BETWEEN THE FLAX AND THE CHRONICLE

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This contribution was forwarded to me by Father Brocard Sewell. It was part of an unpublished thesis at the University of Kent about 1968. Luckily I have been able to trace Mr. McWilliams and he has signified his willingness for it to be published in the Journal, on the understanding that it is a 1968 view - not a 1985 one.

Editor

In some senses the period from 1928 to 1951 seems to have been the most active of Williamson's life, if one is prepared to forget the war years, as he could not. But it is a period in which the quality of action changes, becoming more forced, with more extreme repetition and habit. It is useful to place this shift against the move towards war with Germany, and perhaps later alongside the failure to 'win the peace' by consolidating victory into a European achievement.

In 1928 Williamson was a successful writer, as novelist, short story writer, essayist and journalist. He seems to have been a familiar figure around Fleet Street, or at least in the 'Compositor's Arms' in Poppins Court, then the popular meeting place of the literary and periodical world. Prominent in the following years are his friendship with T.E. Lawrence; the publication of a short monograph about him by a friend, Professor Herbert F. West; the Alcuin Press bibliography; and trips to New York and to Florida.

Success had come mainly with *Tarka the Otter*, and not long after this Williamson, in the *Express*, *The London Mercury*, and in two books, was setting himself on a limb (with Aldington perhaps) by taking war literature seriously in the battle of war books. The controversy was largely based upon an inability in many of those concerned to divorce literature from simple social, political, or historical comment: and upon publishers' willingness to issue war 'novels' many of which were little more than unearned general comment or disordered recollection.

Accomplished imaginative handling of war experience, as in *Her Privates We*, *Death of a Hero* and *A Farewell to Arms*, was rather beyond the range of Douglas Jerrold and his comrades in the phoney war, and suffered only marginally if at all. Less rigorous, or less novelistic imaginative writing (Blunden, Sassoon, Williamson) was not so able to escape involvement with judgment according to 'attitude'. Williamson's *The Patriot's Progress*, extreme and intensely expressed, was misrepresented to a greater degree than Blunden's or Sassoon's writing. (And still is, in fact. M.S. Greicus ('The English Novel and the 1914-18 War', Ph.D. thesis, Edinburgh, 1959) seems to adopt the criteria of the time in judging such novels according to whether they give a 'reasoned presentation of war' (p.213). Fortunately he does not consider Hemingway and the 'unreasonable wound'.) But it is unlikely that this reception bothered him a great deal, for temperamentally Williamson himself underrated the book.

All the same, close connections with literary society lapsed soon after the appearance of *The Patriot's Progress*, perhaps with the completion of the revised *Flax* novels, perhaps with the appearance of *The Gold Falcon*. This time also saw the beginning of Williamson's spiritual association with German fascism, or to be more precise, with the 'ex-soldier's' movement in Germany. Sir John Heygate's remarks in *These Germans* about Williamson's visit to Germany (see *Goodbye West Country* and *The Phoenix Generation*) indicate that he was a well-known sympathiser with German fascism before his Foreward to the 1936 *Flax* edition. A period begins, then, during which Williamson seems to live, or to attempt to live solely upon his convictions.

In 1937 he left the west country to begin a farming venture in East Anglia, believing that Britain's resources lay in the soil rather than in international confidence in her currency. This belief was not unusual in a literary world peopled by distributists, Adelphi groups, and Douglasites, although its origin was personal and not sectarian. Possibly one may trace the influence of Adolf Wagner or of Mosley's agricultural policy as set out in *The Blackshirt*, Oct. 21, 1933. His farming, at all events, was the consequence of complex personal and ideological needs. It took place in the vicinity of Stiffkey, a village not long over the troubles of the famous Rector, and likely to view with caution someone so eccentric as an author, and someone so outspoken as Mr. Williamson.

The local people ran true to form, and by the beginning of the war Williamson was in a situation uncannily similar to Lawrence's predicament at the height of the previous war. Williamson's insistence in investing 'dead' money in his farm for concreted roads, secure bridges, renewing the land, clearing streams and so on was construed amiss by the suspicious and war-wary as having an uncertain connection with German invasion plans. Suspicion was encouraged by Williamson's support for Mosley, his association with local fascist politics, and his membership of the Movement. Perhaps it was this support rather than local suspicion which led to a brief internment.

With the suspension of Habeas Corpus it was possible for such internments to be made without charges and without trial. No charge was made against Williamson and he was released without proceedings. One imagines that it would have been as difficult to find a charge against him that would stand up in court as it would have been had the police followed normal proceedings with Lawrence.

The farm had its successes and failures. The failures entered Williamson's family relationships and he became separated from his wife after the end of the war. He also left his farm to return to Devon. Middleton Murry had also run a community in the south of Norfolk at Thelnetham during the war, and the two writers began a lasting friendship. When Murry completed his twenty-fifth year as Editor of *The Adelphi* Williamson took over the editorship for part of 1948 and 1949. In 1949 he remarried and spent his honeymoon on the continent, paying a visit to his friend Richard Aldington at Le Lavendou. The descriptions of the trip which appeared in *The Adelphi* ('Words on the West Wind') give no indication of a change in the rigidity of his convictions; but it is possible, as Aldington suggested, that the time away from England had a therapeutic effect:

> Henry is already tanned old oak colour, wearing Provencal labourer's blue cotton togs, and trying to figure out how to live on a hundred francs a day. Says he can't write here, but the rest and change are good for him. He takes life and England and himself too seriously.
>
> 10.5.1949 to John Gawsworth, Alister Kershaw, Richard Aldington, p.31.

