THE TWO MADDISONS

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ALL YESTERDAY the gaunt wall of Lundy had been too clear, and over the topaz-brown Severn sea I could count the bright fields and hedges of Wales. Today, 30th June, 1936, the rain fell from Exmoor, and I sat on my rucksack under the dripping lee of a shed near Bull Point, reading *Dandelion Days* and shaking with laughter. The bed-and-breakfast landlady at Croyde next night had known the author when, as she said with extreme disapproval which she expected me to share, 'he lived in a tumbledown cottage, and carved an owl on the door, and made a hole in the bottom for his cats to come in and out'. But it was not till a few weeks after, when I reached *The Dream of Fair Women* and *The Pathway* - for the tragi-farcical *Dandelion Days* was set in an island country which recalled the Coate Farm and Wiltshire downs of Richard Jefferies' *Bevis* - that I realised too late that I had walked through a landscape as haunted as the Bronte moors or the Beauce of Proust. Willie Maddison had left that ruinous cottage for his pursuit of the temptress Eve Fairfax; overe the white desolation of Saunton Burrows he had roamed with the gentle Mary Ogilvie; and in the estuary beyond he had been crucified by drowning. I never returned, though sometimes I have seen the faint Burrows, spread out like the flax of dream, from the edge of Dartmoor. Nothing now remains of the lost young man who walked along the North Devon cliffs in that rainy summer; but here is that same *Dandelion Days*, stained with rusty water, and the presence of Henry Williamson has stayed living within me as one of the permanent experiences of my life. I have told my own story not because it is interesting, but because it is so typical.

All great writers have something in common - a sense of power and vision, a moment of grace and revelation made permanent - which is communicated from them to the reader and is lacking in other authors, whether talents or shams. Its existence can be detected in a moment and experienced during a lifetime; but no critical method yet devised can prove in words that it is present. The reader can only consult his interior genius-thermometer, which tells him whether he is confronted with a limitless force of nature or with a tumbler-full of hot water. The critic, worse still, can only appeal to a majority verdict of fellow-critics; and this sometimes results in grave injustice to writers for whom the necessary gallup-poll has not been held, or has been forgotten. D.H. Lawrence was a genius in the 1920s, and now (chiefly because Mr Leavis has said so) he is a genius again. Where, one is tempted to ask, was D.H. Lawrence during the missing thirty years? Or, to put an easier question, where were the critics? Perhaps they were where Moses was when the light went out. Sooner or later - perhaps soon, for there are signs that the tide of opinion has already turned - it will be among the accepted facts of English literary history that our only two great novelists writing in the second quarter of the twentieth

century, after the deaths of Lawrence and Joyce, were John Cowper Powys and Henry Williamson; and that during the dark period of the treason of the critics they were recognised for what they were by an underground army of unknown readers.

Great writers are all the same, because the truth to which they have direct access is single; but they are also all unique, because it is infinite. The peculiar quality of Henry Williamson is the piercing directness of his vision, the absolute identity of his own feeling and its communication to the reader, the clothing of a naked and terrible pain or joy in a noble and innocent prose, as keen as sunlight and as innocent as spring-water. He stands at the end of the line of Blake, Shelley and Jefferies: he is the last classic and the last romantic. But like each of these three writers - though two thought themselves atheists, and the other invented a theology of his own - the theme of all his work has been the search for redemption from the miseries of the human condition. This is the link between the stories, apparently so utterly opposite, of the two Maddisons.

The Atonement, like the Fall, is unrepeatable; yet both have to be repeated on the human scale by every man who would save himself, still more by the rare few, artists or saints, who would save others. Willie Maddison fell in the War, when he fought the German brothers with whom; he had shared the Christmas truce of 1914, and saw them kill his friends he fell a second time when he deserted the ruined cottage in which he had seen the truth, and followed Eve. When he returns in *The Pathway* he is already lost: it is a doomed young man who knocks at the lonely house by the Burrows and meets the two girls, the boy, the old man and the mother, whom he tries to save and who will be the death of him. He believes that by a change of thought the blind will see, the selfish will love, the cruel have pity, and the dead of the war rise again. He is wrong, and fails: for although all he meets are stirred for a moment and see with his vision, he is cast out and dies; the living are unchanged, the dead remain dead. But he is also right, and succeeds, for the act of the artist-misfit-messiah, which in this world can only be symbolic, is in reality in the kingdom which is not of this world.

'A man's life of any worth is a continual allegory,' said Keats; and the corollary follows that a great writer's works are his attempts to detect and tell the allegory of his own life. For twenty years Willie Maddison lived on in Henry Williamson, working out the bitter destiny which the fictitious hero had been spared through the victory of his death. In this dark night of his soul Williamson shouldered, with an involvement which is difficult to parallel in any other novelist of that time, the burden of the between-wars world, and produced some of his finest work. In *Tarka the Otter* and *Salar the Salmon*, in the Manfred of *The Gold Falcon*, he showed indomitable creatures, whether animals or men, struggling with the joy and suffering of life, and inevitably defeated by forces outside themselves. This tragic culmination is truer and more courageous, in its context of the artist's development and of human history, than the 'happy ending' which could so easily have been devised (the otter and the salmon could have escaped their enemies, Manfred's aeroplane could have reached the shore). Then the closely

related crises of artist and mankind arrived almost together. Williamson left Devon and writing, to reclaim a derelict Norfolk farm, a triple image of his own soul, of a corrupted but still curable England, and of the world plunging again into war; and less than two years later came the second Armageddon which Willie Massison had foreseen and tried to avert. Towards the end of the 1940s the last, or rather present, stage in his career began. A tenuous hope, which still exists, had risen in the hearts of men, like fireweed in the ruins of London. For Henry Williamson the Norfolk farm made fertile brought release from the sense of personal failure which had haunted him from the beginning; the restless wraith of Willie Maddison was laid at last; he returned to a ghost-free Devon and began to write the real story which had always lain behind the symbolic story.

