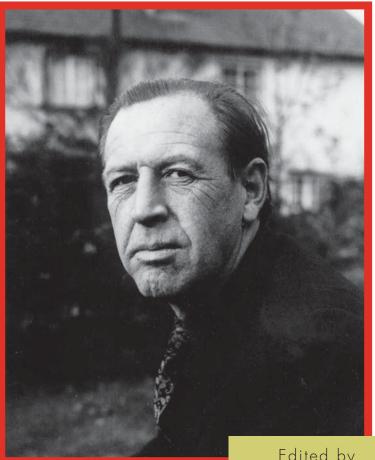
TENSES OF IMAGINATION RAYMOND WILLIAMS ON SCIENCE FICTION, UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA



Edited by ANDREW MILNER

Ralahine Reader

Peter Lang

tenses of imagination

RAYMOND WILLIAMS ON SCIENCE FICTION, UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA

Raymond Williams was an enormously influential figure in late twentieth-century intellectual life as a novelist, playwright and critic, "the British Sartre," as *The Times* put it. He was a central inspiration for the early British New Left and a close intellectual supporter of Plaid Cymru. He is widely acknowledged as one of the "founding fathers" of cultural studies, who established "cultural materialism" as a new paradigm for work in both literary and cultural studies. There is a substantial secondary literature on Williams, which treats his life and work in each of these respects. But none of it makes much of his enduring contribution to utopian studies and science fiction studies. This volume brings together a complete collection of Williams's critical essays on science fiction and futurology, utopia, and dystopia, in literature, film, television, and politics, and with extracts from his two future novels, *The Volunteers* (1978) and *The Fight for Manod* (1979).

Both the collection as a whole and the individual readings are accompanied by introductory essays written by Andrew Milner.

"With the twenty-first-century reader very much in mind, Andrew Milner's selection of texts offers a new, 'alternative' Raymond Williams – the critic and occasional author of science fiction, the futurologist, the wary, self-questioning utopian thinker for whom intellectual pessimism is a lazy response and never the last word."

Professor Patrick Parrinder, University of Reading

"The future was the ultimate stake in all Raymond Williams's thinking and writing, as Andrew Milner simply and powerfully shows us now, by assembling a volume of writings on science fiction and utopianism that turns out to be a very substantial, wide-ranging reader in Williams's work as a whole. The defining importance of 'the sense of the future,' as he called it, the future as the essential discipline of political and moral imagination, is the lesson of this very welcome collection."

Professor Francis Mulhern, Middlesex University

Andrew Milner is Professor and Deputy Director of the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. His previous publications include *Postmodern Conditions* (1990), *Cultural Materialism* (1993), *Class* (1999), *Re-Imagining Cultural Studies* (2002), *Contemporary Cultural Theory* (2002), *Literature, Culture and Society* (2005), *Imagining the Future* (2006) and *Demanding the Impossible* (2008). TENSES OF IMAGINATION

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Volume 7



Edited by Andrew Milner

TENSES OF IMAGINATION

RAYMOND WILLIAMS ON SCIENCE FICTION, UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA



Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

A catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Williams, Raymond.

Tenses of imagination : Raymond Williams on science fiction, utopia and dystopia / Andrew Milner.

p. cm. – (Ralahine utopian studies ; 7) Includes bibliographical references and index.

 Science fiction, English-History and criticism. 2. English fiction-20th century-History and criticism. 3. Utopias in literature.
Dystopias in literature. 5. Criticism-Great Britain-History-20th century. 6. Literature-History and criticism-Theory, etc. 1. Milner, Andrew. II. Title.

PR830.S35W55 2009 823'.087609372-dc22

2009032209

Cover image: photograph of Raymond Williams, courtesy of Ederyn and Ilona Williams, with thanks to Merryn Williams.

