

Henry Williamson and the Lives of Animals

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Abstract

The nature writings of Henry Williamson deserve reevaluation. The qualities of Williamson's work have never been fully acknowledged, in part because of the disproportionate attention given to the flawed and uneven novel sequence *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* (1951–1969). His controversial involvement with extreme right-wing politics has also adversely affected his reputation. This thesis will suggest that Williamson's nature writings, in particular his animal biographies – *Tarka the Otter* (1927), *Salar the Salmon* (1935) and *The Phasian Bird* (1948) – represent his greatest literary achievement, and that these three major works merit a prominent place in any critical survey of the development of the twentieth-century English novel.

Williamson's use of the novel form to represent the lives of animals involves the complex task of conveying the experience and consciousness of non-human subjects. The degree to which this necessarily leads to an anthropomorphic approach will be addressed. In addition, it will be argued that his writings represent an early, and often ground-breaking, example of how narrative fiction can draw attention to environmental issues. His treatment of these issues also illustrates one of the ways that elements of fascist ideology influence his nature writing.

Williamson's narratives are characterised by a complex combination of realism and allegory, through which the lives of animals and humans are shown to be interconnected. Hunting functions in his work as an important means of exploring this connection; his development of an allegorical relationship between hunting and war establishes parallels between the experiences of hunted animals and soldiers on the battlefield.

This study will chart his development as an animal biographer. The approach will be chronological. It will first identify those features of his early sketches and short stories that established the foundations for his later novels and then explore in detail the narratives of *Tarka*, *Salar* and *The Phasian Bird*. It will closely examine the drafts and source materials held in the Henry Williamson Archive Collection at the University of Exeter. Such a detailed examination of his work has never been carried out before; the intention is to establish the significance of Henry Williamson's contribution to nature writing and to literature more generally.

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Abbreviations

Books by Henry Williamson referred to in this thesis, with date of first publication

These are given in chronological order. After the first reference to any one of these texts is made in the thesis, it is referred to by the abbreviated form given below.

When reference is made to a specific edition, this is indicated by the given date.

<i>The Lone Swallows</i> (Collins)	(1922)	LS
<i>The Peregrine's Saga</i> (Collins)	(1923)	PS
<i>The Old Stag</i> (Putnam)	(1926)	OS
<i>Tarka the Otter</i>	(1927)	TO
<i>Devon Holiday</i>	(1931)	DH
<i>Tarka the Otter</i> (illustrated)	(1932)	TOI
<i>The Lone Swallows</i> (Putnam)	(1933)	LSP
<i>The Gold Falcon</i>	(1933)	GF
<i>The Peregrine's Saga</i> (Putnam)	(1934)	PSP
<i>The Linhay on the Downs</i>	(1934)	LOD
<i>Salar the Salmon</i>	(1935)	SS
<i>Goodbye West Country</i>	(1937)	GWC
<i>The Children of Shallowford</i>	(1939)	COS
<i>The Story of a Norfolk Farm</i>	(1941)	SNF
<i>The Old Stag</i> (illustrated)	(1946)	OSI
<i>The Phasian Bird</i>	(1948)	PB
<i>Tales of Moorland and Estuary</i>	(1950)	TME
<i>A Clear Water Stream</i>	(1958)	CWS
<i>The Henry Williamson Animal Saga</i>	(1960)	HWAS

<i>The Phoenix Generation</i>	(1965)	<i>PG</i>
<i>Collected Nature Stories</i>	(1970)	<i>CNS</i>
<i>The Scandaroon</i>	(1972)	<i>SC</i>

Textual Annotations

Manuscripts are transcribed according to the following conventions:

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Introduction

My own bond with Henry Williamson was made through that book. I was about eleven years old when I found it, and for the next year I read little else. I count it one of the great pieces of good fortune in my life. It entered into me and gave shape and words to my world, as no book has ever done since. I recognised even then, I suppose, that it is something of a holy book, a soul-book, written with the life blood of an unusual poet.¹

Ted Hughes, in his address at the Memorial Service at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, on 1 December 1977, thus describes the impact of Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter*. He characterises Williamson's writing as that of 'an unusual poet' and the book as 'a holy book', and he attests to its ability to give 'shape' to his world. These comments help to convey something of the complexity of Williamson's work, a complexity revealed in its form, its language and its effects. The business of this thesis will be an exploration of this complexity.

Ted Hughes is only one of a long list of writers who have declared a debt to Williamson, alongside such worthies as Richard Adams, Kenneth Allsop, Rachel Carson, Miriam Darlington and Robert Macfarlane. All have explored the intricate relationship between humans and the natural environment, a relationship that Williamson described in *Goodbye West Country* (1937) as 'natural man on his natural earth: the highest philosophical truth' (*GWC* 13). The importance of Williamson's position within nature writing can also be demonstrated by tracing his literary descent from the essayists, poets and novelists on whom he drew for example and inspiration: Izaak Walton, John Clare, Gilbert White, Richard Jefferies (especially), W. H. Hudson and Edward

¹ Ted Hughes, *Henry Williamson: A Tribute* (London: Rainbow Press, 1979), p. 2.

Thomas. Williamson occupies a place within a very English tradition but, as we shall see, his work may also be productively associated with such American writers as Henry David Thoreau, Ernest Thompson Seton and Jack London.

These literary connections will support three central arguments of this thesis: firstly, that Williamson deserves to be regarded as a crucial figure in the developing concern for the environment during the last hundred years, namely the understanding of the fragility of the ecosystem that has generated the considerable current interest in ecologically directed nature writing; secondly, that his novels and short stories show that imaginative literature is able effectively to convey this ecocritical response to the natural world; and thirdly, that Williamson continually explored the possibilities of narrative in pursuit of his intention to represent in an original way the other that is the non-human animal.²

That the genre of nature writing has a contemporary significance seems hard to dispute. In his foreword to *The Green Studies Reader*, Jonathan Bate argues that 'the relationship between nature and culture is the key intellectual problem of the twenty-first century'.³ Yet there is much debate about what 'nature' is or how it might be seen. Raymond Williams considered that 'nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language'. He argued that there are three areas of meaning of the word: '(i) the essential quality and character of something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human

² Williamson at times found his literary ambitions hard to reconcile with his nature studies. In a letter to the artist C. F. Tunnicliffe, in response to some criticisms by his publisher, he bitterly stated, 'I'm not a novelist; merely a naturalist' (Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, EUL/MS/126). The argument of this thesis will be that Williamson was very much a novelist, one whose most productive subject was the natural world.

³ Jonathan Bate, 'Foreword', in *The Green Studies Reader*, ed. Laurence Coupe (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), p. xvii.

beings'.⁴ Kate Soper has also distinguished between three ways of conceptualising 'nature'. The first concept is that through which humanity defines its own difference from the non-human. The second refers to the forces that operate within the material world, the nature to whose laws we are always subject. The third refers to what is not urban or industrial, what might offer aesthetic pleasure, what needs to be preserved.⁵ Williamson's animal stories increasingly involve an engagement with these interlocking interpretations of the meaning of nature.

I intend to offer a consideration of the ways in which Williamson was creating something important in his representation of animals and also the methods by which these animal tales convey a distinctive view of the world. My main focus in this thesis will be on Williamson's two most celebrated animal tales, *Tarka the Otter* (1927) and *Salar the Salmon* (1935). I shall also consider his earlier and shorter studies of the lives of animals, his late animal novels *The Phasian Bird* (1948) and *The Scandaroon* (1972) and the representation of the natural world in his other novels, including the sequences *The Flax of Dream* (1921–1928) and *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* (1951–1969).

In the early years of his career, Williamson developed the subjects and themes that came to define his later nature writing. The first chapter of this thesis will examine some of the short stories that he wrote for publication in various newspapers and magazines, later collected as *The Lone Swallows* (1922) and *The Peregrine's Saga* (1923). This will be followed by a more detailed analysis of the longer story, 'Stumberleap' (1925), which was later included in the collection *The Old Stag* (1926). In these early writings,

⁴ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1990), p. 219.

⁵ Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 9-10.

Williamson gradually moved from brief nature sketches to more fully developed animal biographies with an increasing emphasis on death and suffering within the natural world. No previous study of Williamson's work has explored in any detail the development of his mature writing from the sketches and short stories of the early 1920s to his later animal novel-biographies.

Williamson's engagement with the natural world took a practical form that extended beyond the written page. His essays and radio talks regularly referred to the dangers to the environment posed by industrial pollution and destructive farming practices.⁶ Towards the end of his life, in 1971, he collaborated with David Cobham to produce *The Vanishing Hedgerows*, one of the first conservation films ever made by the BBC. During the same period, he wrote three supporting articles for the World Wildlife Conference, one of which described the deadly effect of chemical sprays. In 1927, when *Tarka* was published, otters were about to enter into a decline in numbers so serious that by the 1960s it seemed possible that they would become extinct in England. Their recovery was much assisted by an increase in public awareness of their plight and a concomitant sympathy in part engendered by the popular success of Williamson's novel.⁷

Ecocritical approaches, prioritising a reading of texts that redresses the marginalisation of content and subject matter, have themselves occasionally

⁶ There is surprisingly little reference to Williamson's contribution to environmental thinking in critical studies of ecocriticism. One exception is Jonathan Bate, who argues that 'Williamson was an ecowarrior before his time'. See Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: Collins, 2015), p. 52.

⁷ The wider environmental impact of Williamson's nature writing might be used as a counter-argument to Amitav Gosh's claim that modern writers of fiction have shown distressingly little interest in the fragility of the ecosystem. See Gosh, 'In the Eye of the Storm', *The Guardian*, 28 October 2016, p. 16.

marginalised what might be seen as the literary qualities of those texts.⁸ In the stories of Henry Williamson, a certain synthesis of reference and referent is achieved, and a representation of the natural world delivered that satisfies the needs of story while celebrating and acknowledging the essential otherness of the natural world whose story is being told. The novel, in its negotiation of the territory between interior life and external observation, presents particular challenges to the nature writer. Even when projecting human consciousness, it is necessary to acknowledge the limits of what we can know about any human being, but a nature novelist is likely to have to accept the necessity of representing the other through a degree of imaginative sympathy that may attract the charge of sentimental anthropomorphism.

This charge has been specifically applied to Williamson. Timothy Clark has identified Williamson, or more precisely a passage from his collection of sketches *The Lone Swallows* (1922), as an example of the failings of anthropomorphic writing:

It may still be needful to stress one thing that environmental criticism is not. It is not affirming 'nature writing' in the lax sense of the following two examples from the prose of Henry Williamson [...]. The first text is brief and obviously bad [an extract from the sketch 'The Incoming of Summer' is then given]. Such writing offers only a sentimental anthropocentrism. Its cosiness and aestheticism reduce animal life to a set of mobile toys [...]. This is nature as an adult's fantasy of the toddler's nursery.⁹

⁸ Jonathan Bate, however, has argued for the continued ecocritical importance of poetry at a time when modern Western man is increasingly alienated from nature. See Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 283.

⁹ Timothy Clark, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, ed. Timothy Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 8-9.

The passages in question, however, come from Williamson's very early work, and rather different judgements are made elsewhere about Williamson. Richard Adams has also considered the degree to which Williamson's work can be seen as anthropomorphic:

Today anthropomorphic fantasy has, as it were, separated out into different kinds and might be likened to a spectrum. Beyond one end of this spectrum, as a matter of fact, there lies a kind of 'infra-red'; that is the 'straight' realistic animal story in which there is no anthropomorphism at all. The best known examples of this are Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter* and *Salar the Salmon*. At the opposite end is found *The Wind in the Willows*, in which the animals are to all intents and purposes human beings except in name.¹⁰

Here it is Williamson's later writings that are cited in evidence, and the point is also made that, rather than there being a simple binary opposition between anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic writings, a spectrum exists within which any relevant text can be placed.¹¹

The use of what might be seen as anthropomorphic narratives for the purpose of understanding animals has been the subject of much recent reevaluation. Objections to anthropomorphic representations of animal consciousness are often problematic. Prohibitions against anthropomorphism might themselves be regarded as anthropocentric, in that they tend to relegate

¹⁰ Richard Adams, 'Introduction', in Ernest Thompson Seton, *The Best of Ernest Thompson Seton*, selected by Richard Adams (Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks, 1982), p. 13.

¹¹ David Elliston Allen comments on Williamson's place on this 'spectrum' and further argues that his was the 'supreme British contribution' to the genre of animal biographies: 'the genre had crossed the Atlantic back in the years around 1900, perhaps most notably in the form of Ernest Thompson Seton's widely read *Lives of the Hunted*. In able hands, like Williamson's, it could rise to art of a high level; in less able ones, however, sentimental anthropomorphism tended to be the dire result'. See Allen, *Books and Naturalists* (London: Collins, 2010), p. 381.

everything that is not human to an otherness that is ultimately subservient to human needs.¹² A genuinely objective account of animal behaviour, if such a thing is even possible, might risk turning the animal into a mechanical collection of parts, and objectivity itself is not easy to confidently assert – we can only ‘see’ what our language allows us to describe.¹³ It is worth noting, in addition, that some recent analyses of animal behaviour have retreated from the more mechanistic outlook of much twentieth-century study and argue that what is called anthropomorphism can be a useful tool to infer animal experience by using human experience as a model. Gordon G. Gallup Jr., Lori Marino and Timothy J. Eddy suggest that ‘to the extent that humans and animals share similar sensory capacities and mental experiences, anthropomorphism could represent a plausible account of why animals do what they do’.¹⁴ Frans de Waal points out that we now ‘speak openly about culture in animals and about their empathy and friendships. Nothing is off limits anymore, not even the causality that was once considered humanity’s trademark’.¹⁵

The ways in which Williamson’s writings can be described as anthropomorphic may also be connected to his use of allegory; this will be more fully explored in later chapters. He was clearly sensitive to the charge of anthropomorphism and often argued that the term emanated from the sort of scientific perspective for which he had little sympathy:

¹² For an extension of this argument, see Onno Oerlemans, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004), pp. 65-97.

¹³ See, for a development of this argument, Erica Fudge, *Animal* (London: Reaction Books, 2002), p. 132.

¹⁴ Gordon G. Gallup Jr., Lori Marino and Timothy J Eddy, ‘Anthropomorphism and the Evolution of Social Intelligence’, in *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes and Animals*, ed. Robert W. Mitchell, Nicholas S. Thompson and H. Lyn Miles (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 77.

¹⁵ Frans de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (London: Granta, 2016), p. 4.

My own personal belief is that animals and birds, which are structurally akin to us, and appear to feel and act in many ways as we feel and act, are best to be understood by those despised individuals who ‘humanise’ them. Furthermore, I believe the judgements, based on feeling, of such ‘sentimentalists’ are likely to be truer than those of mediocre science based on observed effect and a strict determination to assume no cause. Mediocrity is uninspired. It is uncreative.¹⁶

A closeness of perception, the careful observation of individual animals in their habitats, is a means of avoiding the tendency to transform the animal into an abstraction. Erica Fudge defines the mode of interpretation called ethology as ‘an attempt to comprehend, through observation, recording and comparison, the reality of animals’ lives’.¹⁷ This comes close to describing Williamson’s own methodology. Throughout his career, Williamson insisted that the primary duty of the writer was to seek and represent the truth and that truth could only be found through close and sustained observation, through uncluttered ‘seeing’. ‘Good writers’, he said, ‘are always observant. Their intelligence lies in their powers of observation, of eyesight. [...] Certainly the so-called great writers (true writers is perhaps a more precise term) are masters of detail. Their pages arrest and hold the attention because their detail is fresh, interesting, living’.¹⁸

¹⁶ ‘Introduction’, *Nature in Britain* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1936), p. 2. He makes further reference to anthropomorphism in his final novel, *The Scandaroon* (1972): ‘in recreating what I saw and felt [...] I don’t think I was being guilty of what, during the “twenties” [sic], was a derogatory word applied to writers who transposed their own feelings to birds and animals when writing about them. The word was anthropomorphism – “the attribution of a human form or characteristics to the lower animals”. Critics who used such a term when I was beginning my writing career were (as I saw it) unable to understand a couple of lines spoken by Hamlet – “I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw”’ (SC 66).

¹⁷ Fudge, *Animal*, p. 131.

¹⁸ ‘Introduction’, *An Anthology of Nature Writing* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1936), p. x.

Williamson's particularity, his focus on the life of an individual animal in a specific place, protects him from the tendency for writers to – in Philip Armstrong's words – transfigure 'actual animals into representatives of an essential animality'.¹⁹ As Gilbert White did before him in the village of Selborne, Williamson focuses his attention on a specific geographical setting, in his case the rivers, moors and fields of the country of 'the Two Rivers' in North Devon. Constantly returning to the same region, but altering the narrative perspective through the focalising eye of otter, stag, falcon and salmon, Williamson is, at his best, able to ground his representations of animals as something other than abstractions or essences.²⁰

When he struggles to achieve this precision and particularity, the cause is often his tendency to drift into rather amorphous allegory and clumsy symbolism, as evidenced in elements of *The Star Born* (1933) and *The Phasian Bird* (1948). This is not to argue that his use of allegory and metaphor is always to be seen as a failure of purpose and effect. In *Tarka* and *Salar*, Williamson is able to fuse his allegorical purposes onto a generally realistic narrative, and his use of metaphor and allegory will be shown later in this study to be a means whereby an insightful translation between the human and non-human domains is delivered.

John Middleton Murry identified Williamson's supreme gift as the capacity to achieve 'a creative transmutation of fact into truth'.²¹ Perhaps in this

¹⁹ Philip Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 150.

²⁰ Lawrence Buell argues for the value of environmental particularism, an attention to the particular, in the depiction of the non-human environment, and he names Gilbert White, Henry David Thoreau and Barry Lopez as models of nature writing in that respect. See Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1995). This attention to detail characterises Williamson's approach and places him securely in the tradition Buell identifies.

²¹ John Middleton Murry, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson', in *Katherine Mansfield and other Literary Studies* (London: Constable, 1959), p. 161.

sense Williamson is showing himself to be a practitioner in the ‘green language’ that Raymond Williams talks of in *The Country and the City*. Here, Williams writes of ‘nature as a principle of creation, of which the creative mind is part, and from which we may learn the truths of our own sympathetic nature’.²² This is a consciousness of an essential identification with nature that can only be conveyed through what is in some ways a new language. Fudge has highlighted the contradictions in the ways we live with and think about animals and suggests that we may need to create a new language to represent the radical otherness of other life forms. This thesis will explore the degree to which Williamson was able to create a language that was significantly ‘new’.²³ He is a novelist whose most successful subjects happened to be animals. At times, these animals may seem to be subsumed to other purposes, but when he achieves an effective balance between wider metaphorical and allegorical purpose and the objective representation of observed reality, *Tarka* and *Salar* are the result. In these two novels, Williamson successfully provides a means of accessing the lives of animals and celebrating their uniqueness and value – a respect for the individual existence of an otter or a fish.

In view of the available evidence of his environmental credentials and the clear sense that he is established within an important literary genre and continues to act as a model for contemporary writers, it seems surprising that Williamson’s literary reputation remains so obscured. He has always attracted

²² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (St Albans: Paladin, 1975), p. 158.

²³ Through reference to the theories of Thomas Nagel, Tim Birkhead refers to the difficulty of convincingly representing an animal’s consciousness: ‘in his famous essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” published in 1974, the philosopher Thomas Nagel argued that we can never know what it feels like to be another creature. Feelings and consciousness are subjective experiences so they cannot be shared and imagined by anyone else. Nagel chose the bat because as a mammal it has many senses in common with ourselves, but at the same time possesses one sense – echolocation – that we do not have, making it impossible for us to know what it feels like’. See Tim Birkhead, *Bird Sense* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), p. ix.

mixed reviews, in response both to his work and to his often demanding personality. Colin Wilson described him as 'a very complex bag of tricks'²⁴ and, *pace* Hughes, claimed that he 'was not a genuine poet or nature mystic. What he really wanted was fame, recognition, to be acknowledged as a prophet'.²⁵ Daniel Farson, in an otherwise sympathetic portrait, acknowledges that Williamson's closest friends often found his behaviour intolerable. He quotes his father, the writer and sportsman Negley Farson, who was briefly a neighbour, referring to Williamson as 'Tarka the Rotter'.²⁶ A parallel may here be drawn between Williamson and the writers T. H. White, J. A. Baker and Gavin Maxwell, all at times troubled or solitary figures whose engagement with the natural world and the task of representing the lives of specific animals seems to have gone hand in hand with a degree of alienation from human society and urban civilisation.

What also connects these writers is their tendency to use their narratives of the natural world as a means of exploring their own thoughts and feelings. In this context, they illustrate the aspect of Romantic poetics identified by M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953): the mirror held up to nature becomes transparent and provides insights into the mind and heart of the poet.²⁷ Onno Oerlemans suggests that 'we can see in romanticism a pre-figuring of a contemporary phenomenon; extending consciousness and being to natural life', and that phenomenon involves examination of 'specific and physical evidence of kinds of consciousness and being in the natural world'.²⁸

²⁴ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 309.

²⁵ Colin Wilson, 'Henry Williamson and his Writings: A Personal View', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 2, October 1980, p. 14.

²⁶ Daniel Farson, *Henry Williamson: A Portrait* (London: Robinson Publishing, 1986), p. 141.

²⁷ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 23.

²⁸ Onno Oerlemans, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004), pp. 64-66.

From his early sketches and short stories to *Tarka* and *Salar*, examining different kinds of non-human consciousness through the medium of narrative is exactly what Williamson is doing.

Anne Williamson's biography, *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic* (1995), places her father-in-law squarely within this Romantic tradition. Williamson certainly at times locates his individual consciousness at the heart of the narrative, so that the truth of what he sees around him says something about the person who is doing the seeing. In Williamson's work, a series of representatives of the author, from 'the man' who calms the seals with his pipe music in *Tarka* (1927) to Shiner, the poacher who protects the fish in *Salar* (1935), demonstrate their empathetic sensitivity to the world of nature through the accuracy of their observations. Oerlemans notes how Romantic poets such as Burns and Clare provide early examples of a 'biocentric' imagination, opening up at least the possibility of feeling as animals feel, thus doing something more than using the 'return to nature' to enable the discovery of an individual human consciousness.²⁹ Williamson can also be seen as 'Romantic' in these terms, in recognising the actuality of the physical world as a separate reality from his representation of that world. For example, in the following passage from *Tarka*, the bitch otter goes hunting:

Filling her lungs with new air, she slipped into the water and swam to the other end of the islet, where a scour had been formed by the flood-rains of the last south-westerly wind. Here the grown family of the moorhen was paddling. When almost under them, the otter saw the legs and the images of legs joined to them, black in silhouette against the less dark

²⁹ Ibid., p. 77.

surface. She seized one of the moorhens and drew it under, releasing it to bite it in her jaws, and carried it back to her cubs, swimming with her nose, whiskers, eyes and part of the dead fowl out of the water. (TO 60)

The narrative perspective here is that of the animal. The moorhen is seen from under water as a set of images of legs, black against a lesser blackness. There is a precise focus on a sequence of physical movements. The otter fills her lungs with air, and 'slipped', 'swam', 'seized' and 'carried'; even the positioning of her head while swimming is precisely described. A series of concrete nouns identifies those physical features of the environment that would have a direct impact on the otter's existence: 'islet', 'scour' and 'flood-rains'. The syntax and vocabulary are simple, largely confined to one- and two-syllable words and dominated by active verbs and nouns. The 'author' is seemingly absent, or at least impersonal. Here, Williamson is offering a biocentric approach that connects him with another element of the Romantic tradition.

Soper has drawn attention to a darker side of Romanticism, one that is also relevant to any study of Williamson's nature writing. She has indicated some uncomfortable links between Romanticism, concepts of 'nature' and fascist thinking:

Romantic conceptions of 'nature' as wholesome salvation from cultural decadence and racial degeneration were crucial to the construction of Nazi ideology, and an aesthetic of 'nature' as source of purity and authentic self-identification has been a component of all forms of racism, tribalism and nationalism.³⁰

³⁰ Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 32.

The claim that he was a Romantic is used by Anne Williamson to distance him from fascism; Soper might as easily argue the opposite. Williamson's work is permeated with allusions to and echoes of extreme right-wing theories, and the history of nature writing itself reveals frequent engagement with ideas closely associated with fascism. The essays of D. H. Lawrence that deal with aspects of the natural world are sprinkled with references to blood, race and the moral weaknesses of urban man. Jack London's admiration of Nietzsche underpinned his enthusiasm for the idea of the superman and led to his belief that the history of civilisation was a history of 'strong breeds clearing away and hewing down the weak and less fit'.³¹ Barry Lopez has identified the way that 'London's novels show a preoccupation with the "brute nature" in man, which he symbolised in the wolf'.³² London's novel *White Fang* is built around a series of conflicts involving man and beast that vividly illustrate the 'law' that the story demonstrates: 'the aim of life was meat. Life itself was meat. Life lived on life. There were the eaters and the eaten. The law was: EAT OR BE EATEN'.³³

The similarities between London's blood-soaked vision of the way of the natural world and Williamson's own perspective may be seen by comparing two scenes from their novels. In *White Fang*, two males compete for the favours of White Fang's mother: 'with his one eye the elder saw the opportunity. He darted in low and closed with his fangs. It was a long, rippling slash, and deep as well. His teeth, in passing, burst the wall of the great vein of the throat'.³⁴ In *Tarka*, Tarka is driven away from the bitch otter White-Tip by an older and stronger rival: 'the older dog rolled over him, and bit him several times. Tarka was so

³¹ Jack London, 'The Salt of the Earth', *Anglo-American Magazine*, August 1902, p. 7.

³² Barry Lopez, *Of Wolves and Men* (New York: Scribner, 1978), p. 269.

³³ Jack London, *The Call of the Wild, White Fang, and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 157.

³⁴ London, *The Call of the Wild*, p. 124.

mauled that he ran away. The dog followed him, but Tarka did not turn to fight. He was torn about the head and neck, and bitten thrice through the tongue and narrow lower jaw' (TO 86). In both these extracts, the lingering attention to the details of the head wounds presents them as honourable scars of combat, the flow of blood acting as a sign of the submission of the vanquished to the victor. The spoils go to the strong. Both Williamson and his fictional animals are in different ways caught within history, and more specifically that interwar period of history that saw the rise of fascism. It is impossible and undesirable wholly to decontextualise the man from his work.

Richard Griffiths and Melvyn Higginbottom have traced Williamson's involvement with far-right political parties and illustrated the ways in which this philosophy infiltrated his writings.³⁵ Farson claims to have recognised Williamson in Frederic Raphael's scathing portrait of an elderly fascist in his controversial novel, *The Glittering Prizes* (1976), and quotes Raphael to the effect that the portrait was indeed partly based on Williamson.³⁶ The myth of renewal and rebirth, central to much fascist thinking, often incorporated the symbol of the phoenix rising from the ashes of an earlier corrupt society. The destruction of this society had been a necessity, at whatever physical cost. Physical sacrifice was thus not only necessary but, in certain circumstances, a duty. Ideas of sacrifice, renewal and rebirth will be shown later in this thesis to be central to Williamson's major animal novels.

One of the defining characteristics of Williamson's writing is a tendency to focus closely on aspects of pain, physical suffering and violent death. Glen Cavaliero suggests that 'Williamson's admiration for Adolf Hitler is a response

³⁵ Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right* (London: Constable, 1980), pp. 134-137; Melvyn Higginbottom, *Intellectuals and British Fascism* (London: Janus Publishing, 1992).

³⁶ Daniel Farson, *Henry Williamson: A Portrait* (London: Robinson Publishing, 1986), p. 114.

in keeping with the sado-masochistic note that runs through the whole tetralogy *The Flax of Dream*. The constant harping on animal violence and psychological oppression, the tormenting of Maddison by his teachers, his father, his mistress, is balanced by a kind of repressed savagery that results in a rejection of ordinary human companionship'.³⁷ Willie Maddison, in *The Flax of Dream* (1921–1924), is clearly a representative of the author, and Williamson's description of his character's painful experiences finds a parallel in his nature novels through the accounts of the perilous lives of otter and salmon. Williamson's involvement with fascism cannot therefore be seen as simply peripheral or a temporary aberration, as is often claimed,³⁸ but has to be recognised as an essential aspect of his thinking. Williamson's nature novels in many ways operate as allegories, and a familiar feature of allegories is their didactic purpose.

Many such threads in Williamson's life and work are gathered up in the important motif of hunting that will be explored in detail via his animal sagas. Through the narrative of the hunt, Williamson drew parallels between the lives and deaths of animals and the suffering and deaths of soldiers on the battlefield. In this context, his own experiences in the First World War become very significant. In 1914, at the age of eighteen, Williamson enlisted as a private in the London Rifle Brigade and was sent to Ploegsteert in Belgium. During this time, he witnessed the famous Christmas truce between the British and German armies, an episode that had a lasting effect on him and at which he later convinced himself Adolf Hitler had been present. He was invalided

³⁷ Glen Cavaliero, *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel, 1900–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 126.

³⁸ See Anne Williamson, *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic* (Stroud: Sutton, 1995), p. 195.

home in 1915 and, apart from a spell as transport officer on the *Ancre* in 1917, subsequently spent much of the war on sick leave in England. Williamson confessed that during his time at the front he was often frightened and bewildered, and in the later stages of his war (after spring 1917) he may have been suffering from a nervous breakdown.

The impact of his war experiences emerges in his depiction of the many hunting scenes within his novels.³⁹ Williamson is here allegorically representing the nature of battlefield experience and operating within an important literary tradition, exemplified in an English context by the novels of Robert Smith Surtees and Siegfried Sassoon. Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis will explore how the hunt connects the lives of men and animals in such a way as to suggest both a common experience and a distinctive division in terms of power and the subordination of animal to human needs. These chapters will show that Williamson's position is equally contradictory: he separates himself from the hunt through an identification of the suffering animal, but also aligns himself with the attitudes and social positions of the officer class.

Williamson's personality was undoubtedly complex. It is thus unsurprising that the two major biographies, *Henry Williamson: A Portrait* by Daniel Farson (1986) and *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic* by Anne Williamson (1995), are largely concerned with the author's life, character and reputation. Relatively little is said about his narrative methods. Most of the other published works on Williamson likewise focus on significant historical events or places that form the background to his life rather than examining the ways he constructed his stories and the nature of his literary achievement.

³⁹ Jeremy Gavron argues that 'in writing about the hunt, in working out his feelings about it, he is also working through his troubled experiences of war'. See Gavron, 'Introduction', in Henry Williamson, *Tarka the Otter* (London: Penguin, 2009) pp. v-xiii.

Murry's essay, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson' (1959), while acknowledging the uneven quality of his work, pays most attention to the early volumes of what was to become the saga sequence *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* (1951–1969), which Murry describes as 'the work of a truly gifted artist, come at last, after much inward travail, to a mastery of his own self-disturbing powers, and working on the grand scale'.⁴⁰ Murry sees Williamson's detailed studies of animal life essentially as marking a stage in his artistic development, written while his ideas for a more complex literary project slowly germinated. His 'self-forgetful concentration on the creatures of a non-human world' allowed him to 'keep his more disturbing memories [of the war] in the hinterland of his consciousness'.⁴¹ This is exactly what did not happen. The portraits of animal life in his nature novels are so imperfectly 'self-forgetful' that the personal and political concerns of the author seep into every chapter. An understanding of this narrative complexity is central to any analysis of Williamson's achievement.

My analysis of *Tarka* (1927) in Chapters 2 and 3 will argue that here, in what is probably his most famous work, Williamson's well-researched representation of what it is like to be an otter and the wider allegorical purposes of the text combine to take his writing to a new level. *Salar* (1935) will be explored in Chapters 4 and 5. Although a work that Williamson often disparaged, it is in many ways an equally impressive achievement, in that it responds to the challenge of depicting the life of an animal which from a human perspective lives in an alien element.

Williamson always believed that his fifteen-volume series *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* would be the work that would secure his reputation and

⁴⁰ Murry, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson', p. 162.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

promote his own moral and political philosophy. *A Chronicle* charts the semi-autobiographical story of three generations of the Maddison family during the first half of the twentieth century. *A Chronicle* is not the focus of this thesis, but some reference will be made to those aspects of the work that illustrate recurrent themes in Williamson's nature writings.⁴² It was during the period of preparation of *A Chronicle* that Williamson wrote the last of his major animal biographies, *The Phasian Bird* (1948), and Chapter 6 will argue that in this book, and in his final work of fiction *The Scandaroon* (1972), Williamson failed to maintain the careful balance of allegory and objectivity that *Tarka* and *Salar* earlier revealed.

I shall also look at another aspect of his animal novels that establishes a creative relationship between the human and the animal: the range of features of genre that characterise the narratives. Through his use of elements of epic, myth, pastoral and tragedy, Williamson creates structural patterns within the biographies of his animal protagonists that allow for a range of interpretations of the significance of their lives and deaths. The dramatic qualities of works such as *Tarka* can be illustrated by reference to the film adaptation made by David Cobham in the last year of Williamson's life. The argument that Williamson's animal novels have a narrative force and impact lacking in *The Flax of Dream* or *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* may be supported by the fact that no such adaptations have been made of either of these two works.

Evidence of Williamson's not always productive involvement with the *Tarka* film script is provided by papers held within the Henry Williamson

⁴² Anne Williamson has examined some of the ways in which the natural world provides *A Chronicle* with not only a physical setting but what she calls an 'emotional tone'. See A. Williamson, 'A Brief Look at Nature and the *Chronicle*', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 52, September 2016, pp. 62-73.

Collection at the University of Exeter. Williamson presented a wide selection of his manuscripts to the university in 1965, and documents from the Henry Williamson Society (formed in 1980) have been regularly added since. The archive contains draft forms of his major animal novels and a deal of correspondence between Williamson and his friends, editors and illustrators. This resource material is invaluable in providing evidence of Williamson's frequent reworking of his materials and his often agonised explanations and assertions of his artistic purposes. This detailed evidence of his development as a writer and his major artistic concerns has not been used before in the service of a comprehensive analysis of his work as a nature writer. It will form an important part of this thesis.

The archive materials also illuminate an important aspect of any study of Williamson: the intrusion of the author into his work. Among the many perspectives operating in his stories is that of the watcher, the identified or anonymous human observer of the natural world. The point of view of this observer is not always clearly objective. Within *The Flax of Dream* and *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, this can result in Williamson's failure to separate himself from the thoughts and experiences of his central protagonists.⁴³ This problem is less evident in his animal tales, but there are intermittent and sometimes rather intrusive appearances of characters who are clearly acting as representatives of the author. The degree to which this tendency is kept at bay in his animal stories will be later examined.

⁴³ W. J. Keith has observed that *The Flax of Dream* 'suffers through Williamson's inability to maintain either a consistent attitude towards, or an appropriate distance from, his leading character'. See W. J. Keith, *The Rural Tradition: William Cobbett, Gilbert White and Other Non-Fiction Prose Writers of the English Countryside* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1975), p. 220.

In his tribute to Henry Williamson, Ted Hughes did more than praise the quality of Williamson's writing; he also acknowledged his darker side, his often uncritical worship of energy, however it manifested itself, and his reactionary political views. The brutal violence in Hughes's own nature writing has itself at times attracted hostile criticism, and some of the striking correspondences between the two writers' work point to significant areas of Williamson's writing that this thesis will explore.⁴⁴ Williamson's animals, like Hughes's, are both biologically accurate representations of their species and allegorical, mythical creatures who teach us deeper truths through the stories in which they appear. Williamson's fish, birds and mammals are tripartite beings: symbolic, textual and biological. This thesis will explore the complexities of his unique and imaginative vision of the natural world.

Williamson was such a tortured and difficult character, who underwent such painful martial, marital and emotional experiences and who engaged in such significant political and environmental activities, that it has often proved irresistibly tempting to see his work as merely a reflection of his life. The multi-faceted nature of this work certainly requires – or involves – an interaction with some uncomfortable biographical and political issues. He also resists easy literary categorisation, being at different times essayist, diarist, biographer, autobiographer, polemicist, scriptwriter and novelist.⁴⁵ It was the last of these literary roles that ultimately mattered most to him, despite his occasional

⁴⁴ See further Yvonne Reddick, 'Henry Williamson and Ted Hughes: Politics, Nationhood and Nature Writing', *English*, vol. 62, 2013, pp. 353-374.

