



Raymond Williams warned that in the course of ‘realising the new fact of the city, we must be careful not to idealise the old and new facts of the country’ (*The Country and the City* [1973]). Explore the salience of this belief about the relationship between urban and rural representation for regional fiction of the period.

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Raymond Williams, in his theoretical work *The Country and the City*, describes how the ‘real history’ of the country has been ‘astonishingly varied’ and warns against generalisations and idealisations, the same ‘certain images and associations’ which overlook the multiplicity and complexity of rural life.¹ Although the city was increasingly depicted and seen as a place of ambition, corruption, disturbance and vice, Williams argues that there is a danger in romanticizing the rural through association and comparison, and that by adhering to the country and city as polar opposites, surface similarities emerge at the expense of valid ones. His 1960 novel, *Border Country*, is often viewed as an extension of his theoretical work, a disparate form for which he could profess many of his ideological views concerning the rural, and refracted through the main protagonist, Matthew; as Elizabeth and John Eldridge contend, ‘his fiction can be understood as theory in practice’.² Williams is critical of previous novelists in their depiction of rural life, feeling the pastoral has been ‘marginalized by generations of literati’³ and claiming Jane Austen to be too selective⁴ and George Eliot too defensive, and he evidently hoped to present as truthful a representation of rural life as he could, drawing on aspects of both literary realism and modernism to present an honest depiction of the contemporary social community whilst also reflecting the complications of understanding this multifaceted and changing world.⁵ In this essay I will explore the ways in which Williams illustrates the danger of idealising the rural in the regional novel, ‘his strategy of demystifying and dispelling illusions’, in his illustration of the fictional country village of Glynmawr.⁶

Throughout *Border Country*, there is a perceptible rendering of an oscillation between a close and distant viewpoint. Poplawski argues that depictions of modernism draw attention to the ‘difficulties and complexities of representation and perception’, that ‘shifting points of view...feature prominently in most discussions of modernism’, and *Border Country*, in physically alternating the vantage point of the protagonist, seems to be no exception.⁷ Williams, in his theoretical work, contends ‘in the country writing, it is not only the reality of the rural community; it is the observers position in and towards it; a position which is part of

¹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, Chatto & Windus Ltd: 1973), p. 1

² Elizabeth Eldridge and John Eldridge, *Raymond Williams: Making Connections* (London, Routledge: 1994), p. 140

³ Jerry Johnson and Craig Howley, ‘Review of the Country and the City, Raymond Williams’, *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Autumn, 2000): 146

⁴ Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 146

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211

⁶ Eldridge, p. 180

⁷ Paul Poplawski, *Encyclopedia of Literary Modernism* (Westport, Greenwood Publishing Group: 2003), p. ix

the community being known', and Williams explores the importance of the observer's position in these oscillations.⁸ Examining a map of Wales, a distant view in the extreme, the country becomes heavily abstracted, and Williams indicates this by professing that 'in the drawing, [it] looked more than ever like the head of a pig',⁹ an entirely non-representational image. In the village of Glynmawr, the Kestrel Mountain enables Matthew to see the entirety of the valley at once, and it has the effect of 'heightening [its] quality' (276). It has the power 'to abstract and to clarify' (364) and creates an image 'where work might not have existed, and the trains might have been moving themselves, with everyone gone from the valley' (363). This overarching perspective strongly implies an aesthetic understanding of the world, and suggests that the knowledge being gained is illusory and false, in that we know that the valley is filled with people, and with people working the seemingly autonomous trains. Moving down from the mountain, Matthew notes how 'the shapes faded and the ordinary identities returned. The voice in his mind faded, and the ordinary voice came back' (364). 'The voice in his mind' then, with the demonstrative 'the' being used over the possessive 'his', suggesting a recurring voice removed from the contemporary, implies that the distant perspective induces an inward turn that opposes the outward reality, and this is again seen when Matthew discovers that to watch from 'above' is to watch 'yourself' (365). Matthew explicitly notes this when he explains, 'from here it was only a place and a memory. The trains which had sounded so near when he lay at night in his bedroom...moved now like toys through an imaginary country' (362), with the deictic adverb 'here', which continues to occur throughout the passage, along with 'from this height' (363), indicating that it is the location which leads to reminiscence and indeed fantasy, an 'imaginary' world, with the use of 'toys' creating a further sense of childhood nostalgia. Furthermore, as a literary regionalist, Williams is typical in his rejection of 'the vague, the high-flown and the sentimental', and the fading 'shapes' allude to the way the distant perspective creates an indistinct, imprecise and indeed 'vague' image.¹⁰