The marriage and the trip abroad seem to have been two elements of an opportune and general rejuvenation leading to the opening of the *Chronicle* in 1951.

But if circumstances in the late forties were changed, the previous twenty years produced no ostensible progress in Williamson's novelistic writing. It is the task of this chapter to consider the fragments of Williamson's literary pilgrimage during the thirties and forties; to show how, while in pieces, his writing preserved the strengths it drew upon later; and to account for his inability to find imaginative integration in his work from the age of 35 to 55, a strange time for a standstill.

Fragmentation

It is possible, without making too arbitrary divisions, to separate the pieces into which Williamson's writing fell. Of the five (war, nature, village, star-born, and autobiographical writing) the fifth, autobiographical writing is the least well defined, and necessarily so; for although the writing is divided, the parts become one in the author, and he himself colours all his writing in varying degrees. *The Pathway* contains tensions which threaten a fragmentation into these four groups; and so, ignoring any separate treatment of autobiographical writing, I will lead on using *The Pathway* as a guide to this fragmented period. If nothing more, the links with *The Pathway* allow one to see the writing in this time as retaining a loose purposive form across separate books and undertakings.

The connections between the village background in *The Pathway* and the life and characters drawn and discussed in *The Village Book* and *The Labouring Life* are obvious. The village of Georgeham in North Devon is a similar location to that in the novel - inland, but close to cliffs and the Torridge estuary. Certain figures in the novel have their counterparts in *The Labouring Life*. Warbeck is present, if not named. Clib the sexton has the same manner and repetitious speech given to Mules. Occasionally the words of the Vicar in *The Labouring Life* match Garside's remarks.

Incidents and characters in the village writing do reflect elsewhere in Williamson's works. For instance the vicar's servant, Coneybeare, has a chapter devoted to him in the first edition of *The Children of Shallowford*, and seems to be the prototype for Ripingall, Phillip Maddison's manservant in *The Phoenix Generation*. So one is tempted to stress the imaginative significance of these characters rather than their roots, if any, in real life; and Williamson advises us to do so in his preliminary 'Note' to *The Labouring Life*. It is worth repeating his statement in 'Reflections on a Theme' that 'All these characters stream through my consciousness; but I, as novelist, manipulate some sort of balance'.

Nevertheless it is important not to ignore Williamson's need to rely upon facts and persons for the groundwork of his inspiration. Often in this interim period of writing, weaknesses come directly from a failure to reintegrate such experience or to control it purposively. The presence of such failures - common in *The Gold Falcon*, for instance - testify to the achivement of the writing where no such division or hesitation is noticeable.

The form of *The Village Book* and *The Labouring Life* reveals an attempt to overcome fragmentation. Their writing took place in the ten years between 1919 and 1929, and a number of chapters or stories from each (if not a large proportion) began as independent and unique accounts or stories set in and around Georgeham. These appeared in periodicals and newspapers. One

appeared in book form.

In these stories, often in print soon after the writing, Williamson had what he describes in the 'Note' to *Life in a Devon Village* as witness of 'an observed and authenticated period that has now passed away'. In mass they would have little form. When selected for the two books they appeared under two general headings : 'The Spirit of the Village' and 'Air and Light of the Fields and the Sea'. The 1930 volume deals with Winter and Spring; the 1932 volume with Summer and Autumn. (If there is a connection here with the section headings in *The Pathway*, I have failed to notice it). In both volumes the stories progress from one category to the other and back so that the reader is unaware of the general headings unless he refers back, perhaps with intuition, to the contents tables.

In 1944 Williamson reconsidered the two books and revised them into *Tales of a Devon Village* and *Life in a Devon Village*. In notes to both he says that he 'was never fully satisfied by them (the earlier collections); they were a collection of varying fragments rather than unified books'. The formal unity of the first volumes was more hoped for than real, but an attempt had been made. It was, in fact, an attempt to point up and organise unifying elements already there, rather than to impose a semblance of unity on random writings. The quality of unifying strands in the earlier collections is purely stylistic - an essential bond between record and description reflecting a strength of perception upon tension, ambivalence and regeneration in the world.

In the later collections an attempt is made to heighten the unity by limiting the number of stories retained, assessing the two collections anew, discarding eight stories from one and fourteen from the other, and by adding 'The Linhay on the Downs', altogether a more powerful piece of writing than many of the stories set outside the village which were no longer retained. In these second collections the groupings of contents are abandoned; and rightly so, for the selection and revision and polishing of the text introduces an amorphous but tangible feeling of interaction between chapters, without in any way impeding the clarity and seeming simplicity of the writing.