The future existence of this *Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, delayed for twenty years because 'ripeness is all', could be deduced from *The Flax of Dream*. The very absence of the war from the tale of Willie Maddison, except for its terrible ever-presence in his soul, showed that Williamson was reserving his war-novel; and a further dimension of reality seemed to be added to the earlier tetralogy by the rare appearances of a character whose function in that story was to be not a participant but a witness. Phillip Maddison, the London cousin, already seemed a visitant from another novel - 'my London trilogy, a realistic treatment of the theme used romantically in *The Flax of Dream*, eight years overdue', wrote Williamson on 24th June, 1936 in *Goodbye West Country*.

Now Phillip Maddison is not a witness but a protagonist, and already seven novels have brought him from the frightened and divided child to the young officer confronting the horrors of the Third Ypres. Hosts of characters and years have appeared, seen brilliantly in an eternal moment, and passed into eternity. Where now are the lovely Hetty Turney, and the pathetic young Richard Maddison, who took his dark lantern to the South London common to find the emblematic moths he had trapped? Phillip's mother is foolish, grey-haired and broken-spirited; his father is a frozen tyrant, for an ingrowing, built-in need for love has produced a man who can neither give nor receive love. In *Love and the Loveless* the new characters still arrive, the familiar ones still change or disappear in the brilliant illumination of Ancient Sunlight. Three hideous battles - Messines, when the great mine was exploded, Cambrai, when the new tanks failed to exploit their breakthrough, Passchendaele with its blood and mud - are fought and described with a terror and beauty which no prose-writer of that war and only one poet, Wilfred Owen, has hitherto achieved. As in the earlier novels of the series - one thinks of Hetty seeing the trout below the mill-bridge in *The Dark Lantern*, or the windmill burning on the battlefield in *How Dear Is Life* - there are scenes in which the poetry goes deeper than the sum of all the symbols into which it can be analysed: such is Phillip's winter walk through the skeletons and thistle-stalks of last summer's desolation on the Somme. There is the wild humour and unerring satire, so little noticed by critics, which have rarely been absent from Williamson's work since the school-scenes of *Dandelion Days* or the Folkestone aunts of *The Dream of Fair Women*. The detail and unity of the novel, both in itself and and as part in a series, are organised with

the same astonishing fusion of instinct and intelligence. In his use of infinite detail Williamson has been compared with Proust (an author he has only recently dipped into and disliked, for original writers often reject their rich distant relatives, and it is only we reviewers who can admire all because we have so little of our own). The comparison is surely mistaken. Proust's immensity has little to do with detail, and as he said himself, 'in my novel no one ever ties his cravat or opens a door!': it is Williamson who, with such wonderful selection and construction, 'puts everything in'. But the two writers have a real affinity in their vision of the past as the place in time where the truth of things and people, to which we are always blind in the present, can be seen as pure and undying. The two ideas of Time Lost and Ancient Sunlight, though independently discovered, are intimately related; and Williamson could say of this aspect of his work, as Proust said of his own, 'my instrument is not a microscope, but a telescope pointed at Time'.

It is still too early to predict the precise goal to which the Phillip Maddison series is moving. But one can feel fairly sure Phillip Maddison is to be saved, not like his cousin by revelation, messiah-hood and death, but by the action and practice of life on earth. Perhaps he will achieve his end outside revealed and organised religion, though not untouched by its influence. The basic truth of the Church has rarely been expressed more beautifully, or more acceptably to those who remain outside the Church, than by the words of Father Aloysius, in *The Golden Virgin*, to Lieutenant Maddison discovered wounded on the Somme: 'the Virgin and the Child is not a symbol of what should be, but of what *is*, Phillip'. *The Flax of Dream* was about divine truth, *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* is about human truth. Phillip Maddison is a divided man, sometimes cruel, cowardly and sinful, sometimes possessed of courage, kindness and insight, moving towards a still unknown salvation, and seen with complete clarity and charity by a man who has become a whole. But this vast novel-cycle, the summer-harvest of Henry Williamson's life as a writer, is not only the study of an individual character. In art the universal is sometimes, perhaps best, revealed by a profound and minute examin tion of the particular. Here is an unrolling map of the labyrinth of three generations, our fathers, ourselves and our children, and the thread leading to the mystery - monster or divinity? - at the centre. In my belief *Love and the Loveless* and its three predecessors constitute the only true English war novel, comparable in vastness and compassion to *War and Peace* or Zola's *La Debacle*; and the whole cycle will ultimately be recognised as the great historical novel of our time, its subject as the total experience of twentieth century man.

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