The mountains become emblematic for a viewpoint and critical distance which thwarts detail, and hence reality, and can be seen as representative of the viewpoint from the city. Where the large city was perceived as unknowable, in comparison to the comprehensible country, Williams is revealing the knowable community to be dependent on perspective, and not just size. It is by demonstrating the inaccuracies of the mountaintop perspective, he is, as Eldridge describes, cautioning against the 'ideological positions' that are embodied by a particular viewpoint and 'thinking that literature on rural society tells us more than it does'.¹¹ It is perhaps not coincidental that it is when Harry is 'staring out at the mountains' which 'were clear and close' (45), the reverse of being on the mountains themselves, he realizes that the ideal of the 'family Christmas, after lodgings' with Morgan Rosser is not the actuality, 'But when we are all here...it isn't that really, not really' (46), with the repetition of 'really' reflecting his search for the truth. Williams is specifying that although it is 'wonderful to...look out' (276), one must be within the rural, what he describes as 'on the ground' to avoid glamorisation, and indeed, idealisation.¹² Additionally, David Harvey argues, speaking of a parallel episode in Williams' later novel, *Loyalties*, 'the problem here is not the level of abstraction...but the very different structures of feeling that can attach to those different levels of abstraction'.¹³ Matthew is shown to feel differently towards the rural village when on the

⁸ Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 165

⁹ Raymond Williams, *Border Country* (Carmarthen, Library of Wales : 2006), p. 374. All quotes herein refer to this edition and will be followed by page numbers.

¹⁰ David James, *Contemporary British Fiction and the Artistry of Space: Style, Landscape, Perception* (London, Continuum Publishing Group: 2008), p. 47

¹¹ Eldridge, p. 186

¹² Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 2

¹³ David Harvey, 'Militant Particularism and Global Ambition: The Conceptual Politics of Place, Space, and Environment in the Work of Raymond Williams', *Social Text*, No. 42 (Spring, 1995): 87

82 Raymond Williams warned that in the course of 'realising the new fact of the city, we must be careful not to idealise the old and new facts of the country' (The Country and the City [1973]). Explore the salience of this belief about the relationship between urban and rural representation for regional fiction of the period.

mountain, saying, 'from here it seemed that a light, a silence, a feeling not ordinarily accessible, had flowed round and enclosed this familiar ground' (362). With the distance obscuring work and people, Matthew is compelled to feel a different sentiment, a disparate structure of feeling, and this response is what contributes to an idealisation of the old and new ways of the country.