⁴⁵ He has not always been well-regarded as a novelist. E. W. Martin argued that 'he cannot see a work of art as a whole but can merely visualise scenes – he is a naturalist rather than a novelist; he lacks the ability faithfully to depict types and he cannot write without a strong sentimentalism invading his descriptions. That is not true art'. See Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 3091/1/2, p. 8. This thesis will challenge that judgement in respect of his animal stories.

unreliability as a judge of his own work. Anne Williamson cites Williamson's disconsolate 1941 reflections on his past literary achievement:

Nowadays I feel myself growing less & less of use, to myself and others. I find that the malaise is now deep-rooted. Reason: I've never written the Phillip Maddison books. I know by past experience that freedom only comes by that partial new-world revelation-creation. Neither *Salar* nor *Tarka* [sic] nor the farm book really mattered to the interior urgency; only the stifled cries of my daemon or geist.⁴⁶

This thesis will suggest, however, that it was with *Tarka* and *Salar* that Williamson reached the height of his powers as a novelist, far more so than with the very uneven accomplishment of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, the family saga built around the life of Phillip Maddison ('the Phillip Maddison books'). Williamson was at his best as a nature novelist, through which form he achieved a remarkable synthesis of literary effects: the detailed representation of animal consciousness, the exploration of environmental issues, the controlled insertion of the figure of the author into the narratives, the interweaving of different genres and the use of allegory to connect the lives of animals to the wider human condition – in particular, the complexities of post-First World War political and social conflicts. This is a single-author study, and restrictions of space will necessitate that aspects of Williamson's work such as those indicated above will be explored only as far as is necessary to indicate the nature of his literary achievement.

Williamson was a compulsive reviser of his own work, endlessly borrowing from his own earlier writings and adapting the narratives of those

⁴⁶ A. Williamson, *Tarka and the Last Romantic*, p. 237.

writers who had dealt with similar subjects. Chapter 1 will examine the themes and structures of his earliest sketches and short stories. Williamson was working towards the shaping of a new form – the nature novel – that would demonstrate the ability of the novel to represent non-human protagonists. The chronological structure of this thesis will chart the stages of his development and finally argue that it is time for a reevaluation of Williamson's literary significance.

1. Early Sketches and Short Stories

In the years that followed the First World War, Henry Williamson set out to establish himself as a writer. Between 1920 and 1922, he was regularly submitting articles to the London *Evening News* and the *Weekly Dispatch*. These early and rather random journalistic commissions gave way to short stories and sketches which increasingly offered a representation of the natural world, particularly the natural world of North Devon. Close study of these early writings demonstrates the slow development of those motifs and themes that came to characterise Williamson's later nature novels. The sketch 'Sportsmen of the Rubbish Heaps' (1922), the short story 'Aliens' (1923), and 'Stumberleap', a short story in the collection *The Old Stag* (1926), will be the main focus of this chapter, which will also examine the importance of his early drafts and sources and draw on the wide range of materials within the Henry Williamson Collection at the University of Exeter. Such a detailed analysis of the context and germination of his work has not been carried out before but is crucial to any understanding of his achievement as a nature writer and novelist.

The most significant collections of his short stories are *The Lone Swallows* (1922) and *The Peregrine's Saga* (1923).¹ In these collections, and in *The Old Stag*,² Williamson began to move from the short story and sketch to more extensive and complex narrative forms. The 1920s reveal the gradual emergence of Williamson as a novelist whose subject is the natural world and

¹ *The Lone Swallows* (London: Collins, 1922) and *The Peregrine's Saga* (London: Collins, 1923). In each case, it is helpful to distinguish between the first and later editions. The 1933 edition of *The Lone Swallows* (Putnam), illustrated by Charles Tunnicliffe, comprises twenty-seven titles from the first edition and sixteen items from other sources. The 1934 edition of *The Peregrine's Saga* (Putnam), again illustrated by Tunnicliffe, includes eleven titles from the first edition and four from other sources. These different editions will be specified when textual references are made to them.

² *The Old Stag* (London: Putnam, 1926).

the interrelationship of people and animals within their shared environment. He gives figurative form to his sense of the intricate interaction of humanity and nature, and in doing so he explores the capacity of the novel to represent non-human protagonists.

The stories in *The Lone Swallows* and *The Peregrine's Saga* are clearly indebted to various literary sources, but Williamson also begins to mark out a distinctive fictional world of his own. Many of the stories take the form of the mini-biography. This suited Williamson for several reasons. The pattern of an individual life provided a simple framework for the narrative, but one that allowed for variation and emphasis according to the nature of the life depicted. The position of the narrator in biographies is frequently that of the well-informed observer, at times with a personal involvement in the subject's life. In Williamson's short stories and sketches, the human observer plays a frequent and significant part, and the plots of his late nature novels *The Phasian Bird* (1948) and *The Scandaroon* (1972) are built around the interaction of the eponymous birds and their human observers. In his most famous works, *Tarka* and *Salar*, this treatment of the relationship between humans and non-human animals will take on a much greater complexity.

The factual accuracy expected of a biography is represented in Williamson's intermittent concern to depict the details of the animals' lives with biological exactitude. Their local setting is increasingly the wider Devon landscape that was to become central to Williamson's work. The narratives of biographies inexorably lead to death, and death for Williamson came to carry an increasingly allegorical significance. Many of the deaths in the stories come about through predation or the human activity of the hunt. The hunt will, as we shall see, become a regular feature of the later works.

Glen Cavaliero draws attention to some of these features of Williamson's early writings:

The pursuit-and-prey theme dominates all his nature stories. These tales remain his best known and most generally successful work; and they are the natural background to the novels – natural in more senses than one. In all of them a detailed and loving absorption in animal and bird life is accompanied by an equal absorption in the ways in which nature renews her life through death. An extraordinary fidelity and closeness of observation is matched by an emotional intensity, an obsession with pain and cruelty, giving these books, the short stories especially, an almost hypnotic vividness.³

Here, Cavaliero seems to be making a generic distinction between Williamson's nature stories and his novels, and he suggests that the former can usefully be seen as background to or precursors of the latter. The argument of this thesis will be that *Tarka* and *Salar* should be approached as novels and that a close study of Williamson's early writings can illuminate an important stage in his development as a novelist. His short stories and sketches introduce the themes and perspectives he was later to develop within more complex narrative structures.

Williamson made an early and explicit statement of his intention to challenge the perception that nature writing was not a serious literary genre:

Nature writing, I have been told by some authorities on art, is regarded as a trivial thing – 'nature', according to those people, is but a frail base

³ Glen Cavaliero, *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel, 1900–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 119.

for art-creation. Those authorities, I discovered, did not know the difference between a linnet and a celandine. And they did not want to be told.⁴

One of the ways he took up this challenge was to explore different ways of representing the natural world. A separation of Williamson's early writings into sketches and short stories is useful in charting the progress of this exploration. A sketch can be distinguished from a short story in having less development in terms of plot or characterisation and in being more focused on brief descriptions of people and places. Using this definition, most of the pieces in *The Lone Swallows* (1922), including 'Vignettes of Nature', 'Sportsmen of the Rubbish Heaps' and the title piece 'The Lone Swallows', can be classed as sketches. As often with sketches, these and other similar pieces are monologues with an insistent authorial presence. There are relatively few short stories. Two of them, 'Swallow Brow' and 'The Change', are described by Williamson in the contents list as fantasies, thereby drawing attention to their fictional form.

In the 'Compiler's Note' to the 1922 edition of *The Lone Swallows*, Williamson had referred to many of the sketches in the volume as 'essays'; he uses the same term in his 'Note to the New Edition' of 1933. The subtitle of *The Peregrine's Saga* (1923 edition), however, is 'And Other Stories of the Country Green', and that of the 1934 edition is 'And Other Wild Tales', suggesting that Williamson is now largely working in a different literary genre. In the 1923 edition, out of sixteen pieces only one, 'A London Owl', is written in the sketch form that dominates the contents of *The Lone Swallows*. This shift in emphasis

⁴ 'Compiler's Note', *The Lone Swallows* (London: Collins, 1922), pp. v-vi.

is foregrounded through the use of the word 'saga' in the title story, and other pieces in the collection include 'A Weed's Tale', 'The Chronicle of Halbert and Znarr' and 'The Saga of Mousing Keekee', all of which draw attention through their titles to their narrative form.

Williamson was also developing his narrative voice and perspective. Throughout his writing career he emphasised his debt to Richard Jefferies, and Jefferies is referred to several times in *The Lone Swallows*. 'Midsummer Night', for instance, ends with an invocation to Jefferies's spirit:

Antares was a dull red ember in the south: the star of summer that
Richard Jefferies loved. My thought was with him – he was near me,
though the body had long been lying in Broadwater. (LS 144)

Williamson took Jefferies as a model both as a writer and as a human being. His choice of book when he appeared on the BBC programme *Desert Island Discs* in 1969 was Jefferies's *The Story of My Heart* (1883), and he served as President of the Richard Jefferies Society between 1965 and 1975. Williamson's description of Jefferies's life and character seems in many ways to parallel how he saw himself:

Richard Jefferies was a poor man who in moments of inspiration
believed himself to be a prophetic thinker and writer of the world. The
world did not think so. [...] He was a genius, a visionary whose thought
and feeling were wide as the human world, prophet of an age not yet
come into being – the age of sun, of harmony.⁵

⁵ *Richard Jefferies* (London: Faber, 1937), p. 7.

Sylvia Bruce has argued that Jefferies was a positive literary influence on Williamson and that the earlier writer's prose style 'was plain, sweet, lyrical and true, marred only by a slight overfondness for inversion of subject and verb, for archaism of vocabulary and for one irregularity of syntax (the Fowlerian "fused participle")'.⁶ This argument, however, rather draws attention to its own limitations. Williamson's early work was vitiated by adopting exactly the features that Bruce identifies as having 'marred' Jefferies's prose, and this thesis will argue that it is, in part, the gradual shedding of those over-rhetorical stylistic mannerisms that marks Williamson's development as a writer from *The Lone Swallows* to *The Old Stag* and then to *Tarka* (1927) and *Salar* (1935).⁷

Two extracts, the first from 'The Incoming of Summer' (*LS*, 1922) and the second from *Tarka*, may be used to illustrate the changes in Williamson's style. Both deal with the weather conditions that mark the changing of the seasons:

Those galleons the clouds have sailed into the north-eastern main, and no canvas or furled rigging are visible. For weeks no treasure of rain has been brought for the earth to spend with lavish abandon on verdant raiment, no largesse of shower has been thrown to the humble chickweed or vagrant sorrel. (*LS* 21)

Bogs and hummocks of the Great Kneeset were dimmed and occluded; the hill was higher than the clouds. In drifts and hollows of silence the vapour passed, moving with the muffled wind over water plashes

⁶ Sylvia Bruce, 'A Frequency of Phoenixes: Some Notes on the Nature Writings', in *Henry Williamson: The Man, the Writings, A Symposium*, ed. Brocard Sewell (Padstow: Tabb House, 1980), p. 60.

⁷ W. J. Keith offers a similar argument in *The Rural Tradition: William Cobbett, Gilbert White and Other Non-Fiction Prose Writers of the English Countryside* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1975), p. 228.

colourless in reflection. Sometimes a colder waft brought the sound of slow trickling; here in the fen five rivers began, in peat darker than the otter which had followed the Torridge to its source. (TO 129)

In the first extract, Williamson's choice of metaphor seems forced and obtrusive. Even if the clouds can be imagined as 'galleons', there is no reason why 'canvas' or 'furled rigging' should be visible. The second sentence is weighted down with its value-based lexis ('treasure', 'spend', 'lavish' and 'largesse'), insistent prepositional phrases and archaic vocabulary. There is no clear sense in which chickweed is 'humble' or sorrel 'vagrant'. The adjectives might be exchanged without any real loss in meaning. The expansive verbal gestures occlude any clear sense of what is being described. In the second extract, the writing is more sharply focused and the syntax less ostentatious. The scene is anchored in a real geographical world of 'Great Kneeset' and 'Torridge'. The first sentence takes the reader's eye steadily upwards to the unexpected positioning of the clouds and the hills. The passing of the 'vapour' occurs in 'drifts and hollows of silence' that find a parallel in the bogs and hummocks of the physical world below. Visual images give way to sound and feeling ('muffled wind' and 'a colder waft'), which lead to another beginning. Through the reference to the source of the river, the otter is reintroduced to the story.

In that passage from *Tarka*, a central focus of Williamson's writing is evident, one that only gradually emerges in the early sketches and stories: the placing of animals within a carefully evoked physical environment in which humans also significantly feature, both positively and negatively. Although there is a clearly nostalgic, even elegiac, element in Williamson's early short stories, where a pastoral vision of the past is set against a degraded present, this

sense of recent degradation also involves an acknowledgement that the countryside is itself unstable.

Williamson's early writings illustrate this bitter understanding. The sketch 'Sportsmen of the Rubbish Heaps' is included in *The Lone Swallows* (1922), having originally appeared in the *Daily Express*. This is a determinedly mock-heroic, mock-epic description of an encounter with 'sportsmen' who are depicted as anything but. Williamson establishes the ground very precisely: 'eight miles from London Bridge in a south-easterly direction'. This early example of Williamson's insistence on placing his tales within a specific geographical location links his practice with that of Gilbert White (1720–1793). What was so strikingly original about White's work at that time was its focus on a small parish in order to write about animals in ways that went beyond the merely descriptive. As White's world encompassed the lanes and fields of Selborne, so Williamson built his later writing around the rivers and moors of Devon. In a small place a wider world is metaphorically represented. Place is presented through a concentration on, and detailed exploration of, a geographically identified region, which itself often takes on the role of a character in the stories. There is a sustained sense of the ways in which, within that region, a complex ecosystem operates and is affected by human activity.

In 'Sportsmen of the Rubbish Heaps', we are placed in the South London district of Williamson's childhood: an enclosed world of pollution and decay, of 'violated woodlands'. The rubbish heaps in which rats flourish act as a signifier of general environmental desecration: 'their holes are everywhere, by broken umbrellas, decrepit straw hats, burst boots, papers, straw, tins, novels, bottles, and old torn shirts' (LS 62). The apparently random list of objects is characterised by adjectives that emphasise this fractured world: 'burst', 'torn'

and 'broken'. The inclusion of 'novels' is a wry acknowledgement of the transitory nature of literary success. The sketch concludes with an anguished juxtaposition of past, present and an imagined future in which 'they' – his fellow-humans – will continue their destruction:

I knew this place years ago, when it was the country. The land is for sale; they are going to build; and the house-squares of civilisation will be better than the green fields so foully ravaged. (*LS* 64)

'Civilisation' here represents an anti-pastoral force, and the 'ravag[ing]' of the green fields suggests a sexual violation. Green fields are also ravaged in Williamson's short studies of owls. In the sketch 'Strix Flammea' (*LS*, 1922 edition), he had described owls as clinging precariously to survival in an inhospitable city. In a later piece, 'A London Owl' (*PS*, 1923 edition), these hints at environmental sickness are further developed. There is a recurrent sense of loss and disillusion throughout these early sketches, often linked to the desecration of the landscape. Here the feeling of loss is shown through references to local hills and rivers:

My way was through roads dreary with sulphurous fog, where cats wandered, and over a hill, once the home of brocks, or badgers, but now laid out as a park. The fog was thick over the lower ground. The hill was old, although now it was a place of regulation and iron railings, part of London. Once corn grew here, and they sang harvest songs when the umbered moon was rising over Woolwich hamlet. Hares ran the stubble, partridges called, the fox slunk among the reeds of the brook Ravensbourne on the flats below. The badgers are gone, the hares all

hunted, the foxes fled – long, long ago. No fish lived in the muddy drainwater and tar that flowed in the bed of the Ravensbourne. (*PS* 268)

The passage is built around a series of contrasts. The hill was once a home to wildlife, but is now regulated and confined ‘as a park’, its identity subsumed by the all-devouring city. The Ravensbourne was at that time a ‘brook’ in the midst of countryside rich in wildlife, but it has since been reduced to ‘muddy drainwater and tar’. The name of the river itself, with its pastoral connotations, has become ironic. Even at this early stage in Williamson’s writing, streams and rivers are signifiers of environmental health; their portrayal prepares the way for *Tarka* and *Salar*, which depict some of the most detailed riverscapes known to fiction.

The river Ravensbourne is central to the short story ‘Aliens’, set in the London borough of Lewisham and included in *The Peregrine’s Saga* (1923). The polluted river here acts as a symbol of the wider destruction that man is wreaking on the earth. The opening sentence emphasises this environmental desecration and decay through a description of a rat moving along the bank:

A yellow dandelion on the bank of the stream was bent as the creature’s body passed over it, and an oily smear tarnished its disk [sic], so disfiguring it that no bronze fly came to explore it for pollen, and eventually it withered without forming any seed. (*PS* 183)

In Williamson’s work, wild flowers often represent nature’s energy and fecundity,⁸ but here the dandelion is ‘bent’, ‘disfigured’ and fatally ‘withered’.

⁸ The epigraph to Williamson’s *Dandelion Days* (1922), the second volume of *The Flax of Dream*, is a quotation from Jefferies: ‘I hope in the days to come future thinkers will unlearn us, and find ideas infinitely better – let us get a little alchemy out of the dandelions’. In the story ‘A

Although seemingly an agent of this pollution, the rat becomes a reflection of its environment:

For years it had lived by the banks of the Ravensbourne stream, that in a greasy brown mud bed meanders by Catford, through an open space that once was a park, called the Ladywell Recreation ground, under an old brick parkway called the Ladywell Bridge, washing tattered fences, dying trees, factories, timber yards, and sordid back gardens, turning a mill-wheel below which in olden time trout used to lie, and meeting the dead brook Quaggy by Lewisham Junction Station; together the poor streams flow through a land more foul till they reach the Thames rushing with its load of filth to the sea for absolution. (*PS* 184)

Even the active verbs in this extract – ‘meanders’, ‘washing’, ‘turning’ and ‘meeting’ – are rather limp and weary, and they seem insubstantial compared to the negative premodifiers that dominate the list of objects that line the stream’s progress: ‘tattered’, ‘dying’, ‘sordid’ and ‘dead’. This is a vision of a waste land; the stream accelerates towards the sea in traditional fashion but here only to rush in search of absolution through a ‘land more foul’ while carrying ‘its load of filth’. Characteristically, Williamson harks back to an idyllic and pastoral past. The vileness of the present is in part evoked by wistful and elegiac memories of when ‘trout used to lie’ below the mill-wheel. The setting of the story is Lewisham, ‘once a quiet village’, where the ‘Ravensbourne stream was once clear and its waters were pure’.⁹

Weed’s Tale’, a dock weed heroically resists all human efforts to destroy it, even through the use of paraffin, by which ‘all fruitfulness of the soil was poisoned’ (*PS* 159).

⁹ Williamson sets the story very precisely here; in the revised version that appeared in the 1933 edition (*PSP*), he removed most of the place names, leaving only the more general references to south-east London and the Thames.

The local and the wider world are woven together; microcosm and macrocosm unite in destruction and desecration. Ravensbourne and its 'dead waters' are 'the background for the drama' of 'Slimey, the last black rat in the south-east of London' and of 'Splitail, the last fish, if one excepts visiting eels, to be left alive, or rather dead-and-alive, in the stream'. The animal protagonists are the last of their kind: 'thus the last fish in the stream and the last black rat in the south-east of London disappeared from the world of mortal things' (PS 199). The polluted environment enables Williamson to assert the significance of the tale through the represented status of his animal actors. There is little here of the exultation in living, of the assertion of the life force, that characterises much of *Tarka* and *Salar*. In this story, life barely shows itself as life; Splitail is 'an animated corpse'. Only in death and the struggles with death does the tale present evidence of urgency and energy.

Humans are reduced to silent phantoms (and are probably engaged in prostitution): 'the Ravensbourne still runs, and at night the blurs that are human creatures trudge the paths by the water. Sometimes they stop and speak to taller blurs that approach, and together the pairs go to places among the trees, secretly, rarely speaking' (PS 199). In an echo of the vision of Jefferies, the narrator sees the local environment as desolate and destroyed: 'human dereliction remains [...]. Beauty dies where man goes often' (PS 199). The harshness of the winter is connected through the narrative with the suffering that man brings to the earth. The First World War hangs as a backdrop to these animal tales. The narrative of 'Aliens' is emphatically placed in 'the hard winter of nineteen seventeen [...] that tragic year'. From the waters to the land, from the earth to the heavens, Williamson sets his stories in a world of death.

This element of his writing also connects Williamson with some of his predecessors in the genre of nature writing. Onno Oerlemans considers that Henry David Thoreau 'bridges the gap between British romanticism and American environmentalism', and a central feature of his work is that 'he revels in the fact of death, when matter is transformed [...]. The oneness we locate in our own individuality is threatened and undermined by confronting the tangle of life and death, organic and inorganic, that composes the natural world'.¹⁰ As we shall see, much of this observation seems applicable to Williamson.

The connection between death and hunting assumes a growing importance during these early works. Williamson takes a consistent interest in the ways that animals, both directly (physically) and indirectly (figuratively), interact with humans. Hunting is a significant example of this interaction. Here the recurrent themes of violence, combat and death coalesce, and there is often an implicit or metaphorical connection with human warfare. 'Sportsmen of the Rubbish Heaps' and 'Aliens' provide early examples of Williamson's interest in the hunt, which would come to play an increasingly central part in his tales.

In this respect, Williamson's tales and those of Jack London (1876–1916) show marked similarities. London's chosen territory was far larger: the Klondike, the Yukon, the wastes of Alaska. There is less detailed representation of a small locality. But in his most successful animal stories, *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906), London was seen to be doing something different with the animal tale, and in that difference we can see him as a forerunner to Williamson. For both writers, the hunt was central to their animal stories, as was a sense of the ways in which the worlds of man and

¹⁰ Onno Oerlemans, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004), p. 210.

animals interact and reflect each other, especially in terms of violent confrontation and death. In *The Call of the Wild*, London speaks of ‘the old instincts that at stated periods drive man out from the sounding cities to forest and plain to kill things by chemically propelled leaden pellets, the blood lust, the joy to kill – all this was Buck’s, only it was infinitely more intimate’.¹¹

The hunters in ‘Sportsmen of the Rubbish Heaps’ are ‘sportsmen’ with sawn-off shotguns and dogs that ‘I would not care to be seen in my own village with’ (LS 60). The sportsmen ‘shoot anything’, but the ‘lowlier fraternity hunt the humble rat’ (LS 61, 62). Williamson presents hierarchies of hunters within this shabby preserve, down to the little boys who trawl for sticklebacks and surly bird-catchers whose prey is finally crammed into small cages through which they thrust ‘beaks covered in blood’ (LS 63). Later, in *Tarka*, Williamson will build a complex narrative around the hunt. Here it is shown as something grubby and merely destructive, a suitable prologue to the writer’s final vision of a dead and departed world: ‘I shall never go there again [...]. All these are dead: let the houses and the streets obliterate the place for ever’ (LS 151).

In this context, ‘Aliens’ is again significant. The story is structured around a series of conflicts or combats. The first of these describes the rat as stalking and catching a sparrow: ‘the rat stood on the bird and with a quick bite severed its neck’ (PS 188). Shortly afterwards, in a foreshadowing of the end of the story, Williamson tells us of the dread hooting of the brown owl ‘that followed the death shriek of some hapless rat’ (PS 188), and this increasing descent into

¹¹ Jack London, *The Call of the Wild, White Fang, and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 34. A further, and at times more uncomfortable, connection between London and Williamson is their interest in Nietzsche’s theory of the superman and the Darwinian idea of the survival of the fittest. Williamson, like London, created his animal protagonists as heroic figures, and also like London scoured the world of humans for supermen, at times with such unfortunate consequences as his enthusiastic support for the cause of Oswald Mosley.

a macabre world is accompanied by the visual and aural evidence of a much wider conflict – ‘colossal bangs, the sweeping of the sky with gigantic whiskers of light’– all seen through the focalising consciousness of the rat. The final intrusion from above is of a falling anti-Zeppelin shell which ‘missed him by two yards [...] missed Splitail by ten feet and Tattered Joe [a homeless beggar], asleep in a disused swan’s nest, by fifty yards’ (*PS* 189). Thus the three protagonists and combatants are drawn together, all accidentally threatened by a world at war.

The crisis of the story finds Tattered Joe and the rat lying two feet apart by the disused swan’s nest where Jack sleeps. This crisis, uniting man, rat and owl, is marked by Williamson’s absorbed focus on the grisly details of physical conflict and death:

Harder and harder it [the owl] gripped with its claws, more desperate were the struggles of Slimey who was endeavouring to climb up the owl’s front and tear the artery at the side of its neck [sic]. (*PS* 198)

It is Tattered Joe who applies the coup de grâce: ‘he caught the owl and crushed its skull (an easy matter) with his fist; then he hit Slimey and broke all the rat’s ribs’ (*PS* 198).

Death spreads itself at the end of Williamson’s ‘Aliens’. A final and quadruple ‘piercing’ unites rat, fish, owl and man in the last words of the story:

Tattered Joe is no more, for in the hard winter of nineteen seventeen, just after the teeth of Slimey had pierced the flesh of Splitail, and the owl’s talons had pierced the body of Slimey, they found him lying frozen in the old heap of sedges and sticks, his heart pierced by the black frost of that tragic year. (*PS* 199)

The piling up of bodies here would grace the stage of the most necrophiliac of Jacobean dramatists. Williamson's tendency to draw his stories to this sort of gruesome conclusion reveals a singular absorption in the details and nature of violence, suffering and death.¹² It also demonstrates another important early feature of his work: the way in which the lives and deaths of his animal characters and the narrator's own reflections are directly or allegorically connected to the First World War.¹³ In 'A London Owl', from *The Lone Swallows* (1933 edition), the first-person narrator, broken by his memories of the war, broods on mortality:

A scream came suddenly through the fog; a dark shadow passed by my head [...]. Yet the owl had to live, and physical life was supported by death [...] the blackbird ate the worm, and the owl ate the blackbird. When the owl died, the ants, the worms, and the flies would eat him. A hopeless philosophy; but in those days, worn mentally with the terrible war and the terrible peace, I did not think I would live much longer.

(LSP 195)

'The dark shadow' here represents both the swooping owl and the morbid thoughts of the narrator. The recognition of the intricate dance of life and death brings little consolation – 'a hopeless philosophy' – and the peace that succeeds war seems equally 'terrible' to the broken writer.

¹² This focus on physical violence is less evident in other contemporary writers of nature stories such as H. Mortimer Batten (1888–1958) and Ernest Thompson Seton (1860–1946), even though, as will be shown later in this chapter, in some respects their practice resembles that of Williamson.

¹³ For a further discussion of the impact of the First World War on Williamson's writing, see Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966), pp. 213-219.

Williamson explicitly drew attention to the impact of the war on his writing:

Some of the other essays were composed immediately after the Great War – that period of prolonged and immense excitation of all the instincts and senses. After the Great War there was a vacancy on the earth, a sadness of vanished scenes and faces. The essays grouped under the heading of ‘London papers’ were written while life was still without direction in that vacancy. (*LSP* xi)

The ‘vacancy’ is in part conveyed through the remorseless movement of the narratives towards death. In these early stories, the hunting usually involves only animal predators and prey. As Williamson’s writing developed, he increasingly incorporated humans into this world of constant conflict, either as active participants or as reflective observers.

In *The Lone Swallows* and *The Peregrine’s Saga*, Williamson positions his human characters in certain significant ways. His interest in the human observer is driven partly by his sense of the importance of the process of seeing and partly by his tendency to insert a representative of himself into the tales. Throughout his career as a nature writer, Williamson emphasised the importance of direct observation. In an introductory essay to an edition of *Salar*, ‘The Sun in Taurus’, he described the part that watching had paid in the composition of the novel:

I have stared at smolts jumping in a Devon river, their foster-mother, as they went down with the currents [...]. I have seen the smolts sliding tail-first over the weirs of mill-ponds which were made by damming the river

[...]. I have followed the smolts down the valley ever widening under its steep hillsides. (*HWAS* 204)

In a preface to a later edition of *The Old Stag*, he protested that he 'could write only what [he] saw and felt' (*CNS* 143).

He was often equally insistent on his own place as an actor within the stories. In a letter of 28 May 1933 to C. F. Tunnicliffe, at the time that the painter was preparing the illustrations for the 1933 edition of *The Lone Swallows*, he suggested that 'you make the boy of the nature diary, who is myself, as I was in those days'.¹⁴ The knowing and sympathetic observer is a regular presence within the stories and sketches of both *The Lone Swallows* and *The Peregrine's Saga*; another significant presence is the small boy who is both observer and actor within the narrative. Both of these figures can frequently be understood as a direct or indirect representative of the author. Although he kept this narrative practice under firm control in *Tarka and Salar*, Williamson never quite lost the habit. In his last nature novel, *The Scandaroon* (1972), he operates as an intradiegetic and homodiegetic narrator, not only narrating the tale but significantly participating in it as a character. In fact, he underlines his participation by introducing occasional autobiographical details: 'it was the year in which I had come to live in my thatched cottage in a neighbouring village, after the Great War, and everything I saw was new, and indeed romantic' (*SC* 20).

John Middleton Murry explores at some length the complex and various ways that Williamson's own past (and at times present) works its way into the fabric of his novels. This occurs to such an extent in *The Flax of Dream* and in

¹⁴ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 126.

A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight that it is possible to argue that Williamson is often exorcising his own demons through the disposition of the characters within his novels. When this occurs, Murry argues:

The nervous exhaustion of Maddison communicates itself too directly to the reader; so that one suspects that the imaginative projection is incomplete and that the author was unable to be completely objective about his hero.¹⁵

An example of this narrative positioning comes in Williamson's early sketch, 'A London Owl', which appears in *The Lone Swallows* (1933 edition). The human watcher asserts his presence in the first sentence of the story: 'a scolding by blackbirds, thrushes, titmice and robins awakened me one summer morning' (LSP 189). 'Scolding' evokes faint connotations of a parental nagging of a lazy child here, and the object pronoun 'me' draws the focus of the sentence. After some more 'fine writing' on the sun and stars – 'eastwards the outline of Shooters Hill was dusky in the smoky haze, for the sun had not yet topped its wooded fringe. The morning star was silver-gold' – the owl (a tawny owl, here) finally briefly emerges before disappearing 'into a shrubbery'.

The watcher-narrator (clearly identified as Williamson) is again foregrounded at the beginning of the next paragraph, and shown to be a writer: 'as I sat at my window writing about the last meeting of Jim Holloman and Dolly'. (Holloman and Dolly are characters who feature in *The Beautiful Years* from 1921, the first volume of Williamson's semi-autobiographical tetralogy, *The Flax of Dream*.) Williamson watches the owl 'by the aid of a Zeiss glass, taken

¹⁵ John Middleton Murry, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson', in *Katherine Mansfield and other Literary Studies* (London: Constable, 1959), p. 103.

from a German at Bullecourt',¹⁶ another early example of the intrusion of memories and images from the First World War into his nature writing. The tale continues to focus on the narrator's observations and search for the owl – 'tried to find', 'I used to search minutely', 'I noticed', 'climb the fence and examine the thicket' – rather than on the owl itself.

One of C. F. Tunnicliffe's illustrations for the 1933 edition of *The Lone Swallows* places Williamson's writing desk in the foreground, with the bird seen through a window at a misty distance. The narrator portrays the writer as subdued in spirit by his incarceration in the suburbs: 'sombre with London smoke, and [...] sat by the window, pen in hand and paper before me, I had no heart to write'. The arrival of the owl has a beneficial impact on the narrator's mood: 'then my mind was troubled no more' (*LSP* 192). Again, the function of the bird in the tale seems largely to be to effect significant changes in the narrator's spirit. Later, it is asserted that owl and man become entwined in experience: 'we were two seekers together, and in territory alien to our wildness'. The narrator experiences something akin to an out-of-body experience through his identification with the bird: 'my thought was with the wind and the star, and with that strangeness beyond' (*LSP* 194).

In later works, Williamson presented a much more effective imagining of the lives of animals and a more complex ecological understanding of the fragility of the living world. In these early sketches, any vision of the natural world struggles to assert itself over the dominating voice of the narrator.

'Nature' has ceased to become a mysterious 'other', something which we are

¹⁶ Anne Williamson quotes from Williamson's diary and Field Message Book to show his part in the preparations for the attack on the Hindenburg Line at Bullecourt. See A. Williamson, *Henry Williamson and the First World War* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004), p. 116.

not, but has instead been largely reduced to a means of depicting human feelings and a metaphor for the suffering but enduring human spirit.

One of the most significant elements of Williamson's nature writing is illustrated here: the use of a human observer, or active participant, to connect the worlds of animals and men and to explore the impact of the natural world on the human consciousness. 'Aliens' is one of several pieces where Williamson uses a small boy as a focaliser. Early in the story, Williamson introduces 'the boy who sometimes wandered along the banks with a catapult'. The narrative relationship of the boy, the fish and the rat is presented not as incidental but as central to the narrative:

This was the first encounter of the boy and the rat. Many times afterwards he saw him, and took 'pots' at him, but he always missed. The years went on, and one day the boy saw the form of Splitail lighted by a slanting sunbeam. (PS 186)

Thus the imagined lives of the fish, boy and rat become intertwined, not as a casual interaction but as something more significantly long-lasting. We are told that the boy wrote 'romances' about this solitary and secret fish. What is also significant is the name Williamson gives the boy: Phillip. The same Phillip Maddison appears in *The Flax of Dream*¹⁷ and also in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. Phillip is born in 1895, the same year as Henry Williamson, and *A Chronicle* continues to follow the patterns and events of Williamson's life very closely.

¹⁷ *The Beautiful Years*, the first book of *The Flax of Dream*, was published in 1921, and the whole was finally published in 1936. 'Aliens' was published in the collection *The Peregrine's Saga* between these two dates.

To complicate the question of the provenance of the boy in 'Aliens', we are also told that Phillip 'had a cousin called Willie far away in the country who was awfully lucky, because he lived near a huge lake, among all kinds of birds and animals'. This is the Willie Maddison who is the central character of *The Flax of Dream* and who meets Phillip in Chapter 19 of *Dandelion Days* (1922). Willie Maddison is another fictional representation of the author. In fact, Daniel Farson has suggested in the preface to his biography that Williamson's nickname of 'Mad Williamson' at school might have been the source of the name 'Willie Maddison'.¹⁸

A further twist in the complex interrelationship between author and character(s) emerges when yet another Maddison appears later in the story, 'a tall pale man in mufti' (PS 192) who comes to the chivalrous rescue of Tattered Joe, a down-and-out and 'one of the strangest natures that civilisation had distorted' (PS 185). Another narrator within the story, Bill the coffee-stall proprietor, describes this latest Maddison as one who 'lived in these parts, and were an officer on leave' (PS 193). The evidence suggests yet another version of the author entwined in the story of the three outcasts: rat, fish and homeless man. The implied connection between these three characters is underlined by Williamson's method of describing Tattered Joe. Here the metaphors and similes that drive the characterisation are drawn from the natural world:

The hue of Joe's round face was the hue of a pulpy apple: his voice was hoarser than that of the oldest rook nesting in the colony of the Infirmary grounds; he looked like the stump of a lightning-blasted tree. (PS 190)

¹⁸ Daniel Farson, *Henry Williamson: A Portrait* (London: Robinson Publishing, 1986), p. i.

Like the rat and like the fish, with whose stories he is carefully connected, he gathers around him some of the accretions of legend.

