic and contemporary body of judgment. *(Reading and Criticism 29)*

The “standards of value” must be based on the “agreement between many people”; here, the problem of the agent who evaluates a literary work, makes a judgment, and gives criticism of it comes to the fore. Responses and judgments are personal acts; yet, because the “agreement between many people” is a prerequisite for standards of judgment, criticism is, of necessity, communal. Further, by emphasizing the importance of “continuity in the values,” Williams foregrounds the historicity with which criticism is essentially concerned and the indispensability of “community intercourse” (29) that is indispensable to the continuity. As he puts it in “Culture is Ordinary,” culture “is always both traditional and creative” because it has to do with “the known meanings” which people learn and with “the new observations and meanings” which are “offered and tested by them” (4). It is at this point that Williams’s view on culture reveals its essential difference from Leavis’s. While culture is, for Leavis, linked to the apotheosized past which “has always gone” *(Culture and Society 259)* and is appreciated only by literary minority, for Williams, culture is concerned both with tradition and with what is emergent, and continues to be inherited and renewed by ordinary people on the basis of their experience in “contemporary living.” In his first published book, we can see the foundation of Williams’s cultural theory and the difference from Leavis, though this book is prone to be mistaken as “a strong restatement of Leavisite position” (McIlroy 25).

**Towards Textual Politics**

Williams’s emphasis on creating the groups “as centres to which individuals are drawn by the quality of their personal responses, and in which these responses may be built into a clear critical responsibility” *(Reading and Criticism 29)* forms a basis
for his belief in participatory democracy. Eagleton points out the significance of social groupings in relation to Williams's view on culture:

Culture is a network of shared meanings. [...] A common culture involves the collaborative making of such meanings, with the full participation of all its members. [...] For Williams, a common culture is one which is continuously remade and refined by the collective practice of its members. [...] Williams's notion of a common culture is thus inseparable from radical socialist change. It requires an ethic of common responsibility, full democratic participation at all levels of social life, including material production, and egalitarian access to the culture-fashioning process. (italics mine; The Idea of Culture 119)

Eagleton explains Williams's notion of culture which involves "full democratic participation" and "radical socialist change" referring to the concluding chapter of Culture and Society; yet, in Reading and Criticism, we can find his burgeoning thoughts that are to be developed into the radical view on culture as Eagleton mentions it. While emphasizing the importance of creating the groups, Williams warns that "[t]here are signs of such groups being formed" but "many of them seem to lack personal meaning in any full sense" (29). Democracy which seeks an agreement always involves the risk of dissolving the differences of its members into a seemingly representative opinion. History teaches us that dictators control people by populist policy under the name of democracy; in such cases people inevitably alienate themselves from those who exercise political power. This is how, ironically enough, appears the binary opposition between the minority and the masses under the banner of democracy. Williams points out that the masses appear as the result of the "ways of seeing people as masses" ("Culture is Ordinary" 11). This can be called "reification," for, according to Fredric Jameson, "reification is a process that affects our cognitive relationship with the social totality" and "is a disease of that mapping function whereby the individual subject projects and models his or her insertion into the col-
lectivity" (italics mine; 146). We need to remember Williams’s assertion that the general ought to be “seen at its most important in completely personal terms”; through the argument about reading and criticism, Williams radically problematizes the relation between an individual subject and the society as a whole at once epistemologically and politically. For Williams, criticism is the very locus where the personal “cognitive relationship with the social totality” is brought into relief. Personal responses to a text and individual judgments “in any full sense” assume essential significance as active commitments to scrutinizing politicoideological implications of the text in order to illuminate the relation rendered opaque by reification. It is at this point that the responsibility of the subject who is engaged in the “culture-fashioning process” counts; and this is why Williams claims that personal responses are to “be built into a clear critical responsibility.” It is not until we understand this radicalness of Williams’s view that we can rightly grasp the meaning of the following sentence in *Culture and Society*: “The cultural training ought essentially to be a training in democracy, which has to be a training in direct judgements” (263).