As well as drawing attention to the abstraction caused by a distant perspective, Williams creates a vivid, detailed, and sensory image of the living, close reality. Milligan, speaking of Williams' writing, argues that 'the central-trope is not making strange but that of doubling-over or repetition', and Williams is seen to introduce and then repeat a number of oppositions between the distance and close angle.¹⁴ When the 'whole valley lay[s] under' the onlooker (76), the railway is described as 'clean' (77), 'silent' (79), 'quiet' (361) and 'still' (361), with 'occasional birds' (79). In proximity however, the reverse epithets are employed. The immediate landscape is constantly described as unclean, there are 'dirty yards' (36), 'untidy sheds' (90), a 'dirty lorry' (90), 'the office windows [are] dirty' (174) and there is 'the muck of the yard' (73, 198, 224). The sounds of the landscape are often piercing, children quarrelling (66), or dogs barking 'furiously' (73), 'insistently' (364) and 'frantically as if trapped' (66). Even the smells are unpleasant; there is the 'foul smell of the old tipped-out carbide' (256), the 'sourness' of the drying wood (62) and 'the bitter scent of the elderflower' (66). John and Elizabeth Eldridge argue that 'trying to do justice to the life and experience of the country without idealisation is...part of Williams' project', and this argument is reinforced by Williams choice of adjectives. Additionally, the sensory choice of language perhaps also introduces the notion that the senses cannot be evoked from a distance, which then contributes to the creation of a misrepresentative image on the mountaintop, or indeed in the city.¹⁵ As Matthew finally realizes 'this, seen close, was his actual country' (364). Interestingly, Williams is not proclaiming that the close is never beautiful. In reference to *Loyalties*, Harvey argues that 'the formulaic view that "truth is beauty"...deserves to be treated with...wrath', and Williams signals in *Border Country*, that it is detail and not distance which in fact leads to truth and genuine attractiveness. The trope of the neck is employed to represent beauty found in looking intimately; Will is infatuated with the 'colour' in Eira's neck (254), and it is the colours in the neck of the pigeon which reveal their concealed splendour, 'Grey pigeons, but see the colours now in their necks' (174). The rural is a nuanced place of both exquisiteness and severity, but the distant view only provides the beauty, and a false beauty at that.

As previously mentioned, in *The Country and the City*, Williams is openly speculative of artistic depiction of the rural, and this notion perhaps extends to *Border Country*. Reflecting characteristics of modernism, which Paul Poplawski describes as often focusing 'on the very processes of making meaning', Williams, somewhat self-reflexively in his own process of writing, explores the limitations of literature and images through the protagonist Matthew.¹⁶ Returning to the older Matthew after our first introduction to Harry, chapter three begins:

Matthew woke, suddenly, and at first could not realize where he was. He stared at the knot of blankets he was holding, and beyond it to the curved mahogany posts of the bed. The book he read overnight lay open on the quilt, and he reached for it

¹⁴ Don Milligan, 'Raymond Williams: Hope and Defeat in the Struggle for Socialism', *Studies in Anti-Capitalism*: 2007. [22/02/12] <www.studiesinanti-capitalism.net>

¹⁵ Eldridge, p. 191

¹⁶ Poplawski, p. ix

automatically finding his way back. He was reading again as the whole memory returned. (81)

This episode encompasses a sense of the problematic nature of this impulse. Matthew, reading the county history of Glynmawr, allows description and images of the ‘church’, ‘roodscreen’, ‘ancient camp’ and the ‘bloodiest of border castles’ (81-82) to ‘return’ to him ‘the whole memory’ of his surroundings. What is significant however, is that the literature restores only retrospection to him, an historic image which comes to him involuntarily and repeatedly, in the same way he reaches for the book ‘automatically’. ‘Finding his way back’ into the narrative is directly linked with ‘finding his way back’ to his recollections, and Matthew is in fact no more aware of ‘where he was’, only being ‘back’ in the Glynmawr of his childhood. Indeed, after this passage, when he stops reading and turns instead to the window, Matthew notes that it is a view ‘he was not expecting’ (82). Williams is perhaps highlighting the inadequacies of both fiction and memory, which tend to idealise, and which cannot represent the intricacies of the rural, such as the specific ‘blue-grey’ of the mist or the ‘drawn and pointed’ silence of the mountains (82) that he later discovers.

Matthew relates the book to the pictures he sees in the train the day previously, ‘Yesterday the pictures...and now this’ (82), and these pictures also invoke a similar notion:

The usual photographs were at the side of the map. On the far side was the abbey, that he had always known: the ruined abbey at Trawsfynydd that had not changed in his lifetime. On the near side was the front at Tenby. A railing horizon, in the wide paleness of sky and sea; then, making the picture, two girls smiling under cloche hats, and an Austin drawn up beyond them, the nose of its radiator in the air. Like the compartment the photographs were more than thirty years old: nearly his own age. Damp had got in at the corners, irregularly staining the prints. (8)

