

Raymond Williams

Introductory note

Raymond Williams (1921–88) was one of the first critics to deploy marxist methods of enquiry not only into literary history but also into the workings of culture on society. From his earliest publications, such as *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961), he developed a sensitive awareness of how the term, ‘culture’, could denote not a rarified high art and its appreciation that had been the dominant sense in the late eighteenth century and throughout most of the next, but rather simply a way of life. He realized that this form of investigation would have to show an awareness of deep semantic changes, and, in *Keywords* (1976), he assembled a sociological lexicon of the most crucial terms. In his extended treatment of the field, *Culture* (1981), he promoted a materialist understanding of how holistic an investigation into literature-in-society would have to be. For him, culture was no generalized ‘informing spirit’ that permeated the highest refinement of social organization, but rather a process involving the whole social order, ‘within which a specifiable culture, in styles of art and kinds of intellectual work, is seen as the direct or indirect product of an order primarily constituted by other social activities’ (p. 12). There is here a clear identification of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’, but, unlike in more rudimentary forms of marxist analysis, in which eventually all is a reflection of the economic, Williams lingers to illustrate how capitalism has an immense variety of ideological effects, closely wedded to technological development, but not predictably derived from it. In his *Marxism and Literature* (1977), he rarely considers ‘literature’ as primarily aesthetic; it has, rather, shifting meanings and performs quite alternative functions at different points of economic development.

After a career in Adult Education, Williams returned to Cambridge University (from where he graduated in 1946) in 1961, and eventually became Professor of Drama there from 1974 up to his retirement in 1983. His work on the material modes of dramatic production figure in the vast majority of Drama reading-lists. From *Drama From Ibsen to Eliot* (1952; rev. ed., 1968) to *Modern Tragedy* (1966; rev. ed., 1979) to *Writing in Society* (1983), he was at pains to assess the conditions of viewing a range of theatrical events (as well as how playtexts were produced) against a deep consideration of economic assumptions, ideological and material. He was to call this form of reading as ‘cultural materialism’, and the most succinct demonstration of its consequences can be found in *Marxism and Literature*, where he looked back on his method in *Culture and Society* as too confining, where

cultural history was determined more or less directly by the hidden 'base'; on the contrary, a fuller explanation was to be found in cultural forms and their specific histories. The first coining of 'cultural materialism' is generally taken to be in an essay entitled 'Notes on Marxism in Britain since 1945', first included in the *New Left Review* (100 [1976–77]), and reprinted in Williams's collection of essays, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (1980). The transition from a more basic Marxist analysis involved a vigorous emphasis 'on the production (rather than only on the reproduction) of meanings and values by specific social formations, on the centrality of language and communication as formative social forces, and on the complex interaction both of institutions and forms and of social relationships and formal conventions' (*PiMC*, p. 243).

These extracts from *The Country and the City* (1973) show how in practice cultural forms possess an effective hold on human motivation and awareness. Far from confining his study of the 'country' to pastoral or georgic literary forms, he gestures towards a complex sense of place composed both of memory and also of a specific topographical and economic history. In sifting the reports of this cultural past, the real object of enquiry is less the search for a correct(ed) statistical record than for a sense of past perspectives that once 'made sense'. He believed in his own location, conceptually, materially and geographically, and he is also known for his novels of place: *Border Country* (1960), *The Volunteers* (1978), *Loyalties* (1985) and his last unfinished project, the two-volume *People of the Black Mountains* (1989–90). When questioned on his approach by the editors of the *New Left Review* in 1979, Williams made it clear that one should have a view as to whether particular literary conventions were emancipatory or not, were more or less accurate at any given point in history. If they were constricting and fictional, why? The goal should be a 'crucial evaluative function' that might judge their effects 'from a deliberate and declared position of interest', for whilst these tropes and myths might reflect no actual history at all, they could still be 'positively productive' in furthering certain ideological ends (*Politics and Letters: interviews with New Left Review*, pp. 306–7). 'Place' is thus both materially there and yet also an object of fantasy and projection, is both at a specific stage of economic exploitation and yet also reflects this basic driver with its own history.