There is no room in this study for detailed consideration of the quality of the writing in *The Labouring Life* and the later collections (*The Village Book* is a lesser achievement); but the nature of their success is of some importance for any critical understanding of Williamson's pilgrimage. They do not tempt the reader to be protective or parochial (any precious appreciation would be false) for they reveal the technique and justification behind the descriptive method of the *Chronicle*.

Speaking in the introduction to *As the Sun Shines* (USA). (US ed. TLL (1933) quoted *As the Sun Shines*, Faber (1941) Williamson shows that the initial process of collecting the stories for the earlier volumes was disposed towards revision in that it took place across a change in his artistic temperament:

> While yet in the wilderness of my illusions I began to write *The Village Book*; and although fatigued from the conception and writing of the four novels ending with *The Pathway*, I still felt I had the power to write a new truth, to transmute, by the ardour of vision, sand into air ascending. Now that I have finished the job . . . I wish that I had perceived before the only truth that I can now accept: the truth that truth is not so much a vision of reformation as an understanding of things as they are.

He links perception with an issue in the imaginative handling of actual persons and real experience:

> Have I, for example, written truly about the character called the Rector? I call him an imaginary character, because I have manipulated him, for the purposes of fiction, while writing the various stories in which he appears. Therefore the character is a Williamson - rector; the Rector is not, by reason of the manipulation, a truthful portrait of any living man. At the same time it would be comteptible and dishonest to deny that the character is based upon the incumbent of the village where I lived for several years.

Then he confirms his sense of a weakness or lack of integration in the impulses behind the first collection:

> When I said above that I had wished I had returned from the wilderness before I began *The Village Book*, I meant that as man and writer I would like to be as the sun, which divines the true or inner nature of living things.

It is necessary to explore the nature of this change in temperament.

An analogy with Yeats is helpful, if not fully appropriate. Like Yeats, Williamson was sensitive to dual forces in the world working towards and away from harmony. Yeats formulated his idea of this harmony in *A Vision*, giving a context (at least in his own imagination) to image and symbol which were returned to life through his poetry. Williamson's *The Star-born* is a similar, if unsuccessful attempt to schematise an imaginative harmonious world. Both books testify to a single-minded intensity of vision, highly schematised, forming a symbolic or absolute pole in a dual understanding of life. In *The Tower* Yeats achieves what Williamson begins to see the need for; he returns his vision into life as a point of fixed reference and artistic control, making possible the handling of 'the true or inner nature of *living* things' (my italics). Williamson's writing in *The Labouring Life* signifies the first step towards his presenting both the dancer and the dance without compromising either.

The Pathway led to forcing truth rather than revealing it, to presenting it direct rather than disclosing it, and contained compromise of the quality of vision and of the detail and natural relations of persons and events. Coming to see 'the truth that Truth is not so much a vision of reformation as an understanding of things as they are', it was possible to envisage writing that could contain the world and the vision together, unimpaired. The movement so far in Williamson's writing has been from intuitive, to rigid, to restrained explanation in narrative form. Restraint heralded the possibility of a new dawn. For when Williamson discusses narrative distortion of a 'truthful portrait of any living man', he is becoming sensitive to a distinction between meaningful explanation of events in narrative form and justified explanation. I have called this development temperamental, for it seems to cross deep-rooted attitudes in the imagination, which in art separate into two kinds of work, as seen in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Clifford Leech describes the distinction:

> On the one hand there is the man who wishes us to see the things around us more sharply than we normally do, to sympathise with other men, however different from us in upbringing or habit of life, to observe both in them and in ourselves the ineluctible and the irreducible facts of human existence. And on the other there is the man who wants to penetrate beneath the skin of observable fact, to explore a dream-world which has a valid relationship with the world of doing and

> conscious thought. (S. Clifford Leech 'Two Romantics ...' *Contemporary Theatre*, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 4, London (1962), p.14).

Perhaps Williamson's restraint shows a change towards containing both kinds of writing, rather than, as in *The Pathway*, moving from one to the other.

Primarily, however, and in what is accomplished in *The Labouring Life*, the change in temperament represents a maturer attitude towards recreation of past experience, for it is revealed most noticeably in the unwillingness to heighten a low-keyed narrative. If narrative explanation is common to both the novelist and the historian, it is not surprising to find Herbert Butterfield making a distinction between processional and recreated historical explanation. He poses the question, rhetorically, of 'whether the structural necessities of the artistic opportunities of literary form stimulated further devices of historical understanding'. (Herbert Butterfield, *History and Human Relations*, London (1951), p.230). In Williamson, there is just such a move towards a formalisation of experience, which I have termed a more rigid narrative structure. The move to restraint in *The Labouring Life* is matched in Butterfield's further statement that, 'unless the life of the past is envisaged for its own sake ... and the presonalities themselves recovered just for love, the scientific analyses that we will make will be liable to abberation, and we may go wrong in our very attempts to relate cause and effect'. Williamson sees as much in his new conception of truth. But insight and resolution are not the same, neither in historiography, nor in fiction.

