WHY I THINK HENRY WILLIAMSON IS STILL WORTH READING

David Hoyle

The day on which a plaque is unveiled in commemoration of any writer must represent a certain degree of achievement for him or her; not least by any means that of having inspired a body of followers to remember and celebrate the particular importance he has for them. A plaque is, at the very least, the sign of a certain fixity, of a permanence in the future. And a signal to those who might pass the house in Eastern Road - hard not to think of it as Hillside Road - that someone beyond the ordinary is associated with it. If the plaque prompts just one of the passers-by to read any of Williamson's work, then I suppose that alone will have justified its being placed there. It is a monumental occasion in more than one sense. An achievement for the Society and for all readers of Williamson's books. And a monument through which he will be recalled, or rediscovered, in future times.

Perhaps, though, the future times of Henry Williamson are even more important than the memories of past affections or continued interest. Perhaps the siting of a plaque is also an opportunity to ask exactly what is being preserved and celebrated. That question seems to pose itself far more for Henry Williamson than for other writers, who, by the time of their death, have been categorised and accepted in a way not yet found here. It can be posed for other reasons, too. Within this society, which surely must represent the widest body of real knowledge about Williamson, I detect a number of quite divergent emphases. For some members, the early fiction seems most important; for others, it is the nature writing; for yet others, the *Chronicle*; and for others still, it is certain novels *in* the *Chronicle* which most call for attention. It is just one product of Williamson's large and varied output that this should be so. For readers outside the Society, the same sense of variety seems similarly to persist. But how often, though, with a quite negative loading. For them, Williamson is 'only' a nature-writer; or he is to be characterised and understood only in terms of political views. Or, again, his strengths as a writer of fiction lay in only those things by which 'true' fiction should not be judged: the ability to recall and recreate his own past; the monumental persistence of his output, prompting judgements based on volume rather than quality.

In view of such variety, such contradictions, of response, it seems in the very least arrogant of me to offer a talk with such a title as this: 'Why, after all, Henry Williamson may be worth Reading'. Yet I don't do so as one offering a definitive statement. Just the opposite: I offer my own, highly subjective, reasons for reading Williamson not as the last word, but as the first, in a debate which I hope might continue well beyond anything I might have to say.

Before offering those reasons, I find it is necessary briefly to step aside from this particular writer to approach the difficult issue of why *any* writer might be worth reading, for us, in the world we live in. How can we justify the opening of a novel, whose covers figuratively and really blot out the world, at a time when our efforts might better be

directed toward trying to avert the real disasters that hang over us? I think the answer has to come from an area beyond pleasure; certainly beyond escape. For me at least, the answer to the question 'why should we read *this* specimen of *fiction*' has to be a moral one, has to be the suggestion that we read what a writer has to offer because he or she may tell us, in ways more or less direct, how we might live better, because they can offer us, however tentatively, responses to the human problems they have perceived and described. By this I emphatically do not mean that writers should have the answers to our own problems, or to Socrates' seminal question: 'How should men live?' Nor that they should provide us with a working out, in the safe world of fiction, of their own particular view of the universe. God preserve us all from writers with designs on us. I simply mean, by this 'moral dimension' that writers should, at least sometimes, have found a way of exploring, at the most subtle levels, the complexities and frequent contradictions which constitute social life. Morality in the novel is not there as the medicine might be slipped into the glass of orange juice, hopefully rendered unnoticeable in the workings of the plot. It is there as an expression of those subtleties which are more valuable than the obvious or the pre-determined. An expression which might equip us, if we are critical, to see such subtleties more clearly, and to make similar or related explorations and connections. If we don't eventually accept a writer's view of the world, then we may still learn something from their *methods* of true discernment.