Cross-references

- 1 Marx and Engels
- 21 Said
- 33 Jameson
- 37 Spivak
- 41 Buell

Commentary

- Alan O'Connor, *Raymond Williams: writing, culture, politics* (1989)
- J.E.T. Eldridge, *Raymond Williams: making connections* (1994)
- Fred Inglis, *Raymond Williams* (1995)
- Scott Wilson, *Cultural Materialism: theory and practice* (1995), especially pp. 26–52
- Andrew Milner, *Re-Imagining Cultural Studies: the promise of cultural materialism* (2002)

Anil Raina, *Marxism and Literary Value* (2002)

Paul Jones, *Raymond Williams's Sociology of Culture: a critical reconstruction* (2004)

Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: environmental crisis and literary imagination* (2005), especially pp. 13–17, 135–36, 143–44

O'Connor, *Raymond Williams* (2006)

Country and city

'Country' and 'city' are very powerful words, and this is not surprising when we remember how much they seem to stand for in the experience of human communities. In English, 'country' is both a nation and a part of a 'land'; 'the country' can be the whole society or its rural area. In the long history of human settlements, this connection between the land from which directly or indirectly we all get our living and the achievements of human society has been deeply known. And one of these achievements has been the city: the capital, the large town, a distinctive form of civilization.

On the actual settlements, which in the real history have been astonishingly varied, powerful feelings have gathered and have been generalized. On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times.

Yet the real history, throughout, has been astonishingly varied. The 'country way of life' has included the very different practices of hunters, pastoralists, farmers and factory farmers, and its organization has varied from the tribe and the manor to the feudal estate, from the small peasantry and tenant farmers to the rural commune, from the *latifundia*¹ and the plantation to the large capitalist enterprise and the state farm. The city, no less, has been of many kinds: state capital, administrative base, religious centre, market-town, port and mercantile depot, military barracks, industrial concentration. Between the cities of ancient and medieval times and the modern metropolis or conurbation there is a connection of name and in part of function, but nothing like identity. Moreover, in our own world, there is a wide range of settlements between the traditional poles of country and city: suburb, dormitory town, shanty town, industrial estate. Even the idea of the village, which seems simple, shows in actual history a wide variation: as to size and character, and internally in its variation between dispersed and nuclear settlements, in Britain as clearly as anywhere.

In and through these differences, all the same, certain images and associations persist; and it is the purpose of this book to describe and analyse them, to see them in relation to the historically varied experience. For practical reasons I take most of my examples from English writing, though my interests go much wider. It ought in any case to be clear that the English experience is especially significant, in that one of the decisive transformations,

¹ A large agricultural estate throughout the Roman Empire, tended by slaves under an overseer or *vilicus*.

in the relations between country and city, occurred there very early and with a thoroughness which is still in some ways unapproached. The Industrial Revolution not only transformed both city and country; it was based on a highly developed agrarian capitalism, with a very early disappearance of the traditional peasantry. In the imperialist phase of our history the nature of the rural economy, in Britain and in its colonies, was again transformed very early: dependence on a domestic agriculture dwindled to very low proportions, with no more than four per cent of economically active men now engaged in farming, and this in a society which had already become the first predominantly urban-dwelling people in the long history of human settlements. Since much of the dominant subsequent development, indeed the very idea of 'development' in the world generally, has been in these decisive directions, the English experience remains exceptionally important: not only symptomatic but in some ways diagnostic; in its intensity still memorable, whatever may succeed. For it is a critical fact that in and through these transforming experiences English attitudes to the country, and to ideas of rural life, persisted with extraordinary power, so that even after the society was predominantly urban its literature, for a generation, was still predominantly rural; and even in the twentieth century, in an urban and industrial land, forms of the older ideas and experiences still remarkably persist. All this gives the English experience and interpretation of the country and the city a permanent though of course not exclusive importance.