Butterfield's second statement supposes that appealing and apparently meaningful structures of cause and effect can be put into question by detailed factual recreation of things 'for their own sake'. Williamson's new position, and his new kind of recreation in *The Labouring Life*, pose problems for narrative heightening of cause and effect with such techniques as plot, characterisation, protagonist, statement, and attitude. If he suggests that what he was trying to *do* in *The Pathway* seems 'illusory' in retrospect; so also the change in attitude puts at issue the manner of the doing. The artistic habits developed in the twenties are not immediately transferable to the kind of writing in *The Labouring Life*. So it does not strike one as unusual that Williamson should have been unable to address himself successfully to the extension or heightening of this new writing.

The problems posed for the handling of heightened techniques are inherent in his new-found sensitivity to *just* selection and presentation, as opposed to imaginatively viable selection and presentation. All the same, in *The Labouring Life* he had moved towards an understanding of a surer fictional descriptive method. In his mind he could conceive critically the kind of task involved in extending this method into the story of Phillip Maddison.

If in moments the issues seemed straightforward, an attempt to put them into practice by extending the low-keyed method of the village books into novelistic writing was soon frustrated. On the one hand the achievement of the village books seemed to deny him the opportunity of larger narrative organisation. On the other hand, Williamson still retained the habits and tendencies of the *Flax* writing, with the needs and attitudes that produced it; factors which seem to be part of his personality.

Given a degree of frustration upon the new direction his writing might have been expected to take, it is not surprising that a long period of time should pass before resolution. For time was needed before any simple and effective recreation in his own mind could take place - the recreation in his mind that would allow the imaginative retrospection of 'ancient sunlight'. But

before experience could find its 'true' perspective, the challenge of conviction remained unabated. It was exacerbated by the likelihood of war; but equally as important it was linked with deep-rooted elements in Williamson's psyche. The old issues had to be explored, and so there is a repetitious moving away from and back to the scheme and mood of *The Pathway*. One begins to see a general movement out of that I have already suggested. Experience leads to intuitive writing or testament, usually autobiographical not imaginative, and usually soon after the events concerned. Next there is a rigid Pathway-like or Star-born-like handling in novel form of the same experience. Finally there is a more restrained and graceful treatment. In the thirties and forties the restrained recreation of experience is put off in the face of a more immediate need to record and then to explore further recent experience. This postponement led to two versions of *The Star-born* two versions of *The Gold Falcon*, and to *The Sun in The Sands* and *The Phasian Bird* as well as some shorter explorations. It finally succumbed when technical and other frustrations lapsed, given opportunity, and perhaps at a time when there seemed less need to handle recent experience at once.

We must examine the repeated process in the novels, bearing in mind that there must always have been a possibility of achieving resolution within an adjusted 'Pathway' scheme; and trying to discover how it was that such a possibility appears to have been more abstract than real. The key to these questions lies in *The Star-born*.

The Star-born Theme

The Star-born and related writings represent the most forceful imaginative line in Williamson's work before the *Chronicle*. Texts of *The Star-born* date back to 1922, but from Williamson's description ('Some Notes ... ' p.56) we know that the first writing for 'The Flax' anticipates it; as does the story 'The Change' written at the latest in 1921 for inclusion in *The Lone Swallows*. It seems to be the earliest published representative of the 'star-born' theme that we have, and it is a good medium for discussion of the theme in his writing.

In the story the narrator meets a figure standing by a wood. The two men are in the outskirts of a city where housing and allotments have encroached upon previously open agricultural land. The figure laments the memory of a sweeter past, and his words suggest an association between his own growth to maturity or loss of innocence and the spread of the city or loss of the countryside:

> 'I had a friend in those days, a true friend, to whom I told all the things in my heart. Together we wandered and explored the big woods in the country'. (*The Lone Swallows*, rep. London (1948), p.178. Text as 1922 ed. except that the name 'Jerry' was originally 'Terry')

Times of childhood or adolescence seem better to Julien, when he had a complete relationship with a friend in a sufficient world - that of the countryside. The situation is the same as in the first part of *The Dream of Fair Women* which laments the loss of the world of Rookhurst and Colham and the ending of friendship with Jack Temperley. Both in 'The Change' and in *Dandelion Days*, the boys swear life-friendship as the world threatens the sufficiency of their pleasure in nature.

The memory of lost harmony is heightened with awareness of present decay and despair:

> When the sun slants through the trees at its edge, you can see the blur of rusting tins and papers deep beneath. But in those days it was beautiful and beloved of a wandering Kingfisher. (Ibid.p.180).

The narrative description is impartial, though seeingly associated with the perception of the 'I' figure:

> The sun came over the houses, the starlings whistled and clucked among the smoke-burnt and red chimney pots. Wives in the houses were preparing breakfast for their men who soon would walk quickly down the pavements towards the station: another day's work in London was beginning. (Ibid.p.180).

Julien's recollection of tranquility in emotion does not affect the reality of the world; so when he begins his story it is seen to reciprocate self-knowledge. Williamson's story is called 'The Change', and Julien's reaction against the world's change (which he views pessimistically) matches his attitude towards a change in himself - the growth of sexual need - which he has been unable to handle.

