IN THE MONKEY-HOUSE

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THERE IS AN ADAGE OF THOMAS HARDY'S that Henry Williamson was fond of quoting: "If a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst", and that seems as appropriate a place as any from which to begin a piece on Williamson's fascism. It is no longer of any real use, if it ever was, simply to ignore his politics in the hope that they'll go away, or in the belief that we, as readers, are somehow exempt from facing, in any honest way, the effects of those politics on the writing. As members of the Henry Williamson Society we have, I feel, a double duty to confront the issues. Not only will it serve Williamson better if we, at least, are honest about those aspects of his character and thinking which we may find distasteful, but it will also help us, as readers, if we can try to face another difficult question: how was it that a writer who could be so compassionate, so sensitive, so generous in so many ways, could actively and knowingly align himself with a movement like the British Union of Fascists, and could openly declare his admiration for Hitler? Put at its most basic, I as a reader have a problem: I admire some of Williamson's writings immensely; of the handful of people who have shaped my own life in ways that I can identify, he is one of the dominant influences, and was enacted first not by personal contact but through the words he chose. And yet, at the same time, I could never tolerate fascism in any of its forms, nor understand how it is possible genuinely to advocate and excuse it. There's the problem; and I feel it could only be solved, if it can be solved at all, by looking closely at the texts and at the life which fed them, by trying to identify those cruxes where the writing shades into political thought, and where the ideas feed into, and feed upon, a political view of the world. From such passages of interaction, possibly, one could just hint at the complexity and the paradoxes, the contradictions, and where they leave us as readers.

Perhaps, then, it is possible to get at these contradictions by citing two brief passages from *The Golden Virgin*, the finest novel, I believe, that Williamson wrote. Near its end we find this scene, in which Phillip attends the burial of the German aviators whose bombs have killed Lily Cornford:

> *The blue sky was as gentle as the eyes of Lily. She and her mother were being buried that afternoon. She would understand why he had come to this funeral of the unloved...*
>
> *The six R.F.C. officers carried the coffin of the commander to the pit beside the other coffins around the mass grave. Was God, during the service, looking down sadly upon the scene? Now the Vicar was saying, 'I am the Resurrection and the Life', but when he came to the 'our dear departed brothers' he changed it to 'these men here departed'. Dear departed brothers, thought Phillip, while it seemed that the eyes of Lily were regarding him steadfastly.* (447)

This is a powerful passage, and its power comes not so much from the near-sentimentality of the actual scene itself as from the way the whole structure of the novel can be seen to reinforce it. We have seen Phillip's stature increasing throughout, and have been made able to relate that growth to the experiences of love and comradeship and the resulting growth of his courage, courage which finally enables him to make, in a way that we feel to be genuine, such a double sacrifice as is entailed in this funeral. Double because it obliges him to miss Lily's funeral, but more importantly because it asks him to forgo all possible ideas of revenge or hatred which his family, his whole society, would condone and encourage. Phillip stands out here, above the limiting moral precepts of the time which have produced him, and above the amoral and destructive life of 1916 which the fiction has so ably recreated. But then, compare this passage from the same novel, a scene in the 'Monkey House' coffee bar just before a Zeppelin raid:

> *The vast carpeted room with its marble pillars and mirrors and chocolate-gilt decorations seemed to be filled more than before with full-lipped dark-haired people in family parties with eyes like black grapes gazing at ease among figures in khaki... Phillip was...looking upon the scene...when a fat young man wearing Homburg hat on his head, a smart new overcoat with astrakhan collar, and pointed yellow boots pushed past to a family party near them, and beckoning with a fat hand on which many rings showed, said something which made them all get up and walk away together. Other dark-eyed groups followed the general exodus, until khaki uniformed figures here and there with their womenfolk became prominent.*
>
> *"See how they run," said Gene. "There's absolute panic in the Whitechapel Road when a Zepp is anywhere near. Here in Piccadilly the wealthier ones are the first to get down into the Underground. They ride round the Inner Circle on a penny ticket until the raid is over..."* (429)