The moral weighing of a writer's work seems to me the ultimate, the acid, test of value in literature, although it is by no means easy to apply or formulate. It seems to me at least implicit in all serious criticism. It would seem why, and how, *Lady Chatterly's Lover* is a more moral work than the poems of Patience Strong. I would want to stress its importance most heavily, because, in terms of the exacting literary criticism it can generate, it is the most austere and demanding test that we can impose. And that brings me (at last), back to Henry Williamson, and to my belief that he can, without any fear of failure, be subjected to such a test. That here is a writer who, at his best (a point I would stress), fulfills all of the moral demands that we can, and should make on any writer that we wish to take seriously. The plaque commemorates a writer who *can* be approached critically: that is, without the prejudice that rises from either enthusiasm or hostility, and can still be found equal to the test. The shame of most academic and journalistic criticism in the period from 1930 to the present day is that it has, in this case at least, failed approach Henry Williamson's work in this truly critical spirit. It has, instead, accepted and perpetuated stale orthodoxies of view that turn, not on literary-critical judgements, nor on open-minded and scrupulously detailed examinations of the texts themselves, but on received prejudices. It has followed a path of comment directed against Williamson as a *man* rather than as a writer. The man may have made mistakes: which of us hasn't? Whether one feels those mistakes to have been serious or not seems a far less important question than this: 'are we right to move *automatically* from statements about the life to statements about the writings?' In the case of some authors, we may be. But here, the relationship between the life and the art is different; far more complex, and, for at least some of the time, dangerously misleading. Most important, the correlation between the life and the novels breaks down because of one vitally important fact: a fact that has been consistently, one might say perversley, overlooked. The fact that Williamson, working with the grain of his true creative genius, soaringly transcended the sometimes petty, sometimes self-conscious, sometimes

self-justifying, sometimes mislaid self which, when all is said and done, makes him most resemble *ourselves*. There is a Williamson who exists, for me at least, in certain moral and literary effects, who is totally different from, and immeasurably more important than, the biographical Williamson. How often so far has it been the case that the anxious, the proclamatory, the uncertain Henry Williamson has generated spurious literary criticism? When we read or hear it, we find ourselves taken back every time to biography, to an assessment of the man. Seldom or never are we lead to a detailed, open-minded judgement of the writings themselves.

And it is those writings which I think, under the light of unprejudiced literary, textual, analysis, provide a monument for Williamson even more enduring than that unveiled today. But they will do so only if they are read critically, without prejudice of any kind, because a truly open-minded reading of some of these texts reveals a Williamson far more durable than any, I think, generally recognised. A Williamson able to live in the living complexity of his texts; certain of whose novels will display that rich, ambivalent, fluid precision of meaning and expression which defies the simpler fixing we can give to ordinary writers. I am not arguing for textual complexity for its own sake. But because, as I hope to be able to show, such complexity and fluidity is what brings a work of fiction closest to the complexity of real living, where the relationships between language and reality constantly shift, develop and elude us. It is easy to catch a dead fish; you slide your hand in the water and pull it out; and you can, if you will, watch it rot statically before you. The difficulty comes in catching the living one, that slithers through your fingers and flips back into the river. For me, that living transcience, which can come only from a writer whose language and moral sense are too subtle for easy paraphrase, is the central quality. Again, it provides an acid test; but, as before, one to which I feel Henry Williamson's writings can, at times, be subjected. Ultimately, one's biographical, historical, bibliographical, even geographical researches are steps towards an end: that end the closest possible encounter with the words on the page and their living meaning. Such meaning is, one could add, the only truly inexhaustible resource an author has to offer; a lifetime of programmes for any literary society.

All of this calls for proof, and I would like to try to offer it this evening by looking at just one novel, *The Golden Virgin*. Before doing so, let me also acknowledge one possible objection to the type of reading I want to try and demonstrate. It is argued sometimes, even today, that the critical 'dissection' of a text will invariably spoil it. That too close or careful analysis is likely, indeed almost certain, to spoil the fresh and exciting responses one might have. That if one has to struggle to understand a work, then its author must have failed to make his or her meaning sufficiently clear. Morally and philosophically, that position seems to me to be completely defensible, beyond argument. There is no reason why those who like their pleasures immediate and strong shouldn't have them so. But for me (and I stress the subjective nature of the feeling), it is the subtlety, at first reading by no means obvious, of Williamson's best writing, and his remarkable (but largely unremarked) ability to pursue themes through several dimensions of meaning at once, that most interests me. My own personal plaque would have to mention that predeliction.

In reading *The Golden Virgin*, I am always reminded of a remark about

D.H. Lawrence made to me by the late Morris Shapiro; that in *Women in Love* we have the strange affair of a novel which, by Lawrence's own account, was to be *about* the Great War (it was written during that war), but which barely mentions it: never directly. A letter of Lawrence's to Harriet Monroe helps explain this puzzle. He writes:

> The war is dreadful. It is the business of the artist to follow it home to heart of the individual fighters - not to talk in terms of armies and nations and numbers - but to track it home - home - this war - their war - and it is at the bottom of almost every Englishman's heart - the war - the desire of war - the *will* to war - and at the bottom of every German's.