ISSN 1661-5875 ISBN 978-3-0353-0015-4

© Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, Bern 2010 Hochfeldstrasse 32, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland info@peterlang.com, www.peterlang.com, www.peterlang.net

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Printed in Germany

For Kathy Wench, my teenage sweetheart and first love, who grew up to be Kathryn Turnier and died of cancer on Christmas Day 2007; and for Marion and Marc, who must learn to imagine the future without her

Ralahine Readers

Utopia has been articulated and theorized for centuries. There is a matrix of commentary, critique, and celebration of utopian thought, writing, and practice that ranges from ancient Greece, into the European middle ages, throughout Asian and indigenous cultures, in Enlightenment thought and Marxist and anarchist theory, and in the socio-political theories and movements (especially racial, gender, ethnic, sexual, and national liberation; and ecology) of the last two centuries. While thoughtful writing on Utopia has long been a part of what Ernst Bloch called our critical cultural heritage, a distinct body of multi- and inter-disciplinary work across the humanities, social sciences, and sciences emerged from the 1960s onward under the name of "utopian studies." In the interest of bringing the best of this scholarship to a wider, and new, public, the editors of Ralahine Utopian Studies are committed to publishing the work of key thinkers who have devoted a lifetime to studying and expressing the nature and history, problems and potential, accomplishments and anticipations of the utopian imagination. Each Ralahine Reader presents a selection of the work of one such thinker, bringing their best work, from early days to most recent, together in one easily accessible volume.

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Acknowledgements

I am indebted to friends, colleagues, and students in and around the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies and to staff at the Matheson Library, especially the Rare Book Collection, at Monash University, for their encouragement and assistance in preparing the collection. A parallel debt is owed friends and colleagues in the School of English at the University of Liverpool and the staff of the Science Fiction Foundation Collection and the Special Collections Reading Room in the Ernest Jones Library at the University of Liverpool. Further individual debts of gratitude belong to: Andrew Benjamin, Roland Boer, Mark Bould, Ian Buchanan, Verity Burgmann, Sue Cousin, Nikolai Gladanac, David Jack, Darren Jorgensen, Sean Kearns, Andrew Keogh, Michal Kulbicki, David Milner, Richard Milner, Tom Moylan, Joyce Morton, Diane Newsome, Patrick Parrinder, Kate Rigby, Matthew Ryan, Carlo Salzani, Hazel Sanderson, Robert Savage, Andy Sawyer, Simon Sellars, Juliet Trevethick, Dimitris Vardoulakis, Marcus Walsh, Gail Ward, Chris Williams, Merryn Williams, and Stuart Wrathmell. I should also acknowledge the Australian Research Council, which generously funded the research behind this collection.

The editor and publishers are grateful to the following for permission to republish: "Science Fiction," from *The Highway* 48 (December 1956), reproduced with permission of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) <http://www.wea.org.uk>; "William Morris" and "George Orwell," from *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958) by Raymond Williams, published by Chatto and Windus, reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd; "The Future Story as Social Formula Novel," from *The Long Revolution* (1961) by Raymond Williams, published by Chatto and Windus, reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd; "Terror" from *The Listener* (3 June 1971), reproduced with permission of BBC Worldwide; "*Nineteen Eighty-Four*," from *Orwell*, first edition (1971), reprinted by permission of Merryn Williams on behalf of the Raymond

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Introduction

Raymond Williams was a significant figure in late twentieth-century intellectual life, a pioneer in the early history of what we now know as Cultural Studies and also a central inspiration for the early British New Left. He was variously - and inaccurately - likened to a British Lukács, a British Bloch and even, according to The Times, "the British Sartre" (Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology 36; Pinkney, "Williams and the 'Two Faces of Modernism'" 28–31). He was a substantial influence on the work of critics as diverse as Terry Eagleton, Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Alan Sinfield, Stephen Greenblatt, and Cornel West (Eagleton, "Introduction"; Hall; Williams and Said; Sinfield 9; Greenblatt 2; West). There are Williamsites in Italy, in Brazil and in Australia (Ferrara; Cevasco; Lawson 33–65). There is also a very substantial secondary literature on Williams. But none of this seems to make much of his enduring interest in science fiction, an oversight the present collection attempts to rectify. I have argued elsewhere that there are three main "phases" in Williams's thought, each explicable in terms of its own differentially negotiated settlement between the kind of literary humanism associated with F.R. Leavis on the one hand and some version or another of Marxism on the other: and each characterizable in relation to a relatively distinct, consecutive moment in the history of the British New Left (Milner, Re-Imagining Cultural Studies). Each also gave rise to a relatively distinct understanding on Williams's part of the relationship between science fiction (henceforth sf), utopia, and dystopia.