Williamson was conscious of some of the shortcomings of his early work. In a letter to Wilfred Meynell dated 30 November 1926, he said that *The Lone Swallows* 'was written only twelve months after I had begun to write and therefore is full of faults, strain, florescence and perhaps self-consciousness. I am trying to make myself to write carefully'.¹⁹ In this context, there is an important distinction to be made between *The Lone Swallows* and *The Peregrine's Saga*. Animals often make only brief appearances in the sketches of *The Lone Swallows*, and they are often described with ornate poeticisms that tend to obscure any clear visual description of the bird or insect in question:

[A whitethroat]: Ecstasy, uncontrolled and rising from his heart like the spring in the hillside, has all his being enthralled. (LS 19)

[A wagtail]: Their long tails move as though to maintain an earthly balance, so faery-frail are they. (LS 20)

[A common white butterfly]: Part of summer's heart as it flickered like a stray snowflake in the sunshine. (LS 82)

In one of the few pieces from the book that can be categorised as a short story, 'Swallow Brow: A Fantasy', the swallows not only speak but talk of a world in which other forms of life also talk:

The meadow grasses talk to the butterflies and the coloured insects that dance among them, for they come to listen to the music of the wind as it

¹⁹ Quoted in Hugoe Matthews, *Henry Williamson: A Bibliography* (Tiverton: Halsgrove, 2004), p. 14.

swings the little gray and purple pollen-bells that you love to knock off with your hand. (LS 82)

In these passages, a problematic feature of anthropomorphism is apparent: giving birds, insects and grasses voices may encourage identification, but it may also restrict our ability to see them as other. Williamson quickly abandoned this form of representation and found alternative ways of conveying the means by which animals think and feel.

In *The Peregrine's Saga*, sketches give way to short stories. Here the animals occupy centre stage and often act as focalisers within the narratives. The first seven stories take their titles from the names of the animal protagonists ('The Saga of Chakchek the One-Eyed', 'Bloody Bill Brock', 'Li'l Jearge', 'The Bottle Birds', 'Zoe', 'Raskil the Wood Rogue' and 'Redeye'). A characteristic of Williamson's animal stories is that he ascribes names to individual animals. These names often carry a metaphorical or allegorical meaning, as they will in *Tarka*. He may have thus risked over-humanising the creatures, but the narratives gain through the individualising of the animals with which the readers are invited to empathise. Especially in his later works, Williamson avoided treating his animal subjects as abstractions; the individual was emphasised over the species, thus celebrating the particularity and complexity of the natural world.

Philip Armstrong identifies what he sees as a problem of characterisation in any attempt to represent the agency of non-human actors: '[the novel's] most valued conventions – psychological realism, and emphasis on deep affect, the commitment to portraits of individual consciousness – are anthropocentric. [...] To apply these techniques to a non-human protagonist is to engage in

anthropomorphism'.²⁰ Williamson accepts the need to represent animals to a degree in anthropomorphic terms but goes beyond this in exploring the nature of an animal's consciousness and connecting the human and the non-human within a wider network of interdependence in a carefully realised physical world.

Some of the distinctive features of Williamson's early nature writings can be illustrated through a comparison with stories by two other nature writers of the early twentieth century, Ernest Thompson Seton and H. Mortimer Batten. The 1923 edition of *The Peregrine's Saga* is illustrated by Warwick Reynolds, who also provided the plates for Batten's *Romances of the Wild* (1922). The similarities between Williamson's work and Batten's are so pronounced that it seems very likely that Williamson was familiar with Batten's animal stories. Williamson's 'Aliens' and Batten's similarly entitled 'The Aliens',²¹ for instance, are both about rats. It is a characteristic of Williamson's early writing that he selects apparently unprepossessing subjects as the protagonists of his short stories, but invests them with a certain defiant dignity.

The opening paragraph of Batten's 'The Aliens' establishes the setting of the story, but in very lyrical, highly coloured language, also characteristic of the younger Williamson, and with rather self-conscious rhetorical flourishes: 'it was as though the old stark tree had suddenly become hung with bells, which, like the harp of Aeolis, gave forth music as the wind smote them'.²² The first 'alien' of Batten's tale, a brown rat ('the alien rats'), is introduced on the second page of the story. An authoritative-sounding footnote tells us that the brown rat 'came from the Baltic early in the seventeenth century'. With Batten this register

²⁰ Philip Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 196.

²¹ H. Mortimer Batten, *Tales of Wild Bird Life* (London: Blackie, 1948).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

change is confined to footnotes, but Williamson more frequently weaves such fragments of scientific ‘fact’ into the fabric of his tale.²³ The rat invades, and then co-occupies, a starlings’ nest, and this rather awkward domestic relationship is used by Batten to deliver another characteristic feature of this sort of nature writing, namely the use of animals to represent features of human existence: ‘mothers the world over observe certain rules where spring is concerned. It has to be so, of course, for where would the weaker folk come in if none could rear its young near the threshold of the strong?’²⁴

Batten takes the concept of ‘alien’ seriously. It provides the title of the story, of course, but also determines the cast list and an unsettling attitude towards the members of that list. Attitudes to ‘alien’ species introduced to the British Isles have often reflected a viewpoint that, if applied to human counterpoints, would seem distinctly suspect. In Williamson’s ‘Aliens’, the word ‘alien’ is unsympathetically applied to city dwellers: ‘as the alien hordes invaded what had been the country, so the wild creatures died out’ (*PS* 184). We are told that it was ‘the invasion of the brown rat into England centuries ago [that had] caused the extermination of the black rat’ (*PS* 186). The invading hordes from the city are thus implicitly compared to rats.

In Batten’s tale, the brown rat has already been identified as an ‘alien’. Now a second alien, the little owl, appears. The paragraph in which the bird is introduced is worth quoting in full:

About those walnut trees there had often sounded of late, particularly at dawn and dusk, a strange flute-like whistling, which somehow had about

²³ In ‘Air Gipsies’, for instance, we are informed that the little owl had been ‘brought from Spain by a naturalist called Lord Lilford during the nineteenth century’ (*PSP* 48).

²⁴ Batten, *Tales of Wild Bird Life*, p. 81.

it a foreign accent. The bird voices of our land vary greatly, yet all of them seem to speak the English tongue. This bird note, for indeed it was, was not quite English – it was, in fact, the call of a Little Owl.²⁵

The reference to an ‘English tongue’ is insistent. Again, a footnote adds a note of authority to the narrative: ‘imported to various parts of England as a vermin killer. Its daylight habits have given good cause to doubt its all-round usefulness’. The word ‘imported’ strikes a jarring note, as does the very anthropocentric notion of ‘usefulness’ when determining the value and status of a living creature. Williamson also draws attention to the alien status of the little owl in ‘A Feathered Waster’: ‘a prolific bird introduced into England half a century ago by Lord Lilford. It has no redeeming trait’ (*LS* 145). Animals are here represented in a loosely allegorical and political context. This aspect of Williamson’s writing would almost disappear in *Tarka* and *Salar*, only to become much more pronounced in his later works.

Ernest Thompson Seton’s narratives, while showing many similarities with Williamson’s tales, ultimately tend to take a different shape and direction. The selection by Richard Adams, for instance, in *The Best of Ernest Thompson Seton* (1982), is made up of ten stories, nine of which are set in specific geographical places in ways that are also a feature of Williamson’s work. More than half of the stories involve some sort of hunting or chase, although here the hunt involves humans in only three of the stories. There is, however, markedly less focus on death or the visceral depiction of the details of death. Only three of the ten stories end with the death of the central animal protagonist. What is also notable is the manner in which these deaths are described. There is a

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

tendency to soften the impact of the physical actuality of death. For example, in 'Raggylug', the story of a wild rabbit, the death of the mother rabbit is described in rather sentimental terms: 'in a little while the cold, weak limbs ceased to move, the furry nosetip of the little mother Cottontail wobbled no more, and the soft brown eyes were closed in death'.²⁶

The difference between this kind of writing and that of even the early Williamson is so marked that it becomes difficult to see why editors and anthologists are so determined to place mature works such as *Tarka* within the genre of children's fiction. In Seton's 'The Springfield Fox' the mother fox, after several fruitless attempts to free her trapped offspring, brings her cub – deliberately, it is suggested – a poisoned carcase, having made the conscious decision that 'sudden death' is preferable to 'a wretched pitiable life'.²⁷ Williamson rarely blurs reality in this way. In *Tarka*, one of the otter's fellow cubs is killed in a trap, but after a description of the mother otter's sense of loss and pain, she and the story move on: 'hearing the bark, the otter took her cubs away, and at the end of the night when they reached the big river, the lost cub was forgotten' (*TO* 60). Richard Adams argues that Seton

contrives to anthropomorphise [animals] to the extent that he makes us think of and sympathise with them – to feel emotions about them – as if they were human beings. In this respect he exhibits more warmth than Henry Williamson, who is concerned to emphasise the difference between animals and humans; to describe the stony indifference of

²⁶ Ernest Thompson Seton, 'Raggylug', *The Best of Ernest Thompson Seton*, p. 45.

²⁷ Seton, 'The Springfield Fox', *The Best of Ernest Thompson Seton*, p. 178.

Nature to extremes of suffering and animals responding, like computers, to stimuli.²⁸

This is an important distinction, but it oversimplifies what Williamson was doing, even in his early stories. He regularly distinguished between what he represented as the mechanical approach of scientists and the observations made by regular watchers in the field. In a radio talk of 1954, he argued for the relevance of intuition, as opposed to hard-headed scientific behaviourism, when representing the lives of animals: 'it is a curious thing, this sense of intuition, by which some people can associate themselves, or their feelings, with lesser forms of mammalian life – a heavy phrase, one designed to align oneself with the learned and scholastic, many of whom are sceptical of all that which has not yet been proved materially'.²⁹

However different the two writers are in terms of their anthropomorphism, Seton's interest in the hunt, and the recognition that animals are often both hunters and hunted, connect his writing with Williamson's. This focus on the hunt is at the heart of 'Stumberleap', a short story from the collection *The Old Stag* (1926) that demonstrates how Williamson gradually developed his tales from the short story form to more extended narratives.

At the time of first publication of *The Old Stag*, Williamson was living in Vale House in the village of Georgeham, North Devon, with his wife and newborn son. He was by this time also working on *Tarka* and had sent a typescript to Sir John Fortescue, the brother of the Earl of Fortescue and author

²⁸ Richard Adams, 'Introduction', in Ernest Thompson Seton, *The Best of Ernest Thompson Seton*, p. 14.

²⁹ 'Forty Years in Wild Devon', 11 August 1954, transcript in the Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/B 48.

of *The Story of a Red Deer*.³⁰ The choice of Fortescue to write the introduction to *Tarka* was largely owing to his work as a nature writer. Williamson's admiration of *The Story of a Red Deer* not only explains his request but also sheds some light on his own processes of literary composition.

The stories in *The Old Stag* are dominated by hunting in its various forms: fox-hunting, hare-coursing and stag-hunting. The eponymous character of the central story of *The Old Stag*, 'Stumberleap', is a red deer stag. Williamson overlaps his representation of the animal's consciousness with the perspectives of a series of human observers, including that of the main narrator. Through this narrative method he introduces some environmental and political concerns that anticipate his later writing and distinguish him from other nature writers such as Batten and Seton.

Fortescue, in his introduction to *Tarka*, attested to Williamson's diligent researches:

But it is not he who runs, but rather he who remains still that is the best observer of wild creatures; and it is easy to see that Mr Williamson has waited immovable through long hours of darkness and of daylight, of fair weather and foul, with eyes, weary it may be, but always alert and vigilant.³¹

What is also evident, however, is the degree to which he habitually took and adapted elements of earlier works that dealt with similar subjects to his own. A comparison with *The Story of a Red Deer* and Jefferies's *Red Deer* (1884),

³⁰ J. W. Fortescue, *The Story of a Red Deer* (London: Macmillan, 1897), hereafter referred to as *SRD*. Williamson had established contact with a number of writers since his move to Devon in 1921, including Walter de la Mare, and it was via de la Mare that Williamson made representations to ask if Fortescue would be prepared to write an introduction to *Tarka*.

³¹ J. W. Fortescue, 'Introduction', in Henry Williamson, *Tarka the Otter* (London: Folio Society, 1995), p. x.

both of which he had certainly read, throws light on Williamson's narrative methods and helps to illuminate the distinctive qualities and very different kind of achievement that 'Stumberleap' represents. Williamson paid tribute to Jefferies's book when reflecting on his own story:

Red Deer is a beautiful work. The author, for his health's sake, (he died three years later [sic]) spent much of the time out-of-doors, on the high moor which he describes with a skill superior to my own.³²

As this comment suggests, Williamson was not always convinced that *The Old Stag* represented a clear improvement on what he had previously written: 'it may be that the group of stories which now follow are inferior to the preceding earliest group [*The Peregrine's Saga*]. The hunting stories were in no wise written to please editors. They took hold of me so that they appeared to write themselves' (CNS 143).

'Stumberleap' opens with the introduction of the familiar Williamsonian narrator, whose story, in fact, it at first appears to be. The story begins, 'when I was a little boy at school, I hated nearly all my lessons' (OS 1). The narrator thus positions his younger self in a Rousseauesque hell of confinement and restraint, more fully explored in his depiction of the world of childhood in *The Flax of Dream* and the early volumes of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. The tedium of the material in the geography book is relieved by a reference to the wild red deer of Exmoor. This reference opens the door of the young Williamson's imagination: 'my mind took hold of it, and dreamed on it, as a green weed takes hold and dreams on a brick wall in the smoke of London' (OS 1). He announces his intention to tell the story of a stag for any little boy

³² *Collected Nature Stories* (London: Macdonald, 1970), p. 146.

who might be dreaming and suffering as he did: 'here is a story of a stag for him, which is as true as my small knowledge of Stumberleap can make it' (OS 2). The imagined reader is identified here, and the vocabulary and narrative voice of the tale are clearly designed for a younger audience than is the case with *Tarka* and *Salar*.

The 'Epistle Dedicatory' of Fortescue's *The Story of a Red Deer* also makes reference to a youthful readership; the book is to be 'placed in the hands of the youth [...] for instruction and example' (*SRD* vii), and it is to this book that Williamson makes early and self-deprecatory reference: '[my story] is not a quarter as good as the proper *Story of a Red Deer* which Sir John Fortescue told me he wrote during a fortnight's holiday to please a small boy' (OS 2). Williamson's acknowledgement may seem uncharacteristically modest, but there are certainly many ways in which his own tale draws on the content and patterns of the earlier work. Fortescue, for instance, includes a scene where a hind flees from the hounds, leaving her calf to hide in the bracken:

The Hind turned and fled and the Calf with her, as he had never fled before, but his poor little legs began speedily to tire, and he could not have held out for much longer, when suddenly he found himself poked down quick as thought by his mother's nose into a tuft of fern. 'Lie still, my son, till I come back,' she whispered; and so she left him.

(*SRD* 53-54)

Williamson drifts into a similarly anthropomorphic approach during a scene in 'Stumberleap':

The hind nuzzled the calf, who lay silently beside her. She heard hounds, and telling her little one to follow, she ran out of the brake and

down the coombe. [...] The legs of the calf went so fast during the first mile that very soon he grew tired, and the hind stopped, placed her head under his ribs, and tossed him several feet into a patch of bracken wherein he immediately settled himself and lay still. (OS 26)

Like Fortescue, Williamson uses a simple and mostly one- or two-syllable lexis here, perhaps again with a young audience in mind. He does, however, avoid giving the animals the power of human speech and instead conveys the communication between hind and calf in terms of their physical interaction.

The early life of the stag is presented chronologically. The stag is both freed from and constrained within a more linear sense of time, in part illustrated by the mystery surrounding his age: 'he lived through so many seasons that no one knew his age' (OS 7). The early stages of his life are passed over quickly, his yearly growth marked by the stages through which his antlers developed: 'form[ing] the points known as "brow, bay, tray, and three-point-top"' (OS 5). Again, Fortescue had done something similar: 'and when another year came [...] and he had shed his old horns and grown his new pair, he carried on each horn, brow, bay and tray, with two on top on one side and upright on the other, or nine points in all' (SRD 137). Jefferies also describes the development of a stag's antlers in these terms: 'at the upper end the antler divides into three points, called three on top. This is a full horn; brow, bay, tray, and three on top, or six points a side for each antler – twelve for the pair' (RD 156). In all three cases, whether within a fictional tale or, as in Jefferies, an objective, factual description, biological information is woven into the narrative.

We are told that 'The Old Stag' is to be an animal biography: 'he is a solitary, and this is his story' (OS 3). The word 'solitary' is important. The central protagonists of Williamson's stories are frequently depicted as heroic

representations of their kind. The emphatic, portentous syntax of the sentence rather insists on our recognising the seriousness of the tale we are to hear. Unlike in Fortescue's tale, however, the story begins with the stag as an adult. The early sections of the story look back over the stag's previous life – 'I saw him coming down from the hills before an October gale' (OS 3) – and reach further back to memories of ancestors 'which roamed there thousands of years before the soil was tilled and sown by man' (OS 6). The phrase that Williamson uses here to indicate his forebears is 'his race', and this is paralleled shortly after by references to the 'many races of the chief hunter, man, [who] had lived there'. In both cases, there is a suggestion of rights over the land earned by long residence, but the red deer in this context take precedence. Linked firmly to the environment of Exmoor, there is a suggestion that the deer were in some way spiritually bound to the place, with a slightly unsettling insistence on the justifying factors of 'purity' and 'race':

Their instincts were uncorrupt, and came pure from the earth-spirit, which had given them fleetness and grace, and a pride of race that prevented them mating with the tame fallow deer of the parks. Exmoor is a true child of her mother the earth, and her abiding pride is the tall red deer. (OS 6)

It is not difficult to find in this passage echoes of the fascist belief that race is essentially biological and that this form of biological racism allows for the division of races into higher and lower.

Kate Soper argues that 'Romantic conceptions of "nature" as wholesome salvation from cultural decadence and racial degeneration were crucial to the construction of Nazi ideology, and an aesthetic of "nature" as source of purity

and authentic self-identification has been a component of all forms of racism, tribalism and nationalism'.³³ The relevance to Williamson's political thinking becomes all too obvious in the 1930s, but in 'Stumberleap' he is doing more than putting the deer to the service of a political theory; he is also engaged in representing the nature of the animal's experience. In fact, Williamson attempts something even more complex in that he blends the consciousness of animal and human observers. What Hermione Lee called 'the ambiguities and relativities of biography'³⁴ will be considered more fully in Chapter 3 in relation to Williamson's major animal stories, but here it may be enough to note that the lives of the watched and the watchers, animal and human, tend to overlap rather uneasily in his early work. Certainly, in 'Stumberleap' this relationship between watcher and watched increasingly dominates the tale. The human watchers take many forms, but the first is the narrator himself, in retrospective view.

He is shown as sharing the stag's introspective isolation. Throughout the story he watches alone – 'for hours I had loitered in that sweet shady place' (OS 21) – and binds himself in spirit to the running of the isolated stag. The narrative voice at one point rather unsettlingly shifts from third-person perspective – 'about fifty yards away a man was lying so still that neither thrushes nor stag knew he was there. The man never moved' – to first-person perspective: 'from where I lay I could see the reflection of ripples gliding on his ears and antlers' (OS 21). This quiet, reflective watcher is again a representative of the author, and the sense of creative isolation is central to Williamson's writing. In *The Sun in the Sands*, he asserted the invaluable

³³ Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 32.

³⁴ Hermione Lee, *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing* (London: Pimlico, 2008), p. 28.

nature of the connection between inspiration and isolation in the Romantic mind. The 'falcon-flash' of inspiration had

its origins in the works of poets like Blake, Shelley, Thompson, Heine, Delius, Wagner, and Jefferies [...]. I realised very soon that he who was visited by this teaching would always be lonely: as the inspired poets of olden times were lonely, singing not from their pain, but from the inner flash that struck deeper than pain.³⁵

The structure of the narrative of 'Stumberleap' is shaped by the developing engagement of the watcher in the drama that unfolds before him. Other perspectives are also mentioned. An anonymous voice offers local knowledge: 'they say on the moor that at such a time a stag's blood is black and poisonous' (OS 3). There is also the character of the Harburer, 'the huntsman's secret agent', who provides another pair of eyes. Later in the hunt there is another watcher, 'a cowman', who observes that 'the girt old zstag of Zstumberleap Wood be zsparking now, a' reckons' (OS 16). All these characters perform a choric function, establishing the stag as a beast worthy of awe and respect and suggesting that Stumberleap's life and death are of more than usual significance to the people of that region.

The dominant focus, however, remains that of the narrator. The progress of the hunt is mediated through the alternating perspectives of the watcher and the watched. Both exist inside the events that are represented in the narrative. At times these two perspectives overlap or shift almost imperceptibly from one to the other:

³⁵ *The Sun in the Sands* (London: Faber, 1945), p. 82.

Stumberleap threw up his head, stretched his thick neck, and bellowed; then rose on his hind legs and sniffed. I saw the instant alertness in the fine eyes of the head upheld. He scented man. The deer were gone, and the rain and the wind blurred all things in my sight. (OS 5)

The first five verbs have the stag as subject. The narrator then takes the subject position for one simple sentence, but the abstract noun phrase that operates as the object rather dominates both the structure and content of the sentence. The next short sentence places man and animal in direct opposition, but that 'man' is not the narrator. The narrator is implicitly drawn into the stag's experience, both of them alone, both watching and hiding away from the community of the hunt. The sentence that follows tends to emphasise the limitations of the writer-watcher-narrator: 'the deer were gone, and the rain and the wind blurred all things in my sight'. The human process of watching, of seeing, has become inadequate for the purpose, 'blurred'. There are limits to human perception, however sympathetic to the object perceived. The 'fine eyes' of the deer have been revealed as superior.

Later in the story, man and deer are shown as sharing the same sense-based power of perception, and they draw the same conclusion. Their experience mingles, overlaps:

After a while, far above me on the sunlit height of the hill, I heard the thin gleaming note of the horn. The stag heard it also, for his head moved, and a ripple spread across the dark pool. Later the voice of either whip or huntsman floated down, and I knew that the hounds were coming to the stream. (OS 21)

A contrast between the perspectives of the external/internal narrator and the central protagonist can be traced through Williamson's treatment of place and space within the narrative. The stag's experience is marked by the number of places he crosses. From the wooded 'goyal' (OS 265), he climbs to the moor (271), descends into the 'coombeside' (272), travels over the high ground (272), crosses a road (274), returns to the bed of a stream (275), reaches the skyline from which the sea is visible (282) and ultimately arrives at the sea itself.

Characteristically, Williamson places the story very firmly in a West Country setting. Bideford Bay, the railway to Lynton and Bampton Fair all play their part in the tale. Fortescue's tale is similarly precisely set:

They saw the white line of the surf breaking on Bideford Bar, and beyond it Lundy, firm and solid in mid-sea, and far beyond Lundy the wicked rocky snout of Hartland Point. (*SRD* 106)

Distinctions between places become important largely in terms of the degree to which they assist or hinder the stag's flight. For the stag, the final plunge into the sea is important only in that it offers a means of escape. For the narrator, it provides an opportunity to celebrate the stag's heroism and defiance at the climax of the hunt: 'beyond the stain, swimming in the rolling waves, was Stumberleap, and after him, fifteen and a half couples of staghounds' (OS 29). The narrator actually joins the hunt in its later stages, thus again connecting man and animal in the movement towards death. As often, it is the drama of the hunt that Williamson uses to bind man and stag together, whether as antagonists in combat or as different kinds of animals sharing some comparable sensory experiences. Whatever doubts Williamson had about the

morality of stag-hunting, in 'Stumberleap' he uses the narrative of the hunt as a means of illustrating the physical powers and tactical acumen of the hunted animal. This use of the hunt will be extended and refined in *Tarka*.

Throughout 'Stumberleap' the narrator reflects on death, at times through a direct address that also implicitly defends the human activity of hunting: 'goodbye, Stumberleap, I thought, you've had a very pleasant life, and all things have to die, and if it hadn't been for the hunt you would probably have been shot or trapped before you were a month old' (OS 23). Williamson's ambivalent attitude to the hunt is further explored in *The Wild Red Deer of Exmoor* (1931), where he recounts the various arguments presented at a meeting organised to debate the validity of stag-hunting. He offers his own attempt at balancing the humanitarian and economic issues at stake. One such economic issue is the destructive habits of red deer stags, described thus in 'Stumberleap':

Stumberleap ignored the oddmedodds [scarecrows] as he walked down the rows, biting a turnip, often pulling it up and throwing it over his shoulder [...]. Sometimes he and other stags would ruin a whole field in a night. (OS 6)

Here again Williamson would seem to be in debt to Fortescue:

For if they went into a turnip-field he would only take a single bite out of a turnip, worry it out of the ground, and go on to another; while often he would pick up scores of roots and throw them over his head, from mere mischief and pride in the strength of his neck. (SRD 138)

Williamson alludes to this behavioural habit again in *The Wild Red Deer of Exmoor*:

Strong-necked and content, the stag walks down the rows of growing turnips, gripping one with his teeth, pulling it from the earth, and jerking his bite free with a toss of his head. The flake in the teeth is chewed and swallowed, the rest of the root falls behind, over his shoulder.³⁶

In all three extracts, the stag takes a single bite out of the turnip and almost casually throws the remainder over his shoulder. The impression of waste is emphasised: ‘ruin a whole field’, ‘from mere mischief’ and ‘the rest of the root falls behind’. While Williamson celebrates the strength and endurance of the hunted deer, he also acknowledges the damage it causes.

The hunt is often depicted in theatrical terms; at times it is almost as if the hunted stag is given the compensation of achieving heroic status. On one occasion, Williamson sets the scene as a verbal representation of a Landseer portrait: ‘against the high bank, which the winter floods had carved, he stood at bay, the tragic head held high and ready to rip hound or man who dared go near’ (OS 23). Earlier, the story had described a scene from the rut in which the stag had been represented through language evoking the features of knight errantry: ‘she [one of the hinds] had been conquered by Stumberleap, and loved him’ (OS 5). Here again there are striking resemblances between Williamson’s representation of the stag’s behaviour during the rut – ‘Stumberleap threw up his head, stretched his thick neck, and bellowed’ (OS 5) – and a similar scene in Fortescue: ‘then the great Stag threw up his head and belled again with triumph’ (SRD 72). Even the death that the hunt threatened is

³⁶ *The Wild Red Deer of Exmoor* (London: Faber, 1931), p. 43.

presented as less important than the immortal fame the stag would gain through his epic defiance: 'the spirit of Stumberleap would roam the shining hills beyond the quest of stars' (OS 24). The physical being of the animal, the zoological accuracy of the portrait, has by now taken second place to an allegorical purpose. Man and stag are finally brought into direct combat, as if to assert their essential equality:

He shouted to the other man, who had grabbed the other antler and was about to put all his weight upon it when with a movement of great power and swiftness, Stumberleap plunged his head between his forefeet, hurling both men into the water. (OS 25)

Williamson invests the scene with further drama through the incorporation of theatrical sound effects: 'down the valley echoed the full-throated music of the pack' (OS 25). A second combat soon follows, between stag and staghound: 'Deadlock alone barred his way'. Deadlock has been introduced as a significant antagonist early in the story: 'the hound Deadlock nearly died in the last chase of the stag' (OS 3). This placing of the hound at the centre of the story looks forward to the climax of *Tarka*, which involves Tarka and a black and white otterhound also named Deadlock. Staghounds that had lost some of their speed and stamina over the years were often retrained as otterhounds, and a 'black and tan hound' has a similarly significant role in Fortescue's tale. A hound called Credulous plays an important, if slightly comic, part in 'Stumberleap', and a dog of the same name is described in Jefferies's *Red Deer* as being similarly prone to misfortune.

As in *Tarka*, Williamson turns to the finality of death to establish a fittingly tragic end to the tale, not in this case the death of the tragic protagonist but of the pack of antagonist hounds:

The pack that had chased the old stag of Stumberleap Wood never ate again in the kennel yard; indeed, when the carcasses of these hounds were eventually washed by the tides into Cardiff harbour, fish had eaten them. (OS 31)

In *Tarka* and *Salar*, death carries an equally epic significance. As in 'Stumberleap', the lives of the eponymous animals are dominated by the hunt. In *Tarka* and *Salar*, however, Williamson made the significant choice to select predators as his narrative protagonists. The implications of this choice will be considered in the next chapter through further analysis of Williamson's use of his source materials for *Tarka*. A far more complex narrative is created in this later text, where Williamson takes his nature writing to another stage – from the short story to the novel.

2. *Tarka the Otter*: Sources and Openings

Tarka (1927) marks a significant literary advance on *The Old Stag*. In this novel, Williamson continues to use the hunt as a central narrative motif, and again he makes careful use of a range of source materials, one of the most important of which was J.C. Tregarthen's *The Life Story of an Otter* (1927). However, his material is now shaped into a more complex and extended narrative form and he makes more productive use of his own researches. Williamson was often irritated by the success of *Tarka* and placed greater emphasis on his saga *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* (1951–1969), but in many ways his story of an otter's life can be considered his greatest literary achievement.

Williamson's choice of an otter as the protagonist of his first full-length narrative may have been significantly driven by his interest in the otter's place within British hunting culture, but it would appear that other factors also played an important part. Williamson seems to have associated himself with the otter, and he hinted at a degree of shared experience. Ted Hughes suggested that Williamson personally identified with *Tarka*, 'that Devon otter was his totem, sacred to him, deeply and mysteriously kin, and it remained so throughout his life. It may seem odd, but to me he always resembled a fierce otter facially – that fierce, fiercely alert, bristly look'.¹ One particular experience that connected Williamson and his creation was his own sense of being a hunted creature during the First World War. Hughes makes a triple connection here, between Williamson's experience of trench warfare, his recreation of that experience through the character of John Bullock in *The Patriot's Progress* (1930), and the

¹ Ted Hughes, *Henry Williamson: A Tribute* (London: Rainbow Press, 1979), p. 2.

hunted otter: 'we see there [*The Patriot's Progress*] that spirit of Tarka – a wild supersensitive creature – hurled into the dreadful world of Modern History. It is one of the very best records of trench warfare, and it certainly describes one of the key experiences in Henry's life'.²

There are other qualities that made the otter an attractive fictional protagonist. In *The Life Story of an Otter*, J. C. Tregarthen offers an explanation of the animal's appeal when, like Williamson, he introduces a human viewpoint as a means of directing the reader's response. The point of view he provides is that of a 'young squire' – a landowning rank that became familiar in Williamson's work – who is 'sat recording the day's sport with his hounds' when he hears an otter's whistle. He muses on the attraction that the animal had for him: 'deer, foxes, badgers, seals, all interested him, though not to the same degree as the otter. The fascination this animal had for him was wonderful. To him it was the homeless hunter, the Bedouin of the wild, the subtlest and most enduring of quarry, the gamest of the game'.³ Here, in the form of the hunted animal, are represented the combined virtues of the warrior, the nomad and the aristocrat of the hunt, all roles likely to appeal to Williamson.

Williamson places great emphasis on the significance of the name Tarka as a means of establishing something significant about the nature of the animal. He does this, characteristically, through an appeal to the authority of history: 'he was called Tarka, which was the name given to otters many years ago by men dwelling in hut circles on the moor. It means Little Water Wanderer, or, Wandering as Water' (*TO* 13). Tregarthen also connects the otter with the idea of wandering: 'the otter is a great wanderer, who not only traverses long

² Hughes, *Henry Williamson: A Tribute*, p. 4.

³ J. C. Tregarthen, *The Life Story of an Otter* (London: John Murray, 1927), p. 66.

stretches of coast and follows streams and river to their source, but crosses hills and even mountains to reach its fishing grounds'.⁴ The otter in his story is never individually named, but identified as 'the otter', or, depending on the point reached in the story, referred to by such epithets as 'the creature', 'the gallant beast', 'the shy wilding' or 'the quarry'; all of these terms either attribute a psychological state to the animal or position it according to the perspective of the human hunter.

Williamson did not immediately arrive at his choice of name. In an early draft of *Tarka*, the otter is named Lutra (from the Latin term for the species, *Lutra lutra*).⁵ Williamson was not the first to use the name Lutra. H. Mortimer Batten's story 'Pilgrims of the Sna' Brew' (from his 1924 collection, *Prints from Many Trails*) features a female otter called Lutra, in a tale which also stresses the otter's wandering life. Williamson seems to have wavered between Lutra and Tarka as his choice of name. The typed form of his early draft reads: 'the youngest of the litter was a dog-whelp, named Tarka'. This has been amended in handwritten revisions: 'eldest of the litter was a dog-whelp and henceforth we go with him until his death, for he was Lutra, of whom our story'. In a later draft, originally entitled 'Lutra the Otter' then changed to 'The Otter Cub', 'Lutra' appears in the first seven pages but is then replaced by 'Tarka', and the previous references are altered accordingly. It may be presumed that the final choice of name better suited Williamson's wider, more allegorical narrative purposes. He reaffirms the significance of the name at the beginning of Chapter 7: 'his cubhood was ended, and now indeed did his name fit his life, for he was a wanderer, and homeless, with nearly every man and dog against him'

⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/48/3/1.

(TO 82). Williamson made a later allusion to his choice of name in a broadcast given in 1954:

Tarka, by the way, the name of my otter book, came in a flash, as it were, in the mind; I thought I had invented it, but later a professor of philology, or words, told me that it was reasonable to suppose it to be the ancient name of the otter, since the 'a' at the end of 'Tarka' was the diminutive, like 'forda' for little ford [...] so 'Tarka', the name seen in an imaginative flash, and described by my innocent twenty-nine-year-old self as meaning 'little water-wanderer, or wandering as water', had the blessing of the scholars some years later.⁶

Other aspects of the genesis of *Tarka* have become obscured by legend. The difficulty of separating fact from fiction is exacerbated by Williamson's predilection for occluding the line between verifiable truth and fantasy. One example of this deliberate or accidental obfuscation is his account of how the story came to be written. Williamson had arrived at what had originally been called Church Cottage, in the Devon village of Georgeham in early spring 1921, and re-named the cottage 'Skirr' after the calls of the barn owls that nested under the thatch. Publication of *The Beautiful Years* had been agreed and an advance paid, so Williamson had felt in a position to assert his independence and leave the parental home. Williamson always claimed that the tale of Tarka grew out of his own experiences at this time, in particular when he nursed a baby otter back to health, but this is neither altogether verifiable nor supported by the testimony of others.

⁶ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/B, p. 48.

Anne Williamson, Henry's daughter-in-law and biographer, suggests that the story may have had a more complex origin: a combination of a meeting in 1921 with a Captain Horton-Wickham, who had kept a tame otter called Zoe, and a reworking of this encounter into the short story, 'Zoe', published in *The Peregrine's Saga*.⁷ There are several photographs extant of Williamson at the threshold of his cottage, holding in his arms assorted dogs and cats, but there is no evidence of any otter. Williamson, however, made frequent references to his having cared for and lived with such an animal. His earliest reference to a Devon otter seems to be in one of a series of articles written for the *Sunday Express* between 18 December 1921 and January 1922 called 'The Woman of Scarecrow Cottage' ('scarecrow' probably being an ironic rewording of 'Skirr'). Williamson described himself as living 'alone in harmony with my owls, my crow and seagull and my animals [...]. My otter likes me, so does Mewliboy, the buzzard'. In another article, 'The Day's Round at Scarecrow Cottage', we are told: 'my three spaniels are in bed with me. And my two kittens. But not the buzzard hawk, Mewliboy. She sleeps in the oven downstairs [...]. Diogenes the carrion crow sleeps on a chair back, and Zoe, the otter, lives in an outhouse, a wild thing, nervous and shy, yet fierce and very strong'.⁸ There seems to be an element of deliberate image-creation at work here. This is the author as romantic artist, in flight from the city, his home, and the nets that would catch him, finding refuge among the innocent creatures of the countryside, some of whose characteristics, such as those attributed to the otter, we are invited to believe reflect his own.

⁷ Anne Williamson, *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic* (Stroud: Sutton, 1995), p. 63.

⁸ 'The Day's Round at Scarecrow Cottage', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, Centenary Issue, vol. 31, September 1995, p. 46.

Williamson repeated this tale of his pet otter throughout his life. One version of the story was broadcast on 28 October 1936, as 'Lives of Animals, 2', and reprinted in *The Listener* of 4 November 1936. In this account, Williamson tells the story of how 'a stranger' called at his cottage one morning and reported that a dead otter was hanging up outside a village farmhouse door. Williamson tells how, acting on the stranger's information, he went to an earthenware drain where a litter of now orphaned cubs was to be found. One cub survived and was carried off by Williamson to his 'friend's house'. The friend later despairs of saving the cub's life, and brings it to Williamson's cottage. The cub thrives, but one night, while accompanying Williamson on a walk, it is caught in a gin-trap. Three of the toes of one paw are 'almost severed'; the otter wriggles free and runs off, never to return. Williamson describes how during the following months and years he looked for signs of the otter, once finding a paw mark which seemed to show signs of a damaged foot.