This importance can be stated, and will have to be assessed, as a general problem. But it is as well to say at the outset that this has been for me a personal issue, for as long as I remember. It happened that in a predominantly urban and industrial Britain I was born in a remote village, in a very old settled countryside on the border between England and Wales. Within twenty miles, indeed at the end of a bus route, was in one direction an old cathedral city, in the other an old frontier market town but only a few miles beyond it the first industrial towns and villages of the great coal and steel area of South Wales. Before I had read any descriptions and interpretations of the changes and variations of settlements and ways of life, I saw them on the ground, and working, in unforgettable clarity. In the course of education I moved to another city, built round a university, and since then, living and travelling and working, I have come to visit, and to need to visit, so many great cities, of different kinds, and to look forward and back, in space and time, knowing and seeking to know this relationship, as an experience and as a problem. I have written about it in other ways but also I have been slowly collecting the evidence to write about it explicitly, as a matter of social, literary and intellectual history.

This book is the result, but though it often and necessarily follows impersonal procedures, in description and analysis, there is behind it, all the time, this personal pressure and commitment. And since the relation of country and city is not only an objective problem and history, but has been and still is for many millions of people a direct and intense preoccupation and experience, I feel no need to justify, though it is as well to mention, this personal cause.

Thus at once, for me, before the argument starts, country life has many meanings. It is the elms, the may, the white horse, in the field beyond the window where I am writing. It is the men in the November evening, walking back from pruning, with their hands in the pockets of their khaki coats; and the women in headscarves, outside their cottages, waiting for the blue bus that will take them, inside school hours to work in the harvest. It is the tractor on the road, leaving its tracks of serrated pressed mud; the light in the small hours, in the pig-farm across the road, in the crisis of a litter; the slow brown van met at

the difficult corner, with the crowded sheep jammed to its slatted sides; the heavy smell, on still evenings, of the silage ricks fed with molasses. It is also the sour land, on the thick boulder clay, not far up the road, that is selling for housing, for a speculative development, at twelve thousand pounds an acre.

As I said, I was born in a village, and I still live in a village. But where I was born was under the Black Mountains, on the Welsh border, where the meadows are bright green against the red earth of the ploughland, and the first trees, beyond the window, are oak and holly. Where I live now is in the flat country, on a headland of boulder clay, towards the edge of the dikes and sluices, the black earth of the Fens, under the high East Anglian skies.

That physical contrast is continually present to me, but it is not the only contrast. Within that Black Mountain village, as again here, there is a deep contrast in which so much feeling is held: between what seems an unmediated nature – a physical awareness of trees, birds, the moving shapes of land – and a working agriculture, in which much of the nature is in fact being produced. Both kinds of hedgerow, there on its earthbank, here on the flat or with a lining ditch, together with the oaks and hollies or the elms and thorns that follow their lines, have been seen and planted and tended by men. At the end of the lane by the cottage where I was a child, there is now a straight wide motor road where the lorries race. But the lane also has been set, stoned, driven over: it is a mark on the land of no more than two generations, since a young builder married the daughter of a farmer and was given a corner of a field on which to build their house, and then his workshop with the lane to it, and then neighbouring houses, and then successive workshops converted to new houses; the first workshop was my parents' first home. In the field with the elms and the white horse, behind my own present home, there are faint marks of a ninth-century building, and a foot below the grass there is a cobbled road, that resists the posts being driven, today, for a new wire fence.