This is an insidious, nasty little piece of prose, not least because it tries to make its points in a covert way. It rests on the assumption, very much alive today, that there's no need to name the racial group you are attacking; you can, instead, draw on the stereotypes, the shared assumptions we have all learned about, in this case, Jews. Notice how the points are made, as it were, in passing; the Jews are all well dressed, but in a stagey, 'flashy' way that echoes the cheap prejudices of the Edwardian music-hall joke. The rings are pointed out, the newness of the clothes thrown in in passing. The physical characteristics are given in a kind of dissembling shorthand. Then, of course, there are the underlying points, the political points aimed at the reader. The Jews are not only war profiteers (different, of course, from a farmer in the second world war accepting enhanced prices for his scarce grain), but they are also cowards. They run away first, pointedly isolating the serving soldiers and their women. The attribution to Whitechapel Road, of course, further emphasises the stereotyping and the evasiveness, and, perhaps nastiest of all, we are reminded that not only are Jews naturally cowardly, they are, just as naturally, mean: the reference to the 'penny ticket' is given almost, but not quite, gratuitously.

This isn't just a piece of bad thinking, it's bad writing, bad because Williamson is failing to do what we have every right to expect authors to do for us - to tell the truth: not just the truth as they see it or would like it to be, but the truth as it is; and if they can't see it as it is, then they should have the courage, and the respect for their readers, to say so, to air their petty prejudices and perhaps try to discover their origins and overcome them. And if anyone doubts that this passage is a distortion of the truth, then let them look, as I have, at the Tyne Cot cemetery above Passchendaele, or at any Great War cemetery. There, interspersed with the crosses on the headstones of 'Christian' soldiers, they will find many others set with the Star of David, over the graves of dead Jewish soldiers. Those graves deserve, at least, a mention. The poems of Isaac Rosenberg deserve, at least, a place in our mind when we read passages like this one of Williamson's. The Jews who die fighting in the Warsaw ghetto deserve, from all of us, an awareness that the cheaper tricks of literature cannot go by unquestioned. If they they are allowed to, I guess, then we are all in deep trouble.

But there's the problem. Is it just the case that, for Williamson, the compassion and the self-abnegation one can learn, with luck, from experiences like those of 1916 can be applied only to non-Jews? That Jews, or presumably any race but one's own, are somehow exempt from understanding or care? That they deserve less than the truth? I doubt it. Or is it just the old *canard* of the Christmas 'Truce' awakening itself again, suggesting a 'natural friendship between British and German soldiers or aviators, but absolutely none for Jewish soldiers? I hope not, but that is how it appears, and so perhaps it's time to look at the politics that underlie such strange, deathly divisions between people and people. Deathly not just in terms of what it leads to - although that's the most important - but deathly too, at times, for Williamson as a writer; the Phillip he describes in the funeral scene of *The Golden Virgin* is able to stand out from, and above, the ordinary life around him and, by implication, the author is too. But then the author of that other scene is, most surely, buried deeply in exactly those things from which Phillip is shown to have escaped: the arrogance, self-deceit, cowardice and frequent brutality that grow from blind prejudice.

There is, first of all, a problem of definition, and in a time when a zealous traffic-warden is liable to be called a 'fascist', perhaps it's useful to clear the ground a little and decide what we mean by fascism. Despite the strange absence of any universally accepted ideology, it is nevertheless possible to list some characteristics of fascism which, generally, unify all of its different manifestations. It is, first of all, an ideology hostile to democracy, demanding in its place the rule by a self-identified elite, authoritarian grouping recognisable by its 'dynamism'. As William Joyce puts it in *Dictatorship* in 1933: "Fascism in its very essence cannot conceive of the sovereignty as resident in the people". Fascism is always opposed to socialism and, of course, communism. It is ultra-nationalist, and therefore sees every activity as subservient to the interests of a corporate, fully integrated, state; in the British case, a state within an Empire whose production is geared towards, and mobilised for, the welfare of the governing state. Fascism is also, though this was initially less true in Italy, bound up with theories of