The broadcast then recounts a series of scattered incidents where Williamson sees or hears an otter and wonders wistfully if it is 'his' otter, perhaps 'anguished with memory' for 'its human friend'. This is the story, oddly anticipatory of Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* (1960), that one way or another has become entwined with the Williamson legend. Certainly, in the reference to the damaged paw, it has clear connections with *Tarka*. What is less certain is whether it also shares fictionality with *Tarka*. Daniel Farson repeats Williamson's account almost verbatim, certainly uncritically, in his biography.⁹ Eleanor Graham also recounts the same story, largely removing the contribution of the 'friend', and develops Williamson's musings about the history of his pet otter into a full-blown obsession: 'now, as he haunted the rivers which

⁹ Daniel Farson, *Henry Williamson: A Portrait* (London: Robinson Publishing, 1986), pp. 43-45.

came down both from Exmoor and Dartmoor, searching for the seal of an otter with three of its front paws missing, the story of *Tarka* began to take shape'.¹⁰

J. W. Blench offers a similarly mawkish and biographical reading: 'he searched for it for months afterwards, but never found it again, although on several occasions it seemed to him that perhaps he had been near it [...]. His quest to find it again sprang from the same sort of compassion which he felt for the oil-contaminated razor-bill he looked after at Skirr Cottage together with an assortment of other wild pets, and especially of course from the same sort of love which he felt for the owl that lived between his ceiling and thatched roof'.¹¹

As Anne Williamson points out, however, Williamson's wife 'has no knowledge of it [the presence of an otter cub in his cottage] at all, and although there are various photographs of Henry with his dog, Bill-John and with his cats, there is none of him with an otter'.¹² Jeremy Gavron is also more circumspect in his judgement of Williamson's story: 'it was soon after he settled in the village that he first wrote about keeping an otter cub – the otter he later famously credited with inspiring him to write *Tarka* – though there is no evidence he ever actually had a pet otter and considerable grounds for believing he borrowed the story from other accounts of rescuing and raising the animals'.¹³ It is Williamson's use of 'other accounts' that will provide the next stage in this analysis of *Tarka*, but it may be first worth pondering the significance of what seems to be his deliberate fostering of a myth about the origin of the story.

¹⁰ Eleanor Graham, 'How the Book Came to be Written', in Henry Williamson, *Tarka the Otter* (London: Puffin Books, 1959), p. 9.

¹¹ J. W. Blench, 'How Good is *Tarka the Otter* as Literature?', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 22, September 1990, p. 27.

¹² A. Williamson, *Tarka and the Last Romantic*, p. 83.

¹³ Jeremy Gavron, 'Introduction', in Henry Williamson, *Tarka the Otter* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. vii.

It seems to be the case that Williamson found it very difficult to remove himself from his narratives. The tetralogy *The Flax of Dream* (1921–1928) and the novel saga *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* (1951–1969) are clearly autobiographical both in content and in the representation of the thought processes of the central characters. John Middleton Murry suggests that one of the weaknesses of this early work is that Williamson failed to be sufficiently objective about his hero, and ‘the imaginative projection’ was therefore ‘incomplete’.¹⁴ E. W. Martin also argues that Williamson was always ‘intensely autobiographical’,¹⁵ and this has perhaps been the cause of the difficulties that many readers have experienced in engaging with Williamson’s central protagonists. There is a constant sense that the author seems too uncritically absorbed in their emotional lives, and the main function of other characters is often reduced to generating a reaction from the hero of the story. Williamson himself acknowledged how much his writing benefited when it was detached from the subjects of his narratives. In a 1960 radio talk, he spoke of a deliberate attempt to distance himself from the fabric of the story: ‘when I wrote about the otter-hunts I did feel one must keep one’s personal feelings away from the narrative, and give complete objectivity, so that all the pity of the narrative came out of your narrative, and not out of your belly’.¹⁶ One of the reasons that Williamson’s animal stories can be judged as superior to his human sagas is that he allowed the represented animal a greater degree of autonomy than he felt able to give his human constructs.

¹⁴ John Middleton Murry, ‘The Novels of Henry Williamson’, in *Katherine Mansfield and other Literary Studies* (London: Constable, 1959), p. 103.

¹⁵ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 309/1/1/2.

¹⁶ ‘I Remember’, 8 November 1960. Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, BBC and TV Scripts, MS 43/B 48.

Through this narrative approach Williamson accepted the challenge of representing animal consciousness, sharply identified by Erica Fudge:

Our language creates and gives meaning to our world, and animals become subsumed into that world because we lack another language with which to represent them [...]. We acknowledge the limitations of our own perspective, but simultaneously accept that what we can achieve with those limitations is important and worthwhile, even if it is only the best we can do.¹⁷

Williamson combines close observation of his chosen subjects with a sustained exploration of the ways that language can be used to convey the existence of those others that we call animals. His attempts to imagine the lives of human others often lack the same imaginative sympathy.

Even with *Tarka*, Williamson could not resist introducing the author as participant in the narrative. There, however, his dominant role is that of the observer, on the margins and objective. His account of his experience with the rescued otter perhaps allowed him to make himself a significant player in the prologue to the tale, while largely maintaining a productive distance during the tale itself.

'Zoe' can be seen as an embryonic version of *Tarka*, but it is also, in many respects, an apprentice piece of work, in which Williamson juggles rather uneasily several elements of the interaction between animal and human observer. That relationship is explored in much more subtle and effective ways in the later stories, and this subtlety of representation is at the heart of Williamson's achievement as a writer.

¹⁷ Erica Fudge, *Animal* (London: Reaction Books, 2002), p. 159.

The central protagonists in the tale are a Captain Horton-Wickham and the eponymous bitch otter cub. Horton-Wickham rescues an orphaned cub after the death of its mother at the hands of the villainous Sir Godfrey Crawdelhook. Williamson seems to have decided on a change of name here. In an earlier version,¹⁸ this part is played by a farmer called Jacob Morte, the symbolism of whose name perhaps came to seem too overt. Sir Godfrey makes another appearance in the fourth part of *The Peregrine's Saga*, 'Love and Death of The One-Eyed', when he poisons the falcon and blinds its mate: 'Sir Godfrey laughed. "It's only got a taste of what it's done to my pigeons. Let it go"' (*PSP* 238).

In the introduction to 'Chakcheck the Peregrine' in *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga*, Williamson described the story as 'a mixed affair, belonging partly to the days of unsophisticated youth', and referred to his characterisation of Sir Godfrey as 'unknowledgeable and in one dimension: a villain of commonplace fiction of the period before I had outgrown the contemporary idiom of fiction-for-the-masses'.¹⁹ Later, in *Tarka*, Williamson avoids creating any such one-dimensional human villains. The least attractive human characters in the novel are allowed some measure of understanding, and no huntsman is portrayed as driven by such sadistic impulses.

Captain Horton-Wickham, however, is a familiar example of the officer class that often represents positive and gentlemanly values in Williamson's fiction. Ernest Martin commented on Williamson's tendency to look on the world 'from a squire-like or officer-like angle'.²⁰ This officer is a determined solitary –

¹⁸ 'The Man Who Did Not Hunt', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, Centenary Edition, vol. 31, September 1995.

¹⁹ *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga* (London: MacDonald, 1960), p. 422.

²⁰ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 309 1/1/2.

‘he discouraged all sympathy or talk about himself’ – and a man of deliberate mystery about whom the village ‘knew nothing’.²¹ We are told that ‘he was always playing his gramophone, or standing about in his garden’ and had a particular fondness for Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*,²² a rather heavy-handed anticipation of the tragic love story recounted at the end of the tale. He had been crippled by ‘a machine-gun bullet at Bullecourt’, and is described as being ‘thin and tall and haggard of face’. These are the familiar physical characteristics of the officer and watcher–protagonist of Williamson’s early stories, and the Captain seems in several respects to be a representation of the author.

The Captain nurses the otter to adulthood with the unlikely aid of a pub cat with a stump for a leg, the result of being caught in a gin-trap. A similar feline, in this case called ‘Shaggery’, makes an appearance in *Tarka* – ‘it had gone wild in the woods [...] caught in a gin [...] lain rough in the woods’ – but plays a much less maternal role in that tale. There is another example of a recurrent thread in Williamson’s writing in the description of the cub as having a tail ‘brown like a tiny bulrush’. The bulrush simile can be found in Williamson’s other renditions of this story. In a radio broadcast he describes its fur as ‘brown as a bulrush’,²³ and Farson uses the phrase as the title of the third chapter of his biography, in which the story of Williamson’s adoption of an otter is repeated. In *The Dream of Fair Women*, the siren Evelyn Fairfax comments enthusiastically on Willie Maddison’s pet otter: “‘what a lovely creature – look at his brown tail! Oh, the darling’s only got three paws. How sweet of you to nurse

²¹ ‘Zoe’, in *The Old Stag* (London: Putnam, 1926), p. 42.

²² Williamson admired Wagner’s music, and *Tristan and Isolde* was his final choice of record when he appeared on *Desert Island Discs*.

²³ ‘The Otter’, in *Spring Days in Devon and Other Broadcasts* (Cambridge: Henry Williamson Society, 1992), p. 61.

these poor broken things”²⁴. Here, the purpose of the otter in the story seems largely to be to provide evidence of Maddison’s tenderness towards all living creatures and to mark him as a solitary and sensitive being, battered by a coarse, unfeeling world.

The story of Zoe builds up to the crisis of an otter-hunt, a *Tarka* in miniature. There are several parallels between this hunt and the extended hunt that makes up the last chapters of *Tarka*: the preliminary gathering of huntsmen and onlookers; the use of stickles (iron-clad poles) with which the members of the field can bar the river passage to prevent escape; the cries of spectators when an otter is sighted; and the final defiant death of the dog otter: ‘the dog fought with them and “painted” the muzzles of several hounds’. ‘Zoe’ ends, however, with the wholly unconvincing melodrama of the death of the Captain. The female otter, Zoe, seeks his protection at the climax of the hunt, and the hounds then fall upon them both ‘as he stood holding the otter in his arms’. This is the human version of the stag at bay, the lonely hero at last brought down by superior forces but maintaining a sort of integrity of self until the end. A postscript to the tale explains that the beastly Sir Godfrey had seduced the Captain’s wife and went off with her ‘just before Wickham was hit so badly’. Her name, we are solemnly told, ‘was also Zoe’. All in all, this is poor, unconvincing stuff. The dialogue is artificial and at times mannered to the point of sentimentality:

‘Zoe, how have you been hurt?’ asked Captain Horton-Wickham. ‘Oh, Zoe, what a sad return.’

‘*Tuckatuck*,’ she whispered. (*PSP* 91)

²⁴ *The Dream of Fair Women* (London: Faber, 1931), p. 95.

Williamson's use of dialogue in his novel sequence *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* (1951–1969) is often similarly ineffective: stilted, awkward and always liable to slip into empty rhetoric. One of the reasons his animal stories can be regarded as superior to his other work is the opportunity they gave him to dispense with extended exchanges of human speech.

There is plenty of evidence within the story of Williamson's familiar focus on death and physical pain. The opening paragraph, for instance, sympathetically places Captain Horton-Wickham in a placid pastoral environment 'at his usual haunt by the pool above the waterside, where yellow kingcups and pale cuckoo flowers grew at the grassy margin of the river'.²⁵ This dreamy setting is shaken by an irruption of violence: 'an animal rolled over. The shot had torn a furrow in her side, and the water was stained red as it flowed under her brown body. She cried to her mate who was hunting eels with her'. It could be argued, however, that even this rather clumsily dramatic writing shows a degree of restraint on Williamson's part compared to the earlier draft that began: 'she screamed as the shot tore a furrow in her side, and splashed into the water which immediately turned red. She screamed for her mate who was hunting eels upstream'.²⁶ In both versions the appeal to emotional sympathy is rather too insistent, and there seems to be a rather facile attempt to generate shock and revulsion. The vocabulary, ironically, is flat and lifeless. Compare these extracts with a passage from *Tarka* that also deals with the death of an otter:

Tarka found a hole in the wall, while Greymuzzle fought the collie.

Weakened by starvation, she was not able to fight for long, and as the

²⁵ *The Dream of Fair Women*, p. 39.

²⁶ 'The Man Who Did Not Hunt', p. 71.

farmer said afterwards, it was not even necessary to waste a cartridge, when a dung-fork could pin her down and a ferreting bar break her head.

(TO 123)

The action is here placed in the past, described from the retrospective point of view of the farmer. The tone is laconic and grimly pragmatic, but this in many respects adds to the emotional impact. The way in which cold and metallic objects are used to bring about the death of a living creature is conveyed through a sequence of brutal concrete nouns.

There is much overwriting elsewhere in 'Zoe'. Cumbersome syntax is weighted down further by obtrusively formal or archaic lexis: 'always he carried in his pocket a feed-bottle of milk, to which he added hot water: Zoe imbibed with an eagerness that amused all beholders'.²⁷ The tale is too romanticised and melodramatic to be effective, and the portraits of both human and animal characters are mannered and unconvincing. The story is of interest more because it introduces various motifs that will later be productively developed in *Tarka* and offers a glimpse of the germ of a story that was slowly developing in Williamson's mind.

Of considerable importance to this development was the other significant literary source, *The Life of an Otter* by J. C. Tregarthen. Williamson saw this book as a precursor, a model to be worked on, something made evident in a letter to T. E. Lawrence in which he argued that 'I thought I could improve on the original crib taken from "The Life of an Otter"'.²⁸ A comparison of *The Life of an Otter* and *Tarka* is instructive in that it offers another example of how Williamson was able to draw on and reshape his sources to create his own very

²⁷ 'Zoe', p. 45.

²⁸ Quoted in A. Williamson, *Tarka and the Last Romantic*, p. 96.

individual narrative perspective. It also reveals the effects of his drafting processes, through which he discards the more derivative elements and ultimately creates something distinctively his own.

The Life Story of an Otter was published in 1909, about twenty years before *Tarka*. Born in Penzance, Tregarthen was a maths teacher for many years before he retired to devote his time to writing. He later became a fellow of the Zoological Society. Like Williamson, Tregarthen insisted that the accuracy of his portrait was the result of long hours in the field:

The critical reader will perhaps wonder at the daring that essays to interpret the workings of the most subtle of animal brains, but I submit that the inferences are, for the most part, of a very safe character; and modest as they are, they would not have been adventured on, had it not been for my long familiarity with the ways and habits of a creature that is by general consent the most mysterious and inscrutable of our fauna, for the incidents described embody the gleanings of a life time of observation and enquiry.²⁹

This is very much the same claim that Williamson made in relation to the writing of *Tarka*, where he talked of the need ‘to impose a sharper seen reality upon its pages’.³⁰ In some later notes on the title pages of the text, Williamson asserted that ‘*Tarka the Otter* was written and rewritten many times between July 1923 and June 1926. Finally I walked every yard of the country described, once with a measuring tape’.³¹ Howard Curnow emphasises the connection between Tregarthen and Williamson: ‘almost certainly the inspiration for Henry

²⁹ Tregarthen, ‘Preface’, *The Life Story of an Otter*, p. 8.

³⁰ *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga*, p. 15.

³¹ The Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/48/1/4.

Williamson's classic work, *Tarka*, written in an amazingly similar vein in 1927, was Tregarthen's *The Life Story of an Otter* which first came out in 1909 and set dramatic new parameters for wildlife writing'.³² The 'amazingly similar vein' might be disputed, but the similarities between the two texts are easy to mark. The overarching narratives follow the lives of the otters from birth to their death at the end of an extended hunt. Both stories are set very firmly in a recognisable geographical area and landscape. Both engage with the task of representing the nature and perspective of a mammal with a very different consciousness from that of a human.

The problem of representation that Williamson here confronts has been described by Frans de Waal as 'our limited ability to enter the inner lives of others, whether they are foreign humans or different organisms'.³³ He goes on to argue that 'even though we can't feel what they feel', we can still try to step outside what Jakob von Uexkull, a German biologist, called our *Umwelt* (German for 'surrounding world') and apply our imagination to theirs. 'Imagination' is the crucial word here. Williamson's use of extended fictional narratives allows him to explore the particularity and materiality of the natural world, for which he demonstrates an imaginative sympathy that is not always in evidence in regard to his fellow human beings.

In this context, a study of the structures of Tregarthen's and Williamson's narratives reveals some significant contrasts. The first sentence of *The Life Story of an Otter* describes the place of birth – 'it was in a morass in a hollow of the foothills that he was littered'³⁴ – and the existence of the cub is established

³² Howard Curnow, 'The Comeback Kid', in J. C. Tregarthen, *The Life Story of an Otter* (Fowey: Cornwall Editions, 2005), p. 21.

³³ Frans de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (London: Granta, 2016), p. 9.

³⁴ Tregarthen, *The Life Story of an Otter*, p. 24.

before the end of the first paragraph. The focus of the next four pages remains very firmly on the cubs and their interaction with their mother. Almost half of the sentences in the first five pages of the text have the mother otter as the subject, either grammatically or semantically. Of the remaining sentences, all but four take the cubs as the subject, and by the fifth page these are dominated by the male cub. This clearly establishes the priorities of the tale and focuses the reader's attention on the central characters, even if the perspective can seem a little unvaried.

The opening of *Tarka* works in a very different way and reveals a far more complex form of narrative. The first paragraph establishes the setting:

Twilight over meadow and water, the eve-star shining above the hill, and Old Nog the heron crying *kra-a-ark!* as his slow dark wings carried him down to the estuary. A whiteness drifting above the sere reeds of the riverside, for the owl had flown from under the middle arch of the stone bridge that once had carried the canal across the river. (TO 3)

The wider environment of the country of the Two Rivers is established through reference to earth, sky and water. Space and distance extend from the hills to the stars; place is set in the context of time and change through the brief reference to the history of the bridge; the different animate and inanimate elements of the landscape are woven in harmony. Twilight, the shining star and the white owl all drift their faint light across the scene that Williamson creates, and the only other actor, the heron, provides his own counterpoint through the visual image of the darkness of his flight. The non-finite verbs that drive the action of the two sentences create a state of continuity, even timelessness, where any movement is leisurely and languid. Shakespeare's line in *Macbeth* –

‘Light thickens, and the crow / Makes wing to th’ rooky wood’ (III, ii, 52-53) – coalesces multiple images of danger and darkness. Williamson’s phrase ‘his slow dark wings carried him down to the estuary’ may be indebted to this reference. It certainly also makes productive use of the image of a bird in flight. The heavy monosyllables slow down the line and maintain the reflective, slightly distanced narrative perspective, while giving a clear impression of the ponderous wingbeats of the flying bird.

The novel’s second paragraph continues to delay the introduction of the central characters of the story. The focus is the fallen oak whose three-hundred-year-old life is briefly sketched, before an account is given of its ultimate collapse into the river: ‘it rocked until dawn; and when the wind left the land it gave a loud cry, scaring the white owl from its roost, and fell into the river as the sun was rising’ (*TO* 3). Again, what emerges here is the way that Williamson connects all the elements of the natural landscape in a snapshot of one significant narrative moment. This sense of the connectedness of the natural world is a pervasive feature of *Tarka*, and it establishes the text’s credentials as a work of ecological understanding, in which the represented life of an individual animal is given wider significance through the ways in which that life comes to stand for something much broader: the integrated wholeness of a specific environment. Robert Finch has convincingly stressed the importance of this element of the novel in terms of what it reveals about Williamson’s work: ‘this engrained sense of ecological and evolutionary drama was something relatively new in popular nature writing of the time’.³⁵ It also serves as an example of what Jonathan Bate sees as the vital ecological

³⁵ Robert Finch, ‘Introduction’, in Henry Williamson, *Tarka the Otter* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

function of modern poets: ‘poets who find their home in a specific environment have an imaginative, not a proprietorial, interest in belonging. The ecopoetic vision is inclusive, not exclusionary’.³⁶

The third paragraph moves on from a study of the oak to describe the movement and shape of the river into which the tree had fallen. Not until the fifth paragraph is the significance of the tree to the plot of the story – the holt in which Tarka will be born – revealed. The bitch otter, Tarka’s mother, is also described merely as ‘an otter’ at this stage. The cub itself is not born until halfway through the chapter. Unlike in Tregarthen’s text, Williamson delays the arrival of the tale’s protagonist until the wider processes and effects of the narrative have been firmly established. The birth itself is described in more detail by Williamson. Tregarthen confines himself to stating that the cubs ‘were deposited’ in the nest that had been built for them. Williamson identifies the moment when birth became imminent – ‘the instincts that had served her life so far were consumed in a strange and remote feeling [...]; she lay on her side, in pain’ – and then the birth itself: ‘she listened for another cry, feeble and mewling, and whenever she heard it, she rounded her neck to caress with her tongue a head smaller than one of her own paws’ (*TO* 12). There is a sharp focus here on the physical actuality of the birth, conveyed through a close attention to the varied sensory awareness of the animal.

The degree of crafting that went into the opening page of *Tarka* can be illustrated by reference to three drafts held in the University of Exeter Special Collection.³⁷ The earliest of the three versions begins:

³⁶ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 280.

³⁷ Terence Jones has also made a study of the revisions made to the opening paragraph. See Jones, ‘From Manuscript to Printed Edition’, *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 16, September 1987, pp. 3-6. He stresses how Williamson’s revisions demonstrate his striving for plainness and simplicity of effect.

With ~~<At>~~ dusk a grasshopper warbler began to sing by the river, and the male rooks in the distant oaks ~~<oakwood>~~ ceased their cawing, and settled to sleep beside their nests ~~<and the reflection of the evening star streamed in the water>~~. The stream ~~<By the uprooted oak the river>~~ flowed deep and black by the uprooted oak and the stars shining on the water were gold and steady. The tree ~~<which was hollow and>~~ was a yard thick at its ~~<the>~~ base, and it lay along the bank. Its earthy roots had been washed by winter floods which had scooped out the bank, and it had fallen only two months. Near the water, and half-way along the trunk was a hole; the tree was hollow.

A reed bunting awoke and joined its harsh and sweet chatter with the ~~reeling chirrup~~ ~~<spring song>~~ of the grasshopper warbler. ~~<She was heard by the animal in the hollow trunk [this sentence later crossed out]>~~ Far up the river Old Nog the heron was fishing. A trout rose and ripples spread to the tree. Then it was quiet again, an animal looked out of the hole. She had a ~~<An otter inside the tree which was hollow, lifted up her>~~ wide flat brown head, ~~small ears and eyes, and stiff grey~~ whiskers.³⁸

The second draft begins as follows:

Dimmity-light over meadow and river, the last ca-ca spoken in the oakwood rookery, and the evening star bright above the distant hill. A whiteness drifting above the rushes, silent and indistinct, for the owl had flown from its roost on the stone corbel under the arch of the bridge.

³⁸ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/48/3/1. (See, for an illustration of the first pages of this draft, Appendix 1.)

Water murmured by the fallen oak. Winter floods had carved the bank at the bend, washing earth and stone from its roots, and it had long since fallen. A raft of sticks and froth was lodged against its drowned and leafless branches. Here hid trout whenever the dark shadows of men moved along the turf.

Jupiter shone steady in the clear green western sky, but its image streamed silvery on the water flowing deep and slow under the thick tree trunk. Brambles grew over the break in the bank, and a bird's voice ran in reel and chirrup through the thorny tangle. It was a grasshopper warbler, a bird of passage that had arrived from afar two days ago.³⁹

The third draft begins as follows:

~~Dimmity~~ <Twilight> over meadow and river <water>, Old Nog the heron crying kra-a-ark! As his slow dark wings carried him down to the estuary, and the evening star bright above the ~~distant hill~~ <valley>. Mice were stirring the dry leaves fallen under the willows. A whiteness drifting above the rushes, silent and indistinct, for the owl had flown from its roost on the stone corbel under an arch of the bridge <which spanned the river>.

Once the owl had roosted in the hollow oak, ~~a quarter of a mile below~~ <a minute's flight down the river from> the bridge, but winter floods had carved the bank at the bend, washing earth and stones from the roots which had pushed out of an acorn ~~five~~ <three> centuries before, and the tree had long since fallen. A raft of sticks and froth was perpetually lodged against its drowned and leafless branches. Here hid a

³⁹ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/48/3/2.

trout whenever the distorted images of men moving along the turf appeared above its surface circle of vision.⁴⁰

The effect of this series of revisions can be seen in relation to the opening sentence. Williamson moves from 'with dusk', to the dialect word 'dimimity-light' and then to 'dimimity', before settling on the more accessible Standard English 'twilight' as the opening word of the story. The phrase 'the eve-star shining above the hill' has a precision lacking in the earlier more laboured versions. The words 'silent and indistinct' are removed from the description of the owl's whiteness, which helps to concentrate attention on the visual impact of the bird's flight. The earliest version introduces the otter in the second paragraph; not only does Williamson later delay to good effect the entrance of a central character in his story, but the distracting presence of other animals and birds is also gradually removed and the canvas becomes less crowded. Williamson does, however, at this point include a brief attempt to represent the scene from the perspective of a fish, a challenging undertaking that he was later to develop in much more detail in *Salar* (1935).

The second paragraph of Williamson's final draft begins:

Below Canal Bridge, on the right bank, grew twelve great trees, with roots awash. Thirteen had stood there – eleven oaks and two ash trees – but the oak nearest the North Star had never thriven, since first a pale green hook had pushed out of a swelled black acorn left by floods on the bank more than three centuries before. In its second year a bullock's hoof had crushed the seedling, breaking its two ruddy leaves, and the

⁴⁰ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/48/3/3.

sapling grew up crooked. The cleft of its fork held the rains of two hundred years, until frost made a wedge of ice that split the trunk; another century's weather wore it hollow, while every flood took more earth and stones from under it. And one rainy night, when salmon and peal from the sea were swimming against the brown rushing water, the tree had suddenly groaned. Every root carried the groans of the moving trunk, and the voles ran in fear from their tunnels. It rocked until dawn; and when the wind left the land it gave a loud cry, scaring the white owl from its nest, and fell into the river as the sun was rising. (TO 3)

Here, the description of the tree which is to enclose the otters' holt is given a separate paragraph where its history is carefully sketched, a foregrounding appropriate to its narrative significance. The line of trees of which it was once a part is carefully situated by the two introductory adverbial phrases, and the concluding phrase 'with roots awash' establishes the connection with the river far more succinctly than the more laboured account in the early drafts. The paragraph as a whole establishes the careful interconnectedness of things that is a distinctive feature of *Tarka*: the tree's birth is determined by a flood; it is shaped by the imprint of an animal's hoof, split by a winter frost, and undermined by extreme weather. Its final fall takes place against the background of migrating fish and has a dramatic impact on the lives of the rodents that burrow beneath it and the owl that roosts above. His communication of the interdependency of living things within a specific natural environment is one of Williamson's greatest achievements, and the early pages of his narrative immediately demonstrate just how far he has moved on from his source material.

J. W. Blench suggests that ‘the successful artistic presentation in *Tarka* of a religious vision of the at-one-ness of all natural things including man, “under the fostering hand of the Creator” (to use a beautiful phrase of Sir Oswald Mosley, which became one of Williamson’s favourite quotations) [...] makes it the great book it is [...], a genuine spiritual illumination’.⁴¹ This argument is problematic. It allows a determinedly mystical and religious interpretation to obscure the degree of craftsmanship that went into the final version of the text. Blench further comments: ‘the countryside of the book is not just simply and externally described; it is presented through the eyes of a poet, so that familiar things become magical. This magic is not superimposed upon reality, it is reality itself observed by a man “possessed of more than usual organic sensibility”, to use Wordsworth’s famous characterisation of the poet in the *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*’.⁴² This loose application of ‘poetic’ qualities to Williamson rather oversimplifies the nature of his narrative achievement. Indeed, it is often when Williamson is being most self-consciously ‘poetic’ that his writing becomes occluded and over-ornate. ‘All great poets’, he claimed, ‘were the lightbringers of humanity’,⁴³ and this exalted sense of vocation led him into some awkward assumptions of oracular wisdom. It is necessary to exercise care when taking Williamson at his own valuation. A close examination of the shaping process that went into his writing, and his use of literary models, is more valuable in establishing the qualities of his writing than loose assertions about ‘poetic’ sensibilities.

Some other significant differences between one of these literary models – Tregarthen’s story – and *Tarka* become apparent as the two stories develop.

⁴¹ Blench, ‘How Good is *Tarka the Otter* as Literature?’, p. 27.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴³ *Collected Animal Stories* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 5.

Otters give birth at different times of the year, and there is little consensus among zoologists about what might be the most common breeding season. James Williams has pointed out that ‘they have been recorded as being born in any month of the year’.⁴⁴ L. Harrison Matthews has also conceded that ‘very little is known of the breeding of the otter; according to the information available there appears to be no fixed breeding season in this species and young may be born in any month of the year, most frequently in the spring according to some naturalists [...]. With so little definitely known on the subject it is obvious that the whole of the reproductive physiology of the otter awaits investigation’.⁴⁵ It would thus seem that the choices made by both Williamson and Tregarthen as to the time of birth of their fictional otters are scientifically justifiable. Tregarthen places the birth of his otter at the beginning of the year, during ‘the rain and sleet of January’, perhaps to create a neat calendar-based opening to the story, or to allow the cub’s growth to take place during the season of spring. Williamson mentions no date until the second chapter, when we are given the season as ‘mid-May’ and told that ‘the cubs were two months old’, thus placing Tarka’s birth in March, at the symbolic beginning of the spring season.

In both accounts of the cub’s early years, an incident occurs in which the young otter is saved by its mother from a predatory bird. In Tregarthen the attack, by a buzzard, takes place by the third page of the narrative: ‘a buzzard, mewing as he quartered the ground beneath, espied the cubs, and thinking they were at his mercy, stooped to seize the easy prey’.⁴⁶ In *Tarka*, the attack occurs much later, when the cubs are over two months old, and the chosen predator here is a short-eared owl: ‘the bird [...] thought that Tarka was a small

⁴⁴ James Williams, *The Otter* (Ludlow: Merlin Unwin, 2010), p. 29.

⁴⁵ L. Harrison Matthews, *British Mammals* (London: Collins, 1952), p. 239.

⁴⁶ Tregarthen, *The Life Story of an Otter*, p. 26.

rabbit, and fanned above him while it considered whether or not he was small enough to be attacked' (*TO* 27). Williamson's selection of owl species here has been questioned by Tim Osborne, who argues that 'the Short-eared Owl [...] seems oddly out of place in a river valley in early summer',⁴⁷ and wonders whether Williamson was thinking of a long-eared owl, a nocturnal hunter (the attack is described as occurring at night) unlike the diurnal short-eared owl, possessing the raised ear-tufts which Williamson describes – 'raised two tufts of feathers on its head' – which are again far less in evidence in the short-eared owl.

This is not the only occasion when Williamson's ornithological credentials have been questioned,⁴⁸ but more significant here is the way that Williamson has adapted Tregarthen's account of the incident. In Tregarthen, the buzzard was only 'about to lay hold' of the cub, and the attack is never followed through. In addition, the mother otter is given a rather human sense of justice, revenge and the ability to reflect on experience: 'the mother was bent on avenging the attempted wrong'. She successfully drives off the buzzard, and appears to consider the lessons of the event: 'the incident troubled the otter so greatly that, resisting all their importunities, she never again exposed them to the risk of capture'.⁴⁹ In *Tarka*, the attack of the owl is of longer duration, and the mother's defence takes on a more visceral quality: 'it had turned with clacking beak to peck the base of the cub's skull when the paw-stroke of the bitch tore half the feathers from its breast. She stood on it, bit once, twice, thrice, in a second of time, and so the owl died'. This tendency to dwell on the

⁴⁷ Tim Osborne, 'The Ornithology of *Tarka the Otter*', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 16, September 1987, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁸ Jeremy Gavron quotes Williamson's son, Richard, as having called his father's ornithology and botany 'sketchy'. See Gavron, 'Introduction', p. viii.

⁴⁹ Tregarthen, *The Life Story of an Otter*, p. 26.

details of death and physical conflict has been identified as characteristic of Williamson's early nature writing. The comment of Glen Cavaliero seems apt: '[Williamson's] 'extraordinary fidelity and closeness of observation is matched by an emotional intensity, an obsession with pain and cruelty'.⁵⁰ In contrast, Colin Wilson's assertion is rather an oversimplification: '[Williamson] 'didn't care much for [...] nature in the raw'.⁵¹ What is clear is that, although in many ways *Tarka* marks a clear development in Williamson's narrative style, elements of his previous work are still evident.

The structural similarities between Tregarthen's tale and *Tarka* continue in the next stage of the two stories: the training of the cubs. Again with Tregarthen, the behaviour of the bitch otter is described using verbs that suggest conscious thought and resolution: 'their mother resolved to take them to the pool and teach them to swim [...]. She was much troubled at this time by their refusal to eat the fish'. Very occasionally, Williamson gives way to this rather anthropomorphic approach ('she was overjoyed when Tarka's lids ungummed'), but in general he tends to focus much more on the actions and physical movements of the animal, suggesting any sense of thought or purpose purely by implication. The following passage, for instance, describes the cubs' training process:

The bitch took her cubs to a pool below the bridge and walked with them across a shallow tail of water. She stared at the stones, brown and slippery with seaweed, and the cubs stared also. They watched the glimmers in the claws of water, sometimes trying to bite them. While they

⁵⁰ Glen Cavaliero, *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel, 1900–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 119.

⁵¹ Colin Wilson, 'Henry Williamson and his Writings: A Personal View', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 2, October 1980, p. 16.

were watching the mother ran along the bank to the top of the pool and slid into the water. More often than usual her head looked up as she swam from bank to bank, for she was not hunting, but driving the fish down to the cubs. (TO 28)

Williamson here employs a sequence of familiar, active verbs to depict the bitch otter's behaviour: 'took', 'walked', 'stared', 'ran', 'slid', 'looked up', 'swam', 'was not hunting, but driving'. In contrast, Tregarthen's lexis and syntax are at times mannered and archaic, reminiscent of the early Williamson: 'wonderful ease and grace marked their movements', 'long ere the woodman's bantam heralded the day', 'every furry wilding'.⁵² By the time of the final drafts of *Tarka*, Williamson had largely left behind such flourishes and had settled on a much more straightforward and restrained form of expression. In addition, he places his narrative more often than Tregarthen in a precisely identified geographical setting. In the opening pages of Chapter 2, for example, he names the Tunnel Pool, Halfpenny Bridge and Canal Bridge. All three places are to be found on the River Torridge between Bideford and Great Torrington. Tregarthen's world is clearly that of the Cornish countryside, but the landscape tends to be depicted more generally, through references such as 'the hill', 'the pool' and 'the hollow below'.⁵³

There are some differences in how the authors recount the stages of the cub's training. Tregarthen tells of the cub's initiation to swimming in water and then to the weaning process and the taste of fish. Williamson reverses this process; fish eating (in this case, an eel rather than a trout) comes first and swimming second. In both cases, however, the first moment of tasting flesh is

⁵² Tregarthen, *The Life Story of an Otter*, p. 35.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

presented as marking a rite of passage in both physical and psychological terms. Tregarthen comments on how 'this fish diet produced a most significant change: the cubs became fierce, and at the same time fearful. No longer was any restraint needed to keep them to the nest [...]. Henceforth the sense of dread lay on their lives like a shadow and deepened with their development'.⁵⁴ Williamson presents a very similar effect, if more sharply: 'the new food changed them almost at once. They grew swift and fierce. Their frolics on the bank often ceased at the cry of a night-bird [...]. They started whenever their mother started. They began to fear' (*TO* 21).