The method of Lawrences's working out of his 'tracking home' need not detain us here; but I believe this obliqueness of treatment offers us an informative parallel to Williamson's own way of working. It is characteristic of Lawrence to be able to articulate his designs; characteristic of Williamson, I think, that he seldom wished to do so. It seems, of course, that *The Golden Virgin* is a novel dealing directly with the war itself. At its centre, structurally and in terms of plot, are the events of July 1st, 1916. Before that, we have detailed account of the preparations for the battle. But if we look again, we find that the novel contains an apparently disproportionate amount of seemingly quite irrelevant matter: 22 of its 28 chapters are set in England, not in France; only one, 'The Cake Walk' actually deals with the battle itself. The novel is also certainly what Henry James would have called a 'loose, baggy monster', ranging through hundreds of scenes in London, Essex, Devon; varying in scale from the silly antics of Piston, the peccadilloes of Eugene, the attempts of Mavis at home dressmaking, and so on, to the opening of the Somme battle. The immediate temptation is to conclude that Williamson has again been mislead by that tendency to autobiography which at times, I believe, prevented him from spotting that what was significant to *him* might not always be of interest to a distant reader, nor of the most telling value in a work, a 'Chronicle', with an ostensibly historical purpose.

It would, I think, be difficult to defend *all* of those detailed inclusions from a charge of marginality. To the admirer of Williamson, of course, such details are valuable in themselves; the close intimacy with the writer that they generate is nearly always welcome. But if one steps back, and reads without that desire for intimacy, they might seem obstructive and unselective; signs of a writer to whom ideas of conscious structure, certainly of economy, were foreign. But we would dismiss many such details at our peril. Is it not preferable to ask, as we read, whether there is any truly unifying principle in the work; any relationship between these brush-strokes and the central theme of the novel, the war in 1916?

It isn't possible, in the space of an hour, to do full justice to *all* of the contributory details in the novel, not to point out the organic, linquistic, links between them. Nevertheless, let me just look at just some of them, as demonstrations of Williamson's *method* there. The very opening pages provide a clear example. Our first re-encounter with Phillip takes place in the Temperance Billiards Hall, in November 1915. As is so often the case, Williamson has worked from a reality: less than a mile from here is the Hall itself, cited just as he gives it. But he has done far more than just *transpose* a reality into his fiction. If we

read its details carefully enough, the Temperance Billiards Hall is offered us as an extremely subtle and therefore extremely expressive image and symbol of the whole war in 1915/16. Its description is handled with a dualism that allows Williamson, whilst focusing on Phillip, simultaneously to characterise the whole state of mind, as he sees it, governing the war as it stumbles towards the Battle of the Somme, and also to suggest the moral problems which call out for resolution at this stage of both the personal and national histories depicted in the fiction.

Phillip's drunken presence in the Hall is especially objectionable to its manager and clientele, since the Hall is meant to be based on solid principles of sobriety and respectibility, a moral extension of family life:

> The word *billiards* was, among the aspiring classes which dwelt in the new suburbs of red and yellow brick, in uneasy association with Victorian liquor, bar lights, and unmentionable worse things connected with women. To help overcome existing prejudice, and lest any doubts arise as the spirit and capability of the impulse towards the setting up of healthy, innocent recreation for the young, Temperance Billiards Halls Ltd. had caused to be let into the outside wall of each building a panel of glazed green tiles with letters and figures announcing the reassuring fact that the company had a capital of £100,000.

The possession of wealth thus reassures all parents about the safety of what is, after all, a speculative business enterprise. The building itself though, is sited opposite the overgrown and jerry-built frontage of the Conservative Club, a frontage erected, it is implied, through the dubious dealings of a solicitor member of that club. From such proximity, the proprietors of the Hall hope to gain more reflected respectibility. One might consider, even before the end of this description, that the facade of the Hall's decency and soundness, suggested quite restrainedly, has wider references than to the building itself. An image from the end of *How Dear is Life* suggest itself, where the crooked old soldier with the Crown-and-Anchor board implicitly figured the state which the war had then reached; a game of random chance, in which the odds were piled heavily against the gambler.

The entrance to the Billiards Hall, which, as we pass through it to the novel's first action, is also our entrance to the resumed story of Phillip, reinforces the ideas with which Williamson seems to wish to govern *The Golden Virgin*.

> Once over the theshold, no parent was likely to continue in doubt as to the hall's respectibility, for the walls of the porch were decorated with two panels in plaster, Law on the left, and Commerce on the right...Law stood with bandaged eyes and sword, holding scales, Commerce with ball and sceptre among some of the subject races of Empire.