This periodization provides the organizing framework for the collection. The first and second phases in Williams's work are respectively those associated with the moments of "1956" and "1968," that is, to borrow Peter Sedgwick's terms, the "Old New Left" and the "New New Left." Where the Old New Left had been formed from out of the double political crisis of 1956, occasioned by the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution and the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt, the New New Left was inspired by the May 1968 Events in Paris, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, the Prague Spring, and the revolt on the campuses (Sedgwick). Where the Old New Left had attempted to preserve the particularities of the British national experience from Stalinist internationalism, the New New Left spurned nationalism in general, and the peculiarities of the English especially, in favour of Francophile cosmopolitanism and active political solidarity with the Vietnamese National Liberation Front. Where the Old New Left had situated itself somewhere in the political space between the left wing of the Labour Party and the liberalizing wing of the Communist Party, the New New Left rejected both Labourism and Communism in favour of various "ultraleftisms," Guevarism, Maoism, Trotskyism, and so on. Where the Old New Left had sought to counterpose "experience" and "culture" to Communist dogmatism, the New New Left discovered in various continental European "Western Marxisms" a type of "Theory" which could be counterposed to the empiricism of English bourgeois culture and the pragmatism of the British Labour Party. To this typology we can add a third phase, roughly that from the 1980s to the present, in which a "Postmodern New Left" confronted the developing globalization of corporate capitalism, the emergence of a postmodern radicalism centred on the new social movements and a new theoretical relativism associated with "difference" theory. Each of these three phases registers in a corollary phase in Williams's own thought, which I have termed, respectively, "left culturalism," "cultural materialism," and, a little inelegantly, "(anti-) postmodernism."

Each also registers in Williams's work on sf, utopia, and dystopia. His key texts from the first period were *Culture and Society 1780–1950* and *The Long Revolution*, both of which include discussions of utopia, dystopia, and science fiction, all of which are included in Part I. The primary focus in both books, however, is on a theoretical and practical rejection of the minority culture/mass civilization topos he had found in T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. The distinctiveness of Williams's position was to see utopian sf as essentially exhausted by the mid-twentieth century and dystopian sf as a newly dominant mode, which effectively reproduced the Eliot–Leavis position in generically specific terms. This argument is at its most explicit in the 1956 essay "Science Fiction" which is our first reading. And here, as in neither book, dystopia is specifically defined as the putrefaction of utopia, in Williams's neologism "Putropia," and its positive corollary specifically

identified as "Space Anthropology," that is, the fictional encounter with the Other as a way of valorizing Otherness itself. Hence, the title of this first part. Its closing reading, on television sf, written fifteen years after the first, interestingly repeats the argument for a space anthropology focussed on "identity and culture contact."

The second phase of Williams's work, that of the moment of "1968" and the emergence of a second New Left, was characterized above all by his development of a full-blown theory of "cultural materialism." By this, he meant "a theory of culture as a (social and material) productive process and of specific practices, of 'arts,' as social uses of material means of production" ("Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory" 243). Here, Williams's engagement with a series of continental European Western Marxisms, and with various forms of Third Worldist political radicalism, clearly ran parallel to that of the younger generation of radical intellectuals associated with the New Left Review under the editorship of Perry Anderson. For Williams, the import was a strange double movement by which, on the one hand, his declared politics acquired a more explicitly "leftist" – and presumably "unrealistic" – character; but, on the other, they also became more analytically distinct from his scholarly work, which he increasingly understood as "social-scientific" rather than "literary-critical." Williams sought to substitute a loosely Gramscian theory of "hegemony" for Leavisite notions of "culture" and more orthodox Marxist notions of "ideology." More generally, he also sought to substitute description and explanation for judgement and canonization, as the central purposes of analysis. This is what we have come to call "Cultural Studies," and it is important to note that this move from literary into cultural studies had been occasioned, in part, by an aversion to prescriptive criticism of the Leavisite variety. Hence, Williams's insistence that "we need not criticism but analysis [...] the complex seeing of analysis rather than [...] the abstractions of critical classification" ("A Defence of Realism" 239). The primary methodological implication would thus be an insistence on setting literary texts, sf texts included, in their social contexts: hence the title of the collection's second part.