This passage also demonstrates one of the many problems of representation faced by writers of animal stories: the difficulty of convincingly conveying an animal's thoughts and feelings. On the one hand, the narrator must avoid the dangers of anthropomorphism and the temptation to ascribe to an animal the human processes of inference, emotion and rationalisation. On the other, there is a literary requirement to present the animal's experience in such a way as to make the narrative both comprehensible and compelling to a human audience. If, in addition, the writer asserts that his tale is grounded in experience and long hours of observation, as Williamson did, then the balance between these two narrative purposes becomes both more perilous and more essential. Ted Hughes has attested to Williamson's success in achieving this difficult balance: 'what spellbound me, as I read, was a sensation I have never felt so acutely in any other book. I can only call it the feeling of actuality. The icy feeling of the moment of reality'.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵⁵ Hughes, *Henry Williamson: A Tribute*, p. 2.

Williamson's method here is to describe the animal's actions and allow feeling and motivation to be inferred. An extract from Chapter 7, after Tarka has finally separated from his family, provides another example:

Twice he crept down the drain, but each time there was a bright light at the break in the pipe, and so he went back. At dusk he slipped out and went upstream again. Just above the bridge was a chestnut tree, and under it a shed, where ducks were softly quacking. He climbed on the bank, standing with his feet in sprays of ivy, his nose upheld, his eyes peering. The scents of the ducks were thick and luring as vivid colour is to a child. Juices flowed into his mouth, his heart beat fast. (TO 83)

The otter is described as responding to external stimuli; the animal's experience is firmly rooted in the physical world. The senses of the otter are brought into focus: sight ('bright light'), touch ('his heart beat fast'), hearing ('softly quacking'), smell ('scents of the ducks') and taste ('juices flowed into his mouth'). The account of the operation of these faculties brings us convincingly into the animal's world, but it is through these five senses that humans also respond to their environment, so a degree of imagined and shared experience is made possible.⁵⁶

Williamson considerably expanded this account from the version in his early draft, where the experience is passed over more quickly:

⁵⁶ Emanuela Cenami Spada has argued that in the study of animal behaviour the use of mental or physical predicates can be considered a fallacy 'only if we know with certainty that animals are completely different from humans'. See Spada, 'Amorphism, Mechanomorphism, and Anthropomorphism', in *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes and Animals*, ed. Robert W. Mitchell, Nicholas S. Thompson and H. Lyn Miles (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 38.

Twice he crept down the pipe, but each time there was light shining at the break in the elbow-joint of the pipe and he went back. When at last it was dark enough to go out to the swift shallow water he went under the bridge upstream, past a farm on the left where ducks were softly quacking in a shed. There were noises behind him, the voices of men and an occasional motor-car, so he hurried upstream, not feeding.⁵⁷

This does little more than move the journey of the animal onwards. The final version has a much greater richness and intensity of engagement with the physical, living experience of the imagined otter.

One aspect of the lives of otters that both Tregarthen and Williamson refer to in some detail is their search for prey. This narrative choice makes sense in many ways: it offers a detailed insight into their existence that helps to establish the credentials of the stories; it forms an important part of the growth and development of the young otters and thus pushes on the chronology of the narrative; it also places the otters firmly within their environment – hunted, they are also hunters. Tregarthen's accounts, however, are at times rather general: 'she and the cubs fished until the stars began to pale'; 'on reaching the fallen pine they began to fish, and so continued all the way to the salmon pool, where they sported till dawn drove them again to the morass'.⁵⁸ Williamson rarely misses an opportunity to describe the capture of prey in more visceral detail, often also placing this capture within a wider world of eat-and-be-eaten:

The dog otter had caught and eaten the drake, swimming up underneath it. At the time of capture the drake had been trying to swallow a frog, by

⁵⁷ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/48/3/1, p. 43.

⁵⁸ Tregarthen, *The Life Story of an Otter*, p. 42.

quipping with its bill, which held one of the legs. When the otter's teeth had gripped the drake, the frog had escaped, but it commenced to swell on the water and so it could not swim down to the pit's floor. Tarka saw it above him as he pushed about eagerly underwater; the frog showed darkly in the dim surface mirror which reflected the grey sludge of the pond's bed. Tarka caught it, and ate it under a thorn bush planted by a thrush beside the pond. (TO 46)

The range of prey described by Williamson is also telling in terms of creating a rounded, detailed account of the animal's way of life. In the last three pages of Chapter 3, the otters are described as eating and having eaten bullfrogs, mallards, eels, salmon, pollack, lampreys, a pheasant and a bird's egg. The narrative gains conviction from such comprehensive coverage.

Williamson is, however, much more than a compiler of facts. In his observations on his own and others' writing, he repeatedly insists on the need to do more than merely record what can be scientifically substantiated. He acknowledges that 'the so-called great writers (true writers is perhaps a more precise term) are masters of detail', but argues, in terms that recall the critical writings of D. H. Lawrence, that they are more than this: 'their pages arrest and hold the attention because their detail is fresh, interesting, living. The best books live because the life in them is ever new: the sun of the author's integrity shines upon them, and from the pages to the inner self of the reader'.⁵⁹

Williamson expands on his theory about the merely 'good' writers (rather than 'real' writers) in an essay, 'Reality in War Literature':

⁵⁹ *An Anthology of Nature Writing*, ed. Henry Williamson (London: Thomas Nelson, 1936), p. x.

Good writers exist within the convention of their age [...] they add nothing to what is loosely called thought, or the spirit. They do not shock one beyond one's complacency. They do not see; their detail is commonplace; they employ what writers with sight (which is the raw stuff of insight) have discovered before them; they are not discoverers; they uncover nothing; they all write the same sort of prose, with the same sort of details.⁶⁰

An example of what Williamson tried to do with 'detail' can be seen by comparing a section from two early drafts of the first chapter of *Tarka* with the final version. Williamson is describing an incident when the young cub sees a kingfisher for the first time. The first draft reads:

Once as Tarka was squatting near the hole a little bird flew on it and frightened him. It was seven inches long, and had a straight beak, all black except an orange patch above its chin. It perched there on pink feet and the greenish blue feathers gleamed in the sun, its head and neck were barred with a brilliant sky-blue. It turned and stared at Tarka with a bright brown eye and the whelp saw the chestnut colour of its breast.⁶¹

This paragraph largely consists of a string of similarly structured clauses, built around a sequence of adjective and noun phrases. The listing effect is reminiscent of a textbook. Even the switch to the cub's point of view is essentially managed to add another colour to the harlequin effect. Ultimately the result is rather mechanical. Above the second sentence of this extract

⁶⁰ *The Linhay on the Downs* (London: Faber, 1934), p. 241.

⁶¹ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/48/3/1.

Williamson has added the note 'describe as image'. The results of this suggested reworking can be seen in the next draft. This reads as follows:

Once as he was blinking away the brightness a ~~short~~ bird <the size of a sparrow> alighted on a twig above him <the hole. A sparrow in size, but not in colour. It may have been that the spirit of earth and fire and water had painted its plumage with their spare colours, for its feet were the colour of the pink rock in the cleaves of Dartmoor, its wings were the green of the opening buds of hawthorn, its> ~~It perched still on pink feet, and he watched it. Its~~ neck and head were <of the sky's blue dome, its breast was the hue of chestnuts newly fallen.> ~~blue as the sky and it had a long black beak~~ <It had a black beak nearly as long as its body, for it was Halcyon the kingfisher whose mate laid her eggs on the bones of fish caught by the beak>. ~~It turned, showing a breast of chestnut and peered at Lutra with a bright brown eye. Lutra~~ <Halcyon peered with a bright brown eye at Tarka who> wanted the bird to play with, ~~and yet he dared not move.~~⁶²

The opening line is an improvement. The word 'squatting' was rather awkward, and the inserted alliterative phrase ties the daylight and the otter's sensory awareness together. The introduction of the 'spirit' is a little forced, but does introduce a bardic connection to the narrative worlds of myth and fable. The portrayal of the kingfisher has risen beyond a mere catalogue of features. Now the colours are metaphorically associated with the physical features of the wider environment and suggestions of the passing seasons ('opening buds of hawthorn' – 'chestnuts newly fallen'). The kingfisher is named 'Halcyon': a

⁶² Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/48/3/2.

further shift towards the status of a mythological creature. The narrative focus on the bird is now sustained and developed; it is given its own place within the tale. The final version reads as follows:

One morning as he was blinking away the brightness a bird about the size of a sparrow alighted on a twig over the hole. A sparrow in size, but not in colour! It may have been that the Quill Spirit had painted the bird with colours stolen from rock and leaf and sky and fern, and enriched them by its fervour, for the bird's feet were pinker than the rock-veins in the cleaves of Dartmoor, his wings were greener than the opening buds of hawthorn, his neck and head were bluer than the autumn noonday sky, his breast was browner than bracken. He had a black beak nearly as long as his body. He was Halcyon the king fisher. His feathers were now at their brightest, for his mate had just laid her seven glossy white eggs at the end of a tunnel in the bank.

Halcyon peered with a bright brown eye at Tarka, who wanted the bird to play with. (*TO* 15)

This reshaping of the opening sentence even more sharply connects the morning, the light and the otter's angle of vision. The exclamatory sentence increases the impact of the bird's dramatic entrance. The identifying of the 'Quill Spirit' personifies the idea of supernatural agency more precisely than the vaguer 'the spirit of earth and fire and water'. Now the description of the colours of the bird is expressed through comparative adjectives: 'pinker', 'greener' and 'bluer'. This gives force and conviction to the idea that the bird is 'enriched'; it still reflects the wider environment but somehow also transcends it. Williamson does not, however, lose sight of the bird as a physical living creature. The

writing throughout is generally more controlled, the syntax often sharper than before; the information given about the nest is less obtrusively inserted than in the first draft, but still provides an authoritative picture of the broader life of the bird: the kingfisher as a living creature with an existence outside the imagined narrative world. This passage demonstrates the degree to which Williamson markedly improves on his sources. This is even more evident in the winter sequence, one of the great chapters of the novel.

For both Tregarthen and Williamson, a pivotal moment in the narrative is the great set-piece where the land is described as in the grip of an exceptionally severe winter. Tregarthen devotes two chapters, 9 and 10, entitled 'Frost and Famine' and 'Tracked', to this section of the story, and in Williamson's text the corresponding description of the season stretches across the same chapters. At the beginning of Chapter 9, Tregarthen characteristically provides a hint as to what is to come: 'but there was soon to steal upon the unsuspecting creatures a frost which exceeded in severity any visitation of cold that the old marshman had witnessed'.⁶³ This ominous note is then softened by the suggestion that 'protected by their thick coats the creatures enjoyed the biting cold', but Tregarthen goes on to describe an incident where the dog otter is nearly trapped beneath the ice. This offers a striking contrast to the macabre ending to Chapter 9 of *Tarka*. The otters have been described sharing a meal with an old otter called Marland Jimmy and playing on a slide of frozen mud. The narrative then moves upwards from the surface of the waters to the skies. Here Williamson characteristically unites the elements in a landscape of ice-bound suffering. The rhythm of the sentences slows and staggers to a halt,

⁶³ Tregarthen, *The Life Story of an Otter*, p. 104.

reflecting the water's gradual freezing into immobility. Above the water the skies also seem to be iced into greyness:

A mist was rising like steam from the top of the water, which moved slower with its weight of surface slush. The slush became clotted, and hardened, and suddenly ceased to move. The star-points dulled. Orion was stripped of his flashing, the green tongue of Sirius was mute, the Swan lost her lustre, the glare of the Bull faded. (*TO* 111)

Williamson introduces into this wintry world an ominous symbol of the frozen north, 'an Arctic Owl, and its name was Bubo, which means terrible'. The end of the chapter sees the owl perching on 'something that swayed and creaked to its weight'. The owl gazes down and forward, but 'there was no movement; there was no life. The owl stared round again, and flew away, as though nodding to the head of Marland Jimmy gazing film-eyed out of the ice' (*TO* 112). The owl functions as a dispassionate witness to this world of death, and through the perspective of the owl Williamson slowly directs the reader's gaze to the final gothic image of the chapter, the lifeless mask of the trapped otter. In this way, Williamson has turned Tregarthen's description of a brief moment of tension into an unfolding piece of drama and a final tableau of far greater metaphorical and narrative impact.

In Tregarthen's tale the otter and his mate attempt a raid on a duckhouse. The owner hears the otters and drives them off, hungry but unharmed. Williamson retains the general outline of this incident but adapts the material to telling effect. In both stories, the otters have been depicted as famished with hunger and desperate to feed their cubs; Tregarthen describes how they 'found a few limpets on which they managed to keep themselves and

the whelps from starving until the supply failed. Then the little mother, driven to extremity, dulled the gnawing pangs of hunger with seaweed'.⁶⁴ In *Tarka*, 'Greymuzzle returned to the duck pond with only seaweed and shellfish to nourish herself and the cub' (TO 118). The setting of both incidents is a solitary duckhouse owned by a marshman-farmer. Both tales describe the otters as enticed by the smell of the ducks, but unable to break into the shed: 'the scent of the ducks nearly drove the starving creatures mad';⁶⁵ 'the smell of the ducks was painful' (TO 113). Both marshmen, following the animals' tracks, cry out triumphantly in the belief that they have trapped the male otter: [Tregarthen] "King Oter [sic], thy time is come";⁶⁶ [Williamson] 'He shouted, "I've got'n [sic]" (TO 122). But in other respects, Williamson departs from his source in significant ways.

Tregarthen presents the attempt to hunt down the otters from the perspective of the marshman. This is a straightforward description of a battle between man and beast, a battle of wits and the use of the senses in which the man is predictably discomfited. Williamson builds carefully to his version with two powerful pieces of writing. The first is an account of an epic and desperate battle between the otters, a fox and a badger for the body of a swan, in which the otters' initial killing of the bird is accompanied by the carefully orchestrated choric cries of estuary birds: 'every curlew on the sandbank cried', 'the treble whistle of the redshank was piped from shore to shore', 'the ring plover sped over the water', 'Old Nog cried *Kra-r-rk!*'. The second piece is another striking evocation of the Devon winter, in which the planets, the elements, man and wild animals are caught up in a pitiless dance of death:

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 108.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 110.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 120.

Every day on the burrows was a period of silence under a vapour-ringed sun that slid into night glowing and quivering with the zones and the pillars of the Northern Lights. More wild red deer from Exmoor strayed to the Great Field, which even the rats had quitted. The deer walked into the gardens of the village, some to be shot stealthily, others to sleep into death. The shepherd of the marsh-grazing stumped at night round his fire, clad in the skins of sheep, and swinging his arms. Beyond the straw-and-sack-stuffed hurdles, foxes, badgers, and stoats slunk and prowled and fought for each other's bodies. Over the lambs in the fold flew Kronk the raven, black and croaking in the moonlight. (*TO* 119)

It is again instructive to compare this final version with an earlier draft:

Every day was a period of pale silence which slid without creak or movement into the pallor of night. ~~Deer~~ <wild red deer from Exmoor> walked into gardens and cattle-shippen and were shot stealthily; the shepherd spent many sleepless nights guarding his lambs in the fold, beyond the straw stuffed hurdle-fence of which prowled ~~Fang-over-lip~~ and other foxes with badgers and even stoats. Kronk the raven came as well; when the moon was full he flew black and croaking like a ghoul from the gibbets of the night <while Orion strode the southern sky with a shining mace to shatter the false star-dwarfs and Sirius threw his flashing tongue as they fled before him>. ⁶⁷

In the final draft Williamson has placed the action precisely in Exmoor and sharpened up the second, over-elaborate sentence. He omits the slightly

⁶⁷ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/48/3/1.

clichéd image of the shepherd guarding his lambs and offers a far more effective description of the actions he performs to keep off the cold, in this way linking his suffering with that of the world around him. The original list of prowling animals rather peters out, and the revised version offers a rhythmically and thematically climactic end to the sentence: ‘slunk and prowled and fought for each other’s bodies’. The last sentence of the final version, with its understated suggestion of menace conveyed through the contrast of the black croaking raven and the enclosed lambs, is a clear advance on the earlier mystical portrayal of the heavens, where the references to ‘the false star-dwarfs’ and the other mythological beings evoke uneasy reminders of *The Star Born* (1933), a strange and faintly messianic fairy-tale, generally regarded as one of Williamson’s least successful works.

Not that Williamson was altogether able to resist the appeal of this kind of spiritual communion. Parts of the original passage were transferred to a paragraph marked out by double-spacing in Chapter 9, which rather ominously begins with the mannered phrase ‘and the sky was to the stars again’ and concludes with a scattering of celestial references before the reappearance of the ‘false star-dwarfs of burnt-out suns, who had turned back into Darkness again’ (TO 106). Anne Williamson has noted the parallel with *The Star Born* here and finds evidence of the theme of redemption in the way that ‘the passage takes on the whole ethos of that book’.⁶⁸ The degree to which that ethos provided a desirable model must, however, be open to debate. Colin Wilson was generally unimpressed with this aspect of *Tarka*: ‘Williamson wanted to save civilisation with a gospel of nature mysticism; but he himself

⁶⁸ A. Williamson, ‘A Life’s Work: A Descriptive Bibliography of the Writings of Henry Williamson’, *The Henry Williamson Society* [website], 2013, <https://www.henrywilliamson.co.uk/a-lifes-work>.

was not a genuine poet or nature mystic. [...] The mysticism is all a bit too literary and self-conscious'.⁶⁹ The slightly waspish nature of this criticism should not be allowed to distract from what is a salutary note of caution about some tendencies in Williamson's writing.

However, the culmination of the chapter is without doubt far more dramatic than in Tregarthen's version, and is made clearly significant to the narrative as a whole. The bitch otter, Greymuzzle, is cornered and beaten to death, thus providing a gruesome climax to the whole death-dominated sequence. What happens immediately before Greymuzzle's death is also significant during this section of the tale. While approaching the duckhouse, Tarka is trapped by a sprung gin, and his mate, resisting the impulse to flight, bites through three of his toes in setting him free. Thus Williamson presents the bitch otter as a heroic, ultimately self-sacrificial being, a staple figure of his narratives, and also gives the maimed Tarka the defining marks that will identify him for the remainder of the narrative.

This section of *Tarka* has rightly been praised as one of the supreme achievements of the book. Jeremy Gavron refers to 'the great winter chapters',⁷⁰ and Blench talks of 'the celebrated description of the coming of winter to the Braunton Burrows' as being 'of exceptionally fine quality'.⁷¹ What Williamson does so effectively is transform the source material, where the landscape acts as a stage on which the otters perform or a hostile force which they must survive, into a far more complex and interconnected narrative world where setting and protagonist cannot be seen as distinct from each other. This

⁶⁹ Wilson, 'Henry Williamson and his Writings: A Personal View', p. 14.

⁷⁰ Gavron, 'Introduction', p. xii.

⁷¹ Blench, 'How Good is *Tarka the Otter* as Literature?', p. 22.

is writing which is epic in quality and challenging in its environmental implications.

In the chapter of Tregarthen's text that follows the winter scene, we are briefly told that 'that day a thaw set in', and the season of winter is quickly abandoned. Williamson, however, extends his description of the change of seasons and offers an evocative, spiritual vision of a wider world freed from the grip of winter: 'the south wind was breaking from the great roots the talons of the Icicle Spirit, and freeing ten thousand flying seeds in each brown head'. As this evocation of the approaching spring comes to an end, Williamson introduces himself into the story as an internal narrator. This passage is worth quoting in full:

Linnets sat on the lighthouse telegraph wire, wing to wing, and talking to the sky. Out of the auburn breasts fell ravishing notes, like glowing strokes of colour in the warm south wind.

And when the shining twitter ceased, I walked to the pond, and again I sought among the reeds, in vain; and to the pill I went, over the guts in the salt grey turf, to the trickling mud where the linnets were fluttering at the seeds of the glasswort. There I spurred an otter, but the tracks were old with tides, and worm castings sat in many. Every fourth seal was marred, with two toes set deeper in the mud. They led down to the lap of the low water, where the sea washed them away. (TO 125)

This insertion of the first person is significantly timed. The horrors of the Ice Winter have passed, and wind and water now testify to the coming of spring. The narrative has reached a significant halfway point; the end of the chapter marks the conclusion of 'The First Year'; the next chapter begins the section

called 'The Last Year'. It is at this pivotal stage that Williamson directly introduces himself, and does so after an alliterative and heavily adjectival piece of lyricism that rather draws attention to its own artifice. The sequence of first-person subject pronouns, verbs of action and adverbial phrases of place (the last of which is rhetorically and syntactically reversed) – 'I walked to the pond', 'I sought among the reeds', 'to the pill I went' – establishes Williamson as a wanderer and traveller in the image of Tarka, the protagonist of the story.

There is an argument that this intrusion of the narrator is slightly awkward within a story that prides itself on its objectivity. T. E. Lawrence was certainly unimpressed. In a letter to Edward Garnett, made up of a series of notes about *Tarka*, he commented, 'the "I" seems causeless. Is it the remains of an earlier draft, or the irruption of a later mood?'⁷² The answer to Lawrence's question seems to be that it was the latter. The earlier version entitled 'The Rough Draft of *The Otter's Saga*'⁷³ contains no such passage, the corresponding chapter ending with the death of Greymuzzle.

Williamson's fondness for including himself, or a representation of himself, into his stories was a feature of his early work. He seldom missed an opportunity in life to portray himself as the embattled and misunderstood victim of a hostile world. The long-suffering Captain Horton-Wickham in the short story 'Zoe' is in many ways an example of this tendency. Other characters in the same short story are at times introduced apparently randomly. A red-haired girl called Diana Shelley emerges from a pack of hunt followers for no obvious reason other than that she was 'the youngest and prettiest of them all', and is made to fall into the water to general merriment. A Diana Shelley, however, is a

⁷² T. E. Lawrence, 'A Criticism of Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter*', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 30, September 1994, p. 123.

⁷³ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/48/3/1.

central character in *The Flax of Dream*. The character of Mary Ogilvie is introduced equally arbitrarily at the end of the story simply to provide an audience for the final sad revelation about the Captain's love life. A Mary Ogilvie is another major player in *The Flax of Dream* and is generally agreed to be a fictional representation of Ida Loetitia Hibbert, Williamson's first wife.

W. J. Keith has commented on the masks and devices that Williamson employed throughout his writing to conceal or reveal his essential self and the difficulty he often had in keeping a necessary distance from his materials: 'Williamson also resembles Borrow in the way he mixes his imaginative with his real life so that it is impossible to separate fact from fiction [...]. We are never quite sure to what extent we should separate the "implied author" from what we know of the actual writer'.⁷⁴ In general, however, Williamson was far more successful in excluding his own personal concerns in his later, greater, nature stories, *Tarka* and *Salar*. That he was conscious of the benefits of refining himself out of narrative existence is indicated in the observation he made about the writing of *Tarka*: 'yet I knew it was the real stuff, for it was true. My part as a writer seemed a small, entirely impersonal part: it was the English countryside that mattered, the trees, the rivers, the birds, the animals, the people. Indeed, I wanted the book to be without an author's name on the title page'.⁷⁵

There are, nevertheless, two other occasions where he temporarily abandons this sought-for objective distance from the narrative. The first occurs in Chapter 8 when 'a man' with a spaniel dog appears above Wrecker's path; he follows the trail of the otters into a cave and discovers a baby seal. The placing of this piece of the narrative at the end of the chapter gives it structural

⁷⁴ W. J. Keith, *The Rural Tradition: William Cobbett, Gilbert White and Other Non-Fiction Prose Writers of the English Countryside* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1975), p. 217.

⁷⁵ *The Children of Shallowford* (London: Faber, 1939), p. 52.

emphasis. The appearance of the man is also carefully anticipated. Much of the earlier chapter has been narrated from the spatial perspective and distanced bird's-eye view of an external narrator, also able to move in time between past, present and future: 'many times during the rise and fall of tides the bitch otter ran into the cave, and on the morning of the grey seal's return to the sea she swam round the Long Rock and crawled out of the surge among the limpet-studded rocks of Bag Hole' (TO 95). The narrative then shifts to the perspective of three different animals: firstly, Kronk the raven – 'Kronk was waiting for a meal off the rabbit, but he did not like to go near it until he knew for certain that the trapper [...] had not tilled a gin beside it specially for Kronk'. Secondly, the otter Greymuzzle: 'she looked left and right, often pausing to sniff the air. She picked up a feather, ran with it a few yards, and dropped it again'. Thirdly, a grey seal which 'swam out twenty yards and turned to watch the top of the cliff' (TO 96). Time now becomes restricted to the present experiences of the animal characters and is represented through a swiftly unfolding series of events. Into this sequence, by carefully managed stages, steps 'the man', apparently operating within the narrative as an anonymous representative of humanity, but increasingly and evidently also a representation of the author. The distinction between the narrator and the characters represented within the story now becomes blurred. The arrival of the man is anticipated when we are given access to the feeding raven's sense of security that 'the gulls would give the alarm should a man come round either the south or the north side of the wall, which hid approach' (TO 98). In the next paragraph, 'a man walking fast, had taken his ninth stride round the northern wall, three hundred yards off'. The man becomes the object of the seal's point of view, as it 'turned to watch the top of the cliff. She knew that the tossing flight and the cries of *quoc-quoc-quoc!*

meant the presence of man'. The seal marks the progress of the man and his spaniel dog down the cliff and the raven follows his path by sailing downwind 'to be over him'. Finally, we are given a fourth point of view: Tarka sees the man 'climbing round the Long Rock' and following some otter tracks that lead into a cave.

The narrative perspective now moves to that of 'the man', still represented in the third person. We are restricted to what he sees and hears in the order in which he experiences things, from the 'diminishing circle of daylight' as he penetrates further into the cave, to the time when 'darkness and sea-whispers' come together. Using a torch to make his way onwards, he discovers by touch the bones of dead seals, hears the cry of an infant seal and identifies 'by the shape of its head' an old bitch otter, not named, but which we understand to be Greymuzzle. The chapter ends with 'the man' establishing what seems like an imaginative sympathy between himself and the seal: he 'took from his pocket a wooden whistle made from an elderberry stick and played several soft tunes upon it. The seal looked at him, as though calmed by the rude music [...]. The man played on, moving away from the seal' (*TO* 102). In the first edition, this passage is followed by the sentence – 'slowly he bent down to stroke its head, and the seal licked his hand' – which rather over-plays the intensity of the suggested emotional bond. In the revised edition of 1962, and in subsequent editions, these words are removed.

The main thrust of the narrative is not obviously advanced by the inclusion of this episode, nor is there a great deal of new information given about any of the central animal characters. The function of this scene seems to be to foreground the author in the form of his semi-fictional representative and to make a claim for his empathetic integration within the natural world, his

becoming a part of the lives of the animals who, from his position as author, are also his imaginative creations and the subjects of his narrative. The second occasion when a stand-in for the author appears occurs much later in the story, in Chapter 16, where the wandering Tarka passes close by a churchyard wall and by a thatched cottage 'where a man, a dog, and a cat were sitting before a fire of elm brands on the open hearth' (*TO* 198). The details of this setting mark it as Williamson's own cottage, further confirmed when the dog is identified as a spaniel; and a white owl, Williamson's habitual colophon, is also introduced into the scene, 'crying skirr-rr'. Again, this passage occurs towards the end of the chapter, and again it is not easy to see exactly how the narrative is much advanced. The man later emerges from the cottage and, striking a match, sees 'the twy-toed seal, identical with the seal that led down to the sea after the Ice Winter' (*TO* 199). The reference to the footprint that marked the end of Chapter 10 implies a shared experience and understanding between the external narrator and the internal actor within the narrative. Williamson has here woven into the tale aspects of the autobiographical legend of his lost pet otter and maintains his presence as both a participant and knowing observer, himself observed and given significance within the narrative. Robert Finch observes that 'at the end of the first half of the book, the author makes a sudden, startling appearance in the first person [...]. Williamson does not subsequently appear in the narrative'.⁷⁶ This seems an oversimplification of quite a complex interweaving of author and narrator.

Chapter 16 is the last occasion within the story when this sort of narrative overlap occurs. From now on Williamson keeps himself offstage, but

⁷⁶ Robert Finch, 'Introduction to *Tarka the Otter*', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 46, 2010, p. 11.

he is replaced at the crisis of the narrative by two characters with whom he is very much associated. Anne Williamson has recounted the first meeting of Williamson and the Hibbert family in 1924, and the impact that Charles Hibbert, one of the hunt officials of the Cheriton Otter Hounds, had on *Tarka*. He also had a significant impact on Williamson's life, in that his daughter, Ida Loetitia, became Williamson's first wife. Both father and daughter appear in the last chapter of *Tarka*. The hunt is approaching its conclusion, 'at the beginning of the eighth hour', and Tarka is hiding, almost submerged under water, when a dragonfly lands on his nose. The girl realises 'that she alone had seen the otter', but flushes, hides 'her grey eyes with her lashes', and says nothing. Here we are given what seems to be a partial representation of the author, sensitive, aware and deeply at one with the environment – 'since childhood she had walked the Devon rivers'. At the same time, we are provided with a familiar female figure in Williamson's stories, a maid 'gentle in thought to all her eyes beheld' (*TO* 251). Her father is associated with the natural world in rather a different way – 'an old man lank and humped as a heron' – and it is he who notices when Tarka sneezes for a second time, raises his hat and gives the *Tally Ho!* Perhaps the father also represents that other element within the author, that which acknowledges the thrill of the chase. As the next chapter will show, it is through the chase, the hunt, that Williamson draws together many of his varied narrative threads and in so doing achieves something significant and distinctive in his use of the novel form.

3. *Tarka* and the Significance of the Hunt

The final chapters of *Tarka* are indebted to various historical accounts of otter-hunting. By 1924, Williamson was following local otter-hunts, in particular the Cheriton Otter Hounds. This pack hunted the Taw and Torridge rivers, part of that area of North Devon now known as 'Tarka Country'. Williamson's connections with the hunt went beyond those of the disinterested observer. In 1924, three years before the publication of *Tarka* and while following a hunt, he met his future father-in-law, Charles Hibbert, a keen member of the otter-hunting fraternity and one of the hunt officials of the Cheriton. Anne Williamson has attested to the importance of the annals of the Cheriton Hunt in providing material for the novel as a whole and for the concluding events in particular:

He also worked in several real-life events which he read about in the annals of the Cheriton Hunt written by the Master of the Hunt, William Henry Rogers. There is one story of a very long hunt which started at 7.30 a.m. and continued until 6.50 p.m. which, although Henry changes some of the details, is the basis for the long hunt endured by Tarka at the end of the book. William Rogers was very helpful in providing Henry with information and correcting mistakes of etiquette and ambiance of the hunting fraternity, and in due course *Tarka* was to be dedicated to him in recognition.¹

In his earlier stories, Henry Williamson used hunting as a motif through which he could explore the lives of individual animals as well as aspects of the relationship between those animals and human beings. In *Tarka*, he expanded

¹ Anne Williamson, *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic* (Stroud: Sutton, 1995), p. 97.

and integrated representations of the hunt more fully into the structure of his narrative. A central element of all his narratives is the blending of observational realism and allegory, and it is his developed use of allegory in *Tarka* that demonstrates his development as a nature novelist. One important way of seeing *Tarka*, for instance, is as a parable of the First World War, and it is largely through the process of the hunt that *Tarka* emerges as an allegory of warfare.² 'Allegory' has a wide range of meanings, but its various features offer significant insights into Williamson's narrative methods. Allegory can be defined as a metaphor sustained and developed. One such metaphorical association is that between hunting and war; this association is evident from a very early stage in Williamson's writing career.

The sketch 'Sportsmen of the Rubbish Heaps', from the collection *The Lone Swallows* (1922), is set 'one Sunday after the war', and we are informed that some small boys were once seen 'systematically dragging the ponds with the aid of an old army blanket' (LS 151). The world of war is very close here; death and violence have not vanished from Williamson's post-war world but operate within a more sordid environment. These, at times incidental, references to war are a feature of his earliest work. In the short story 'Aliens', from *The Peregrine's Saga* (1923), he goes further and weaves together the lives, and deaths, of the story's various animal and human outsiders against the background of the events of 1917.

Some critics argue that Williamson's writings about the First World War mark the high point of his literary achievement. In reference to *How Dear is*

² Emma Griffin has analysed the connection between hunting and war, stressing the symbolic and cultural dimensions of the hunt and making reference to the ways in which twelfth-century chroniclers such as Peter of Blois and Gerald of Wales 'relate hunting to warfare, casting the hunt as a kind of peacetime alternative to the rigours of war'. See Griffin, *Blood Sport* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 29.

Life, the fourth novel in the sequence *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, John Middleton Murry stated: 'I do not know of any picture of the 1914–1918 war which can be compared to it for sheer power of enduring in the reader's memory'.³ Randall Stevenson saw *A Chronicle* as being 'the most comprehensive novelistic account of the Great War and its place in the history of the twentieth century'.⁴ Williamson's direct involvement with fighting on the Western Front was limited; he was invalided out of the conflict for much of the war, but the impact of the experience on his life and writing is hard to overestimate. On 14 March 2014, the BBC2 programme *I Was There: The Great War Interviews* featured extended excerpts from an interview with Williamson about the famous 1914 Christmas Day fraternisation between British and German soldiers, an occasion that, according to Anne Williamson, 'made a deep and lasting impression [...]. He could never forget what he learned that day – that the German soldiers thought as deeply and sincerely as the British that they were fighting for God and their country'.⁵ Similarly, in a discussion about the way in which the horrors of war must inevitably fade from the consciousness of a nation, Murry allowed an exception:

Yet here and there a man of more than ordinary sensibility arises for whom to forget is an impossibility. The experience of war becomes a festering wound in his psyche for which the rest of his life is a quest for healing [...]. Such a one is Henry Williamson.⁶

³ John Middleton Murry, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson', in *Katherine Mansfield and other Literary Studies* (London: Constable, 1959), p. 98.

⁴ Randall Stevenson, *Literature and the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 110.

⁵ Anne Williamson, *Henry Williamson and the First World War* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004), p. 49.

⁶ Murry, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson', p. 98.

This study is not primarily concerned with *A Chronicle*, but it will argue that the experience of war that had such an impact on that sequence of novels is also evident in Williamson's nature writing.⁷ Many critical treatments of *Tarka* have failed to appreciate the significance of Williamson's use of allegory. Murry suggested that Williamson, at the time of the composition of *Tarka*, had 'shrunk from living again' the memories of the war and that 'the detailed studies of natural life – the famous *Tarka the Otter*, and the less known but even superior *Salar the Salmon*'⁸ were a means of keeping his memories of the war at a safe distance. This rather underestimates the degree to which those memories flowed into his nature writings. This can be best illustrated through an examination of his allegorical approach. Paul Fussell has argued that 'war experience and its recall take the form of the deepest, most universal kind of allegory. Movement up the line, battle and recovery become emblems of quest, death and rebirth'.⁹ This emblematic pattern is clearly represented in the narrative structure of *Tarka*.

The actions of the huntsmen in *Tarka*, for instance, often resemble a military operation. During the last moments of the hunt, the huntsmen move in, wielding iron-tipped poles like medieval infantrymen: 'a second pole was brought down from the other flank, crossing with the first' (*TO* 185). It is through the creation of a succession of battles, fought and survived by the protagonist of his narrative, that Williamson connects the experience of the hunted otter with that of the soldiers in his First World War novels.

⁷ William Atkins convincingly argues that 'the equation of the moors [of Devon] with the battlefields of Europe came naturally to Williamson, himself a damaged child of the Great War'. See Atkins, *The Moor* (London: Faber, 2014), p. 36.

⁸ Murry, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson', p. 121.

⁹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 162.