The manner of the story is comparable to much in later writing. At first the relationship between Julien and Louise is closest to that between Willie Maddison and Elsie Norman. Julien sees Louise first in the countryside: '"I just stood and looked at her. Then she was gone, and I hid behind a hedge, but she did not look back."' The same scene is found in *The Flax of Dream*. Similarly, Louise's father is an artist, as is Mr. Norman, testifying once more to Williamson's interest in creativity and heredity, which in *The Star-born* makes the protagonist's father (unknown to him) a poet who despaired in life, committing suicide or disappearing.

Julien is rejected when he offers marriage to Louise; just as Maddison is rejected by Elsie and by Eve, and later almost rejected by Mary; just as 'the star-born' is rejected by Mamis; and Manfred by Barbara. The nature of the rejection is comparable in each case. It amounts to postponement or qualified affection from each partner. The qualification concerns the rigidity of the character's poetic attitudes; but the effect of the rejection is to postpone or deny any physical progress in the relationship. One might note that this situation finds resolution in the tentative relationship between Phillip Maddison and Helena Rolls in the *Chronicle*.

Louise refuses Julien's offer of marriage, frustrating him and leading him to reveal the solipsistic roots of his desire for her. When he tries to force himself upon her rather brutally, 'the tenderest girl became a spitfire'; she struggles free and tells him what it is that prevents any real contact between them. She diagnoses the cause of his otherness and lack of tenderness:

> "'Julien, Julien won't you make a great effort to kill your egoism? Cannot you see that your intolerance of all people because they have not the same fervour about poetry as yourself will eventually cripple all your powers? You sneer at Jerry, who is one of the dearest boys, because he doesn't want to hear you quote 'The Hound of Heaven'; you sneer at your own father because you say that he doesn't understand you. Oh, Julien, won't you try to alter things for your own sake?'
> 'Not for yours?' I sneered.
> 'For your own, Julien,' she replied quietly.
> 'You don't love me?'
> 'Not as you love me, Julien.'
> 'No, of course not! You don't know what love is! I can eat my heart out for you; dream, dream in London all the time, pine in the smoke,

> and no one understands me. Not one! The Poet is always the outcast, from Christ downwards. The world smashes and destroys genius - the genius that is always trying to make others see the beauty in the world, and make humanity happier.' (Ibid.p.184.85).

Julien's 'genius' is bound up with his inability to find a satisfactory relationship with the girl - it is a means of escaping from it, sublimating it, and, of course, retaining it. When he says that the poet is always the outcast, while he may be right in a sense, he is blaming the world for a stance he has adopted towards it. Wilbo, Maddison, and Manfred reach equivalent positions.

In *The Flax of Dream* Elsie's words at the end of the second novel match those of Louise, and later (in *The Pathway*) Mary repeats some of Louise's words, defining and limiting her relationship with Maddison:

> 'Do you love me?'
> 'In my own way I do', she murmured.
> 'Only in your own way? Don't you love me as a woman loves a man?'
> 'I'm not certain.' (*The Flax of Dream*, p.1250).

Meanwhile in both *The Gold Falcon* and *The Star-born* the protagonist forms a spiritual relationship with a girl engaged to another man - the physical extension of the relationship is avoided. While in *The Phasian Bird* the protagonist lives in peculiar isolation.

I said earlier that the process I am illustrating cannot have been predetermined. There must in theory have been other solutions, optimism rather than pessimism. In Williamson's writing optimism in resolving a spiritual relationship appears twice only; and only at this level where the world and the flesh do not challenge the relationship. First there is a story 'The Maiden Salmon' in *Devon Holiday*, and second the projected film version of *Tarka the Otter* in *Goodbye West Country*. The two are very similar, and I will look only at the second.

The film was to differ from the novel; Tarka becoming a pet otter that escapes. Then the film would follow the novel up to the death scene. The writer who reared the animal traces its fate in the wild; and after its death he records the tale 'all that night'. When the writing is complete:

> He has spent all of himself in this sublimation of his life. He begins to feel the reaction, bitter doubt, as the illusion fades. He has worked himself to the end of his powers - and for what? (*Goodbye West Country*, p.319).

Resolution in art does not lead to resolution in life; although apparently it could be done in film, for at this moment 'the girl' is drawn to the writer, inexorably.

> She tells him she too has known of the otter, and has longed to search with him for it - she reads a page of his MS. - 'But I never thought to meet anyone who felt as I do', she cries, involuntarily. The Search is over; he has achieved manhood. (Ibid., p.320).

The end of the optimistic conclusion, however, unearned, is manhood. The imaginative quest is a sublimation of a 'Search' for manhood. If, as a corollary, the pessimistic endings sublimate a sence of failure to achieve 'manhood', it is not surprising that they should be unable to present any resolution in personal relationships. It is not surprising that they should

have been forced into fantasy, isolation, and repetition as long as the need to write them existed.