The key works from this period were *The Country and the City* and *Marxism and Literature*. The latter was "almost wholly theoretical" in form,

to borrow his own description and, as such, had nothing to say about sf nor about any other substantive area of inquiry. But, as he insisted, "every position in it was developed from the detailed practical work that I have previously undertaken, and from the consequent interaction with other [...] modes of theoretical assumption and argument" (Marxism and Literature 6). And some of this detailed practical work had indeed been concerned with sf. In The Country and the City, his primary concern was with the pastoral and the counter-pastoral, but he had found examples of each in the future cities of sf. For our purposes, however, the most important text is the 1971 first edition of Orwell – which Williams himself doesn't cite as relevant to Marxism and Literature - where he worried away, yet again, at the precise significance of dystopianism in Nineteen Eighty-Four. By comparison with the discussion in *Culture and Society*, the extract from *Orwell*, which provides the collection's second part with its first Reading, proposes a much more even-handed treatment of the novel. Here Williams is clearly more responsive to the very real strengths of what is, after all, quite probably the greatest dystopian fiction written in English during the twentieth century. But he remained fixated on Orwell's supposed "anti-socialism," an oddly inappropriate description of a writer whose declared vocation had been to write "against totalitarianism and for democratic Socialism" (Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters Vol. 1 28). Part of the explanation for this animus lies in the more personal, and less analytic, responses to Orwell (and Morris) which Williams volunteered in the extracts from his 1977 interviews with New Left Review included in Readings 8 and 9.

The third and final phase of Williams's critical work, that produced mainly during the 1980s, is best characterized by his developing engagement with the globalization of corporate capitalism and with the promise of a postmodern radicalism centred around the new social movements. The key political texts are Williams's deeply sympathetic 1980 review of Rudolf Bahro's *Die Alternative*, included as Reading 12, and the 1983 reworking of the long revolution analysis, *Towards 2000*, a lengthy extract from which is included as Reading 13. Both suggest a greater sympathy for utopianism than hitherto, albeit one cautiously restrained by a strong sense of the realistically possible. Such questions of rational futurological imagination are also broached, however, in his two 1978 discussions of sf:

Introduction

"Utopia and Science Fiction," first published in Science-Fiction Studies and here included as Reading 10; and "The Tenses of Imagination," originally presented as lectures at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, and here included as Reading 11. Both suggest how radically impressed Williams had been by Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed, sufficiently so as to lead him toward a more positive evaluation of utopia as a general form and News from Nowhere as a particular text – hence the title of Part Three. Le Guin's novel is organized around the contrast between the twin planets (strictly, a moon and a planet) of Anarres and Urras. These represent what Ann Kaplan would later term the "twin faces of postmodernism," the "utopian" and the "commercial" (4). Interestingly, the same twin faces structure both the futurology in Towards 2000 and the fiction in Williams's own future novels. The collection's third part concludes with the full text of his 1984 essay, "Nineteen Eighty-Four in 1984," which was included as an appendix to the second edition of Orwell and is clearly by far the most sympathetic of his three discussions of the novel.