One episode, from *A Fox Under My Cloak*, illustrates this connection. Phillip Maddison, the author's representative, has excited the enmity of his fellow officers, and they decide to hand out a condign punishment. Narrated from the point of view of Maddison, the incident is presented in terms that directly evoke the experience of a hunted animal and further associate it with suffering on the field of battle:

'I'll tell you what!' roared Baldersby [...]. 'I would like to see the outsider in the middle of twenty couple o' dog hounds now, here, at this very moment!' [...] He was grabbed, lugged downstairs for what Baldersby called the kill [...]; fear or death-thought ruled, akin to that which screamed as a child under the cane of the father, to that which screamed out of men physically dislocated, mortally stricken upon the battlefield [...]; he writhed from the clutches of the laughing-weak, who received violent heel-blows upon chests and chins [...]. Gasping and twisting, thrusting and sobbing, the culprit broke from the worry, and with one hand holding pyjama trousers, fled up the stone steps to the attic room.¹⁰

Phrases such as 'the kill' and 'the worry' are taken from the terminology of hunting, and the account as a whole is reminiscent of the cornered otter in Chapter 12 of *Tarka*:

The otter's rudder near the opening was seized and pulled by a hand [...]. Tarka writhed and contorted as he hung by his rudder; his back became a bow, suddenly bending up, and his teeth made a row of holes

¹⁰ *A Fox Under My Cloak* (London: Macdonald, 1955), pp. 186-89.

in a hand. The jerk made his rudder slip and he dropped among boots, to squirm between legs and away down the glider. (*TO* 155)

The immediate aftermath of this hunt is described at the beginning of Chapter 13, as the otter, wounded, drifts on the tide. Williamson here examines the imagined feelings of an animal during a hunt: 'while he was among the hounds he had felt neither fear nor hurt for the power of all his senses had been in movement to escape' (*TO* 157). This considered observation seems designed to preclude any question of uncritical anthropomorphism, and Williamson takes care to represent the animal's responses through a precise description of the otter's sense-awareness and physical movement. Daniel Farson gives another example of Williamson's unsentimental view of an animal's feelings. In a talk on 'The Red Deer of Exmoor' that he gave to the BBC, Williamson – significantly – compares the experience of a hunted animal with that of a soldier at war:

Will you be patient and listen to the reason why I do not believe that the stag, or any hunted animal, suffers the mental pain called 'fear' while it is being hunted?

Men in battle do not fear [...]. Before the action starts, yes: a most awful paralysing cold fear: but when it is happening one enters another world wherein ordinary feelings are lifted from one. One is, as it were, in a fourth dimension, a kind of clear-headed delirium.¹¹

In this passage, the allegorical connections between the feelings of a hunted animal and those of a soldier are explored in detail. While both may feel fear before the hunt or battle, once the action commences they are transported into

¹¹ Quoted in Daniel Farson, *Henry Williamson: A Portrait* (London: Robinson Publishing, 1986), p. 83.

another 'dimension'. Williamson here argues that the felt experience of human and animal can be meaningfully connected.

In the last chapters of the revised 1932 edition of *Tarka*, a further connection between war and hunting is established through the impact of sound. Many of Williamson's descriptions of battlefields emphasise the impact of the sound of gun and shellfire. *The Wet Flanders Plain* (1929), published only two years after *Tarka*, tells the story of his return to the battlefields in 1925. First, the ringing of bells in his village church evokes disturbing memories:

Then with a dinning crash the metal tongues smite the deep bronze mouths, and an immense torrent of sound pours out of the narrow doorway. The great sound sweeps other thought away into the air, and the earth fades; the powerful wraith of those four years of the War enters into me, and the torrent becomes the light and clangour of massed guns assaulting heaven.¹²

Later, while describing his return to Flanders, he recalls the sounds of battle: 'a coarse vibration of steel, opening a furrow in the very heavens, droning, buzzing, hissing, dropping in scale to a deep bass and growing louder and louder, a noise enormous and terrifying'.¹³ Robert Graves spoke of the impossibility of conveying the nature of the cacophonous sound experienced during modern war: 'you couldn't; you can't communicate noise. Noise never stopped for one moment – ever'.¹⁴ Chapter 15 of *Tarka* begins with the otter being awakened by 'the tremendous baying of hounds'. Noise, in fact, dominates the opening section. We are told that, as the huntsmen's boots

¹² *The Wet Flanders Plain* (London: Faber, 1929), p. 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁴ Quoted in Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 213.

scraped against the shillets and their hunting-poles tapped the rocks, 'the noise hurt the fine drums of his ears'. This sense of the punishing effect of loud noise is developed during the description of the final hunt.

In Chapter 19 of the 1932 edition, Tarka and his cub, Tarquol, have taken refuge in a riverside holt but are driven out of it by the huntsmen's pounding of the earth overhead: 'heavy thuds shook down bits of earth on the otters' heads and backs. The huntsman was pounding the holt-top with an iron digging bar. Tarquol tised, moving to and fro in fear of the great noises [...]. On and on went the pounding, until he could bear it no longer' (*TO* 263). In such passages, Williamson recreates the auditory suffering caused by trench warfare.

Extreme fatigue is another condition of war. Again and again in the war episodes of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, Williamson refers to the exhaustion of the troops, brought about by seemingly endless physical labour and sleep-deprivation. In *A Test to Destruction* he describes, in terms that recall Wilfred Owen's 'The Dead-Beat', the state of the troops at the end of a night working party: 'shortly after 4 a.m., hot tea with rum was dished out to the returned soldiers. Some of the young boys refused it through exhaustion; a few were crying [...]. [They] dropped to sleep, some still in equipment, upon the hut floors'.¹⁵ Towards the end of the hunt in *Tarka*, the extremity of the otter's fatigue is likewise insisted on. During the last chapter of the 1927 edition, he is continually depicted as exhausted and seeking rest: 'he breathed and rested', 'for five minutes he rested', 'Tarka was too weary to seek a holding in the banks' (*TO* 250); 'he was calm and fearless and fatigued', 'at the beginning of the ninth hour an immense fatigue came over him' (*TO* 253). In comparison, the

¹⁵ *A Test to Destruction* (London: Macdonald, 1960), p. 151.

otter in J. C. Tregarthen's *The Life Story of an Otter* (1909) is only described as suffering extreme fatigue in his last moments: 'the hounds were nearly as exhausted as he'.¹⁶

The exhaustion of the otter is emphasised by successive close references to the passage of time. This insistence on a precise recording of the time – 'at half past ten in the morning', 'the beginning of the ninth hour' – is one of several other features that recall the careful temporal sequencing of Williamson's accounts of the preparations for battle in the seventh volume of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, entitled *Love and the Loveless*:

It was 2 a.m. He was free for at least three hours. Pack mules, loaded with water and ammunition, were to be at the emplacements at 5 a.m., together with pack mules to carry the Vickers guns to the Second Line just below the crest. There was to be a two-hour pause, in which to consolidate. Then the second assault, to be followed by a five-hour pause, to await the counter-attack, smash it, and then advance to the sixth objective, the Oosttaverne Line.¹⁷

The enumeration of the different companies and battalions that are to make up the assault forces is another characteristic of war narratives. The epic is similarly concerned to establish the importance of a particular battle by presenting the names of the participating warriors. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, the poet lists the kings who rallied to the cause of the war against the Trojan Aeneas, focusing on both their rank and their weapons as a means of distinguishing them:

¹⁶ J. C. Tregarthen, *The Life Story of an Otter* (London: John Murray, 1927), p. 148.

¹⁷ *Love and the Loveless* (London: Macdonald, 1958), p. 154.

The first to enter the war and march his armed men forth was the furious Mezentius, scorner of gods, coming from Etruria's borders. Close by him marched his son Lausus [...]. After them came Aventinus, a son of Hercules [...]. His soldiers carried in their hands for warfare javelins and sword-sticks [...]. Next came two brothers from Tibur's battlements.¹⁸

In *Tarka*, Williamson provides us with the ranks of human actors and observers, also segregated and ranked through gender, age and weaponry:

Some men leaned on long ash-poles, stained and polished with linseed oil and shod with iron and notched from the top downwards with the number of past kills, two notches crossed denoting a double-kill. The women carried smaller and slenderer poles, either of ash or male bamboo. There were blackthorn thumb-sticks, hazel-wands, staves of ground-ash; one boy held the handle of a carpet-sweeper, slightly warped. (*TO* 220)

Next comes the roll call of hounds, also endowed with the associations of past combat:

The kennel-boy and whip called them by name and flicked gently near the more restless with his whip: Barbrook and Bellman, Boisterous and Chorister, Dewdrop, Sailoress, Coraline and Waterwitch; Armlet, who lay down to sleep, Playboy and Actor, Render and Fencer; Hemlock the one-eyed, with Bluemaid, Hurricane, Harper and Pitiful, the veterans; Darnel and Grinder, who sat behind Sandboy. Then two young hounds

¹⁸ Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. W. F. Jackson Knight (London: Penguin, 1956), p. 195.

of the same litter, Dabster and Dauntless, sons of Dewdrop and Deadlock. (TO 221)

Williamson took many of these names – for example, Armlet, Fencer, Render, Harper and Dewdrop – and some of their characteristics from the records of the Cheriton Otter Hounds. The list itself is carefully shaped. The first hounds are presented in alphabetical order and the pattern of two and then three-syllable names develops an emphatic rhythm. The alliterative sentence that concludes the register shudders to a stop on the name of Deadlock. The beginning of the next paragraph drives home the impact of the name: ‘and there Deadlock, his black head scarred with old fights, sat on his haunches, apart and morose’ (TO 221). As with Tarka, the scars on the body of the hound themselves constitute a narrative. He has a mark on his right ear made by Tarka’s mother, two years before, at the time of Tarka’s birth. The wheel is about to come full circle.

The gathering of combatants is concluded with the arrival of the otter hunters, where the martial imagery becomes more pronounced:

Other otter hunters came from their rivers which flowed into the seas of Britain west and south and east. Their uniforms were coloured as the dragonflies over the river. There were grey pot-hats, dark blue jackets and stockings, and white breeches of the Cheriton; the grey hats and breeches, and stockings and red coats of the Culmstock; the cream-collared bright blue coats and stockings and cream breeches of the Crowhurst from Surrey, Kent and Sussex; men of the Dartmoor, all in navy blue [...], the green double-peaked caps, green coats, scarlet ties,

white breeches, and green stockings of the Courtenay Tracey from Wessex. (TO 222)

The enumeration of the different hunt companies brings to mind the listing of companies drawn up before a battle, both in the pattern of the noun phrases – preposition, definitive article and proper noun – and in the careful identification by uniform. Williamson, however, does more than this. Through the simile of the dragonflies, the huntsmen are also implicitly associated with the colours of the river life. Furthermore, the gathering of the hunts from different parts of England is described almost as itself a natural process – ‘from the rivers which flowed into the seas of Britain’ – and the epic quality of the occasion is suggested through the ways in which this small area of Devon comes to represent the whole country. There are unmistakable echoes here of the heralded arrival before a battle of the various nobles and their followers in Shakespeare’s history plays, one of many examples of the dramatic qualities of Williamson’s writing. Throughout *Tarka*, Williamson takes full advantage of the drama inherent in otter-hunting.

The threatening presence of the hunt has been established very early on. In Chapter 1, we are told that the bitch otter had been hunted ‘that morning’, and Deadlock, the antagonist of the story, is introduced. In Chapter 2, the otters’ holt is threatened by the arrival of the pack of otterhounds. The bitch otter bites Deadlock in the ear, and Tarka hears for the first time the ‘cry which he was to hear often in his wanderings [...]: *Tally Ho!*’ We are now given further information about Deadlock, ‘the biggest stallion-hound in the pack’ and ‘the truest marking hound in the country of the Two Rivers’. He is to appear at intervals throughout the story, and, with the implied inevitability characteristic of dramatic tragedy, his life and that of Tarka are increasingly and insistently

entwined. Tarka's father has fled before the hounds, and the chapter ends with the suggestion of his capture and death. We only hear of this through sounds 'offstage', again in the manner of dramatic tragedy. 'Then with the deep rumbling came the prolonged thin rattle of the horn, and the triumphant whooping of whips and huntsmen' (*TO* 35). Events such as these during the movement towards the crisis of the narrative are dealt with briefly and not allowed to detract from the impact of that final crisis.

The process and performance of hunting are described elsewhere in such a way as to give a sense of wider space and time to the narrative. In Chapter 6, the otters are described as following an ancient path whose age is measured as existing from a time before 'fields were ploughed; before wild men hunted them for their skins with spears of fire-hardened wood. These paths were older than the fields, for the fields were once the river's wider bed, in the mud of which the heavy rudders had whilom dragged' (*TO* 74). The word 'whilom' here is rather obtrusive, but is in some ways in accordance with how the narrative positions the otters. They are shown as making their physical mark on the land long before the arrival of man, whose first engagement with the world of otters is through the hunt. The opening sentence of Chapter 7 connects the otter's life to the hunt in a different, slightly ironic way: 'Tarka was alone, a young male of a ferocious and persecuted tribe whose only friends, except the Spirit that made it, were its enemies – the otter hunters' (*TO* 82). The narrative insists on the inextricable bond between the otters and the hunters; the lives of each are in some way defined by the other.

At the beginning of Chapter 14, Williamson pauses in the narrative to debate the very nature, effect and purpose of hunting. This is a brief *andante* chapter, a slow movement offering a period of pause and philosophic reflection

between the greater dramatic crises of the narrative. The activity of hunting is considered against the wider context of the rural society within which it operates. The hunter who follows the hounds 'in the leisure of his time' is contrasted with the farmers who would 'exterminate nearly every wild bird and animal of prey, were it not for the landowners, among whom are some who care for the wildlings because they are sprung from the same land of England' (*TO* 173). Significantly here, Williamson's argument seems to be that the empathetic bond between the hunters and the hunted comes from their common national heritage. Race trumps biological distinctions in terms of shared experience.

At times within the narrative, in fact, Williamson switches to the perspective of the hunter. On one occasion, we see through the eyes of the Master of the Hunt as he watches a series of objects – fern frond, ash-spray, and dead stick – float by, and then 'the lovely sight of an otter spreading himself over the stones' (*TO* 237). Here the huntsman is allowed a moment of appreciation of the natural world within which he operates. In some other ways, the narrative integrates human and animal experience. The cries of the hunt followers are made to sound faintly bestial: 'the yarring cheers of the whippers-in', 'the screeching, yarring yell of one of the honorary whips' (*TO* 254). Ironically, the word 'yarring' has been used earlier to describe the otter cubs' cries.

Williamson was always careful not to crudely demonise the participants in the hunt. In a broadcast recorded in 1954, he insisted on this objectivity as necessary to his art:

In my youth I followed otterhounds to find out about otters because I wanted to write the story of an otter. I had learned very young that if one

writes something with complete detachment yet with as it were an underlying compassion – the author never taking sides – never being partisan – then the effect on the reader is much greater. I did not like otter-hunting – my sympathies were always with the otter – but I would not allow such feelings to turn me against otter hunters who were, generally speaking, ordinary kind people.¹⁹

There might seem to be some justification here for the criticism voiced by Llewelyn Powys at the time of the publication of *Tarka*: ‘it is too much when he includes his wealthy sporting friends in his pictures of nature! [...] He does not seem to recognise his companions for what they are and it is impossible for us to feel any enthusiasm for their brutalities. He gives us a series of unpleasant glimpses of unpleasant people’.²⁰ But Williamson offers a more balanced judgement than this suggests. He concedes that sportsmen have no pity for the animals they hunt, ‘and since they lack this incipient human instinct, they misunderstand and deride it in others. Pity acts through the imagination, the higher light of the world, and imagination arises from the world of things, as a rainbow from the sun’.²¹ Williamson is here rehearsing views on hunting previously articulated in his fictional and non-fictional writing on stag-hunting. There almost seems to be a hierarchy of attitudes revealed towards the hunted animals: at the lowest rung are the farmers who, constrained by ‘necessity of life’, lack all sympathetic feeling; next are the hunters whose pity is withdrawn from the animals at the time of the hunt; at the top are those capable of

¹⁹ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/B 48, p. 6.

²⁰ Undated reference taken from Anne Williamson, ‘A Life’s Work: A Descriptive Bibliography of the Writings of Henry Williamson’, *The Henry Williamson Society* [website], 2013, <https://www.henrywilliamson.co.uk/a-lifes-work>.

²¹ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/B 48, p. 127.

imaginative empathy and identification, among whom, we have to presume, are writers and artists.

In addition to providing a balanced view of huntsmen, Williamson was always careful to portray his animal protagonists as themselves both predator and prey, hunter and hunted. Occasionally, this view is expressed rather brusquely. In the novel *Love and the Loveless*, Phillip Maddison has observed with some distaste the culmination of a fox hunt, where 'the carcass, borne aloft by the huntsman, was flung to the pack, during which the Master blew his horn and everyone gave a sort of mad screaming cheer'.²² He reflects, however, that the fox had also been the cause of many deaths: 'anyway, Phillip thought, the fox had taken many birds and rabbits, and now had copped it'. In the early chapters of *Tarka*, much space is given to descriptions of the ways that beast preys upon beast. In Chapter 2 the otters hunt trout, frogs and eels, and in Chapter 3 all the hunting is performed by animals. A badger kills a hedgehog; a dog otter kills a duck; the mother otter and the cubs catch trout and frogs. The lives of animals are constantly depicted as interconnected through hunting and being hunted. Tarka catches a lamprey 'fastened to the side of a trout'. The trout, enfeebled by the parasitic grip of the lamprey, was dying, but had itself 'been a cannibal trout and had eaten more than fifty times its own weight of smaller trout [...]. A rat ate the body the next day, and Old Nog speared and swallowed the rat three nights later. The rat lived a jolly and murderous life, and died before it could fear' (TO 86).

The human hunters are thus operating within a world dominated by brutal struggles for survival; they are presented as a natural part of this world rather than an alien intrusion into it. *Tarka* can be seen in this context as a

²² *Love and the Loveless*, p. 60.

political novel and not only in its allegorical connections to the First World War and elements of right-wing thinking. It deals with the operation of power within the world of the novel and the relationships between those who have power and those who do not. Here, as elsewhere, Williamson is not interesting as a nature writer despite his political views but because of them. He seems to have seen the whole of human and animal existence as driven by a series of crises. The sequence of crises provided by the hunt is integral to his handling of narrative pace and structure within the novel.

The movement towards the final crisis of the story is carefully and slowly engineered. In two chapters, 12 and 15, important features of the final hunt are anticipated. These chapters are given over to episodes where Tarka is hunted by the otter packs. Every chapter of *Tarka* is, in fact, built round a crisis of some sort, usually involving the activity of hunting, whether by man or animal.

Williamson clearly draws on Tregarthen's use of the hunt within the narrative to build up suspense, but he develops this use of the motif of hunting to much more complex structural effect. References to hunting thread through the first eleven chapters, leading to the first description of an extended hunt. These references operate in two interlocking ways: first, allusions to the activities of otter hunters, which form a constant backdrop to the narrative; and second, examples of hunting carried out by the otters and the other predatory animals that feature in the story. Through this process, Williamson develops a sense of foreboding during the narrative and anticipates an inevitably tragic ending.

Tarka is more than a series of striking vignettes; it is a most carefully structured narrative, and it is in this complexity of structure and mingling of literary genres that much of Williamson's achievement rests.

Chapter 12 marks the first of the three extended treatments of a single hunt that build towards the final crisis of the tale. Williamson's use of three major hunts is central to the effect of the second half of the novel. The importance of the triadic structure in myth and legend has long been recognised. Northrop Frye drew attention to its place within the patterns of romance:

The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero. We may call these three stages respectively, using Greek terms, the *agon* or conflict, the *pathos* or death-struggle, and the *anagnorisis* or discovery, the recognition of the hero, who has clearly proved himself to be a hero even if he does not survive the conflict.²³

The application of this multi-generic pattern to *Tarka* seems clear, particularly in terms of the crisis of the story and its relationship to the wider structure of the narrative.

Other contexts in which the threefold structure of folktales operates are suggested by Fussell and illuminate ways in which Williamson's use of the patterns of epic and romance also demonstrate *Tarka's* allegorical relationship with the narratives of war. Fussell connects the patterns of the 'paradigmatic war memoir: training, "combat", recovery. Or innocence, death, rebirth'²⁴ with

²³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 187.

²⁴ Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 159.

the literal counting to three in arms drill and the tripartite rhythms of activities undertaken between battles: playing, sleeping, and eating. It is those last three activities that also dominate Williamson's descriptions of how otters live during those periods of their lives when they are not being hunted.

Chapter 15 functions structurally in a very similar way to Chapter 12. A second lengthy otter-hunt, increased in severity and peril, dominates the chapter. Again, as is expected of a hero of romance, Tarka survives the test, but there is now clearly an escalating tension, an increasing sense that sooner or later the forces ranked against our protagonist will prove overwhelming. A tragic momentum continues to build within the narrative. Here and elsewhere, the structure, form and content of this chapter anticipate the patterns of the final events of the story. The hound Deadlock is foregrounded throughout. He is named twenty-six times in the eight pages of Chapter 15. Tarka is named thirty-eight times, and it is their increasingly gladiatorial combat that drives the chapter to its conclusion. Deadlock leads the chase after the otter, and in the final pages they fall into the water together and fight their way along the river to where it meets the sea. It is here (as in Chapter 12) that Tarka escapes, having triumphed in this latest skirmish, nearly drowning his antagonist in the process. There is something in this insistent pairing of Tarka and Deadlock, through which their fates are constantly entwined, and the movement of the wider narrative, that suggests a remorseless inevitability about their final meeting, reminiscent of the patterns of Shakespearean histories and tragedies: Hotspur and Hal, Macbeth and Macduff, Octavius and Antony. The dignity and worth of both are constantly emphasised and exemplified. Ultimately, one or both must die to give an appropriate closure to their histories.

Williamson's account of Tarka's flight and escape also incorporates elements of the pursuit and chase genre, exemplified by the works of John Buchan and Geoffrey Household. Certain features of this genre clearly apply both to this chapter and to those that conclude the story. The hero faces apparently insuperable odds, but the reader is generally encouraged to believe that he will escape, at times because of the first-person narrative voice. The nature of the pursuers is slowly undermined, their moral status compromised, despite occasional signs of decency. The ingenuity of the pursued becomes the focus of narrative interest, and there is often a significant use of the environment as a means to evade capture. The protagonist's knowledge, their ability to absorb themselves in their physical surroundings and almost to enter into an alliance with it, becomes an essential feature in their ability to escape.

At the end of *Tarka*, in the final three chapters, time is compressed and speeded up, and the relation between text time and story time becomes much closer, more analogous to the form of drama. Time has moved on quickly – 'November, December, January, February, were past – but otters know only day and night, the sun and the moon' (TO 211) – and the narrative is hurrying to its conclusion. The arrival of spring finds the otters returned to the Twin-Ash Holt and the Canal Bridge. Structural patterns of place and time suggest a journey's end. The next chapter is to begin with the arrival of the participants of the hunt that will mark the termination of Tarka's journey.

The travels of the hero are a central feature of most epic stories. The *Odyssey* builds its narrative around the hero's journey in which he wins fame, is tested and triumphant in warfare, and finally returns home. The epic structure of *Tarka* has been, in part, represented through the descriptions of the lengthy peregrinations of Tarka, the water-wanderer. These wanderings have been

described as taking place over months and years, and the narrative has at times passed quickly over whole seasons.

The journey that constitutes Tarka's life is charted by Williamson through the seasons. The two books of the novel are entitled 'The First Year' and 'The Last Year', and in both years Williamson carefully traces the pattern of the seasons. The story begins in spring, changes by Chapter 4 to the summer, to autumn by Chapter 7 and then on to the winter chapters, 9 and 10. It is April again in Chapter 11, 'summertime' in 14 and autumn by 16. Chapter 17 passes swiftly over the winter months, and the narrative continues to gather pace: within two pages 'oak and ash broke their buds', and 'a summer sandpiper flew over the bridge' (*TO* 215). By the beginning of the next chapter, 18, Williamson is able to describe how neighbouring hunts visit the country of the Two Rivers 'for a week in the early summer' (*TO* 222). The life of the otters is thus closely connected with the natural rhythms of the years, and these rhythms are themselves subsumed in the novel under a broader response to the cycles of life and death.²⁵ The significance of Tarka's death will be considered later in this chapter, and the similarly allegorical treatment of the death of the salmon in *Salar* will be explored in Chapter 4. At this stage of the narrative of *Tarka*, however, death is only a distant threat.

Chapter 18 begins with business-like briskness: 'at half past ten in the morning a covered motor-car stopped at the bridge below the Dark Pool. From the driver's seat three men got down, and at the sound of their footfalls deep notes came from the van'. The audience are taking their seats for the final acts

²⁵ For a detailed analysis of the cultural significance of the seasons, see Nick Groom, *The Seasons* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013). Groom's argument that 'if we deny nature and our relationship to it, we deny our deepest selves' (p. 327) comes very close to Williamson's philosophy.

of the drama: 'motor cars were drawn up on one side of the road. The men, women and children who had come to the meet of otterhounds stood by them and talked or lounged against the stone parapets of the bridge' (TO 220). The reference to the Dark Pool not only strikes a slightly ominous note but continues the movement of the previous chapter whereby the circular structure of the narrative is carefully shaped. The story, which has moved from the coast to Dartmoor and then on to Exmoor, now returns to its starting point. The penultimate chapter of *The Life Story of an Otter* is called 'Back in the Old Haunts'.

References to the passing of hours and minutes have been insistent. In the first sentence of Chapter 18, the time is established as half past ten, and for the rest of the chapter and those that follow we are given regular reminders of time passing. The hounds trot down to the river 'shortly after half past ten o'clock'; they find a scent where Tarka had passed 'six hours before'; we trace the movement of the otter by noting the period of time he stays in any one place – 'for nearly twenty minutes he waited by the tree' – and shortly after 'a voice just over his head cried *One o'clock!*' (TO 230). As the chapter ends, Tarka hears voices close by the wheelhouse where he is sheltering 'at two o'clock'.

In the last chapter, there is also an emphasis on the lengthy duration of the hunt. We are told that it was 'at the beginning of the sixth hour' that Tarka again passed under Canal Bridge and that 'during the sixth hour' the otter disappeared (TO 250). Then 'for more than an hour' he lay hidden, but 'at the beginning of the eighth hour' he was sighted again (TO 251). 'At the beginning of the ninth hour an immense fatigue came over him' (TO 253); the Master looks at his watch and notes that it was 'eight hours and forty-five minutes from

the find in the Dark Pool', and it was 'at the beginning of the tenth hour' (TO 254) that he drifted into sea water and met his death. This careful tracking of time parallels the account of the Cheriton Hunt. In both cases, it is the length of the hunt, the extremes of physical endurance thus tested, that helps to convey its epic status. The hunt by the Cheriton at Woodford Bridge is described as starting at 7.30 a.m. The first 'Tally Ho!' is given at 8.30; at noon the Master takes brief refreshment, and at 2 p.m. has a longer break. The hunt continues until 'past six of the clock' and concludes at 6.50 p.m. The remarkable length of the chase is again stressed during the final summary: 'had the otter held out another half-hour we should not have had enough daylight left to catch him by. There was no check but the one for lunch, and no digging except for ten minutes at one holt throughout all this long summer's day [...]. It was killing work, especially for a third day'.²⁶

This debt to hunting narratives, real as well as fictional, is just one example of the complex interweaving of genres that characterises *Tarka*, and it is clearly and fully revealed in the last chapters of the novel. As these final chapters develop, what becomes evident is the care that Williamson took in constructing the conclusion to his narrative. In doing so, he not only drew on material from fictional and non-fictional histories of otter-hunts and continued to reshape his own earlier drafts; he also wove together strands of a range of literary genres: saga, myth, allegory, legend, fable, tragedy, biography, thriller and epic. Elements of these genres can be seen throughout the novel, often represented in the character and role of the protagonist. Williamson's source materials also frequently incorporate features of such genres as epic and fable,

²⁶ W. H. Rogers, *Records of the Cheriton Otter Hounds* (Taunton: Barnicott & Pearce, 1925), p. 194.

and the ways in which these features are either modified or developed help to indicate the wider literary achievement of *Tarka*.

There is no doubt that Williamson was aware of the significance of genre as a means of directing or suggesting interpretations of a text. *Tarka* was originally entitled 'The Otter's Saga'. *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga* was published in 1960, incorporating the four narratives *Tarka*, *Salar*, *The Epic of Brock the Badger* and *Chakchek the Peregrine*.²⁷ The term 'saga' is in some ways analogous to 'epic'; Williamson seems to have seen them as largely coterminous. Both tend to relate the story of the extended adventures of a single hero, often involving physical conflict. Sagas can be distinguished from legend and romance through their focus on a society within a historically or geographically specific context, and both contexts are very much a feature of these stories. The four works included in the volume, especially *Tarka* and *Salar*, mark a clear development from his earlier nature stories in terms of their narrative complexity and length. They also have in common the central motif of travel.

The importance of the idea of travel within the narrative illustrates how *Tarka* is connected with more genres than the epic. Moving from birth to death and charting the most important events along the way, the tale operates as a fictional biography. That Williamson was conscious of the biographical form is apparent in his foreword to *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga*, where he describes the four stories as being both 'epics' and 'the biographies of Tarka, Salar, Bloody Bill Brock and Chakchek' (*HWAS* vii). Murry has referred to Williamson's 'compulsion to autobiography' as a 'datum: an essential and

²⁷ *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga* (London: Macdonald, 1960).

precious part of his idiosyncrasy',²⁸ while also acknowledging that the word 'compulsion' may be unjust. He nevertheless considers Williamson's inability to detach himself from his protagonist in *The Flax of Dream* as a serious weakness within the tetralogy. In his preface to *The Flax of Dream*, Williamson himself admits that 'the tale is neither wholly fiction, nor wholly autobiography. It may be autopsychical. I cannot tell'.²⁹ During the 1920s and after, in the post-Freud years, psychobiography certainly became an increasingly popular genre, but in *Tarka* and his other animal biographies, Williamson seems to have beneficially escaped from the trap of the 'autopsychical', and achieved a necessary distance from his creations. In so doing, he demonstrated something of the objectivity that Hermione Lee has cited as one of the 'Ten Rules of Biography'.³⁰ In reference to this desired objectivity, Lee argues that, although all biography can be seen as a form of autobiography and 'there is no such thing as an entirely objective treatment [...]; there must also be detachment'. This desirable balance seems to be a very accurate description of what Williamson achieved in *Tarka* but failed to replicate through his portraits of Willie and Phillip Maddison in either *The Flax of Dream* or *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*.

There are other 'rules of biography' listed by Lee that seem applicable to *Tarka*. The first is that the story should be 'true'. Williamson repeatedly asserted that the truth of the novel could be gauged by reference to the number of days in the field collecting evidence and the series of revisions of the text he undertook. Being loosely based on 'fact' is also one of the generic features

²⁸ Murry, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson', p. 136.

²⁹ *The Flax of Dream* (London: Faber, 1936), p. 7.

³⁰ Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 12-13.

commonly seen as distinguishing epic from myth. Two other 'rules' cited by Lee are that biography raises moral issues and 'should have some value for the reader', and that 'biography is a form of history'. Both of these 'rules' seem clearly applicable to *Tarka*.

Biography characteristically ends in the death of the subject; the incidence of violent death is the most significant feature of war represented in the final stages of the narrative. Chapter 17 of *Tarka* ended with the narrator imagining the otter's dream of 'a strange sea, where they were never hungry, and never hunted'. Ironically and immediately, the narrative then moves to the opening stages of the final hunt. Chapter 19 describes the hunting and death of Tarquol, thus anticipating the more significant death of Tarka in the next chapter. In employing this narrative sequence, Williamson follows the pattern of many epic and heroic narratives. In several of Shakespeare's tragedies, the death of the tragic protagonist is preceded by what can be regarded as 'lesser' deaths, which serve as a foreshadowing of the final destruction of the hero.

In Chapter 19, Williamson introduces a refrain, providing a point of reference within the narrative and introducing the epic concept of the return of the hero: 'Tarquol was trying to get home'. Few minor animal characters feature at this stage of the story, but one that is introduced is an ominous bird, a red-backed shrike, also known as a butcher bird. It acts as a harbinger of death: Tarquol is shown 'squatting by its larder of bumble-bees, grasshoppers and young harvest mice impaled on thorns. The mice were dead, but the bees still moved their legs' (*TO* 243). This macabre scene immediately precedes the extended description of the cub's own death. The intense and disturbing nature of this death has been much commented on. Miriam Darlington considered that 'the events [...] contain so many elements of nightmare that I wonder if a child

reader would be traumatised by it'.³¹ The otter runs out of the hedge, but is caught 'before he had gone very far on his short, tired legs' (*TO* 243). The attack of the hounds is then described in visceral detail: 'Deadlock seized him and shook him and threw him into the air. Tarquol sprang up as soon as he fell, snapping and writhing as more jaws bit on his body, crushed his head, cracked his ribs, his paws and his rudder' (*TO* 244). Williamson, through a series of verbs dominated by harsh bilabial and velar consonants, presents a defiant but doomed individual figure, destroyed by overwhelming odds. This is both a familiar battlefield image and also a characteristic experience suffered by the human protagonists of his narratives. His stated wish to offer an objective view of the hunt and its practitioners comes under strain, as the delicate beauty of the countryside is implicitly contrasted with the coarse brutality of the 'sportsmen':

Among the brilliant hawkbits – little sunflowers of the meadow – he was picked up and dropped again, trodden on and wrenched and broken, while the screaming cheers and whoops of sportsmen mingled with the growing rumble of hounds at worry. Tarquol fought them until he was blinded, and his jaws were smashed. (*TO* 244)

Darlington comments that at this point 'he leaves the reader in no doubt which side to take'.³²

It is possible to argue, nevertheless, that Williamson exercised a productive restraint. In an earlier draft, we are given the reaction of the cub's mother: 'White-tip came back a few paces, halted, rose on her hindlegs, cried

³¹ Miriam Darlington, *Otter Country* (London: Granta, 2012), p. 261.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 262.

out in agony wild, and ran away again'. The Master's dismembering of the corpse is given close attention – 'mask and rudder and pads were cut and twisted off' – and finally the body of the otter is flung to the hounds, who fall upon it in what seems like a frenzied bloodlust set against the background of the enthusiastic cries of the huntsmen:

Tallyho- tally ho- tally ho – tear'm, tear'm, tear'm and eat'm, the trunk was flung to the hounds, seized, worried, pulled and torn asunder, while the huntsmen wound the rattle on the horns, and men cried Whoo, whoop! Hungry hounds growled and snarled, cracked up bones, and swallowed muscles and sinews.³³

It seems once to have been accepted that hounds would eat their captured quarry at the end of a hunt. Lord Willoughby de Broke gives the following rather blunt advice: 'when the hounds run into their cub it is probably wise not to take him away from them. Let them tear him in pieces while they are angry, and thus learn the habit of breaking up their foxes properly while the Huntsman excites them by horn and voice'.³⁴ Williamson certainly knew of this author, however far he may have dissented from his sentiments. In a letter to Constant Huntingdon, he warned against undue optimism regarding the sales of *Tarka*: 'you must not be too optimistic about the otter hunters buying the book. They are, of course, a very tiny portion of the public, and they seldom buy fiction books or know Conrad from Nat God: although they buy books like Lord Willoughby de Broke's classic *Hunting the Fox*'.³⁵

³³ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/18, p. 279.

³⁴ Lord Willoughby de Broke [Richard Greville Verney], *Hunting the Fox* (London: Constable, 1920), p. 47.

³⁵ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 2/1/48/6/1.

In the earlier draft, the scene of Tarquol's death is concluded with the presentation of the rudder to what seems to be an arbitrarily introduced character, 'a beautiful fair-haired schoolgirl with two plaits tossed over her shoulder'. This familiar persona in Williamson's work, the nymphet, was also wisely removed during the drafting process. The final version of the chapter concludes with a sentence that has both structural and thematic significance: 'he had gone home before Tarka'.³⁶ The approaching climactic death of Tarka is anticipated, and the epic concept of returning home repeated and emphasised.

Repetition is a familiar element within allegorical narratives. Jeremy Tambling has argued that the use of repetition within allegories can be illuminated through reference to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in which repetition is associated with the 'death drive', 'the impulse within the organism to move in a deliberate but unconscious manner, following "its own path to death"'.³⁷ The remorseless movement of the life of an animal towards its death is an almost invariable pattern within Williamson's animal stories, and this form of movement suggests another connection with allegory: the link that allegories have with journeys, or quests, often involving some form of compulsive drive or apparent obsession on the part of the voyager.³⁸ Both

³⁶ Identified as the 'sixth text'. See Hugoe Matthews, *Henry Williamson: A Bibliography* (Tiverton: Halsgrove, 2004), p. 57.

³⁷ Jeremy Tambling, *Allegory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 167.