These apparently optimistic stories do not offer any solution, although they clarify the issues and it is possible that they come from happer moments in Williamson's personal life. They appeared in 1935 and 1937, being written no later than 1935. Any long-term resolution is out of the question if one considers *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, *The Phasian Bird* and the reprinting of *The Gold Falcon* and *The Star-born* over the next decade. There is no resolution or integration back into life, as promised at the end of *The Labouring Life*:

> Now it is time to quit my solitary stance overlooking the village. LIVING! says the great landlord of the sun, burning bright over all. LIVING! answers old Jinny Carter, at the verge of the grave; and, we all hope ... living Beyond. (p.487).

Instead, the endings bring news of death.

In 'The Change' Louise goes away to Devon with her father, she dies, and Julien is remorseful, blaming himself for her death. He tells of this and then leaves the narrator 'with no sound of footfall'. The story ends as follows:

> The leaf spun insistently as the wind passed wearily onwards, and beside me the long green grasses held their drops of light-laden water, nor was there any mark as of feet having pressed there, nor any trail leading away.
> With a vague mournfulness I turned and went along the miry path to the roadway, where a tattered fence gaped forlornly. The land was sold, the trees would be cut down, and useful houses erected. Perhaps the spirit of the dead haunted that wilderness of torn branches and charred fire-circles, to find rest only where all was changed. Never again would I go back among those poor trees, where in the cruel days of youth sweet hopes had been crushed like a wood-anemone under careless and unknowing feet. *(The Change, p.187-188)*

Julien, like the *'star-born'*, loses his identity and fades away in rather unearthy fashion. He disappears while his words live on in the narrator, just as Maddison's words live on in Mary and his friends. (The tension or fantasy may come from a sense of Julien as a past or heightened self of the narrator - the usual metaphor between character and author in Williamson being brought *into* the story.)

Although deep-set problems of the author's personality can be sublimated in writing, this sublimation does not redeem the individual from the presence of the problems in his everyday personality. The literary personality may in part be a means to escaping or distancing personal problems, but unless it becomes a means to exploring them and returning them to the full individual, the writing will not complete a therapeutic journey.

The imaginative exploration in Williamson's 'star-born' writing either enters fantasy or begins to fragment just at the moment when it is faced with the need to return to the problems of personality which originally (at one level) set the process going. This frustration (with the two exceptions) leads to the death of the girl or the protagonist. Alternatively, with a more heightened ending, the protagonist disappears into the 'Beyond', redeemed by his vision to an otherworldly or heavenly condition.

It is instructive to consider Williamson's comments upon these aspects of his writing, and particularly to note his sense of tension in his personality. In 'The Change' there is a deep division between Julien and his father. We see this again the *The Flax of Dream*, and it begins *The Sun in the Sands*. In *The Children of Shallowford* this division is seen as the consequence of a 'breaking-in' of 'natural intelligence'. Talking of himself, Williamson says that 'the mental barbed-wire became, at seventeen, material barbed-wire.' *(The Children of Shallowford (1939), p.230.)* Extended to a general loss of 'natural intelligence' in Williamson's mind, it can be said to have led to the war. His own repression or incompletion has become identified with the fact of war. The attempt to resolve the problems discussed above is inseparable from Williamson's concern with the war. The failure of *The Flax of Dream* as a messianic document for the young goes hand in hand with its failure to redeem a flawed personality.

After the failure, in *Goodbye West Country*, Williamson says that 'all artists, to become real people, have to assume another self, and learn to discard it, lest it envelope them.' The same year, in *Richard Jefferies*, he says: 'Yet to be too imaginative is not healthy, for that state arises from inactivity or frustration, which is also a kind of death.' Then in *Children of Shallowford* he says that 'the two worlds, of imagination and reality, were irreconcilable, almost hostile, within one human being'. While in *The Gold Falcon*, Manfred says,

> 'For awhile I believed in a personal sunrise, rather a particular star-rise, but now I hear the receding roar of a ruined star falling backwards beyond the rim of time (my little span of time) and know that it will never shine.' (p.32)

The next year, Williamson finds himself 'rootless, fallen in a gap wide between two worlds *(Sun In The Sands, p.108)*. In each statement he suggests that he had pursued the imaginative line too far, that he had become enveloped with his assumed self and unable to break back into a simple personal reality. The moment of acute realisation must have been to find that he was treating his children just as his father had treated him.

The start of the Norfolk venture may in part have been an attempt to break away from this condition by testing his ideas on the land rather than on paper. For the affirmation 'LIVING!' of 1932 had lapsed in five years of 'inactivity or frustration ... a kind of death'. In going to Norfolk Williamson was challenging his ability to face destiny and come through - the move would either lead to his Götterdämmerung or to a regeneration into Parsifal, spiritual death or spiritual life. It was the opportunity to warp his personality to the land as well as to a vision of star-reality. The novel dealing with a similar period in Phillip Maddison's career is called *Lucifer Before Sunrise*. The title evokes the presence of life and death in the one person. Lucifer is both lightbringer and prince of darkness; and Lucifer before sunrise states man's or Williamson's condition - living or dying in the knowledge that sunrise or harmony is possible. As Pozzo says, 'The light gleams an instant' in the birth astride the grave.