The collection's final and fourth part comprises extracts from the opening pages of Williams's two future novels, The Volunteers, first published in 1978, and The Fight for Manod, begun earlier but not finally published until 1979. Although most secondary accounts of the latter stress its obvious affinity with the earlier volumes in the Welsh trilogy, it is clear from the Readings in Part Three that Williams himself was simultaneously conscious of its affinity, as a future novel, with The Volunteers. Both Manod and The Volunteers exhibit a qualified hope, a realism of purpose in a darkening future: Williams was clear that the future imagined here "is not a desirable one, but it is [...] perfectly possible" (Politics and Letters 301). They thus provide the dystopian counterpart to what he had found in Le Guin's ambiguous utopia. In thirty years of writing about sf, Williams had learnt to substitute the complex seeing of analysis for moralistic criticism; and to situate texts in their material and intellectual contexts. He had come to understand the kind of honourable personal motives and socially effective structures of feeling that underpin both utopian and dystopian forms. He had come to realize that neither was inherently antithetical to the space anthropology he had admired in Blish and, later, in Le Guin. But his suspicion of radical dystopia remained largely intact: without resistance, without "realism," without what he termed the "true subjunctive," dystopia would kill hope, as surely as unrealistic utopia will fail to inspire it. Hence, his enduring reservations about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Williams may well be right in this general judgement, but he is mistaken about Nineteen Eighty-Four. For he misreads the novel, as many critics have, as if it ends with "it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother" (Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four 298). At a superficial level, Orwell invited us to read the novel thus: in the first edition, as in most subsequent, the next words are "The End." But we know he had been deeply impressed by Nous autres, the French translation of Yevgeny Zamyatin's We, a novel organized into forty chapters, or "Notes," the penultimate of which is entitled "La Fin." Nous autres continued for a further six pages after "La Fin" (Zamiatine 227–232), just as the first edition of Orwell's dystopia continues for a further fourteen after "The End" (299-312). Nineteen Eighty-Four actually ends at the conclusion to the "Appendix" on Newspeak with: "It was chiefly in order to allow time for the preliminary work of translation that the final adoption of Newspeak had been fixed for so late a date as 2050" (312). In content, these lines add little, but their form is redolent with meaning. For, as Margaret Atwood observes of the whole "Appendix," it "is written in standard English, in the third person, and in the past tense, which can only mean that the regime has fallen, and that language and individuality have survived. For whoever has written the essay on Newspeak, the world of 1984 is over" ("George Orwell" 337).

Atwood herself used a similar device in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which concludes with an extract from the proceedings of a "Symposium on Gile-adean Studies," written in some utopian future long after the collapse of the Republic of Gilead (311–324). Moreover, she readily admits that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* provided her with a "direct model" for this ("George Orwell" 337). Both Orwell's "Appendix" and Atwood's "Historical Notes" can thus be read as framing devices, the effect of which is to relativize dystopia by historicizing it. Williams's true subjunctive is, in fact, precisely what occupies the space between "The End" and the "Appendix" on "The Principles of Newspeak." Moreover, it takes a particularly interesting form within the actual text of the "Appendix," that of the subjunctive future perfect. Atwood

is right to observe that the "Appendix" is written in the past tense. But there are other tenses at work, notably the subjunctive future perfect. So, in the sentences which provide its chronological frame, Orwell writes that it "was expected that Newspeak would have finally superseded Oldspeak [...] by about the year 2050"; and that "within a couple of generations even the possibility of such a lapse would have vanished [...]. When Oldspeak had been once and for all superseded, the last link with the past would have been severed" (299, 310). This use of the subjunctive functions very much as Williams had observed it in Morris: to mean that these events will not necessarily have eventuated. The subjunctive future perfect is thus the logically informing tense of dystopia. For this is what dystopian future fictions recount, what *would have happened* if their empirical and implied readerships had not been moved to prevent it. That Orwell knew this may well be a part of his lasting significance. That Williams never quite came to appreciate it must remain a source of regret.