racial 'purity', after which economic and political rationales are often cited in support of the theory. Mosley, for example, attempted to justify the attacks of his party on Jews because they, for him, had attempted to establish themselves as a subversive 'state within a state', and because they were supposed to belong to an 'internationalist' conspiracy which would undermine the integrity of nation states. A further common feature is the way in which fascism presents itself as a 'new spirit', a 'new idea', as the harbinger of a 'new age' and a 'new order'. There is much emphasis on novelties, but they are always bound up in complex ways with the nostalgic hankering after quite ancient systems; witness Mussolini's seminal disinterment of the fasces, Hitler's references to the pre-Christian, Nordic state, or much harking back, more generally, to a social system resting on strict conceptions on blood-based hierarchy. And yet another common feature is the emphasis laid on violence, the raising of violence to the level of a cult, partly as the symbol of the 'new' virility, partly as an end in itself. One other common characteristic of fascism which is less often emphasised, but which seems to me crucially important for its relevance to Williamson, is that it is always the product of failure, the failure of democratic societies, the failure of individual lives and the fear which it enhances. Marxists have tried to show that fascism is impossible without failure, that it is like the putrid fungus that grows on a decaying body political, the inevitable product of capitalism's collapse. Perhaps that view is extreme; nevertheless, Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, like Italy in the same period, bear out and suggest the conclusion, as do, perhaps, the political polarisations we see in our own merry world. I have said that this aspect of fascism is especially relevant to Williamson's case, and I would like to explain what I mean by that, not just because it is one way of getting nearer to that area of interaction,between his writing and his political thinking, but also because it lets us start at the beginning, in the period when those political ideas first seemed to germinate.

An early, direct expression of those ideas can be found in the notorious 'Foreword' to the one-volume 1936 edition of *The Flax of Dream.* There we are told that

> *the vision of a new world, dreamed by many young soldiers in the trenches and shell craters of the World War, is being made real in one European nation at least.* (p.7)

Which nation that might be is made clear in the following sentence:

> *I salute the great man across the Rhine, whose life symbol is the happy child.* (p.7)

There is no need to linger on the horrible irony of this. It seems now so much like a bad joke, something in a Brechtian comedy, that it is hard to believe that Williamson meant it. We can forgive him, I suppose, for not knowing what we know, and even for not working out, as so many of his contemporaries did, what the 'life' symbol really stood for. We can even forgive him for not guessing himself a year later, when the Spanish Civil War (a minor event, incidentally, which never appears in

any of his writings) was making it fully plain even to the British Foreign Office, usually the last to know. But it gets harder to forgive him, or his would-be apologists, for perpetuating the same 'life-symbol' myth on into the 1950s or '60s, let alone the '70s and '80s. But let's ask instead what might have lain behind the statement in the first place, what inspired the literary Nazi salute in 1936. The answer is complex, and it asks us to spend a little time looking back at Williamson's writing career in the period of the 1930s.

Here is a sentence from *The Sun in the Sands*, written in 1934:

> *Very secretly within myself I thought that evolution had, in me, chosen to make a leap forward: that the ideas that burned in me had never been expressed in the world before.* (p.19-20)

We can join in Williamson's own half-smile at himself here, a note of self-parody stressed a little earlier in the same passage when the young author had expected 'flashes as of lightning, ectoplasmic sparks dancing about the room (p.19) as he entered a literary soirée. But this self-parody, this adult vision of youthful self-deceit, is curiously mixed, in this book and others, with a note of deadly self-seriousness. For example:

> *To me everything was plain, and the spiritual force or life of the world was denied everywhere... Jefferies was of the Christ-thought, which was as light within sunlight; and in spirit I was with them, and the other poets, the lightbringers.* (p.45)

This, again, is followed by an attempt at balance, but a half-hearted one that doesn't really tackle the amazing conceit. With only *The Sun in the Sands* to go on, we would probably conclude that this messianic self-conception, this belief in ideas worked out and developed to infinitely greater degrees by Williamson's predecessors, were curious, but fairly minor parts of his make-up. But the weight of evidence from this period tends the other way. If we look at *The Pathway*, *The Dream of Fair Women*, *The Star-born*, *The Gold Falcon*, *Goodbye West Country* and, later, *The Phasian Bird*, we would find much there to suggest that Williamson really did believe himself to be a Messiah, or at the very least the prophet-philosopher of nature with new and radical truths to offer the world. *The Pathway* is proto-typical. As John Middleton Murry pointed out, its form and theme are repeated in the next two novels Williamson wrote, as they are also in *The Star-born*. The common pattern is of a 'lightbringer' or 'poet', a man with an enhanced understanding given by contact with nature, who can, if attended to, revolutionise and improve that world, prevent wars, free the imagination and expose the conventional fallacies of conventional thought. But the prophet is not followed; he is ignored, despised and eventually killed in accidents which are, nevertheless, indirect products of others' misunderstandings of him.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Williamson's invention of this hero-type was a personal response to his own situation in these years. If he really believed, as the evidence from this period certain-