The Children of Shallowford describes the morning in 1926 when Williamson's son Windles was born. Loetitia had stayed the night with the midwife, and in the morning Williamson walked down to the house from his cottage. At first his mood was elated, but this changed to doubt:

> Perhaps Loetitia was dead? During the tangle of thoughts of the previous night ... the dark idea had grown in me that she would die. The idea had increased until it had almost overwhelmed me; but I had struggled with it, and stopped it, only to feel it growing again with a terrifying

> weight of darkness which had to be thrust away and made impotent. This idea had tried to overcome me during a period of, roughly, an hour. It was entwined with, perhaps arising from, another set of ideas ... the theme of resurrection or resurgence of European man. Later, after the sweet release, it had come to me that I had, as it were, received upon myself the periodic waves of labour pain felt by Loetitia three miles away. Indeed, this thought had been behind the black idea of death - for at one period I had almost believed I had been helping Loetitia in her struggle for life. *(The Children of Shallowford, p.39.)*

At the moment of birth, death is present in Williamson's imagination. He explores its presence on two levels. Firstly it is fear, based on his knowledge of the world, which is again intensified in association with a general implication. The personal and the ideological are together. Strength of emotion or experience in one reflects into or is broadcast through the other.

Furthermore his wife's labour in giving birth is analogous to his own labour in writing; and she is, then, subject to the powers of light and dark present in his own personal struggle for rebirth. The analogy of tension leads to his second explanation which poses a harmony between himself and his wife, as if he 'had been helping Loetitia in her struggle for life'. Her struggle for life is stressed, not her struggle to give birth. It is a moment of complete identity between the seer and his wife; but on the whole such harmony was not available and demanded special circumstances.

Without personal harmony Williamson was left 'fallen in a gap wide between two worlds' tending towards the extremity of *The Star-born*, a book facing death in a revealing way. The links between *The Star-born* and *The Flax of Dream* are clear in *The Pathway*, but it is useful to refer back to 'Paternity' while looking at the opening of *The Star-born*. Its two versions begin thus:

> Till her dying day Esther remembered the dream. In the night lurked something dark and terrible, and it had come from the utter darkness of ruined stars. All things fled from it. *(The Star-born I, p.15).*

> Till her dying day, Esther remembered the dream. She was pressed down by a heavy weight of blackness in which she could neither cry out nor move. In the blackness there was something greater than fear, an inertia beyond terror; and all things were striving to escape from it. In the teror if its imminent presence all things had life ... and all things strove to move from the presence which was of the utter darkness of ruined stars. *(The Star-Born II, p.15).*

It would be difficult to account in detail for some of the writing in *The Star-born;* but it is possible to see the general issues handled, and the implication of their handling.

Here familiarity with 'Paternity' suggests that the force is time. The perception of time in the description of John Maddison contrasts time with eternity, equating a sense of time with an awareness of death. Death comes from 'ruined stars' - it is something that categorizes existence, something predetermined and cosmic. Facing death can bring an 'inertia beyond terror' if transcendence or release is not available, as Williamson indicated in *Richard Jefferies*. All things strive to escape death; and the paradox is common enough that 'in its presence all things have life'.

Williamson was conscious of death at the moment of his son's birth. In *The Beautiful Years*, Willie's mother dies giving him birth, just as Barley in *The Innocent Moon* dies giving birth to Phillip's son. There is no escape from

death. Yet there is something in men that denies death. In Willie Maddison's boyhood this something grows as a perception into a transcendent sufficient world revealed in nature. It is sufficient and protective, akin to the instinctive wholeness between child and mother. In Maddison this oneness is always threatened by the world, and it is finally made ambivalent (i.e. destroyed) when the boy passes into physical maturity. The knowledge of sexual desire is equated with knowledge of death.

In 'Paternity' an owl is present at Willie's birth. It is taken by the villagers to be a harbinger of death, but it is an ambiguous sign. Williamson's choice of such a device for himself would seem to suggest a feeling of his own place between two worlds - an uncertain harbinger of death during a quest for reintegration, lost wholeness, or transcendence. It is not only in *The Beautiful Years* that the owl anticipates an ability to find both beauty and tragedy in the world.

In *The Star-born* the level of fantasy allows a different approach to the issues discussed in this chapter. It allows a break from the determined process of life: birth and oneness with the mother; innocence in pleasure and reality; guilt in sexual knowledge; frustration in the world; death. Here the child is born (with a twin sister, Mamis) and is soon taken from the mother to 'the Beyond' by an owl. He remains there until returning to the world as a young man. The child never experiences the process of independence through separate cognition and the growth of selfhood and apartness from the mother. Nor does it experience the growth of sexual desire and need. Instead it finds immediate contact with a fantasy extension of Willie's or Holloman's nature-harmony. In this it gains knowledge of an ideal existence, so that on returning to the world the star-born has a full perception akin to that threatended sense of harmony in Willie Maddison.