The readings collected here were composed over a period of nearly three decades for a very wide variety of publications, each with their own publishing conventions. I have generally regularized these to the conventions now used by Peter Lang for the Ralahine Utopian Studies series. Some standardization seemed necessary, and it might as well be in accord with the series of which the collection will form a part. This means that the references in the texts are only occasionally exactly the same as in the Williams originals. My version almost invariably provides more information than his: mid-late twentieth century footnoting could often be pretty opaque, Williams's own especially so. Unlike Williams himself, I have clearly distinguished book titles, which are given in italics, from essay and short story titles, which are here given in quotation marks. I have also checked and, where necessary, amended his quotations for their accuracy to the original. These are normally only minor matters of capitalization, italicization, variations between American and British spelling, and so on. Williams wrote before accepted usage required that "he or she" be substituted for the gender-specific, "he," and, in this respect, I have kept to the original usage, since these extracts were a product of their time. Wherever I have substantially changed Williams's original – as in the discussion of Morris in Reading 2 – I have indicated this in the reference.

PART ONE Space Anthropology, Utopia, and Putropia: Left Culturalism

READING I

Science Fiction (1956)

Editor's Introduction

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, Williams addressed himself very directly to the definition of a third position between Leavisism and Marxism, a peculiarly British "left culturalism" combining Leavisite aesthetics with socialist politics. Williams's intellectual and political reputation was established by Culture and Society. As his biographer, Fred Inglis, observed, it became one of the two "sacred texts of" the "new political movement" that was the first British New Left (157). Utopia and dystopia figured prominently in the movement's preoccupations. For the ex-Communist intellectuals associated with The New Reasoner, the key theoretical problem was the legacy of Stalinist Marxism, one possible solution to which was a recovery of older utopian socialist traditions. For E.P. Thompson, the historian whose first major work had been a biography of William Morris, this meant a return to Romanticism, to poetry and to News from Nowhere. For many of the younger radicals intrigued by the new popular culture and appalled by the Cold War and the threat of nuclear warfare, both George Orwell and his great dystopian novel, Nineteen Eighty-Four, seemed to offer a more directly contemporary alternative to Stalinism. As Williams himself would later recall, the "New Left respected Orwell directly, especially in its early years" (*Orwell* 87).

But, at this stage, Williams himself showed little sympathy for either Morris's more explicitly utopian writings or Orwell's more explicitly dystopian. His objections were first aired in a little-known essay Williams published in *The Highway*, the journal of the Workers' Educational Association, in December 1956. The occasion was a critical review of recent sf, entitled simply "Science Fiction." Here, Williams argues that stories of "a secular paradise of the future" had "reached their peak" in Morris, but had thereafter become "almost entirely converted into their opposites: the stories of a future secular hell." Williams prosecutes what might now be termed an "ideological critique" of this recent corruption - literally, the putrefaction - of Morris's earlier utopianism. His immediate targets are three "putropian" novels: Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four, Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, and Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451. Williams distinguishes three main types of contemporary literary sf, termed respectively Putropia, Doomsday, and Space Anthropology. By the first, he means dystopian sf of the kind exemplified by Huxley, Orwell, Bradbury, and Yevgeny Zamyatin; by the second, the kind of fictional catastrophe in which human life itself is extinguished, as in A.E. van Vogt's "Dormant," Philip Latham's "The Xi Effect," John Christopher's "The New Wine," and almost, but not quite, John Wyndham's The Day of the Triffids; by the third, stories "which consciously use the sf formula to find what are essentially new tribes, and new patterns of living."

While cheerfully confessing to an intense dislike of most examples of the first two, Williams adds that even these are interesting "because they belong, directly, to a contemporary structure of feeling." We should note this early use of a concept that would be distinctive to Williams's work and would be theorized at length in The Long Revolution and Marxism and Literature. The particular structure of feeling that concerns him here, which underlies both putropian and doomsday fictions, is that of "the isolated intellectual, and of the 'masses' who are at best brutish, at worst brutal" - in short, the myth of the defence of minority culture against barbarism. The reference to T.S. Eliot is made quite explicitly at one point, that to the Leavises clearly implied. These dystopian fictions are often defended as cautionary tales, Williams concedes, but adds that "they are less warnings about the future" than "about the adequacy of certain types of contemporary feeling." "I believe, for my own part," he continues, "that to think, feel, or even speak of people in terms of 'masses' is to make the burning of the books and the destroying of the cities just that much more possible." As he would soon write in the "personal conclusion" to Culture

and Society: "There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses" (289).