This country life then has many meanings: in feeling and activity; in region and in time. The cobbles under the field are older than the university to which the bridletrack leads, five miles under thin thorn hedges, across the open and windy fields, past Starvegoose Wood. The foot of earth over them is a millennium, in one kind of reckoning. But the lane in that Black Mountain village, now so different both from the motor road and from the shaded lane I remember, is recent: about as far back as when my father, at twelve, went to work as a boy on a farm. I have the farmer's reference when he left: the shaky, rounded writing that he was honest and willing; and what he left for was to be a boy porter on the railway: that line of four through the valley, old road, tramroad, new road, railway: the cuttings and embankments moving like foothills; settled and familiar, laid a hundred years ago. When I was born he was a signalman, in the box in the valley: part of a network reaching known named places, Newport and Hereford, and beyond them London, but still a man in the village, with his gardens and his bees, taking produce to market on a bicycle: a different network, but it was a bicycle he went on, to a market where the farmers came in cars and the dealers in lorries: our own century. He had been as much born to the land as his own father, yet, like him, he could not live by it. That man, Joseph, my grandfather, was a farmworker until middle age, when he lost his job and with it his cottage, and became a roadman: cutting and clearing along a length of the road that led away to the Midlands, to other cities. One uncle lived in London; another in Birmingham; we moved, as a family, on visits and holidays, between country and city, in our own direct relationships. We were a dispersed family, along the road, the railway, and now letters and print.

These were the altering communications, the altering connections, between country and city, and between all the intermediate places and communities, the intermediate or temporary jobs and settlements.

So this country life had its meanings, but these changed in themselves and changed in relation to others. In the south-west, at nights, we used to watch the flare, over the black ridge of Brynarw, of the iron furnaces of industrial South Wales. In the east now, at nights, over the field with the elms and the white horse, I watch the glow of Cambridge: a white tinged with orange; and in the autumn here, the stubble fields are burned, sometimes catching the thorn hedges, and when I saw this first at night I took it as strange accidental fire. My own network, from where I sit writing at the window, is to Cambridge and London, and beyond them to the postmark places, the unfamiliar stamps and the distant cities: Rome, Moscow, New York.

The lights of the city. I go out in the dark, before bed, and look at that glow in the sky: a look at the city while remembering Hardy's Jude,² who stood and looked at the distant, attainable and unattainable, Christminster. Or I remember Wordsworth, coming from high country to London, and saying from Westminster Bridge:³

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This city now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

It is true that this was the city before the rush and noise of the working day, but the pulse of the recognition is still unmistakable, and I know that I have felt it again and again: the great buildings of civilization; the meeting-places; the libraries and theatres, the towers and domes; and often more moving than these, the houses, the streets, the press and excitement of so many people, with so many purposes. I have stood in many cities and felt this pulse: in the physical differences of Stockholm and Florence, Paris and Milan: this identifiable and moving quality: the centre, the activity, the light. Like everyone else I have felt also the chaos of the metro and the traffic jam; the monotony of the ranks of houses; the aching press of strange crowds. But this is not an experience at all, not an adult experience, until it has come to include also the dynamic movement, in these centres of settled and often magnificent achievement. H.G. Wells⁴ once said, coming out of a political meeting where they had been discussing social change, that this great towering city was a

² In Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Jude Fawley, a mere labourer, strives to enter the University at Christminster and fails.

³ 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' (1807).

⁴ We have been unable to trace the exact source for this sentiment, but it is consistent with a strong distrust of totalitarian, urban, power that Wells (1866–1946) introduced into his prose (see his *The Discovery of the Future* [1902], *Mankind in the Making* [1903] and *The Shape of Things to Come* [1933]) and his fiction (see especially the need to re-build with a more humane technology after *The War of the Worlds* [1898] and the acerbic commentary on both Ponderevo's social-climbing and the cold heedlessness of the country gentry at Bladesover House in *Tono-Bungay* [1909]).

measure of the obstacle, of how much must be moved if there was to be any change. I have known this feeling, looking up at great buildings that are the centres of power, but I find I do not say, 'There is your city, your great bourgeois monument, your towering structure of this still precarious civilization', or I do not only say that; I say also, 'This is what men have built, so often magnificently, and is not everything then possible?' Indeed this sense of possibility, of meeting and of movement, is a permanent element of my sense of cities: as permanent a feeling as those other feelings, when I look from the mountain at the great coloured patchwork of fields that generations of my own people have cleared and set in hedges; or the known living places, the isolated farms, the cluster of cottages by castle or church, the line of river and wood and footpath and lane; lines received and lines made. So that while country and city have this profound importance, in their differing ways, my feelings are held, before any argument starts.