It is these two figures, and all that they represent, whose influence is to dominate the novel's action; and whose figurative significance, especially of the former, draws together and organises its moral sense.

The use of Commerce as a governing motif is less wide or significant than that of Blind Law, and I do not have time to detail all of its reverberations here. It echoes the chapter in *A Fox Under My Cloak*,

'Business as Usual', which exposes the motives of City traders, and shows that their patriotism is a convenient cloak for profiteering and masks a total unconcern for the human and moral realities of the war. It recurrs now in the visit of Uncle Hilary to Phillip in hospital, where he tries to persuade his nephew to eschew his pro-German sympathies. His moralistic arguments for 'the life of the Nation' are subtly undercut by our knowledge that, since the war, Hilary's capital had 'increased to six figures'. At least £100,000.

It is, though, the figure of a Blinded Law which draws together and explains a great deal that happens in the novel. The figure is ambivalent: its blindness represents impartiality, of course, but the same blindness is also offered as a potential failing. Judgement, to be sound, must be based upon sight, and only then on impartiality. If one takes the governing metaphor of the whole novel as one of blindness, in many and various forms, it provides a thread which does indeed pull together many aspects of Williamson's treatment of his autobiographical-self-hero with his wider treatment of the war as a whole. His overriding and underlying point seems to be that for Army and society in 1915/6, it was becoming increasingly difficult for people to perceive the truth. This is only partly a result of the Defence of the Realm Act: that itself is a symptom of the change from a defensive and ostensibly honourable campaign in 1914 to a new, harder, more sinister demand for revenge rather than justice; a blind desire for victory in which a blind and suborned law wields a sword, unwittingly destroying those its seems to protect. Ideas of blindness subtly dominate the novel; they are there in those chapters dealing with Desmond's and with Keechey's inability to see straight what Lily is and who she loves. They are at their most obvious in those few chapters dealing with the battle, in which it is made clear that the Army has simply failed to *look* closely enough at the situation on the ground; failed to measure the depth of the German dug-outs, or to imagine the difficulty of crossing No-man's-land laden with 55lbs of equipment.

Blindness returns in other specific scenes. At the Military Tribunal, to encorce the 'call up', attended by Tom and Hetty, the presiding magistrate announces that

> *'so called defective eyesight is no longer a disqualification for the Army. It does not matter whether a man is short-sighted, so long as he is physically fit'* p.145

The verdicts of the court, that both the cowardly Ching and the genuine consciencious objector are *equally* guilty tells of this suspension of true judgement.

The revolving statue of Eros in Piccadilly, similarly, is offered as a figure of randomness and failure of Judgement. As Phillip walks beneath it, it seems to him the 'hub' of a vast Empire now roused 'for its own destruction'. Its bow, like the avenging sword held by Blind Law, points in turn, yet without discernment, at the human beings

> circulating below, with their thoughts of food, fear, fornication, and death; and here and there an individual inspired by austere thoughts of love everlasting, or patriotism, of the hope of courage in the final test of duty.

Aspirant hero, coward or fornicator, all are treated as equals.

Dora, ever a choric character, or authorial voice, is made to articulate a similar point. She is now haunted by an intangible dread of what society is inflicting on itself, 'as though the Erinyes, avenging spirits of the twilight, dwelt in the dark glen above her (Devon) village'. There is a parallel logic in conceiving of the avenging fate which now dominates the world as the Erinyes, the Kindly Ones, as in thinking of the determined desire for revenge as the activity of the law. Both euphemisms conceal and placate the real truth. For Dora, the spirit of the times is figured also by the water which rushes past her door:

> Was her mood taken from the running noises of the stream below, the water everlastingly hurrying, blindly...to the sea, its blind parent? The sea...now blind, for ever set upon its task of reducing rock to sand, and sand to dust?

It is, though, one thing to recognise and depict in such a way the particular problems confronting a society at a given period. The extra and crucial difficulty for an author comes in trying to use his fiction as a means of exploring possible resolutions for those problems. The overall structure of this novel suggests that such a resolution has been found. Chapter 1, 'Night Thoughts', leads to a final chapter entitled 'Night and Morning'. The drunken and irresolute Phillip who staggers into the Gild Hall at the beginning of the novel is, by its end, determined to live for the men under his command; to make a new start. The development is both expressed and enacted in two corresponding passages of vision. In Chapter 2, Phillip at hiw lowest conceives of life in terms of this image:

> To remain alive was to continue to endure the nihilism of time rushing by, soundless and vain, atoms whirling in a void, creating life that must be destroyed, leaving blanks to be filled by other speck-like atoms whirling in darkness. p.51