³⁸ Williamson's nature writings have traditionally been celebrated as offering a 'true', even literal, representation of the natural world, based on his extended studies in the field, a perspective often encouraged by the author himself. In *A Clear Water Stream* (1958), for instance, he describes the long hours he spent watching the water and the plants that grew in it: 'I waded in the water to examine them [...]. I was beginning now to see water in terms of factual knowledge, for a book on a salmon's life I hoped to write one day' (*A Clear Water Stream* (London: Faber, 1958), p. 125). It is the argument of this thesis that seeing Williamson as a simple, factual recorder of the natural world fails to do justice to the more complex quality of his work.

Tarka and the later *Salar* are constructed around the idea of a journey; in *Salar* this is a biological imperative, but both journeys inevitably lead to death.

Williamson weaves images of death into every stage of the novel. One example is his use of the motif of the gibbet. Towards the end of Chapter 4, one of the otter cubs is caught in a trap and its corpse is added to the gamekeeper's gibbet. Williamson concludes the episode with an incident familiar from border ballads: 'the crow that slept in the ivy-grown holly saw a new corpse hanging among the fitches and vairs which had run into one end of a drainpipe, but never run out again. The crow said aa-aa and flying to the gallows-tree, picked out its eyes' (*TO* 56). In Chapter 6, another description is given of a gibbet 'where the corpses of herons, kingfishers, red-throated divers, cormorants and shags were nailed to an oak tree. Some had been shot, others trapped' (*TO* 73). The motif of the gibbet is a familiar device in Williamson's work and has a complex narrative significance. On one level, it represents the vulnerability of any form of wildlife deemed to be injurious to man's interests and the ruthlessness with which man will destroy what stands in his way. On a more allegorical level, the gibbet can be read as representing the cross. The cross and the idea of crucifixion signify more than a Christian meaning. Fussell has documented the importance of the idea of crucifixion during the First World War, both as a source of rumours that attributed acts of barbarism to the Germans and as a wider symbol of human sacrifice on the battlefield.³⁹

There are many examples of the rather ghoulish interest in the gibbet in Williamson's early work. The sketch 'A Boy's Nature Diary' (*LSP*, 1933) includes the following sequence of references:

³⁹ Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 143.

March 1st [...]. We saw one of the keeper's vermin poles. It contained crows, jays, a weasel, several rats, etc. all in various stages of decomposition, from about two years old to a few days. (LS 84)

April 10th [...]. On the vermin pole were jays, weasels, stoats, hedgehogs and rats. (LS 95)

April 12th [...]. We saw the vermin pole. It had a pair of newly killed kestrels on it. (LS 95-6)

April 21st [...]. He has many weasels and stoats on his gibbets. (LS 101)⁴⁰

The last page of the short story 'The Wood Rogue' (*PS*, 1923) also attests to Williamson's morbid fascination with this motif:

In autumn the leaves fell from the hazel-wands and the ash-poles, from the elderberries and the oaks, exposing against a drab sky the squirrel dreys and the birds' nests – deserted tokens of hope. [...]. In places only a whiskered skull – grotesque caricature of life with its empty eye-sockets – hung grinning on a rotten string. Dishevelled crows dangled from other tiers, with sparrowhawks and kestrels, hedgehogs, rats and poaching cats. This was the gallows-tree of the failures, of the wood rogues, of the beasts and birds unrepentant in life and in death.

When spring came again nothing visible remained of Raskil. His skeleton had fallen and broken up, his bones were hidden by grasses and by the tender sweet violets that grew at the base of the oak. After two more springs had come and gone not even a bone remained. All

⁴⁰ 'A Boy's Nature Diary' is identified by Hugoe Matthews as Williamson's earliest work, existing in manuscript form (1913) and included in *The Lone Swallows* (1933). See Matthews, *Henry Williamson: A Bibliography*.

were merged into the earth which embraces with tranquillity the forms of those who, after toil and endeavour, are discarded by the spirit. (*PS* 117)

The subject matter and imagery of the first part of this passage is very reminiscent of the poem 'The Gallows' by Edward Thomas:

There was a crow who was no sleeper,
 But a thief and a murderer
 Till a very late hour; and this keeper
 Made him one of the things that were,
 To hang and flap in rain and wind,
 In the sun and in the snow.
 There are no more sins to be sinned
 On the dead oak bough.⁴¹

Thomas's poem, written in 1916, also uses the image of the gibbet to represent a wider world of mass slaughter. Williamson was certainly very familiar with Thomas's work. His daughter, Anne, for a time acted as Williamson's secretary. In 'The Wood Rogue', however, the grim focus on images of decay and dismemberment drifts into a more reflective contemplation of the inevitability of death and the consolation that life will inevitably spring up again. This idea, and the emphasis on the earth as a spiritual resting place, also informs the closing pages of *Tarka* and *Salar*.

The last chapter of *Tarka* is built around a sequence of deaths. The slow description of the end of the otter's life sounds an elegiac note: 'below the island the river widened, smooth with the sky. Tarka swam down slowly,

⁴¹ Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems* (London: Selwyn & Blount, 1920), p. 70.

bleeding from many wounds'. As the action reaches the sea, the language acquires a biblical rhythm: 'deeper water, whereon sticks and froth were floating. Hounds were called off by the horn, for the tide was in flood' (TO 254). Hound and otter come together in final heroic combat: 'Deadlock saw the small brown head, and bayed in triumph [...]. He bit the head, and lifted the otter high, flung him about and fell into the water with him'. In death, however, the otter is granted the final triumph over his enemies, signified by his battle-cry: 'they saw the broken head look up beside Deadlock, heard the cry of *lc-yang!* as Tarka bit into his throat, and then the hound was sinking with the otter into the deep water' (TO 255). A funereal garland is provided for the victor: 'oak-leaves, black and rotting in the mud of the unseen bed, arose and swirled and sank again'.

During this tragic conclusion, features of another genre emerge: those of film. The ending is clearly shaped through many of the conventions of film narrative. The action is predominantly visual in effect. There are several verbs of 'looking', which draw the reader's gaze to particular angles and perspectives. In the last page, Tarka was 'seen again, moving with the tide, his mouth open'. There is a series of filmic cuts, first to the hound's view – 'Deadlock saw the small brown head' – then to the human: 'they saw the broken head look up beside Deadlock [...]; they waited and watched'. The huntsmen are then presented as 'looking down at the dead hound' and, finally, 'as they watched, another bubble shook the surface'. The insistence on 'seeing' and the constant switching of perspectives exemplify the cinematic qualities of *Tarka* and explain why, at the end of Williamson's life, there was such a successful film adaptation of the text.

There is a moment of tragic catharsis when the huntsmen gaze at the dead warrior: 'they pulled the body out of the river and carried it to the bank, laying it on the grass, and looking down at the dead hound in sad wonder'. The narrative here pauses to honour the dead combatants, without distinction between them. Williamson frequently argued that such a dignified and non-partisan response should be offered to the German dead of the First World War. In *The Innocent Moon* (1961), Willie Maddison writes an impassioned article in which he wishes that 'the German people might have been given the ground wherein their dead lie [...]. For I have been in Germany, and I have seen brutal things done by the conquerors to the conquered'.⁴²

But these huntsmen and hounds are creatures of the land. Tarka is granted a death appropriate to his water-life, a death which parallels that of several human protagonists in Williamson's other novels, in that it happens at sea. In *The Pathway* (1928), for instance, Willie Maddison is drowned crossing the estuary to Appledore, and in *The Gold Falcon* (1933) Manfred drowns in the Atlantic. The otter's death is also given a note of mystery, as no corpse is left to be dismembered or displayed: 'and while they stood there silently, a great bubble rose out of the depths, and broke; and there was a third bubble in the sea-going waters, and nothing more' (*TO* 255).⁴³

⁴² *The Innocent Moon* (1961), p. 68.

⁴³ What Williamson also does in the 1927 edition is to set out the final sentence in such a way as to create a stepped structure of successive lines with some of the visual features of verse:

bubble rose out of the depths, and broke, and as
they watched, another bubble shook to the
surface, and broke; and there was a
third bubble in the sea-going
waters, and nothing
more.

He employs the same approach at the end of Chapter 10, the end of the section 'the First Year', exactly halfway through the novel:

Every fourth seal was marred, with two
toes set deeper in the mud. They led down
to the lap of the low water, where

Tarka's end is thus represented in terms that connect his story with those of epic, romance, legend, myth and tragedy: the hero returning home, after many travels, to engage in combat with his and his people's foe, to die heroically and defiantly and in so doing to gain lasting fame. The plausibility of this ending, in terms of what is known about otters and otter-hunts, has been challenged. Williamson alludes to this in his foreword to *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga* (1960), where he mentions a letter from a member of the Crowhurst pack contesting the accuracy of some of his material. A later correspondence, however, offered support for his account of the final scenes of the book: 'I [...] remain in his debt for the source of the final scene, when a dying otter in a tidal pool drowned the stallion-hound of a pack which had hunted the otter to exhaustion during many hours [...]. "People tell me that a sinking otter would never drown a hound, but I tell them that I saw the very thing happen in an Irish tidal river," he said to the author modestly receiving his congratulations' (*HWAS* 20).

There is other evidence that suggests that the final scenes of *Tarka* do not sacrifice biological accuracy in the service of narrative effects. W. Walmesley White's account of the lives of otters supports the choice of setting for the denouement: 'when disturbed by hounds towards the mouth of an estuary they [otters] often escape out to sea rather than upstream'.⁴⁴ Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald offers further testimony to the authenticity of Williamson's account. He asserts that otters characteristically travel 'distances of six miles or

the sea washed them away.

The image of the water washing away evidence of life is to be repeated at the ending of the novel. Williamson was perhaps adopting a deliberately 'poetic' method here to emphasise the mythic and epic elements of the tale. He abandoned this form in later editions, and there is no evidence of his using it again.

⁴⁴ W. Walmesley White, *Bird Life in Devon* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931), p. 176.

so [...]. But much greater distances are covered direct from water to water across country, fifteen miles or more at a stretch'.⁴⁵ This behaviour is very similar to the wanderings of Tarka during the course of the story. Vesey-Fitzgerald describes the ways that otters swim:

When they swim under water they [show] a trail of bubbles. These bubbles are known as the "chain" [...]. You can always know how tired an otter is by its chain, for there is but little chain to begin with, but the more tired it gets and the longer it is under water [...] the more distinct becomes the chain.⁴⁶

This has marked similarities with Williamson's account in the last chapter: 'as he swam, twin streams of bubbles came out of his nostrils, raced over his head and neck, and shook off his back to lie on the surface in a chain' (*TO* 248). Vesey-Fitzgerald offers the opinion that 'the best and most intimate account of otters that I know is that by J. G. Tregarthen, *The Life Story of an Otter* [...]. Tregarthen did know the otter, better than any man before or since'.⁴⁷ The observations that Vesey-Fitzgerald himself makes about otters, however, rather tend to make the case that *Tarka* has a strong claim to be at least the equal of Tregarthen's book in this respect.

There certainly seems little doubt that the ending of *Tarka* is a far more accomplished piece of work than *The Life Story of an Otter*. Tregarthen constructs a rather different build-up to the final hunt. In *The Life Story of an Otter*, the animal, although unnamed, has acquired legendary status during the course of the narrative. By Chapter 8, the otter is described as having grown to

⁴⁵ Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald, *Rivermouth* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1949), p. 114.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

such a size that 'interest has become widespread and people have flocked from far and near to the meets in the hope of seeing him found and hunted'.⁴⁸ As the final hunt approaches, we are told that 'through the winter he had been the topic of conversation in the chimney-corner of cotter and crofter, and a very frequent intruder on the thoughts of the squire'.⁴⁹ The most important way in which Tregarthen's otter is given near-mythical status within the tale is through the repeated and extended conversations between the various local countrymen. However successful it might be in imparting a sense of awe and wonder, this narrative point of view also has the effect of placing the animal at a subordinate distance, largely reduced to an object of the human gaze. There is no example of lengthy human speech within *Tarka*. At the end of the story, although the narrative focus shifts at times to hounds and men, the main focaliser remains the otter.

When Tregarthen gathers together his hunt followers, the effect is more mock-heroic than in Williamson's version. The squire is placed firmly at the forefront, and the other locals rather struggle along in his wake: 'at the hamlet they were joined by the parson, the parish clerk, the landlord, two sawyers, and six or seven others'.⁵⁰ The emphasis remains on the human perspective and on the significance that the animal has for the hunters. We are told that the determination of their chase 'testified to the fascination the pursuit of the giant otter had for them'. In contrast with *Tarka*, where Williamson carefully individualises the hounds and at times allows their point of view to drive the narrative, the otterhounds remain largely anonymous. This is not the case with another of Williamson's significant sources, *The Records of The Cheriton Otter*

⁴⁸ Tregarthen, *The Life Story of an Otter*, p. 93.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

Hounds, and in particular the account of the 'long hunt' carried out by Arthur Heinemann and his pack. Here, the writer is at pains to point out that one of the main lessons of the story was the qualities demonstrated by the hounds – 'hounds themselves deserved every credit for their perseverance, for it was their third consecutive day's hunting'⁵¹ – and Old Monarch, Fencer, Tablet, Viceroy, Rector and Scrutiny all get honourable mention.

The hunt itself in *Tarka* is described as 'the hunt of a lifetime' and the otter as having 'extraordinary tenacity'. As with *The Life Story of an Otter*, the hunt is represented as something extraordinary, the stuff of legend. In *Tarka*, no such claims are explicitly made; the significance of the hunt emerges through its place within the wider narrative and the ways in which it provides a cathartic conclusion to the various generic forms represented within the narrative. There is, for example, a feeling of impending climax generated by the build-up of hounds and men and the sense of a return, of the story coming full circle in the final chapter of the novel. In the second paragraph, we are taken back to a time 'two years before', when Tarka was born, to a holt where his 'sire had been asleep when hounds had found him' (TO 245). Places are mentioned that recall the setting of the beginning of the narrative: the Canal Bridge, the railway bridge and 'the gap in the bank where the Owlery Oak, Tarka's birthplace, had been held by its roots two years before'. Williamson's insistent pointing of the narrative identifies the text as a literary construct. Here (and elsewhere) Williamson reveals himself as a novelist writing about nature rather than a naturalist making use of the form of the novel. In this final chapter, many of the narrative methods of the novelist are clearly evident.

⁵¹ Rogers, *Records of the Cheriton Otter Hounds*, p. 190.

The changes that Williamson made to earlier drafts of the ending also indicate the gradual clarification of his artistic purpose. In a letter dated 29 October 1925, to Constant Huntingdon at his publishers, he wrote:

About the literary point you hint at, at the end of the book, I don't think I could have made it clear. I realised some time ago the emotional value of restraint, but some writers make a cult of simplesse [sic], and this is, I think, apparent as an artifice, and to be avoided. The only fanciful touch in the last fifty pages is the last sentence of the book, which at present reads:

The body was of no value to the fisherman, and was dropped over the gunwale as they rowed home, and the tide received it gently, like something loved that had been lost and found again.

That's the only touch of fancy – giving to saltwater the feelings of a mother. I think it will be unwise if I take out most of the poetry, and make it merely an otter story, bare and limited to what a score of nature writers in this country could do with equal efficiency. By poetry I mean the precise descriptions of actual things by means of an unfettered imagination.⁵²

The stated intention to create something more than 'merely an otter story' and the insistence on the poetic quality of the work indicate something of Williamson's literary ambitions. The death of the otter is dignified by its final bodiless drifting out of existence, almost dissolving into air. The last sentence of the final version reads 'and while they stood there silently, a great bubble rose out of the depths, and broke, and there was a third bubble in the sea-going

⁵² Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/48/6/1.

waters, and nothing more' (TO 255). (This account of Tarka's death may also have been influenced by Williamson's admiration for Percy Bysshe Shelley. In *The Pathway* (1928) and *The Phoenix Generation* (1965), there are moments in the plot that are clearly designed to parallel the circumstances of Shelley's death.)

The endings of Williamson's major sources are much more corporeal. In the records of the Cheriton Otter Hounds, the hounds' final destruction of the corpse is described: 'though he fought hard hounds were mad for blood and never let him break away [...]. Hounds could hardly break him up so spent were they with swimming and hunting'.⁵³ Tregarthen's otter is caught as he reaches the sea, where 'they managed to hold him and worry his life out'.⁵⁴ As a mark of respect, the squire restrains from dismembering the body; instead, 'the otter was set up in the hall in a handsome case [...]. Of the many trophies that adorn the walls there is not one the squire was so proud of, nor whose story he liked so well to relate'.⁵⁵ The legendary status here accorded the otter seems to be largely in the service of a human need, the opportunity for the locals to recount their own triumphant victory over a redoubtable foe.

The conclusion to Williamson's tale is more nuanced. The impact of the ending does not depend on any human estimation of the place of the individual beast in hunting history. The Cheriton account records the weight of the dead otter as 22 lb. Tregarthen's beast is triumphantly recorded as 29 lb. Vesey-Fitzgerald mentions 'a number of undoubted records of dogs over 30 lb'.⁵⁶ Williamson resists the temptation to assert the importance of his animal

⁵³ Rogers, *Records of the Cheriton Otter Hounds*, p. 194.

⁵⁴ Tregarthen, *The Life Story of an Otter*, p. 148.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁵⁶ Vesey-Fitzgerald, *Rivermouth*, p. 108.

protagonist simply through its physical size, recognised during the final stages of the hunt when the Master sees Tarka swimming below Elm Island and estimates the otter's weight: 'a twenty-pound otter, thought the Master' (*TO* 173). Tarka's narrative significance derives from a more complex literary context. The wondering gaze of the human witnesses to his death acts as a proxy for the reader's own response, ultimately generated by the complex mixture of genres that characterises the text and the complex narrative functions of the central character. George D. Painter has argued that the deaths of Williamson's protagonists, whether human or animal, serve the same tragic purpose: 'in *Tarka* and *Salar*, in the Manfred of *The Gold Falcon*, he showed indomitable creatures, whether animals or men, struggling with the joy and suffering of life, and inevitably defeated by forces outside themselves. This tragic culmination is truer and more courageous in its context of the artist's development and of human history than the "happy ending" which could so easily have been devised'.⁵⁷ This seems a more convincing analysis than that of J. W. Blench: 'at the end of *Tarka* we are left with the peace of nature', and, 'at the end of the book his spirit returns to the life of nature whence it came'.⁵⁸ These readings, verging on the sentimental, fail to adequately reflect the complexity of response that these final pages of the novel invite.

The extreme nature of the final hunt and its epic significance are also attested to through reference to place. The evocation of place is central to the reputation of *Tarka*; the book is inextricably associated with that part of North Devon that lies around the two rivers, the Taw and the Torridge. The area

⁵⁷ George D. Painter, 'The Two Maddisons', *Aylesford Review*, vol. 2 no. 6, Spring 1959, reprinted in *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 5, May 1982, pp. 30-33.

⁵⁸ J. W. Blench, 'How Good is *Tarka the Otter* as Literature?', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 22, September 1990, p. 30.

around Braunton, Barnstaple and Bideford is known today as 'Tarka Country'. The Tarka Line runs between Barnstaple and Exeter, and the Tarka Rail Association has produced a booklet containing twenty-two self-guided walks running from each of the eleven intermediate stations along the line. Several publications have traced the course of the journey that Tarka is described as having followed during his life. In *Tarka Country Explored*, Trevor Beer has composed a walking guide that traces Tarka's route, incorporating the Tarka Trail.⁵⁹ Anne Williamson has compiled a list of precise map references that pinpoint key sites within the story, the original purpose being to assist the photographer Simon McBride, whose work illustrates the Webb and Bower edition of *Tarka*. The list, with accompanying textual references, later appeared in the *Henry Williamson Society Journal*.⁶⁰

The journey thus charted begins at Owlery Holt, close to Canal Bridge and Halfpenny Bridge. Tarka's travels take him to Braunton Burrows during the great winter scene, onward to Dartmoor in the spring, to Exmoor in the summer, then to the coast around Morte Bay and finally, as the narrative reaches its conclusion, full circle to Halfpenny Bridge and Canal Bridge. The nature of this journey, in both its length and circularity, is a feature of epic and is insisted on in both *Tarka* and in Williamson's source, *The Life Story of an Otter*.

The geographical range described is, however, also an accurate representation of the territorial wanderings of otters in the wild. Helga Hoffman comments that 'otter territories vary quite a lot in size, mainly dependent on the supply of fish [...]. Their territories may stretch for up to 30 km on each side of a

⁵⁹ Trevor Beer, *Tarka Country Explored* (Bideford: North Devon Books, 2004).

⁶⁰ Anne Williamson, 'A Note on the *Falcon Maps*', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 16, September 1987, pp. 16-18.

river'.⁶¹ James Williams refers to his own researches in discovering that a 'dog otter covered more than nine kilometres in one night' and to reports that a Scottish otter was found to have covered over time eighty kilometres of territory. He also offers some direct support for Williamson's narrative:

During his adventurous, fictional life, 'Tarka' covers the whole of the system of the Taw and the Torridge, Williamson's Two Rivers.

Williamson knew what he was talking about. When Charlie Hamilton-James and Philippa Forster made a film about the wild otters on the Torridge in 2006, eighty years after Williamson finished his marvellous and evocative book, they found that the otters were to be found in exactly the same places, and holts even, that Williamson had written about.⁶²

Williamson's narrative may have many of the fictional features of epic and saga, but it is also often scientifically verifiable. It is this combination of forms that marks out the achievement of the text.

The significance of place within *Tarka* is demonstrated in the careful sequencing of identified sites and locations during the last chapters. A similar foregrounding of place is also found in Williamson's two major sources, but the account given in *The Records of the Cheriton Otter Hounds*, admittedly brief, names only Woodford Bridge, Bulkworthy Brook and Newton Mill. In the last chapter of *The Life Story of an Otter*, Tregarthen begins by identifying Longden Pool, the Moor Pool, the Lidden and Kite's Cairns, but the latter part of the narrative deals only in general place references. The penultimate chapter of

⁶¹ Helga Hoffman, *Wild Animals of Britain and Europe* (London: Collins, 2011), p. 138.

⁶² James Williams, *The Otter* (Ludlow: Merlin Unwin, 2010), p. 78.

Tarka, in contrast, regularly specifies places and locations as the hunt gathers pace. Several of these locations are used to recall earlier events as the narrative comes full circle.

We are first placed by the 'pool below the bridge', identifiable as Taddiport Bridge, ten yards above the watermill described at the end of the previous chapter. *Tarka's* flight then takes him along the straight line of water under the Town on the Hill (*TO* 233), over land until he is 'a hundred yards above Taddiport Bridge', later 'passing Servis Wood' (*TO* 234), then to 'a thousand yards from Taddiport Bridge' where he is described as passing 'the brook up which he had travelled with his mother on the way to the Clay Pits', under a railway bridge to Elm Island (*TO* 235), 'fifty yards below Elm Island' and 'under Rothern Bridge' (*TO* 237). For a brief paragraph, the narrative perspective then widens beyond and above the trail of the otter. Placed above the action, we are shown that 'a quarter of a mile below Rothern Bridge the river slows into the lower loop of a great S. It deepens until half-way, where the S is cut by the weir holding back the waters of the long Beam Pool. Canal Bridge crosses the river at the top of the S' (*TO* 238). Canal Bridge is where the story began, and the focus of the narrative remains firmly on the river.

One of the central themes of the story is that of the restorative and protective function of the river. Otters are amphibious animals; their enemies tend to be land-based, and water is frequently presented as the otters' principal means of escape. At times, the narrative goes further than this and presents the element of water, in the form of the sea or river, as actively intervening on the otters' behalf. At the end of Chapter 12, *Tarka* has been badly bitten and torn, but the beginning of the next chapter finds him recovering under the protection of the river: 'he bled also from rudder, back, neck, flank and shoulder

[...]. He lay still for a quarter of an hour [...]. No hound spoke. The water rose, and lifted him off the root, and carried him away' (*TO* 157). A parallel to this incident, and several others in the story, is to be found in the experience of another heroic figure. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, the leader of the Latins, Turnus, is badly wounded in battle, but escapes by water:

And now all over Turnus the sweat broke out and spread like a river of pitch, for he had no chance to breathe and rest; he was now exhausted, and he shook, and panted in pain. Only then, at last, did he leap headlong down with all his armour on him, and plunge into the river. And as he plunged, the river welcomed him to its yellow stream and bore him up on gentle waves. It washed the blood away and carried him back, happy, to his comrades.⁶³

Tarka is shown as being an integral part of his physical environment. At the beginning of Chapter 19, he is described as 'one with the river, finding his course among the slimy stones so that his back was always covered'. The river becomes an ally, an element in which he is at home. In contrast, the hunters are intruders in this world. They scrape and slip and scramble from bank to bank, threshing the water 'in a line from shillet-bank to shillet-bank' (*TO* 237). Nature is not, however, always portrayed as protective. In the previous chapter, elements within the natural world seem to conspire against the hunted otter: 'robins ticked at him, wrens stittered. Burrs and seeds tried to hook to his hair, finding no hold. Warble flies tried to alight on his back and suck his blood; the rushes brushed them off' (*TO* 227). Tarka's world is not presented as a merely protective pastoral retreat.

⁶³ Virgil, *Aeneid*, p. 250.

Nevertheless, the perspective of the otter offered by Williamson connects the animal very firmly with the environment and emphasises the negative impact of mankind. The otter is presented as existing in harmony with the natural world, especially water: 'he moved faster than the stream; he insinuated himself from slide to pool' (*TO* 184). In contrast, when the otter is forced to scramble over land, that world is presented as a hostile, polluted place, corrupted by the influence of man: 'he crossed [...] onto a tarred road. The surface burned his pads, but he ran on and even when an immense crimson creature bore down upon him he did not go back into the meadow across which hounds were streaming. With a series of shudders the crimson creature slowed to a standstill, while human figures rose out of it, and pointed' (*TO* 183).

An earlier draft is even more emphatic in its representation of humanity and its creations as monstrous, deformed things, shown very much from the perspective of the otter, a perspective which the reader is implicitly encouraged to share: 'with screeches and grunts the motor coach was stopped and enemies rose among its seats, bawling and pointing. A bottle was flung; it burst with a tinkle of shards beside him'.⁶⁴ Williamson's later revisions tone down the rather melodramatic excesses of the earlier version, but the essential point of view remains. Furthermore, the detritus of humanity is shown as coexisting with the physical presence of men and machines; the vulgarity of human behaviour is represented by the cheap and broken fragments that are left behind them:

He ran in the shade of the ditch, among bits of newspaper, banana and orange skins, cigarette ends and crushed chocolate boxes. A long yellow

⁶⁴ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/18, p. 209.

creature grew bigger and bigger before him, and so men rose out of it and peered down at him as he passed it. With smarting eyes he ran two hundred yards of the road, which for him was a place of choking stinks and hurtful noises. (*TO* 183)

Again, the earlier draft of this chapter clearly shows the degree to which environmental concerns were very much in Williamson's mind, if expressed rather less subtly:

He ran in the shade of the ditch among fragments of newspaper, bananas and orange skins, cigarette ends and crushed chocolate boxes. It was a famous 'beauty spot'. The otter encountered another automobile, neither so long nor so broad as the motor coach, and it pulled up with a series of shivering squeaks. The person at the wheel of this Ford did his best to run the front wheels of his vehicle over the otter, in an instinctive response to the shock to his nervous ganglions.⁶⁵

The reference to the 'beauty spot' is too obviously sardonic, and the last sentence rather overdoes the representation of humanity as gratuitously cruel, an impression not much modified by the self-consciously mannered 'nervous ganglions'. In both versions, Williamson returns to his theme towards the end of the chapter: 'among rotting motor tyres, broken bottles, tins, pails, shoes and other castaway rubbish lying in the bright water, hounds made their plunging leaps' (*TO* 188). The process of the hunt, its cruelty and heroism, takes place within a world which is itself vulnerable to destruction and desecration. Here, Williamson is confronting what Timothy Clark has called the end of 'externality',

⁶⁵ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/18, p. 210.

where the consequences of human action do not go away and nature no longer exists outside human culture.⁶⁶

These characteristic environmental concerns that underpin much of Williamson's writing are revealed at an early stage of the novel. In Chapter 4, we are told how the otter hunters poured paraffin into riverside holes to drive the quarry out, leaving behind 'a disgusting smell'. When the otter later emerges, the stream seems to shrink from him: 'when, an hour later, he crept out into bright light, the water passed away from him with a coloured smear on its surface' (*TO* 50).

There is no such insistent emphasis on environmental desecration in Tregarthen's book. As is the case with *Tarka*, there is a consistent focus on the animal's integration within the natural world and on the ways in which that world can be at different times a rich source of sustenance and a hostile, unforgiving place that must simply be endured. In *The Life Story of an Otter*, however, there is no sense that the environment is under threat from human activity or the 'civilisation' that Williamson so often views with deep misgivings. Colin Wilson took issue with what he saw as Williamson's 'Wordsworthian nature mysticism', arguing that Richard Jefferies's *After London* was 'a dangerous kind of book to admire because it is pure romantic nostalgia – Jefferies's revenge on civilisation. Williamson's animal books are all pervaded with the spirit of *After London*, his feeling that cities are a pollution on the face of the earth'.⁶⁷ This is to oversimplify the implied argument within Williamson's work; he always insists on the necessary interrelationship between man and the natural world. It is

⁶⁶ Timothy Clark, 'Nature, Post Nature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, ed. Louise Westling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 75-89.

⁶⁷ Wilson, 'Henry Williamson and His Writings: A Personal View', p. 17.

when the word 'civilisation' is applied to a society that adopts environmentally destructive practices that Williamson draws back in disgust.

Through a combination of allegory and realism, *Tarka* achieves a sustained and complex representation of the consciousness of an animal. At the same time, the novel places the life story of that animal within a wider depiction of the interrelationship between human and non-human life. In *Salar* (1935), Williamson attempts something even more challenging: to replicate the achievement of *Tarka*, but with a very different choice of subject, a subject whose life takes place in what is, in human terms, an alien element and whose form of consciousness might seem to separate it even further from human understanding.

4. From *Tarka* to *Salar*

Salar the Salmon (1935) was an even greater challenge than *Tarka*. In many ways, Williamson's choice of a salmon as a protagonist enabled him to continue and extend the central concerns of his earlier narratives. Like otters, salmon occupy a dominant position within the natural food chain; like otters, they have come to have a totemic place within human culture; like otters, they are signifiers of the environmental health of our rivers.

The decision to represent the life of a salmon, however, required Williamson to set his narrative even more deeply within a watery world, a largely alien environment from a human point of view. In addition, he was continuing to carry out his literary exploration of an animal's life and consciousness through the form of the novel. He again implicitly addresses the complex question: what does it mean for a novel not to have a human protagonist? With *Salar* – in contrast to *Tarka* – the protagonist he selected was a fish rather than a mammal, and its way of life and sensory engagement with its environment were therefore even more distanced from human experience. Through close reference to Williamson's correspondence and early draft materials and close examination of some of his other animal biographies, this chapter will argue that *Salar* forms a natural and successful progression from Williamson's earlier work. The nature of this progression will be examined by identifying *Salar* as the culmination of Williamson's other animal sagas.

He acknowledged the difficulty of the task he had set himself, and claimed in a diary entry of 1 January 1936 that 'I think my mind has never recovered from the enforced writing of the salmon book. I know what T. E.

Lawrence meant by an overstrained mind' (*GWC* 6). An entry ten days later recalls that

the last book, *Salar*, was so costly, so continuous an anguish to write, a daily act resented so bitterly that I spent quite forty minutes every hour during the summer of 1935 declaiming against the necessity of having to write for money which was spent before it arrived. [...] *Tarka the Otter* had been rewritten seventeen times, not for style, but for truth: and now I was sending off sections of the salmon book, without one revision, to be set up in page-proof. (*GWC* 18)

A passage from *A Clear Water Stream* describes the writing of the opening chapters: 'I managed to write the first few chapters of the book, by self-discipline, every word forced against my reluctance. There was no life, for me, in the descriptions of rock, wave and fish' (*CWS* 221). In *The Phoenix Generation*, Phillip Maddison resolves to 'keep on with the book until it's finished. It's now or never. I know how a spawned-out salmon feels'. The narrator then expands on his suffering:

The writing of the book, owing to long hours and a poor and irregular diet, involved so continuous an anguish that [Maddison] spent forty minutes of every daylight hour of that summer loafing in the field, to renew the energy to continue. (*PG* 169)

Here, the subject of the book is a trout rather than a salmon, but the task is represented as equally onerous. Finally, Maddison 'began to feel that if the trout did not die, he would' (*PG* 170).

Whatever his doubts, the reasons behind Williamson's selection of the salmon as a subject are not difficult to understand. The epic qualities of the salmon's journey and the impressive physical attributes of the salmon itself have long given the fish an elevated status in human culture and society. Izaak Walton claimed that 'the salmon is accounted the King of fresh water fish',¹ and in 1880 Frank Buckland, a Victorian naturalist and author, wrote: 'for many years past I have scarcely done anything else either officially or privately, except to attend to and carefully watch the interests of the King of Fish, the Salmon, the great *Salmo salar*'.² In 'October Salmon', Ted Hughes, whose debt to Williamson as a writer was considerable, depicts a salmon 'lying in poor water' and awaiting death. The salmon has become 'a death-patched hero' but was once [in a nod to *Hamlet*] 'king of infinite liberty'.³ There is plenty of evidence that Williamson saw the salmon very much in terms of rank, always an important consideration for him. In the introduction to *Salar* in the *Henry Williamson Animal Saga* edition, he wrote that 'the noblest of fish is the salmon' (HWAS 204). Like Tarka, and like the other animals dealt with in the *Animal Saga*, the salmon represents a sort of nobility within its own world.

In that preface to *Salar*, Williamson admitted that the book had not been 'an easy one to write' but also argued that he had a definite purpose in mind: 'to present in words what in those days the films failed to give to people: a sense of living truth, or beauty, of life wild in nature' (HWAS 205). This is a more upbeat recollection than offered in the 'Epigraph to *Salar the Salmon*' that appears in the same edition. Here, Williamson is dismissive about the book: 'so

¹ Izaak Walton, *The Compleat Angler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982 [first published 1653]), p. 126.

² Quoted by J. W. Jones, *The Salmon* (London: Collins, 1959), p. 1.

³ Ted Hughes, *River* (London: Faber, 1983), p. 70.

the style is that of one compelled to complete a work before the subject could be seen in detachment, one result of being confined to a narrow valley for several years and dominated by ambition to bring the sight of water, tree, fish, sky, and other life upon paper'. This last sentence, however, suggests a wider intention, one that is also manifested in *Tarka*, to place the life of an animal within a wider environmental context. This sense of a wider imaginative world lies at the heart of Williamson's work and helps to establish the nature of his achievement.

What Williamson seems to have quite consciously done in his narratives was to explore the different elements of earth, air and water and to convey the ways in which different animals adapt to them. In so doing, he established the significance of his narratives both in their own right as epics or sagas and also in the wider ecological issues they raised. The ecological importance of the salmon has been widely recognised. J. W. Jones claims that 'for more than 150 years the Salmon [sic] and his humbler cousin, the trout [sic], have been the first indicators of the insidious pollution of our rivers'.⁴ Robin Sharp and Norman Maclean, writing fifty years later, see the return of salmon to our rivers as evidence of success in the fight against pollution: 'well-publicised heralds of progress have been the return of salmon to the Thames, the Clyde and other urban rivers'.⁵

That Williamson was aware of the connection between the form and functions of the narratives is evident not only in the words of the title – *The*

⁴ Jones, *The Salmon*, p. 2.

⁵ Robin Sharp and Norman Maclean, 'Going Fishing: Recent Trends in Recreational Angling', in *Silent Summer: The State of Wildlife in Britain and Ireland*, ed. Norman Maclean (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 108.