As a figure in the form of a man, the Star-born is able to adopt ideal stances and unequivocal attitudes to the world, for he is not threatened by its forces from within himself. He can take up a kind of love-relationship with Mamis (now a young woman) which is platonic, perhaps because of his ignorance of desire, perhaps because she is his earthly sister - the kind of idealized feminine figure Dolly and Eve refuse to be diminished to. But in the end, like Maddison and Julien and the others, he disappears from the world, leaving behind him the memory of his coming and of his attitudes. (The association between the Star-born and Christ which is present in the 1933 version is greatly modified and never specific in the 1948 edition.)

He does not die. Like Julien he disappears mysteriously. Instead of death these figures return to an abstracted or spiritual mother-figure, called the 'White Mother-Maiden' in *The Star-born*. Birth is a separation from this *Ur-Mutter* and death is a return to her, a return to spiritual innocence and unworldly existance, a move from time to eternity. A further analogy with Yeats is appropriate here. One recalls the fifth stanza of 'Among School Children':

> What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
> Honey of generation had betrayed
> And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
> As recollection or the drug decide,
> Would think her son, did she but see that shape
> With sixty or more winters on its head,
> A compensation for the pang of his birth,
> Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

The Star-born crosses the barrier between the spiritual and the earthly worlds, his perception undrugged, purer than the troublesome 'recollection' found in Maddison. (Yeats employs no cosmic mother-figure, of course. Only Hesse seems to have experienced this aspect of Williamson's inspiration with comparable intensity.)

It is difficult to assess the value of *The Star-born* as literature, and it is not really necessary to do so. Its value to Williamson's readers is clear enough, for it reveals an ideal process towards which many figures in the novels tend to lean. Because of this I have given a simple account of the book. Now it would be as well to note that Williamson, even in fantasy, was unable to tolerate such a simple or unambiguous statement; and that the issues explored with Maddison and similar characters are introduced into 'the Beyond'.

They appear during the Star-born's instruction in the spirit-harmony of the world. Their vehicle is a spirit named Wanhope (appropriately enough) whose thinking threatens the simple beauty and cheerful harmony that the spirits deal in. Wanhope speaks with the voice of Hardy at times, if one judges the tone of his ideas, but is revealed as a Christ-figure during the story. In fact Williamson ('H.W.') explains to Barley that Wanhope 'is Christ'. *The Sun in the Sands, p.226).* But if Wanhope is Christ, then he is a Christ who has 'Jefferies, van Gogh, Shelley, Byron, Beethoven, Shakespeare, Wagner and other poets' for his disciples or saints.

The harmony of the spirits is best explained according to the way it transcends death in the world. It is a harmony 'from everlasting to everlasting' far beyond the 'little span of time' than man knows. Two images that appear quite frequently in Williamson's writing illustrate this: the may-fly and the nightingale.

The may-fly's life-span is brief and vivid, usually from dawn to sunset - its destiny lies with the sun. Watching a may-fly, Williamson observes, 'I began to marvel at the mystery and fidelity of the life or spirit-cycle of which she, frail beauty, was but a servant.' *(Goodbye West Country, p.197.)* The may-fly images an existence made meaningful in terms of a larger order. There is an element of the phoenix in the image. While in *The Star-born* Wanhope sees 'a strange star ... arising out of the east, like a silver may-fly from the stream of heaven.' *(The Star-born I, p.29.)* The morning star, which is the 'White Mother-Maiden", rises signifying the transfiguration of the child into a 'star-born' like the change from larva (a wordly form) to may-fly (an ideal form).

The nightingale bridges the earthly and harmonious worlds. The birds live and die, but their song is eternal, a part of them which denies death. The song of a nightingale calls Holloman to a sense of Mystic unity which prevents his complete involvement with Dolly. In *The Star-born* 'the song of the nightingale ... will bear the Star-born beyond mortal pain.' It is a medium for contact with the absolute, where between one life and all life there is harmony. Wanhope speaks against this harmony, finding a different beauty in the world. He claims that the spirit-harmony ignores elements in the world which are not consistent with its optimism in creation. The owls kill for food: 'Everything lives by death, and without food they cannot be'. He tells the Star-born that 'Death is nothingness ... It is the end and purpose of life.' Wanhope looks to a different aspect of the world, 'saddened by death and pain,' to a different beauty. He asks himself 'do I want to know where the notes of a sky-lark go when they leave the bird's throat? Like Jimmy Carter, he asks for life in the face of death and necessity - he asks for reality and not a flax of dream:

> 'Life is as a ruined star falling from its orbit, life is maintained only by hope for what men call the future, which is a dream to escape the truth of their lives.' *The Star-Born I, p.84).*

But in admitting the need to dream he returns to the unresolved position of the novels - having denied harmony he cannot escape the need to dream of its possibility.

So *The Star-born* gives us an insight into the nature of the problem in Williamson's writing at this time; but it does no further in resolving the issues. At the end of the book the Star-born returns to the 'Mother-Maiden' from whom he came. Death, sexuality, and ambiguity are side-stepped again. Wanhope reindicates the direction of *The Labouring Life* by pointing to the quality of life before death or transfiguration. But this and the village writing remain pointers in a direction Williamson did not fully explore for some time yet.

The White House, Braunton Burrows.

Scraperboard by Ian McGinnes