In the penultimate chapter, Phillip's 'cosmic' vision is now characterised by a perceived sense of harmony, of illumination which makes sense of the attritive and blind darkness of the previous quote:

> It was a warm night, with a gentle wind. Remotely above them the Milky Way lay across the depth of the sky. It was the beginning of the season of meteors and shooting stars.
>
> Now slides the silent meteor on and leaves
> A shining furrow, as thy thoughts in me.
>
> He could never write poetry like that. It was as unattainable as the pale star-dust of the galaxies, which had been burning aeons before man had come upon the earth...Yet Love was before the stars were flames, and Love would remain when they were burned out. Love was the spirit of the universe, shining in the Abyss. p.432-3

Before asking how such a development of view is achieved, it is as well to remind ourselves of the early 'clues' which Williamson offers to its origins. Not that 'clues' is the right word: this isn't a mystery held back until the last pages; it is an attempt to discover, through the medium of the fiction itself, what possible answers there might be to the issues posed by the same fiction. Another character in the Gild Hall was Mavis. This is how *she* was re-introduced:

> Mavis had a blank in her; in part, life for her was a dark tunnel in which her soul dreamed of celestial, ideal things. The tunnel was akin to fear, and death. The dead image of the father she had adored, until without warning he had kissed her, when she was thirteen, in a strange way; a distressing way, for immediately afterwards he had become blank and cold with guilt...For a long time afterwards the words of his angry voice had the power to darken her to hopelessness. *I do not love you*, he had cried; and never resurrected himself from the tomb of his guilt, under which love lay buried. The child's hazel eyes had become blackthorn dark with brooding, the spines grown dully inwards.

The loss of love here has, as it were, occluded sight once more. Mavis's perceptions are turned inwards upon herself, producing the fixations which are so well caught in Phillip's image of a bird pecking at its own reflection in a mirror.

The desperation caught here radiates throughout the novel. I have already mentioned the fatherless Desmond, and his refusal to see that he cannot command Lily's love where it is not freely given. The same is true of Keechey, the upholder of Law, who now out of lust and revenge, perceived by Lily as thwarted love, awaits his chance to get even. It is true of Ching, whose broken home life has inextricably entangled sneaking lust and love together. Of Richard in his 'tomb'; by this stage of the *Chronicle* utterly isolated in his inability to perceive or share the feelings of others. Lovelessness, too, in the Army, where Christmas day in the Northampton camp is

> given over to ghosts..the ghosts of lost childhoods, of lovelessness, of spiritual self-denials and self-suppressions so normal that almost automatically most of the herded young men got drunk. p.113

If the figures of Blind Law and Commerce, and a randomely destructive Eros, provide us with governing images of the problems, we might ask how they are drawn together and used in the fiction. The connections between erotic love and destruction, of self and others, is, for example, a long-standing theme in the whole *Chronicle*. It has, of course, as we have just heard, locked Richard in his *tomb;* and Mavis and Ching too. It was there in the story of Hugh Turney, whose thwarted love for Dora led indirectly to his death from syphilis, a death figured in *The Dark Lantern* as consumption by fire. But I don't believe that the links between sex and death are to be seen as central here. Cundall, another choric character, *is* given these words in Chapter 27:

> Western man is rotting, that's the trouble. The war is the epitome of the sexual rot, the sadism, the bunk in Western man...we're on a voyage of death. p.405

And Phillip conceives of the loaded and be-ribboned soldiers preparing for the Somme as 'bridegrooms of death'. But, despite such equations, the aim of the fiction seems much wider. It isn't just the case that misdirected or obsessive love can be destructive; but that self-love, the lack of true loving-kindness, can blind one to the realities of others, to the realities of self. Extended from the personal to the historical dimensions of the novel, such blindness draws whole societies into destruction. To look again at the quote from Chapter 2 cited above is to realise the ambivalence with which Williamson is able to treat his subjects here; to see how closely personal and historical narratives are interwoven. The

soundless rushing of atoms in a void is an appropriate image for Phillip's dark view of the universe; but does it not also become, simultaneously, an equally appropriate image of that central moment in the fiction, the morning of July 1st?

> Atoms whirling in a void, creating life that must be destroyed, leaving blanks to be filled by other speck-like atoms whirling in darkness.

It is the terrible fate of the soldier Howells there to be literally consumed by the flames of the phosperous he carries. This image of battle has also been vividly prepared for us by Phillip's aerial view of the Battle of Loos in *A Fox Under my Cloak*, where the speck-like figures of the Foot-Guards were shot down, replaced, shot down again; the attack ending in chaos.