ly suggests he did, that he had a revolutionary message of natural-truth for the world, then by 1928 things must have begun to grow uncomfortable for him. He must have felt disappointed with the response he was getting. The first three volumes of *The Flax* had sold very badly, for one who wanted to change the world, it must have been difficult to find his own personal life intractably difficult to manage, and also to find that the success of *Tarka*, while giving him financial security had, in the process, marked him down as a kind of writer he didn't really wish to be. His response to all this in *The Pathway*, and in much writing before 1951, was not to try to modify his ideas or his self-conception, but rather to align himself with certain other 'prophets' who shared a common characteristic. Most of them are arrayed for us, together, in one passage in *The Pathway*, where Maddison climbs, like Jefferies, to the summit of some hill, there to receive a vision:

> *Now Shelley was in the wind and the grasses of the hedge with him, and Jefferies free of the world's negation, and Blake, and Thompson, and Jesus of Nazareth, and his shoulders were wide as the hills, and his spirit strong as the sea, for they said as they moved beside him, We are with you evermore, for you are of us!... He breathed deeply , and with the outward breath released himself into the light, wan and pure, of all-knowing. He felt himself of the everlasting life and light of the world.* (p.1357-8)

Well, Willie Maddison certainly kept good company in such moments, and there is no doubt that we are meant to take it seriously. But what is the significance of Maddison's chosen peers here? It isn't chance that brings together so diverse a pantheon as this; they are assembled to encourage Williamson's hero, I believe, because they were all men who were in various ways rejected or scorned during their lifetime, whose sensibilities led them not to worldly success or even happiness, but to misunderstanding, to the 'world's negation' and, in most cases, to early death. The consolation they offer this autobiographical hero, the consolation Williamson has worked out for himself in his fiction, is that worth *was* eventually recognised, and the unrepentant world thus exposed.

There is, of course, always a danger in too closely equating an author and his fiction, of assuming that they are one and the same in important respects. It is a danger especially real with Williamson's writings, but I would still suggest that the characters and fate of the heroes of these works of the 1920s and 1930s have much to tell us about Williamson, and that, in the case of *The Pathway*, the publication, and then re-publication, of *The Star-born*, both times with the half-serious fiction that it had been written by Willie Maddison, confirm that Williamson and his literary soirée can be seen, at least from the point of view of their 'philosophical' aims, as one and the same.

The Star-born, really, is what gives the whole game away. It was a colossal mistake ever to publish it, because it is supposed to contain that crucial message for the unregenerate world that the Williamson/Maddison figure based so much on. It is where we have to look for evi-

dence to support those claims of Messianic powers, of a new pathway for the modern world. When we do, we will be disappointed. The idea that there are truths in nature which, when applied to the human world, will improve it, is not new, and it still has some currency. But its Romantic originators took it much, much further than Williamson ever did; saw its problems and its traps, and never tried to suggest that contact with the natural world was any kind of panacea for all human ills. The Romantic attitude to nature, an attitude Williamson picked up third-hand from Francis Thompson's version of Shelley's version of it, has its interest and its lessons, but it doesn't have the answer to all human problems. Result, Maddison has to die. If he'd been left alive, as Williamson was, we could ask, as we can when we read *The Star-born*, why the world looks very much like the same place.