But then also, specifically, I came from a village to a city: to be taught, to learn: to submit personal facts, the incidents of a family, to a total record; to learn evidence and connection and altering perspectives. If the walls of the colleges were like the walls of parks, that as children we had walked round, unable to enter, yet now there was a gate, an entry, and a library at the end of it: a direct record, if I could learn to read it. It is ironic to remember that it was only after I came that I heard, from townsmen, academics, an influential version of what country life, country literature, really meant: a prepared and persuasive cultural history. I read related things still, in academic books and in books by men who left private schools to go farming, and by others who grew up in villages and are now country writers: a whole set of books, periodicals, notes in the newspapers: country life. And I find I keep asking the same question, because of the history: where do I stand in relation to these writers: in another country or in this valuing city? That problem is sharp and ironic in its cultural persistence.

But there was more to Cambridge than that. An ambivalence certainly: a university of scholars and teachers but also of coaches and placemen, on their way to higher places; a world of men extending human knowledge and bringing light to nature and to the lives of others; a world of other men contracted in sympathy, telling their qualifying paradigms inside the walls, in an idle and arrogant observation and consumption. The university, to my family, had been equally foreign, whether it was Cambridge or Bologna. But there was also the Cambridge of Stourbridge Fair, once the leading market of the country: 'the prodigious resort of the trading people of all parts of England' as Defoe described it in the 1720s;⁵ 'a prodigious complex of people' and also a model, to Bunyan, for Vanity Fair. When I returned much later, as a Fellow of a College, I found I was by virtue or default of an intellectual appointment an aspect, an unwilling member, of a collective and perpetual landlord, and I was asked, politely, to attend tenants' lunches, which I could never stomach. I remembered Arthur Young⁶ on the University of Cambridge:

its revenue £16000 a year and for 1s 6d a member can sit down to a dinner such as a gentleman with £1000 a year cannot often give with prudence.

Defoe had followed one road out:

⁵ In his *Tour Through Great Britain* (1724, 1726).

⁶ In his *Annals of Architecture* (1st ed., 1784).

on the edge of the Fens, to Huntingdon, where it joins the great north road; on this side it is all an agreeable corn country, as above, adorned with several seats of gentlemen.

Young, in 1791, had followed another:

Taking the road from Cambridge to St Neot's, view six or seven miles of the worst husbandry, I hope, in Great Britain . . . There seems somewhat of a coincidence between the state of cultivation within sight of the venerable spires of Cambridge and the utter neglect of agriculture in the establishment of that University.

That is the road I now drive on, coming home from the university. The fields are well farmed now. But in the next village west, Cobbett saw, in 1822, something

which very much resembles almost a village of the same size in Picardy, where I saw the women dragging harrows to harrow in the corn. Certainly this village resembles nothing English except some of the rascally rotten boroughs in Cornwall and Devonshire, on which a just Providence seems to have entailed its curse. The land just about here does seem to be really bad. The face of the country is naked. The few scrubbed trees that now and then meet the eye, and even the quick-sets are covered with a yellow moss. All is bleak and comfortless; and, just on the most dreary part of this most dreary scene, stands almost opportunely, 'Caxton Gibbet', tendering its one friendly arm to the passers-by. It has recently been fresh-painted, and written on in conspicuous characters, for the benefit, I suppose, of those who cannot exist under the thought of wheat at four shillings a bushel.

That, too, is different now, but whenever I consider the relations between country and city, and between birth and learning, I find this history active and continuous: the relations are not only of ideas and experiences, but of rent and interest, of situation and power; a wider system.

This then is where I am, and as I settle to work I find I have to resolve, step by slow step, experiences and questions that once moved like light. The life of country and city is moving and present: moving in time, through the history of a family and a people; moving in feeling and ideas, through a network of relationships and decisions.

A dog is barking – that chained bark – behind the asbestos barn. It is now and then: here and many places. When there are questions to put, I have to push back my chair, look down at my papers, and feel the change.

A problem of perspective

The initial problem is one of perspective. A few years ago I was sent a book for review; a country book, in a familiar idiom, that I would normally have enjoyed reading. But there in front of the experience was a formula:

A way of life that has come down to us from the days of Virgil has suddenly ended.