But is this coincidence of imagery only a convenient way of handling two disparate narrative lines at once? Keeping two balls in the air and allowing the author to tell the story of Phillip while still maintaining the historical dimension of the fiction? If it were, it would in itself be no small feat of fictional organisation, a way of changing the scale of the novel at will. In some of the earlier books of the series, such changes were sometimes noticeable and obtrusive. At times, the authorial voice took over, hijacked the fiction, went away from *details* and confronted us directly with an 'explanation' of what was happening. No matter how subtly Williamson had begun to convey our sense of the developing problems of Richard and Hetty, say, he was still unable to resist the overt statements which undercut, and often contradicted, the explorative fiction he was achieving. Whilst we had begun to feel that the aberrant sexual relationship of Richard and Hetty was somewhere at the base of their problems, we had nevertheless to listen when we were told that, no, it was the age itself that was to blame. That it was life in the town rather than the country which caused such difficulties. As if we could have believed that Richard and Hetty in a country cottage would have been happier, or that the Rolls and Cakebreads, happy in the town, could be said to fit into such a crude patterning. By now, though, and *From How Dear is Life* onwards, the opposing pulls of personal and historical narratives have been largely reconciled, even though they will return to exert their pressures later in the sequence.

But the language which is shared here between Phillip and history is able to do more than simply combine scales of feeling and event. The language *can* be shared because its meaning is equally applicable to both elements in the fiction, and this double applicability is far more than just a linguistic sleight of hand, a choosing of the right word to cover both dimensions at once. The language works in two directions because Williamson is offering a single explanation for both the personal and historical phenomena he is depicting. He can do so because Phillip is both the focus for *and* the product of that history. We can, for example, believe in the psychological logic which would enable him to conceive of life as the whirling of atoms in a void just *because* we have been shown how one, having seen the view of the Battle of Loos mentioned above, would naturally choose such an image. His presence there supplied both the language for the image *and* the reason for choosing it. The language mutual to both is where the connections are made.

It would seem, then, that if the individual Phillip is enabled to escape the random and falsified way of life figured by the Gild Hall at

the beginning of this novel, then some solution must also be offered for us all. That the world around him has not changed by the end of the book is obvious: obvious also, though, that Phillip's relationship *to* that world has also changed. He has grown further apart from, but also above, it. His presence at the funeral of the German Zeppelin crew makes that point clearly enough:

> 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 ... p.447.

When we recall that these fliers have, the night before, killed Lily and her mother, we feel the weight of this substitution.

Is it Lily, then, and what she stands for, that leads Phillip away from the confusions of the Gild Hall? Ultimately, the answer is yes, but not before Williamson has included and explored other possibilities. Going back to the entrance to the Gild Hall, we find a third figure represented in the porch:

> With artistic daring, Queen Victoria had become a young woman with blond hair hanging down her back, swathed all in white. p.12

I'm not going to suggest that its Phillip's reverence for Queen Victoria that saves him. The important thing here is the introduction of the Golden Virgin herself: reality transformed 'with artistic daring'. Who is represented by this figure? Are there any correspondents to her in the novel, as there are for Commerce and Blind Law? Well, there are several Golden Virgins here. There is Helena Rolls. This is the novel in which Phillip finally - at last- grows beyond his passion for her. But that happens at the end. Before that, his hopeless love is as tormenting and misleading as ever, and is exactly mirrored in Desmond's love for Lily. But it is no solution for Phillip, no way out of the 'whirling void'. For him, for Desmond, for Ching, the fixation upon 'an ideal', rather than the life of a shared relationship and understanding, is exposed as false.

Most obviously, the Golden Virgin of the title and the figure in the porch is that on the cathedral at Albert. It is a central image in much writing about the war. Paul Fussell,in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, devotes a section to it and the literature it produced; failing to mention, typically, that Williamson had written a whole novel with this title. Fussell says:

> (The statue) was seen and interpreted by hundreds of thousands of men, who readily responded with significant moral metaphors and implicit allegorical myths...The most obvious 'meaning' of the phenomenon was clear: it was an emblem of pathos, of the effect of the war on the innocent...For some, the Virgin was throwing the Child down into the battle, offering him as a sacrifice which might end the slaughter...Others saw her action not as a sacrifice but as an act of mercy: she was reaching out to save her child, who, like a soldier, was about to fall.