For Williams, the problem of reading and criticism is an analogy to the relation between an individual and society as a whole; in other words, his thoughts on culture and politics are based on his insight into reading and criticism. Williams maintains that the reader is to “be concerned at once with the texture of the writing at every point in the text, and also with the structure which will emerge from this”; and then he writes:

The structure or pattern of a work is more than the text; it is the text and the response. It goes without saying that such response must be everywhere actual, and its elements justifiable from the text which is the only fact in the work. And it is true that the structure of a work is always intimately related to the very smallest detail of the texture. (italics original; *Reading and Criticism* 73)

Because the reader’s response to the text is a prerequisite for the emergence of the
structure, the agency of the act of reading is brought to light by Williams's underlining the importance of the structure. The structure has to do with reading and interpreting a work as a whole; at the same time, Williams stresses, the response to the work should “always” be related to “the very smallest detail” of the text. Since the structure is concerned with the whole, or presupposes the whole, it is not unnatural that Williams, who aims to grasp literature and society as a whole, should emphasize the “structure” in his first book and develop the concept into that of the “structure of feeling.” However, structural thinking entails a danger of falling into metaphysical and transcendental structuralism in which every element that constitutes the structure is reduced to the structural whole. This danger is, as has been pointed out, similar to that of the representative system of democracy, but Williams is always aware of the danger of reductionistic structuralism and democracy. Williams thinks that every value and standard for criticism is not outside the text but inside it; in this sense, there is no outside of the text. This is also a typically structuralist view, but what is crucial for him is the “structure,” which consists of “the text and the response”—we must note Williams’s italicization of this “and.” The response is to be concerned with “the very smallest detail”; simultaneously, such a detail should be “representative” and the response to any detail is to embody “the critical response which one made to the whole work” (74). This is the pivotal point of Williams’s theory on the interaction between the individual and the whole, neither of which are a priority but both of which are prerequisites for criticism.

Finally, we need look at how Williams overcame the limitation of Leavis’s literary criticism. As for Leavis’s pessimistic view on modern culture, Williams points out that he “too easily construct[s] from such evidence a contemptuous version of the lives of our contemporaries [...] from print” (Culture and Society 260). As Culture and Environment typically shows, Leavis confers privileges to the literary works which are supposed to record the uncontaminated organic society, which “has always gone.” In this respect, Leavis’s history can be thought of as forged deductively from a prescribed ideal of the past; consequently, his “outline of history” paradoxically falls into the ahistorical idealization of the past and the pessimistic antipathy towards the mod-
ern "mass" civilization. In such a reactionary view, Williams sees "an assertion of minority social standards as equivalent with the standards of minority literature, an appeal to privilege as vicious as it is irrelevant" (Reading and Criticism 104). What is at stake here is also the problem of how to read the text: Williams foregrounds the problem of regarding literature as historical evidence and emphasizes the crucial importance of response of the reader. Because any "political or philosophical implications" are to "only be an aspect of the total effect of the work upon the reader" (106), the response to the text is essential for the reader to approach sociopolitical matters. Moreover, this view on political implications as "the total effect" has significance not only for the problem of Leavis's method but also for recent literary criticism which is apt to connect political "implications" in literary texts directly to external, historical facts. Reading and criticism based on this kind of hypostatization of political implications fatally overlook the fact that such implications are "the total effect" of the interaction between the text and the response to it. Leavis's idealization of the past is also a kind of hypostatization of what is written in books; therefore, what is substantiated in the literary text is no more than a wishful project of his ideal.

The response as Williams stresses it, to use Eagleton's terms, can be regarded as a method to "grasp ideology as an inherently complex formation which, by inserting individuals into history in a variety of ways, allows of multiple kinds and degrees of access to that history" (Criticism and Ideology 69). History is not in the text as such; it can be accessed through the "inherently complex formation," or conceived of as "the total effect." Eagleton's contention that we can grasp ideology by "inserting individuals into history" corresponds to Williams's assertion that to grasp the structure of a work, which appears only when the text is responded to by individuals, is the way to connect the act of reading to the politicoideological matters and to the total understanding of society as a whole. Although Eagleton, applying the epithet of "Left-Leavisism" to Williams, captiously denounces him as being an empiricist (Criticism and Ideology 22), Williams's argument on the structure shows as deep an insight as Eagleton's structuralist thinking on literature and ideology. Reading and Criticism should be regarded as a work pregnant with possibilities of going beyond the limita-
tion such an epithet as “Left-Leavisism” denotes. In *Culture and Environment*, Leavis quotes the following sentence from D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*: “The novel can glorify the most corrupt feelings, so long as they are conventionally ‘pure’” (italics original; 54; Lawrence 101). Nevertheless, Leavis considers literary texts to be so “pure” that he cannot rightly grasp history in spite of the “outline of history” on which his criticism is based. What Williams has done in *Reading and Criticism* is to find the way to overcome the contradictions and impasse into which Leavis’s historical approach to literature unwittingly fell. The concept of structure is not just a method of reading but also a radical critique of criticism, “culture-fashioning process,” and democracy.

Works Cited