In detail, certainly, this was curious. From Virgil? Here? A way of country life?

But in outline, of course, the position was familiar. As it is put in a memorable sentence, in the same book:

A whole culture that had preserved its continuity from earliest times had now received its quietus.

It had happened, it seemed, in the last fifty years: say since the First World War. But this raised a problem. I remembered a sentence in a critically influential book: Leavis and Thompson's *Culture and Environment*, published in 1932. The 'organic community' of 'Old England' had disappeared; 'the change is very recent indeed'. This view was primarily based on the books of George Sturt, which appeared between 1907 and 1923. In *Change in the Village*, published in 1911, Sturt wrote of the rural England 'that is dying out now'. Just back, we can see, over the last hill.

But then what seemed like an escalator began to move. Sturt traced this ending to two periods: enclosure after 1861 and residential settlement after 1900. Yet this at once takes us into the period of Thomas Hardy's novels, written between 1871 and 1896 and referring back to rural England since the 1830s. And had not critics insisted that it was here, in Hardy, that we found the record of the great climacteric change in rural life: the disturbance and destruction of what one writer has called the 'timeless rhythm of agriculture and the seasons'? And that was also the period of Richard Jefferies,⁷ looking back from the 1870s to the 'old Hodge', and saying that there had been more change in rural England in the previous half-century – that is, since the 1820s – than in any previous time. And wasn't George Eliot, in *Mill on the Floss* (1860) and in *Felix Holt* (1866), looking back, similarly, to the old rural England of the 1820s and early 1830s?

But now the escalator was moving without pause. For the 1820s and 1830s were the last years of Cobbett, directly in touch with the rural England of his time but looking back to the happier country, the old England of his boyhood, during the 1770s and 1780s. Thomas Bewick, in his *Memoir*, written during the 1820s, was recalling the happier village of his own boyhood, in the 1770s. The decisive change, both men argued, had happened during their lifetimes. John Clare, in 1809, was also looking back –

Oh, happy Eden of those golden years⁸

– to what seems, on internal evidence, to be the 1790s, though he wrote also, in another retrospect on a vanishing rural order, of the 'far-fled pasture, long evanish'd scene'.

Yet still the escalator moved. For the years of Cobbett's and of Bewick's boyhood were the years of Crabbe's *The Village* (1783):

No longer truth, though shown in verse, disdain,
But own the Village Life a life of pain

and of Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1769):

E'en now, methinks, as pondering here I stand
I see the rural virtues leave the land.

And by ordinary arithmetic, in the memory of Sweet Auburn –

loveliest village of the plain,
Where health and plenty cheer'd the labouring swain,

⁷ In works such as *Wood Magic* (1881), *Bevis* (1882) and *Life of the Fields* (1884).

⁸ Line 163 of 'Whetstone', from *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenes* (pub. 1820).

Where smiling spring its earliest visit paid,
 And parting summer's lingering blooms delay'd;
 Dear lovely bowers of innocence and ease,
 Seats of my youth, when every sport could please

– back we would go again, over the next hill, to the 1750s.

It is clear, of course, as this journey in time is taken, that something more than ordinary arithmetic and something more, evidently, than ordinary history, is in question. Against sentimental and intellectualized accounts of an unlocalized 'Old England', we need, evidently, the sharpest scepticism. But some at least of these witnesses were writing from direct experience. What we have to inquire into is not, in these cases, historical error, but historical perspective. Indeed the fact of what I have called the escalator may be an important clue to the real history, but only when we begin to see the regularity of its pattern.