The use of the adjective ‘usual’ signals immediately that the image is common, typical, and by extension somewhat generalised, and the subsequent description suggests that it is an idealised image also, with the mildness of the natural landscape, the joyful girls, and the wealth signified by the Austin motor car. The reality of this image is then undermined by the way in which Williams draws attention to its materiality through the image being discoloured, and this perhaps has further significance, the physical distortion of the image reflecting the way Williams feels it distorts the truth. Again, connected with this observing of an image is the idea that it induces past memory, that which has ‘always [been] known’, over present fact. Matthew, centring on the historical ruin, takes comfort in that which has remained unaltered since his youth, and by focusing on his childhood world, Matthew is propagating the belief in a ‘Golden Age’ just passed, and that is what Williams openly critiques in *The Country and the City*. By looking retrospectively, there is a chance of nostalgia, and nostalgia is inherently linked to idealisation. As John Su describes, ‘Nostalgia in modernist writing...marks the partial or vestigial recovery of a past that has been betrayed and effaced by bourgeois modernization’ and that ‘nostalgia promises at least a temporary respite from an industrialized and homogenizing world’.¹⁷ Dennis Dworkin and Leslie Roman contend that ‘the novel is deeply imbued with the author’s feeling of longing for the ideal Welsh community life of Glynmawr’, but I would have to disagree.¹⁸ William’s portrayal of the rural does not endorse the nostalgia Roberto Dainotto sees as ‘behind the

¹⁷ John J Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 11

¹⁸ Dennis Dworkin and Leslie Roman, *Views Beyond the Border Country: Raymond Williams and Cultural Politics* (London, Routledge: 1993), p. 21

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fantasy of the regionalist cure'¹⁹ but reflects more Dominic Head's description of John Fowle's *Daniel Martin*, there is an 'ultimate rejection' of rural nostalgia whilst still a definite susceptibility apparent to this kind of wistfulness.²⁰ Williams, through demonstrating the precincts of framing and confirming current truth through art, his own wedding picture being 'dead' and 'not even like them' (177), seems to be indicating the importance of immediate observation, in order to not idealise its old and new facts; as Matthew eventually recognizes and appreciates, 'It was one thing to carry its image in his mind... But it was different to stand and look at the reality' (89). Williams seems to exemplify the divergence between art and reality, presents this as encouraging undue nostalgia, and indicates that this has propagated a false image of the country.

In his introduction to *Border Country*, Dai Smith asserts, 'there is not a false or sentimental note anywhere in this book. Nothing is romanticised and nobody is idealised'.²¹ Through choosing 'to speak of the ordinary world and the people in it',²² most specifically the working-class, and what has been described as the 'immediate, pressing and personal' element of working life in the novel, Williams draws on an inherent quality of realism to counter-act idealisation, whilst also employing the explored modernist elements, such as inward self-interrogation and shifts in perspective, to expose the follies of this idealisation.²³ It is clear that Glynmawr is a changing world, 'Work had changed and was still changing it, though the main shape held', and is far from eternal or timeless, but Williams refrains from condemning this change, knowing that 'this was not anybody's valley to make into a landscape' (91). John realises in the novel that men do not fit 'five or six types' (336), and is inspired to acknowledge Harry as a person and not as a category, and we, as readers, are asked to do the same; to learn from the particulars of Glynmawr the deep inadequacies of generalisation, and acknowledge the inaccuracies and dangers of idealisation.

¹⁹ Roberto Dainotto, 'All the Regions Do Smilingly Revolt: The Literature of Place and Region', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Spring, 1996): 503

²⁰ Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2002), p. 188

²¹ Dai Williams, 'Introduction', *Border Country* (Carmarthen, Library of Wales: 2006), p. xiii

²² Katherine Kearns, 'Introduction', *Nineteenth-Century Literary Realism: Through the Looking Glass* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press: 1996), p. 15

²³ Don Milligan, 'Raymond Williams: Hope and Defeat in the Struggle for Socialism', p. 170

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