I have dwelt on the messianic self-conception of Williamson's and the ideas on which it seems to have been based, because it seems to me important, if not essential, to an adequate understanding of his political thought. For one who sets out on a writing career convinced that he has a revolutionary message for his society, a conviction that amounts at times almost to messianism, the obvious failure of that message must leave a vacuum, a troubling self-doubt that has to be stilled in some way. The true way of stilling it, but by far the most difficult way, is some attempt to re-examine self; to trace the origins of that self-image and to correct it through an honest confrontation with those factors that have produced it. Williamson was able to do exactly that, and the first novels of the *Chronicle* bear witness to his eventual courage and self-understanding. But that was a long way ahead, and in the meantime Williamson took what I feel to be an easier and quite unsatisfactory course. I have already mentioned that the pattern and governing idea of *The Pathway* was simply to repeat itself, stagnantly, in the next two novels Williamson wrote. It manifested itself also in the increasingly overt political statements of the 1930s and '40s, where we can clearly see the way in which the old 'revolutionary' message of the novels shaded into thoughts about political action. Here, for example, is a passage from *The Children of Shallowford* of 1939. It ostensibly describes '17th-18th February, 1926', but the evidence of the later gloss, the re-interpretation of former feelings, is clear:

> *I knew that the haphazard economic structure was the cause of pale faces, bad teeth, fearful men and women, wars between European nations... My experiences as a journalist had shown me that Communism was not the way I desired; it was too restricted, too narrow in its class-consciousness; I wanted a national regeneration of all classes, with natural leaders of a classless state. But first the idea must be put into men's minds... ...in the beginning was the Word.*
>
> *Such were my thoughts as I lay sleepless in bed. Nothing unusual in them; for years they had been my life's dominant.*
> (p.34-35)

That this *is* a gloss on earlier ideas is evident in any comparison. In the early novels there is no evidence of this kind in political feeling, no desire to declassify society or discover the 'natural' leader.

In *The Pathway*, 1928 edition, Lenin is even described as 'a keen flame of heaven to purify mankind' (p.348), although he was, of course, purged from the later version.

There is, however, one important continuity between the earlier passages and the later. The ideas of 'national regeneration', of 'a new order', 'a new world' do sound very much like the Williamson/Maddison voice of the '20s, but by now, by 1939, they have coincided for Williamson with the polemics of fascism. And yet there is more than just a coincidence of slogans. *The Children of Shallowford* is, in its own way, another chronicle of failure. Not just of the apparent near-failure of a marriage, but, crucially, of Williamson's intention to write that revolutionary work he had, by then, envisaged and longed for for twenty years. Instead of changing the world, he was being forced back into himself, writing of his family, of the minutiae of his surroundings, of the tiny details of an everyday life that, though often pleasant and amusing, are very far indeed from fulfilling the programme he had set for himself. *The Children of Shallowford* marks another failure too, the failure of courage. The self-review Williamson needed to make was difficult; it must have seemed, in those fag-end years of the '30s, impossible, but it seems to me that it was the only way in which he could have sorted out this increasing fixation with self, this continuing retreat into fantasy and evasion, productive only of irritablility, self-aggrandisement and inertia.

I believe that Williamson's admiration for Oswald Mosley was itself a kind of evasion. Certainly there are apparently 'reasonable' justifications for it, links of thought rather than feeling. The kind of 'suburban prejudice' of which Ezra Pound was to accuse himself, the petty meanness of anti-seminism bred in a suspicious, lower-middle class enclave of south London, coincided well with Mosley's ideologies. So too did the lower-middle-class romanticism which dogs so much of Williamson's work, the picture of writer-as-hero, striving alone against the encroaching tide of urban spoliation. It is interesting to note just how far a certain kind of rural nostalgia flavours fascist writings in all countries, a hankering for a squirearchy, a paternalistic, but strictly controlled, hierarchy that owes more to town-dwellers' fantasies about rural life than to the reality. And there is, of course, the pacifist angle, another apparently rational draw towards fascism for Williamson. How understandable it is that anyone who had been through the Great War should have seized on any chance to prevent its recurrence, but then how strange that fascism, of all things, should be mistaken for that chance. Perhaps, again, we could stretch a point and forgive Williamson for that folly in the 1930s,but how could we defend, say, a novel like *The Phoenix Generation*, published in 1965, which attempts to justify and extol an old, completely exposed vision?