It is worth, perhaps, getting on the escalator again, since all we have done so far is to move 'Old England' and its timeless agricultural rhythms back from the early twentieth century to the middle of the eighteenth century. When we remember 'our mature, settled eighteenth century', we may not, after all, have made very much difference to the ordinary accounts. Shall we then go back to Philip Massinger, in the early 1620s, in *The City Madam* and *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*? Here the new commercialism is breaking the old landed settlement and its virtues. Here is the enclosing and engrossing Sir Giles Overreach. Here is the corruption of an older rural civilization:

Your father was
 An honest country farmer, goodman Humble,
 By his neighbours ne'er called Master. Did your pride
 Descend from him?⁹

We can't say, but we can go on back to Bastard's *Chrestoleros*, in 1598, where the same complaints are being made, or, if we are asked to assume that the disturbance occurred at the turn of the century, to Thomas More's *Utopia*, in 1516, where another old order is being destroyed:

For looke in what partes of the realme doth growe the fynest and therfore dearest woll, there noblemen and gentlemen, yea and certeyn abbottes, holy men no doubt, not contenting them selves with the yearely revenues and profytes, that were wont to grow to theyr forefathers and predecessours of their landes, nor beyng content that they live in rest and pleasure nothinge profiting, yea much noyng the weale publique, leave no ground for tillage, thei inclose all into pastures; thei throw doune houses; they plucke downe townes, and leave nothing standynge, but only the churche to be made a shepeshouse. And as though you lost no small quantity of grounds by forestes, chases, laundes and parkes, those good holy men turne all dwellinge places and all glebeland into desolation and wildernes.

⁹ Overreach is the unscrupulous monster from *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (1633) by Philip Massinger (1583–1640), who tries to humble his nephew, Frank Welborne by gulling him of his rightful property. The quote is from Massinger's *The City Madam* (1632), when Luke satirises Lady Rich's pretensions to breeding (IV.iv., p. 63).

Except that then, of course, we find ourselves referred back to the settled Middle Ages, an organic society if ever there was one. To the 1370s, for example, when Langland's *Piers Plowman* sees the dissatisfaction of the labourers, who will not eat yesterday's vegetables but must have fresh meat, who blame God and curse the King, but who used not to complain when Hunger made the Statutes. Must we go beyond the Black Death to the beginning of the Game Laws, or to the time of Magna Carta, when Innocent III writes:

the serf serves; terrified with threats, wearied by corvees, afflicted with blows, despoiled of his possessions?

Or shall we find the timeless rhythm in Domesday, when four men out of five are villeins, bordars, cotters or slaves? Or in a free Saxon world before what was later seen as the Norman rape and yoke? In a Celtic world, before the Saxons came up the rivers? In an Iberian world, before the Celts came, with their gilded barbarism? Where indeed shall we go, before the escalator stops?

One answer, of course, is Eden, and we shall have to look at that well-remembered garden again. But first we must get off the escalator, and consider its general movement.

Is it anything more than a well-known habit of using the past, the 'good old days', as a stick to beat the present? It is clearly something of that, but there are still difficulties. The apparent resting places, the successive Old Englands to which we are confidently referred but which then start to move and recede, have some actual significance, when they are looked at in their own terms. Of course we notice their location in the childhoods of their authors, and this must be relevant. Nostalgia, it can be said, is universal and persistent; only other men's nostalgias offend. A memory of childhood can be said persuasively, to have some permanent significance. But again, what seemed a single escalator, a perpetual recession into history, turns out, on reflection, to be a more complicated movement: Old England, settlement, the rural virtues – all these, in fact, mean different things at different times, and quite different values are being brought to question. We shall need precise analysis of each kind of retrospect, as it comes. We shall see successive stages of the criticism which the retrospect supports: religious, humanist, political, cultural. Each of these stages is worth examination in itself. And then, within each of these questions, but returning us finally to a formidable and central question, there is a different consideration.

The witnesses we have summoned raise questions of historical fact and perspective, but they raise questions, also, of literary fact and perspective. The things they are saying are not all in the same mode. They range, as facts, from a speech in a play and a passage in a novel to an argument in an essay and a note in a journal. When the facts are poems, they are also, and perhaps crucially, poems of different kinds. We can only analyse these important structures of feeling if we make, from the beginning, these critical discriminations. And then the first problem of definition, a persistent problem of form, is the question of pastoral, of what is known as pastoral.