If utopia and dystopia are the socio-political subgenres of sf, as Darko Suvin famously argued (Metamorphoses of Science Fiction 61), then Williams seems to come dangerously close to rejecting a genre in which he had nonetheless shown serious interest. Except that there is still the third sf mode, which inspires his admiration precisely for its capacity to move beyond the then dominant forms of English cultural pessimism. So he found in James Blish's A Case of Conscience - a later version of which would win the 1959 Hugo Award – with its "beautifully imagined tribe" of eight-foot tall, reptilian Lithians, "a work of genuine imagination, and real intelligence." Such preferences - for Blish, as against Huxley and Orwell - might seem uncontroversial to contemporary cultural studies, but they were clearly eccentric to the academic literary criticism of the 1950s. Moreover, Williams's preference was for Blish, not only against Orwell, but also against Morris. For if dystopianism as putropia constituted an important part of the problem, utopianism was not thereby part of the solution. It is precisely the less than utopian plausibility of Blish's human voice "far away, among the galaxies," which Williams finds so interesting. For the young Williams, utopia was about perfection, dystopia about radical imperfection - secular heavens and secular hells - and neither allowed for the distinctively "human" voice present in the best space anthropology.

Science Fiction (1956)

Fiction is a kind of fact, although it takes some people centuries to get used to it. To point out that its substance is imaginary, or fantastic, is no criticism of it, for that is the kind of fact it is: a thing man has thought or imagined, rather than observed or made. In practice we value fiction over a very wide range, from the obviously realistic to the evidently miraculous. When we look, then, at a contemporary phenomenon like sf, we must be careful not to dismiss it because it is fanciful, extravagant, or even impossible, for, on the same limited grounds, we could dismiss *The Odyssey*, *The Tempest*, *Gulliver's Travels*, or *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The facts of sf are fictional, and can only be assessed in literary terms.

Many of us know sf mainly from our children's comics, in which, for example, the inhabitants of the planet Phantos, tall purple bipeds with the heads of cows, led by the Super-Phant Gogol, are invading the planet Cryptos, whose inhabitants are a kind of dun biped sheep. Repulsion guns, aquadetectors, artificial suns, and the suspension of gravity abound. Yet the literary bearings, here, are easy, for the space-gun is just a new kind of tomahawk, and the Super-Phant is our old friend the sheriff of Nottingham. If this were the whole of sf, it would not call for comment.

In fact, in sf written for adults, the Cowboy and Indian, Earthman and Martian type is now quite rare. Wells's War of the Worlds keeps being filmed, under various titles, and with varying degrees of acknowledgment, but, in print, the subjects and emphases are now normally different. Sf has been put to service in almost every kind of traditional story. There are the stories of war and banditry, like War of the Worlds or Mr E.F. Russell's "A Present from Joe." There are stories of adventure and exploration, beginning perhaps with Poe's story of a flight to the Moon, "The Unparalleled Adventure of one Hans Pfaal," and continuing through nearly all the stories of Jules Verne to a recent example like Mr Arthur Porges's "The Ruum." There is at least one ordinary murder story, Mr John Wyndham's "Dumb Martian," which is also a common kind of love story. Men from flying saucers have been used as a contemporary deus ex machina in an otherwise realistic story, such as Mr Henry Kuttner's "Or Else." There are humorous stories, like Mr H. Nearing's "The Cerebrative Psittacoid," and trick stories like Katherine MacLean's interesting "Pictures Don't Lie." Poe wrote a "Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade" using nineteenth-century scientific and technological wonders as a continuation of Sinbad: Scheherazade is strangled, for although the king believes in a sky-blue cow with 400 horns he will not believe in photography or the steamship. Earlier, Mary Shelley, in Frankenstein, had added sf to the Gothic novel, and this horrific strain has been very widely exploited. C.L. Moore's "No Woman