I don't think Williamson is ever so fixed in his interpretation of the statue as these examples show others to be. But it does focus an extensive discussion of Christianity, and of Catholism particularly, in the novel. The next 'Golden Virgin' who offers an alternative to the chaos of the war is, then, the Virgin Mary.

It is through the figure of Father Aloysius that the arguments for Catholicism are put. At the Kingman's house in Essex, the discussion goes far; and it seems there that Aloysius's explanations of the faith and its place in the world of the war have convinced Phillip. Certainly, the return of the priest to the wounded Phillip on the Somme, where we see him actively ministering to the wounded and dying, suggests a strong feeling on Williamson's own part for the practical aspects of that religion. For Mavis, too, Catholicism comes to be the only way by 'which one's personal sorrows could be harmonised with those of the World'. Not healed, you will notice, but brought into alignment with the sorrows of others.

Williamson seems to wish to leave the religious issue largely unresolved here, however. Great is as his respect for Aloysius, and for the restrained decency of the Catholic Kingsmans, he never shows Phillip as doing more than being drawn *towards* Catholicism. No conversation takes place. Instead, in the light of the war, the images of piety experienced at the Kingsmans strangely dissolve:

> Where was God in the actual scheme of things? His Son had failed to alter the scheme; He had died on the Cross, condemned to death by the makers of iron; and all God's Mother could do was to stand below the cross and grieve; and later, to be erected as a Virgin with the Babe in her arms, to ward off the Abyss - into which, originally, both had fallen. It was alright for Father Aloysius to talk; but it was a fairy story. He quivered with terror of death, waiting to enter the dead town of Albert...p.271

But if Aloysius does not draw Phillip into becoming a Catholic, he *is* made to express some of the central moral statements of the novel. He answers Phillip's agonised question: 'How *could* anyone forget himself or herself?', with

> 'One must not be bitter about onself, Phillip. That leads to self hate, which in the end splinters one, and the splinters hurt others. Self-centredness, the Old Adam, has to die, you know, or change rather, before one can find spiritual freedom...'

But how does one escape that bitterness, that sense of life in a bleak void, which is at the root of Phillip's being here?

The answer, of course, comes through the agency of yet another Golden Virgin, Lily Cornford. Technically, the term is wholly inappropriate. Lily has had and lost a child; has been known in the past to 'pick up' men. But Lily has, despite the emotional and physical traumas of her past, remained more than intact. Her ability to forgive Keechey, to understand his motives, and her spiritual escape from the corruption that surrounds her, are what save her, and help to save Phillip, from the threats of the times. Phillip's love for her allows him not to take advantage of her, not to take 'what the Gods provide'. His spiritual sympathy for her comes from a strange likeness of thought, carefully described in their visit together to the Lake Woods of his boyhood. But

it is Lily's instinctive generosity of mind and spirit which count most of all, for it is from her that Phillip learns similar qualities. Her lovingkindness and honesty affect him; but her love *for* him is what seems most of all to free him from the traumas of his past. Figuratively, her influence is explained in one concise scene in France before the battle. Phillip joins his men by the camp fire, and is pleased and surprised that they seem to like and respect him. A feeling of warm harmony ensues; he is

> Jubilant that, at last, he felt that he belonged to the men of his platoon, as they to him... Nightingales were singing in the wood, and through the open flap of the tent shone the pale moonbeams. p.226

as well as economically combining the references of the popular song, an emblem of homesickness overcome, the words here hark back to the visit of Phillip and Lily to the woods, and to their disrupted attempt to hear the nightingale singing in the park at Randisbourne. Now, in the generous harmony that comes from comradeship, the same feelings of balance and love are achieved. The genuine tenderness which Phillip has experienced with and through Lily, a tenderness which transcends lust, which makes redundant the longing for the 'ideal' Helena, and which reproduced in different form the compassion of Catholicism, is the key to his moral development.

But it isn't easily bought. Being loved does not alone unlock the self from the darkness and blindness of the past. It is through his love for Lily that Phillip is shown to be *able* to make that transcendance, yet we are shown that it comes also through true insight into self. In the moments before the battle, Phillip realises that he can settle his fears only by looking inwards to himself, searching for that self-forgetfulness which alone will preserve him.