> *Birkin might have been limping out of the First Battle of Ypres in 1914 with a spiritual translation of all that horror and chaos into clarity and order, he thought...* (p.139)

This, and many other similar passages in both this novel and the journal from which it is barely adapted, *Goodbye West Country*, advance ideas

that seem to me to be simply terrible. What kind of 'order and clarity', after all, does Birkin represent? How does he really translate the horror of the war into anything but more horror, and horror of a far worse kind. Apologists for British fascism have pointed to its dynamic economic policies, its plans to employ the unemployed in schemes of road and house building that would have changed the face of Britain. But would that resurgence really have been possible, or worthwhile? Would all of the Bauhaus-inspired, pine disinfectant-scented houses in the world have compensated in any way for what could only have been a loss of all national integrity? I have heard it argued that British fascism, the home-grown variety, would somehow have been more decent, more gentlemanly than its foreign models, but there is no evidence for that at all. Perhaps it is just our own sensitiveness that prevents us from acknowledging that, as they did in Vichy France, Nazi sympathisers in Britain would have had no qualms in exacting full-scale Nazi policies here. Certainly, the evidence of the East End streets in the 1930s, and in the 1980s, offers little hope for great racial tolerance. Nor do Mosley's speeches, nor Williamson's echoes of them, suggest that fair-play would have intervened. Those in doubt, please re-read the Monkey House scene, above.

The ideas are terrible, too, because they so soon became the very antithesis of the pacifism and natural harmony which Williamson did, I think, genuinely want. After 1930 the massive re-armament programmes in Germany, the purges, the building of Dachau and its derivatives, Nazi intervention in the Spanish Civil War, in the Rhineland and Sudetenland, all were there as clear evidence for anyone who would look and listen. So obvious is it, and it was obvious to many people in Britain in the 1930s, that Nazism and its clones were utterly contradictory to pacifism, to the continued life of 'the happy child', that we are left with two choices. Either we believe Williamson simply saw what he wanted to see, to believe what suited him, or we say he was fooling himself and trying to fool others with his talk of a 'new order'. The disparity between the facts and the authorial presentation of them is often so wide, so nonsensical, that it eventually becomes useless to speculate, and valid only to ask how those elements of Williamson's life in the '30s that I have mentioned may have driven him towards this fantasy and escape from self.

To escape, also, those currents of what Auden called the 'low, dishonest decade', currents in which, from the evidence of the auto-biographies and fiction we see Williamson fully caught up and submerged, political action offered itself as a renewal of hope. To join forces, publicly, with a movement that advocated the 'resurgence' of energies and disciplines opposed to a middle-class slothfulness of thought and action must have seemed doubly attractive, since Williamson was, by his own frequent admission, fully submerged in that very sloth. And the apparently doomed heroism of the movement, at least by the later 1930s, must also have attracted him, its self-pitting in grandiloquent gestures and posturings against the inevitable and irreversible trends of the period, trends which, paradoxically, it helped generate and direct. Witness Willie Maddison, Manfred Cloudesley, Wilbo, the Starborn, the self of *Goodbye West Country*, doomed heroes all, strutting and fretting

their hours on a shaky stage.