> If only he had dared to tell his fears to Father Aloysius, when he had the chance! But what were his fears? He must know them, if he was to master them.
> Julian Grenfell hunting Phillip Sassoon; the calalry subalterns in York hunting Otto Beit's son; Baldersby hunting himself; himself hunting Albert Hawkins. Ah, the missing Link! Albert Hawkins! Now the chain was complete! Albert Hawkins waiting behind the garden fence to see Mavis, long ago! 'Go on, Peter, give him a good lesson!' Albert Hawkins had stood still and let himself be hit by Peter Wallace until his face was woeful with tears and his new butterfly tie spoiled by his own blood. That was far worse than what Baldersby had done... Phillip prayed for foregiveness; then he got up and went to see how he might help his men, each in a separate loneliness. p.275

Summarised in this way, the formula of the novel may seem crude. We have a young man afflicted and produced by the spirit of the times in which he lives. To remedy his affliction, he encounters various alternatives: idealised but hopeless love; religious love; the true love, reciprocated, with a sympathetic and spiritually aware woman. Guided by this last, he is able to grow in self perception, and to transcend the dangers of the age, expressing his new sense of self and

duty in care for his men, in forgiveness of others and self. One counter to this charge of simplification could come from the text itself. The wound which Phillip receives on the battlefield comes as he turns to look after his men coming up behind him. Had he not stopped to guide them, he might not have been shot. But when he encounters Downham back in England, Downham who hasn't yet been to the front, he asks,

Shot in the arse, were you? What were you doing, running away again?

No clearer indication could be needed of the gap now grown between Phillip, with one kind of understanding, and those at home, with quite another.

But the technique itself of the novel also, and more subtly, answers the charges of crudeness or simplification. The governing images I have mentioned, Blind Law, Commerce, Eros, the multi-dimensional Golden Virgin itself; the numerous scenes which illustrate types of suspended or perverted judgement; the *gradual* growth of Phillip's love for Lily, all of these things subtilise and vivify the fiction to a point at which simplifications such as I have had to offer in this essay are likely to diminish its achievement.

And there is another major point which seems to me to rise out of the structural question. There can be little doubt that Williamson was, to an unusual degree, an autobiographical novelist. In the later volumes of the *Chronicle* especially, where we have the autobiographies from which to make comparison, it is hard to escape the conclusion that life and art are too often confused. But we'd make this a general judgement of Williamson to our loss. It would be easy to assume that because Williamson frequented the Gild Hall in his youth, it went unadapted and raw into his fiction, true because real. Wouldn't it also be a mistake to assume that that was how it was 'in reality'? Who knows, I don't, whether there *were* such figures in the porch? The important point, surely, is that he has either used or invented some figurative devices which help explain the times he was describing. Were we reading Henry James, or Dickens, or Lawrence, we would surely be alert to the possibility of such ambivalence; our eyes and ears would be ready for the significant detail which drew together and re-expressed subtle ideas. But it isn't customary to read Williamson in this way, to look for and examine the details of his texts for something beyond character or event. It is hardly done, even now, to look for *them,* not in Williamson.

But such effects are there, and they reveal an author able to take his place, in his best fiction, beside those of other writers. Language is the key: hardly surprising in fiction, but I mean language used not simply to re-tell or recreate the past, but to bring it into the truly living relationship that involves us, the author, the times he is depicting, *and* the words he uses. The same words as *we* use, with the same multiple and slippery meanings.

'Virginity', 'Love', 'duty', 'judgement', 'blindness', 'justice', 'sight': words used to govern this fiction; but because each is a complex word, with many dimensions of specific meaning, the fiction which turns on them is correspondingly complex, and shares their multi-dimensional natures.

The Golden Virgin is one example of the kind of fiction which I

believe Henry Williamson, at his best, was able to achieve. For me, that best extends from *How Dear is Life* to half way through *A Test to Destruction*. Four and half novels only, out of a much larger total. To say that these are the complex works, the works most alive to the possibilities of language, is not to deride or dismiss his other writing. But if one had to choose (and I think we do), then these novels seem to me to be those which most remarkably and most consistently reveal a novelist most aware, although perhaps at that subconscious level at which we all give meaning to language, of the possibilities of fiction. It is an awareness seldom if ever attributed to Williamson, for whom words and their complexities are so often seen as merely the records and recreations of plain facts; the facts of his own past; the facts of history; the facts of nature. But, as his marvellous best, as I hope I have been able, in a crude and abridging way, to show, words were far more potent and subtle things than we ordinarily acknowledge. It is that potency, and that subtlety which, in the end, persuades me that he is, and will always be, worth reading.

Notes

1. *The Golden Virgin*, Macdonald, London, 1957. All quotations are taken from this edition, and page numbers given.

2. 17th November, 1914.

3. OUP, 1975, pp. 132-3.