It is at these levels of personal response that I feel Williamson's politics were generated and experienced. Of course, most political thought can be seen as a rationalisation of a person's own preconceptions about the world, a handle on which to hang a picture of self and its relations with society. The case is different, though, when the person in question is an author, for to be one means more than anything else that one makes public, explains, that relationship between self and world, lays it open for analysis, offers it as some kind of guide for others. And it is for that reason, I think, that we have to ask authors to be honest with us, and if they are not we can rightly look for causes and explanations which might underlie an adopted stance. When that stance tends to distort the world, as it does sometimes in Williamson's work, then that search for reasons becomes important. To take another example. The Norfolk books are offered to us, through the stance the author has chosen for them, as documents concerned with recreation, change. The desire to restore the farm is given, repeatedly, as a political act in the broadest sense; it is presented as a 'microcosm' of, and an active symbol for, the Right's attempts to regenerate a decadent Europe. But those microcosm-macrocosm structures, often so crudely drawn, don't really bear close scrutiny. One man on his farm cannot contain or explain the fate of a European continent. There may be connections between them, but they are far more complex, more subtle, than what can be grasped as direct relationship. The falsifications of the image reflect, in another way, the falsifications inherent both in fascism and, more importantly for us, in Williamson's basically unpolitical adherence to it. There was no 'Golden Age' of British agriculture. Williamson had read Hardy, Jefferies and Cobbett, and should have known from them that the ideal agricultural community never existed; the prosperity and ease of such times as he wished to restore rested on the poverty and immobility of those at the bottom of the rural hierarchy. The Golden Age is a myth, but one fed by that same urban nostalgia for lost roots that fed Williamson's own boyhood yearnings for nature. Yet, again, the self-image seems dominant; the image of a revivalist pitted against the apparently purely modern financial system of international capital, but in such a way that microcosm and macrocosm are doomed to failure. But what concerns one more, as a reader of these books, is the inevitable failure of the metaphor, of the links of sense and the distortions of self and experience which they produce. Wilbo, Phillip, Manfred, Willie, have to fail; once the linking metaphor is established between one person's activities and those of a whole civilisation, the hero has to go down with the ship. If not, he is left stranded on the flimsy metaphor, awash. The Norfolk farm venture may have succeeded depite Williamson's aims for it; Europe, though, by his own analysis, was defeated. A happy ending for us, an embarrassment for the author who has to sell up, move on and try another career. But underlying all of this is the suspicion that the political aspect of that metaphor was no more than another rationalisation for an escape from the nagging duty that had lain on his mind since 1919, the duty to write about the Great War. But that, in its turn, could not be faced until another duty was faced, the duty to clear self from the constraints and evasions forced upon it by the problems of his childhood, of his relationship

with his father. Williamson was able to do that in the first three novels of the *Chronicle*, as we can see for ourselves, and there the political mode of thought is gradually put aside as a fiction dealing with human relationships, with individual guilts and responsibilities, is evolved. Of course, there is a residual attempt to politicise the issues, to show that it is really 'urbanisation' and its evils which cause problems in human relationships, and which lead to the Great War. Happily, though, those facile, generalising explanations are soon undermined by the kind of fiction which explores its own premises, and which seeks to understand human character in terms not of environment or race, but in terms of the choices we all make in relationships with others. At its best, the explorative, creative parts of that later fiction are superb, and they are so for the very reason that they don't simply rehearse, cryptically, the author's prejudices or evasions, but try instead to come to terms with them, to see how they affect others, to trace their origins. Those origins, Williamson shows, are not to be found in any tired old cliché-ridden distinctions between town and country living, nor in any shabby attributions to race or custom, but in the everyday accumulation of painstaking experience. Most important, the argument of the best novels of the *Chronicle* is one that runs exactly counter to the easy labels that Williamson and others have tried to place upon it, an argument that shows how individuals like Phillip may escape from the dangers of their environments and their suspicions and, as in *The Golden Virgin*, learn love and respect for self and others by facing up to and understanding the limitations placed upon them by life.

And still, there it is in the same novel and in dozens of other places; the blind and bitter prejudice, the attempts to find economic causes and solutions for the heart's problems, the wish to argue and sloganise his way out of creating honest fiction. Such things attest to the crucial paradox at the centre of Williamson's writings; the paradox that although he could, at one level, see right through the limitations of his own prejudices and fears, resolve them and show how they could be resolved, the process nevertheless remained somehow subliminal, instinctive, taking place at a level of thought which is mirrored only by the best prose, quite cut off from the conscious, self-aware, political mind. That is a huge paradox, because it contains the contradiction of huge insight side by side with blindness. Look, for example, at the continuing exploration of blindness that we find in *The Golden Virgin*, at the attempt to find out how it was possible not just for soldiers to make their own colossal mistakes, but how the Keecheys and Desmonds can so badly misinterpret other people, and also how it is possible for Phillip himself to learn new insights about himself and others. That exploration is worked out fully, and worked out through the medium of a prose often so sensitive that it can exist in several related dimensions at once. But, alongside that exploration, that working towards a way of seeing that involved us all in *new* and enhanced ways of seeing, alongside it is the Monkey House scene, a perpetual tribute to blindness. That is a large paradox, and I suppose it is finally a matter for the individual reader how he or she is reconciled to it, if it is possible at all. But what seems to me most important is that we are aware of the paradox, of the strange contradictions that beset Williamson's writing, and that we react to it honestly, rather than hoping it will somehow go away. It won't.