Henry Williamson Animal Saga – but also in his foreword to the collection. He speaks of the four sagas as

the four chief epics of the natural world of the first part of my life. [...] The subjects of my four stories are an otter, a salmon, a badger, and a peregrine falcon. The unity of place is preserved: the country covered by webbed paw, fin, clawed pad, and pinion lies between the Bristol Channel or Severn Sea on the north, and Dartmoor and its rivers on the south. (*HWAS* vii)

Thus the stories are connected through their generic forms and their geographical setting. The different perspectives offered are signalled by the use of synecdoche: paw, fin, pad and pinion. Williamson goes on to make further important distinctions based on the nature of the journeys that will characterise the narratives:

The travels of the badger by reason of his short legs, which tread rock and earth only, are the most confined. The otter, who often lets rapid water bear him, ranges farther; so does the salmon, who leaves the river for the ocean where much of his life is mysterious, although I tried to follow it with the imagination; while the peregrine falcon, a wanderer by name, ranges the wind above the earth and sea. (*HWAS* vii)

The journey is a characteristic component of allegory, frequently representing a search for knowledge. In Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the pilgrims are caught up in the general urgency of spring and travel 'from every

shires ende / Of Engelond'⁶ to undertake the pilgrimage to Canterbury, their purpose being to 'seke' that experience which will be discovered at the shrine of Thomas Becket. Additional knowledge will be imparted incidentally during the journey through the various tales they tell, tales that the Host requires to have 'sentence', to be in some way instructive. During Salar's travels, the salmon's knowledge and experience are essential to its survival and ultimate triumph through the act of procreation. Equally importantly, the journey is presented by Williamson as one from which the reader can learn a great deal.

That the salmon's odyssey was a subject of continuing interest to Williamson can be seen by the frequency with which he returns to the subject in his writing, seemingly turning the topic over and over in his mind. (Even his last animal story, *The Scandaroon* (1972), includes a short description of salmon fishing in the country of the Two Rivers, similar in several ways to the account in Chapter 4 of *Salar*.) In *Goodbye West Country*, he follows up the ideas that are explored in *Salar*: 'it occurred to me, after *Salar* was finished, that salmon may find their way back to the nursery river simply by following along the sunken gorge which once, in a prehistoric age, was the bed of that river' (*GWC* 119). Although the structure of *Tarka* follows the otter's journey, and although the concept of 'wandering' is encapsulated in the name that Williamson gave the animal, the journey is not presented as the object of the creature's being, as something which essentially defines it. The task that Williamson set himself in *Salar* is in some ways more complex than in *Tarka*: to tie the observable, recorded reality of an animal's life to a narrative that also incorporates recurrent elements of allegory and myth, so that a more intricate

⁶ Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The General Prologue', *Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), lines 15-16.

relationship with human existence is made evident. In addition, he selected a type of animal journey that necessitated a representation of the nature of existence in an element – water – not natural to man and a form of animal perception that requires ambitious acts of imaginative sympathy and analogical inference. The difficulty of the task Williamson set himself has been acknowledged by Charles Foster, who argues that humans lack an emotional relationship with fish: ‘as a species we have a congenital, curious and near complete lack of imagination and empathy when it comes to fish’.⁷

The whole narrative structure of Williamson’s novel, as with its predecessor, is tied to this idea of a journey in both time and space, and the nature of this journey is defined by the element within which it exists. Rivers by their very nature exist in a constant state of flux and can even be seen as operating in a sort of hierarchy, an idea that might well have appealed to Williamson. T. T. Macan and E. B. Worthington have drawn attention to the way that rivers ‘change during the passage of time and the changes are in the direction of shorter and less torrential mountain courses and longer and more meandering lowland courses. It is convenient to speak of a young or primitive and old or evolved river, applying those terms, as they were applied to lakes, not as an indication of the tale of years, but as an indication of the stage of development which has been reached’.⁸ All of the animals in *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga* undertake journeys of different lengths, Salar’s being by far the longest in terms of distance. Their journeys can also be seen as allegorical, travelling from birth to maturity to death, growing in knowledge and experience, containing elements of animal biographies, *Bildungsroman* and

⁷ Charles Foster, *Being a Beast* (London: Profile Books, 2016), p. 103.

⁸ T. T. Macan and E. B. Worthington, *Life in Lakes and Rivers* (London: Collins, 1951), p. 63.

sagas. Williamson had a great admiration for Joseph Conrad, describing him as having 'steadfastness and strength in all his descriptions of sea and land'.⁹ Like Conrad, he used seas and rivers as the testing grounds for the aspirations of his heroic protagonists, and during the river journeys of Tarka and Salar, Williamson is able to incorporate elements of the epic and the picaresque within his wider narrative.

As Williamson indicates, the four animals in the sagas are linked through their association with three different elements: 'rock and earth', 'rapid water' (that is, river and ocean), and finally the 'wind above the earth'. A further connection is then made to the author, 'a young man in the time of the stories who saw his life, in conjunction with the wild, as a saga', but these sagas, we are told, are also to be seen as 'the biographies of Tarka, Salar, Bloody Bill Brock, and Chakchek' (*HWAS* vii).¹⁰ Having established the multiplicity of genres operating within the narratives, the foreword concludes with a restatement of the essential placing of the animal protagonists within the elements 'whereby the reader is led into the author's realm of river, sea, earth and air' (*HWAS* viii).

'The Epic of Brock the Badger' is the earliest of these four stories. It was first published in 1933 in the collection *The Old Stag*¹¹ and adapted from a story called 'Bill Brock's Good Turn', printed in *Pearson's Magazine* in 1925. The story that appears in the later illustrated edition of *The Old Stag* (1946) is

⁹ *An Anthology of Modern Nature Writing*, ed. Henry Williamson (London: Nelson & Sons, 1936), p. xii.

¹⁰ The work of Rachel Carson suggests that Williamson established a model for extended animal biographies. Carson's first book, *Under the Sea Wind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1941), is built around three mini-biographies of different animals that live in, on and above the sea. Linda Lear has pointed out Williamson's influence on Carson's writing: 'she initially thought of a narrative account of the daily life of several sea creatures, much in the manner of the great English naturalist Henry Williamson, whose work she greatly admired'. See Linda Lear, 'Introduction', in Rachel Carson, *Under the Sea Wind* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. xi.

¹¹ *The Old Stag* (London: Putnam, 1933).

constructed in three parts: the first opens with a framing narrative in which Mr Tinker, the proprietor of the Rising Sun, begins to tell the story of 'Bloody Bill Brock, as we called him' (*OSI* 199). The enclosed tale begins with the badger cub, underground in the sett, awakened by the sounds of the badger-diggers above. As in a similar scene in *Tarka*, the description of these sounds suggests an allegorical parallel with the experience of trench warfare:

They crouched very still at the unknown terror. The roar came again [...]. A series of roars shook the darkness, following the sound of a hunting horn. The roars ceased abruptly [...]. The earth trembled above them, and a flint fell on the cub's head. He could hear feet thumping and strange, terrifying shouts and notes of a hunting horn. (*OSI* 201)

The opening section of the story is filtered through the consciousness of a small boy, Willie, and some of the friends who also feature in *The Flax of Dream*, but gradually, as the tale develops, the narrative becomes more focused on rendering the physical actuality of the badger's existence. The earth is established as the element on and within which the badger operates. Williamson pays close attention to the conditions that operate underground:

The hole, ragged with broken roots and hanging rootlets, was wider than the badger, yet he came out laboriously, with much scraping and grunting. He did not tread on his paws, but heaved himself along by the blunt black claws of his forepaws against the side of the tunnel. He moved like an immense mole. (*OSI* 239)

The passage is precise in its depiction of space and at the same time sense-packed, suggestive of the sounds and physicality of the badger's movements.

The last sentence expands the image of the badger to establish it as the greatest of the beasts that live underground. We have been earlier told of how 'in the fourth year of his life he gained his cognomen of Bloody, becoming Bloody Bill Brock. This was given him because invariably he mauled the dogs who crept to ground after him' (*OS/ 209*). His position at the top of the earthbound food chain is established: 'all night he prowled and hunted. He ate fruit fallen from trees; he dug out wasps' nests and the combs of wild bees; [...] he caught mice and rats, small birds; he rolled hedgehogs into water to make them uncurl and then he ate them; [...] he fought with other boar-badgers and routed them' (*OS/ 210*).

The badger's local supremacy, like the supremacy of otter, falcon and salmon, is further established by Williamson's account of its martial exploits. At the conclusion of the first section of the story, the badger fights off a pack of dogs and men to rescue his mate. At the end of the tale, Williamson describes the badger's last stand. He is alone, defiant and unconquerable, which is rather reminiscent of the way that Williamson tended to depict his own heroic and artistic isolation: 'shouts, oaths, drunken laughter, yelps, barks, growls; and in the centre of the confusion walked the old, old badger, opening his jaws slightly and thrusting his head at every snarling dog face. None dared to encounter the bite of the terrible boar' (*OS/ 252*). The men and dogs are here subsumed into one hostile being, characterised by inarticulate howls and craven fear. In this context, there is a distinction to be made between this early 'epic' and the later sagas of otter, falcon and salmon. The human antagonists of the story are depicted as more degenerate beings. The heroism of the badger is not matched by any noble or worthy foe; the badger's world lacks the glamour and flash of salmon or falcon.

What the badger has in common with the other eponymous figures of the sagas is the sense of eminence that, for Williamson, is associated with history and the prolonged connection with nation and place. He accords the badger the exalted position that he sees as coming with long residency:

The little lumbering bear of Ancient Britain was wandering by night from the hill-tunnels of his ancestors long before the strange tongues of Angles, Saxons, Teutons, Danes, Romans, Phoenicians, and Normans echoed in the forests and startled the little quick island men.

(GWC 359)¹²

This slightly confusing and very non-chronological list of human invaders depicts these tribes as coming from much more mixed ‘ancestors’. The point is emphasised in the next sentence, which also sees the badger as possessing a form of permanence not granted to the ephemeral works of man: ‘the badger was patiently scratching out his galleries then, as he will be when all the jerry-built houses of this age of higgeldy-piggeldy [sic] are under English corn again’. The stress on ‘English corn’ is significant in its suggestion of a future nationalistic and ecological recovery, as is the contrast between the aristocratic ‘galleries’ and the proletarian ‘jerry-built houses’. In this context, it is the earthy element in which the badger lives that allows Williamson to use the animal as a symbol of social permanence in a shifting world.¹³

¹² This inaccurate classification is an example of Williamson’s sometimes fallible science. On the next page he asserts that ‘scientists, zoologists, and badger-diggers say that Brock is a member of the weasel tribe, which includes otters and seals: but I think he is a bear’. Unfortunately, they are right and Williamson is wrong: seals are not mustelids, and badgers are not bears.

¹³ In Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), the Badger contrasts the longevity of his sett with the more ephemeral constructions of human society: ‘people come – they stay for a while, they flourish, they build – and they go. It is their way. But we remain’. See Kenneth Grahame, *The Annotated Wind in the Willows* (London: Norton, 2009), p. 99.

Williamson's badger rises above its subterranean world to attain some degree of the status characteristically accorded to the author's animal protagonists. The next of his subjects, the peregrine falcon, takes this imagined status a significant stage further. Peregrines are generally accorded a pre-eminence among the ranks of raptors by writers and ornithologists alike. Mark Cocker and Richard Mabey have argued that 'the bird's strength, beauty, sheer success and adaptability cement its status as one of Britain's, if not the world's, most impressive animals, although perhaps the key launch pad for our imagination is its remarkable speed. This Ferrari of the bird world has the reputation of being the world's fastest species'.¹⁴ The power of flight here celebrated is the attribute that makes the falcon such an attractive subject for an author concerned with the exploration of animals' mastery of the elements.

There is plenty of evidence that Williamson took a great interest in the nature of the falcon's flight. In a letter of 15 July 1933 to Charles Tunnicliffe about the illustrations for *The Peregrine's Saga* (1934 edition), he takes the artist to task for the (alleged) inadequacy of the presentation of the falcon's stoop: 'your sketch dosent [sic] show the almost terrible compression of the feathers'.¹⁵ *The Peregrine's Saga*, like *The Epic of Brock the Badger*, is made up of a series of largely self-contained sections. In the second of these, entitled 'No Eel for Nog', Williamson describes the male falcon's attack on a heron:

He saw the line, tipped up sideways, beat a dozen swift strokes, closed pinions, pressed every feather into a taut and quivering body, and stooped. The rush of air against his eyes was so keen and hard that he blinked the third eyelids over the dark orbs, so that he saw but dimly.

¹⁴ Mark Cocker and Richard Mabey, *Birds Britannica* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005), p. 145.

¹⁵ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 126.

Larger and larger grew the heron, and The Backbreaker's eyes became clear and brown. (*PSP* 202)

Williamson here alternates between precise focus on physical detail and a suggestion of a wider significance. The shape and movement of the wings are sketched in. Even the shift of the feathers is described, in terms that recall his advice to Tunnickliffe. But the eyes are also 'orbs' – the archaic word suggesting something greater – a globe or planet. The bird is called 'The Backbreaker', the compound noun recalling the names of the heroes of Norse Sagas.

Names matter to Williamson. The name 'peregrine' comes from the Latin *peregrinus*, meaning 'wanderer'. Williamson insists on this connotation in 'The Raid on London': 'he was a peregrine, which means wanderer' (*PSP* 221). In *Tarka*, we are told that the otter's name means 'Little Water Wanderer' or 'Wandering as Water'. The salmon in *Salar* is given the cognomen 'leaper'. Williamson's animal protagonists are constantly associated through their names with the idea of journeying, a characteristic feature of epic and saga. In the section of the story called 'Love and Death of the One-Eyed', Williamson expands on the title he has given the bird: 'Chakchek the unmated, Chakchek the outlaw. Hark to the saga of Chakchek the One-Eyed!' (*PSP* 223). This rhetorical flourish again celebrates the bird as inhabiting a world of heroic action. While Williamson is careful to represent the flesh-and-blood actuality of the falcon, he has wider allegorical intentions.

Helen Macdonald has shown how the falcon has established a place in the discourse of nobility: 'in Iran and Arabia, the peregrine is called Shaheen, Farsi for "emperor". Pero López de Ayala, Chancellor of Castile and medieval authority on falconry, thought it "the noblest and best of the birds of prey, the

lord and prince of hunting birds”¹⁶ The white falcon was the heraldic bird of Anne Boleyn, described in awestruck terms in Nicholas Udall’s 1533 lyric:

This white Falcon
 Rare and gaison,
 This bird shyneth so bright,
 Of all that ar
 No bird compare
 Maye with this Falcon whight.¹⁷

For Williamson, the nobility of the falcon, its exalted place in the hierarchy of birds, is of constant significance. He spends almost a page charting their family history in the *Tarka* chapter ‘No Eel for Nog’:

They were peregrine falcons of the ancient and noble house of Chakchek. A Chakchek was famous among falconers throughout Europe during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. [...] A Chakchek surveyed the battle of Trafalgar [...]. One, called Chakchek the One-Eyed was in Ypres during the first bombardment. A Chakchek was hunting the airways of the Two Rivers’ estuary as the ships went over the bar to join Drake’s fleet; centuries before, when Phoenicians first came to trade; long, long before, when moose roamed in the forest which stood where the Pebble Ridge of Westward Ho! now lies – the trees are long since gone under the sand, drowned by the sea. (*TO* 198)

¹⁶ Helen Macdonald, *Falcon* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), p. 14.

¹⁷ Nicholas Udall, ‘This White Falcon’, in *The Civic Garland: A Collection of Songs from London Pageants*, ed. Frederick William Fairholt (London: T. Richards for the Percy Society, 1846) p. 2.

This historical sweep recalls the roll call of invaders that Williamson summoned up to emphasise the length of time during which the badger has existed in England. Again, extended residency is presented as a sign of essential Englishness and of a proportionately privileged status within that nation. The falcons are represented as surviving where other species have become extinct and as outlasting even forests. It is also notable how many of the historical events connected to the peregrines are battles, 'surveyed' by the falcon or mirrored in the bird's own actions when 'hunting the airways'. The peregrine of 'The Raid on London' is explicitly contrasted with the insignificant figures of city dwellers scuttling below, mere 'agitated streams of moving hats on the pavements'. The falcon gains an analogous connection with the imposing buildings on which it perches, and even with the military hero on whose statue it alights. Williamson rarely missed an opportunity to allude to the unhealthy, debased nature of city life as opposed to the vigorous health of rural existence.

But the allegorical significance of the falcon extends beyond this and crosses into some uncomfortable areas. 'Noble they are', repeats Williamson, 'of lineage as ancient as the first gods of man, and their god is older, being Altair in the constellation of Aquila, a night-sun with gold-flickering wings' (*PSP* 199). The falcon is now revealed as a creature of myth and fable. This is familiar territory for Williamson. His novel *The Gold Falcon* (1933) tells the story of the self-consciously Byronic figure of Manfred, 'airman and poet of the World War', a somewhat laboured reworking of the character of Willie Maddison in *The Flax of Dream*. When Manfred dies at the end of the novel, he is 'transmuted to the shape of a falcon, and his glance was equal with the glance of the sun' (*GF* 389). A year later, in *The Linhay on the Downs*, Williamson stated that in the novel 'the falcon was honour, or the soul, or God, awaiting

and finally claiming the pilgrim whose life was search, however vain and wayward, for integrity and truth' (*LOD* 182). The ultimately strained and unconvincing use of the signifier of the falcon in *The Gold Falcon* is hinted at by the somewhat rambling explanation of what is signified.

Falcons have often functioned as symbols of warfare, especially in relation to the battles carried out in the sky by fighter pilots, and the practice of falconry can itself be seen as a form of combat. The iconic and martial image of the falcon was appropriated by the Nazis for their own purposes, including the promotion of theories of racial supremacy. Hermann Goering was a keen falconer and had a portrait painted of his white gyrfalcon perched in a suitably elevated position. In this context, the passage in *The Peregrine's Saga* in which the peregrine is temporarily captured by a bird-netter makes for rather uncomfortable reading. The netter is described as 'an unshaven and insignificant individual, who worked for a maculate Yiddish "bird fancier" in Whitechapel' (*PSP* 217). He is described as being terrified of the noble bird that he has netted, firmly placing himself in a subordinate position. The insistence on the Jewish origin of the man's employer seems wholly gratuitous and anti-Semitic.

An occasion when Williamson uses the symbol of the falcon more explicitly within the context of fascist politics occurs in *The Phoenix Generation*. Williamson's fictional surrogate, Phillip Maddison, has met Adolf Hitler. He tells a friend that 'he had the look of a falcon, but without the full liquid dark eyes: an eyeless hawk whose sockets had burned out in battle and later filled with sky' (*PG* 188). A bird symbol that Williamson also applied to Hitler was the phoenix. That there was some overlap in his mind between the symbols of falcon and phoenix is evident in one of his letters to Charles Tunnicliffe, when the

illustrator was working on *The Gold Falcon*: ‘your falcon is too obviously a falcon; it is a symbol of the man’s soul that ascends into the sun when it has passed its test in this world. It should suggest a phoenix without the heaviness of a conventional phoenix’.¹⁸ The contrast between what is being asked for in this letter and the earlier request for an accurate representation of the falcon’s feathers is striking and indicates the two very different imperatives that were driving Williamson’s writing.

Another imperative is related to the role of raptors as indicators of wider environmental issues. In *Silent Spring*, Carson stressed the significance of the widespread reports of the demise of birds of prey in drawing attention to the effects of dieldrin-based insecticides during the 1960s: ‘deaths (of foxes) were heaviest in the same counties from which sparrowhawks, kestrels and other birds of prey virtually disappeared, suggesting that the poison was spreading through the food chain, reaching out from the seed-eaters to the furred and feathered carnivores’.¹⁹ More recently, an essay by C. R. Tyler and R. M. Goodhead on the impacts of hormone-disrupting chemicals on wildlife recalled that ‘failure to lay and increased embryo deaths were also shown to contribute to a reduced breeding success in sparrowhawks contaminated with these organochlorine pesticides. Peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) populations suffered too, and extensive surveys of British populations in 1961 and 1962 showed a precipitous decline, compared to pre-war levels’.²⁰

In *The Peregrine’s Saga*, Chakchek’s mate is poisoned by an aristocratic pigeon fancier, and in the introduction to the story in *The Henry Williamson*

¹⁸ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 126, letter dated 29 December 1932.

¹⁹ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963), p. 118.

²⁰ C. R. Tyler and R. M. Goodhead, ‘Impacts of Hormone-Disrupting Chemicals on Wildlife’, in *Silent Summer. The State of Wildlife in Britain and Ireland*, ed. Norman Maclean (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 128.

Animal Saga, Williamson recalls hearing a local publican tell him how pigeons would be deliberately sent up as bait with strychnine-laced strips of liver tied to their bodies. This illegal practice also plays a significant part in *The Scandaroon* (1972). In *The Vanishing Hedgerows*, a 1972 film he scripted and narrated for the BBC, Williamson focuses on the decline in the numbers of the grey partridge as a means of illustrating the poisonous effects of uncontrolled crop spraying; he also stresses the almost complete disappearance of peregrine falcons and the crucial insight into the impact of pesticides that was gained when the bodies of the dead birds were forensically examined.

The ways in which Williamson represented these animal protagonists within his narratives reveal the significance of his allegorical methods, but he was also always at pains to emphasise the trouble he had taken to research his subject. In 'A Personal Note' about the writing of *Salar*, he refers to the difficulties of composition that he had experienced but also describes how he 'had spent thousands of hours up trees, on shillet banks, beside fast runs [...], had walked innumerable times along the banks of the Bray, down to its junction with the Mole' (HWAS 372). Furthermore, in order to supplement what he feared might be 'the superficial observations of an amateur', he had read widely about the salmon: 'on my shelves was a set of *The Salmon and Trout Magazine*, beginning with the first quarterly number published in December 1910, and continuing until the spring of 1930, my first season at Shallowford' (HWAS 372). This is not to say that he wholly doubted his own ability to collect data and draw conclusions. Characteristically, in a discussion about how salmon find their way home after their time at sea, he opposed the vision of the poet to the narrow perspective of the scientists 'who walk where poets fly' (TME 190). The scientists argue that only instinct is involved, that 'every egg

carries its potential sea-route'. Williamson asserts the evidence of his own experience, that eggs of Tay salmon planted in a Devon river will return to Devon through 'a beautiful natural memory of place'. Later studies seem to have supported Williamson. Jones has contended that in the case of *Salmo salar* the hereditary drive to spawn 'is overlaid and guided by the individual memory of the peculiarities of a particular river, and a particular tributary of that river'.²¹

The opening chapter of *Salar* illustrates Williamson's characteristic combination of scientific observation and wider narrative purpose in his representation of the lives of animals. The chapter begins with a coalescence of sea and sky, water and light, between which elements the consciousness of the fish moves:

At full moon the tides swirling over the Island Race carry the feelings of many rivers to the schools of fish which have come in from their feeding ledges of the deep Atlantic. The returning salmon are excited and confused. Under broken waters the moon's glimmer is opalescent; the fish swim up from ocean's bed and leap to meet the sparkling silver which lures and ever eludes them, and which startles them by its strange shape as they curve in air and see, during the moment of rest before falling, a thrilling liquescence of light on the waves beneath. (SS 15)

The elegant, even balletic, movements of the salmon ('swim', 'leap', 'curve' and 'falling') are intricately linked to those of the waters of sea and river. The journeys of the fish are carefully tied to specific oceanographic locations and are driven by a sequence of responses to external stimuli. The salmon pick up

²¹ Jones, *The Salmon*, p. 68.

the 'feelings of many rivers'; the swirling tides and broken waters leave the fish 'excited and confused'; they leap to meet the lure of 'the moon's glimmer' that at the same time 'startles' them. The verb 'lures' carries associations of a more menacing temptation, the lure of a fly fisherman's bait. Williamson is here interested both in the physical nature of the salmon's existence and in the degree to which a salmon's thought processes can be meaningfully conveyed in human terms.

After this opening sequence in which the Atlantic salmon approach the rivers of their birth,²² Williamson steps back in time to chart the sea journeys they undertook as samlets or smolts, during which the combination of light and water again shapes the thought processes of the fish:

The tides poured over the reef, flowing north and lapsing south in light and darkness; the moon moved over the sea, and as its light grew so the tides pressed faster, mingling the river-streams until memory or feeling in the smolts for their rivers was lost in the greater movements of ocean.

(SS 18)

Here, the influence of water is described as directly affecting consciousness; the impression of huge powers at work is conveyed through the heavy, sonorous rhythm and the faint suggestion of naming a godlike force through the absence of a definite article before 'ocean'. An earlier draft had the less imposing phrase 'the great movements of the sea'.²³ Williamson goes on to

²² These are given in a long list in an earlier draft: 'they were from Wye and Severn, Usk and Towy, and many other rivers from the throat and jowl of Wales, that great hogshead of land; from Taw and Torridge, Mole, Ockment and Bray, whose streams ran down from the moors of North Devon' (Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, EUL MS 239). Williamson often claimed to have written *Salar* too quickly to allow for much revision, but here and elsewhere he seems to have taken care to remove passages that tend to hold up the narrative.

²³ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/39, p. 4.

explore further the idea of intentionality: ‘the unconscious lust for a fuller or spiritual life led them back along the undersea paths they had travelled as smolts, to where ancestral memory became personal memory – to where the river currents frayed away in the tidal rhythms of the sea. The returning salmon thinks with its whole body’ (SS 19).

A significant example of this bodily thinking is the salmon’s leap, through which Williamson again presents movement as a form of consciousness. The leap is revealed as a totemic act that defines both the salmon and its journey. At the end of Chapter 21, Salar is specifically entitled ‘the Leaper’. The species name ‘Salar’ may derive from the Latin *salire*, ‘to leap’. Here, as elsewhere, Williamson chooses his names with care, frequently drawing on Latin species names; in this way he combines a nod to scientific methodology with a specific identification that establishes the creature as an individual actor in the story. In Chapter 18, for instance, we meet Libellula the dragonfly, Coelebs the chaffinch, Danica the mayfly and Trutta the trout.

At times, Williamson expands on these base names and adds an appositional phrase that offers a wider allegorical significance. In an early draft of *Salar*, the killer whale, *Orcinus orca*, is introduced in the first chapter: ‘following the porpoises were the ferocious gladiators, or killers, small whales which could crush a porpoise with a single bite in the recurved teeth of their immense mouths’.²⁴ The final draft has these whales represented by an individual: ‘following the porpoises were ferocious gladiators, or killers, led by Orca, the strongest, who could crush a porpoise with a single bite in the recurved teeth of his immense mouth’ (SS 22). The Latin word *orcus* means ‘belonging to the world of the dead’ or ‘the god of the lower regions’. The choice

²⁴ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 239, p. 10.

of name thus emphasises the whale's awesome status, reinforced by the identification of Orca as being 'the strongest' and the leader of the pod. The association of the whales with another classical and heroic model, the gladiator, is emphasised by a further alteration to an early draft where Williamson refers to the whale as 'Orca the grampus', 'grampus' being an alternative name for the killer whale. The final draft emphatically triple-names the whale as 'Orca Gladiator, the grampus, the killer' (SS 44).

Salar's cognomen of 'the leaper' is less ostentatiously martial but no less significant. He leaps at pivotal points in his journey. At the height of his powers, he flings himself out of the water 'for joy' and easily outswims a pursuing otter. His later return to the spawning grounds is signalled through a passage in which the salmon's ascent of the weir is described in careful physical detail and in terms that suggest the ability of the fish to learn from experience:

Shiner saw a fish leap from the midst of the most broken turmoil – a curve of white and tarnished silver which [...] moved up steadily, vibrating fast and surely, a fish that had learned a way through the varying pressures and water-layers [...] and as Shiner watched, it shot forward out of sight, to leap high from the calm still water of the mill-pool.
(SS 278)

In Chapter 23, Salar checks his leap, afflicted by the growing change in his physical shape and condition 'hastening upon him with the season of coloured leaves' and what Williamson represents as 'a confusion of personality'. But in the last chapter, not long before his death, we are told that 'Salar had leapt, the second time in the New Year', the final defiant surge of energy on the part of the epic hero.

Traditionally, such a hero, although firmly set within the context of his society, is also often seen alone, particularly during moments of combat or crisis. When Salar is hooked in Chapter 13 ('Black Dog'), he is isolated in his underwater struggle against a single enemy. To reinforce this idea that Salar, like Tarka, is both a representative of 'his race' and also a sharply individualised creature, he is given unique physical markings. As in the case of Tarka, these markings are wounds suffered in a form of combat. Tarka's foot is damaged when he escapes from a trap, which thereafter gives him a distinctive paw-print. The incident when Salar is attacked by a lamprey leaves him with a scar, the mark that allows Shiner to identify him at the end of Chapter 21: 'it shot forward out of sight, to leap high [...] and reveal, at the moment of rest at the top of the curve, a soldered mark on its side, as of a wound healed. Such was the return of Salar – the Leaper' (SS 278). This particularity and occasional isolation provided Williamson with another opportunity to use the salmon to represent his own experience as a writer. He remarked that the salmon's 'fortitude' in surviving its arduous journeys 'was to me a triumph and an inspiration' in relation to his own various struggles as 'the solitary writer' (HWAS 205).

Although Salar is often depicted very much as an individual member of the species, Williamson also presents the salmon as significantly interacting with others of his kind. In *Tarka*, he risked the charge of anthropomorphism by offering an extended treatment of the relationship between Tarka and White-tip, his mate. In *Salar*, Williamson repeats and extends this narrative approach by slowly developing another relationship, at times seen in almost human terms, between Salar, Gralaks the grilse (described as 'small fish which had been only a year in salt water') and Trutta the trout. The main narrative functions of these

other two fish are to parallel Salar's experience, engage in a form of companionship with him and, in the case of Gralaks, to provide a partner for the male protagonist.

In *Goodbye West Country*, Williamson makes reference to a hostile review from the Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan, that criticised 'the personifying of the principal fish characters' and the 'unnecessary, silly and harmful [...] extremes of personification as the love plot'. His defence against this criticism was to cite his own experience: 'I don't think the very slight "love plot" is untruthful. Observation, observation: and then observation, my dear Professor' (*GWC* 388). The chapter 'Water Play' in *A Clear Water Stream* recounts in some detail the occasion when Williamson watched a salmon grilse apparently enjoying the company of a sea-trout: 'the two fish returned and hovered again, side by side; then they drove downstream again, the pug turning on its side, showing the taper and thickness of its body, as it rubbed head and flank with a flapping movement on the river-bed' (*CWS* 144).

Several times in *Salar*, all three fish are shown swimming together as a group. There is a suggestion that this association was consciously engineered for their mutual benefit:

He [Trutta] was a sick fish and Salar was piloting him. Salar was unaware of Trutta's weakness and pain, but he knew he was being followed, and was content thereby. His tail was guarded. Also he knew Trutta for something like himself, a familiar form accompanying his life, making the same journey. (*SS* 102)

Williamson avoids exaggerating the degree of the fish's ability to recognise the feelings of others, but suggests that Salar has an instinctual sense of fellow

purpose. In fact, far from being uncritically anthropomorphic, Williamson's representation of this interplay and mutualism seems to have been remarkably accurate in scientific terms. Frans de Waal, in his exploration of 'fishy cooperation', refers to recorded evidence of coordinated hunting between different species of fish (including a trout) in the Red Sea and concludes that 'fish may have a better understanding of how cooperation works than we have been willing to assume'.²⁵

Trutta's 'following' also reinforces the idea of a hierarchy within the animal world, one that Williamson's choice of the salmon has already established and one that is evident throughout his animal stories. The similarities between the experiences of Salar, Gralaks and Trutta are, however, more frequently stressed. All three are hunted by human and animal predators, and all three are described as having to surmount similar obstacles in their travels along the river. Their common experience is underlined by the number of times that Williamson insists on their companionship. In Chapter 19 alone, we are told that 'Trutta had joined them', 'Trutta moved up into the run of fast water', 'Salar [...] lay in the run, behind Trutta. Both he and Gralaks, behind him, were watching for food, but only the sea-trout was feeding', and 'Salar and Gralaks lay in fast water, close to the tail of Trutta'. This insistent grouping reflects the genre features of myth, legend and epic, in which the central protagonist is frequently accompanied by characters who fulfil the narrative roles identified by Vladimir Propp as the 'helper' or the 'princess'.²⁶

²⁵ Frans de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (London: Granta, 2016), p. 200.

²⁶ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968 [first published in Russian in 1928]), p. 26.

If Gralaks can be seen as occupying the role of 'princess', in that she is the ultimate object of Salar's quest, she also helps to broaden the ways in which Williamson can represent what it is to be 'salmon'. In Chapter 11, she avoids the lure of the young boy fishing the river, in an anticipation of the episode of Salar's hooking. She escapes capture because 'a length of trace also had fallen into her cone of skylight'. When Williamson describes the moment that a fish is hooked, he is careful to connect it to a description of how and what the salmon sees. When Salar takes the bait, the fly is also described as coming into his 'skylight', but here there is no floating line to alarm him, and the bait looks like 'the nymphs he had been taking, only larger' (SS 170).

In the final chapter, the roles of the three fish are brought to a resolution. Gralaks has increasingly been described as lying beside Salar, and as the plot moves towards the climactic mating of the two fish, the action is presented through the conventions of a love story. Other fish are Salar's 'rivals'; a salmon parr is described as being 'in love' with Gralaks, and Salar is constantly engaged in combat. The culmination of their mating is also depicted in a way that implies some commonality of feeling between people and fish; the detailed account of the sensations that Salar experiences evokes the moment of human orgasm while still being conveyed in terms associated with the physical reality of a salmon's existence:

The sight of the eggs and the taste of the water made Salar quiver; and as Gralaks moved backwards, he moved forward, feeling as though he were being drawn from underneath by a lamprey of sweeter and sweeter sensation. His milt flowed from him in a mist. [...] For a few moments Salar lay in ecstasy. (SS 303)

Trutta largely plays a watching role during the above events, which is perhaps also true to the conventions of epic and romance. In the final moments, however, he achieves a heroic status, defending the central protagonist of the narrative. Otters are approaching the dying Salar, and the big trout drives them off: 'he did this again and again, following them around the pool', until the otters return and drive Trutta 'into deep water where he was helpless [and where they] killed and left him' (SS 318). In the manner of legendary heroes, Salar also achieves a noble and dignified death – 'he had got so far with the last of his strength, and had died in the darkness' – with the final paragraph providing the sense of consolation and ultimate triumph through the image of shoals of 'little fish breaking from' the eggs that he has fertilised.

The death of these major players in the drama is given additional mythical and allegorical significance through the assertion in the last paragraphs of the chapter that, like classical battlefield heroes, their bodies will be 'washed all away, to the sea which gives absolution', and that the lives of the newly hatched salmon will be watched over by 'the friend of all, the Spirit of the waters'.

The changes that Williamson made to an early draft reinforced this allegorical approach, as shown in this paragraph from the final page of the novel:

The spate rose rapidly, and washed all away, to the sea which gives absolution, alike to ~~all~~ the living and the dead.

~~Long after Salar and Gralaks had parted~~ In the redd gravel of the moorland stream the eggs were hatching, little fish breaking from the confining skins to seek life, each one alone, save for the friend of all, the Spirit of the waters. And the star-stream of heaven flowed westward, to

far beyond the ocean where salmon moving from deep waters to the shallow of the islands, leapt – eager for immortality. (SS 319)²⁷

The first sentence is set out as a separate paragraph, and a full line space is inserted before the final paragraph. The reference to Salar and Gralaks is then removed, and the image of the hatching fish is left to represent not just the continuance of an individual line but the survival of a whole species. The salmon's death is given religious and spiritual significance, and through the hatching of the next generation Salar achieves immortality.

J. W. Blench also saw the 'truth' of the story of *Salar* in religious terms. Part of his argument runs as follows: 'traditional Christians will agree that the picture of nature is true about the world as it is, but they will also find confirmation of the scriptural doctrine that non-human nature, as well as human, as a consequence of the Fall, requires redemption'.²⁸ He goes on to argue the relevance to Williamson's work of the views of F. H. Maycock, postulating 'a pre-human evil in nature, a partial vitiation of the life force at its source, brought about by the rebellious spiritual beings or fallen angels who had become the enemies of God'. This seems peculiarly wrong-headed. There is no doubt that Williamson is unsparing in his depiction of the ruthlessness of the battle for survival in the natural world, but far from seeing this as 'evil' or as evidence for the fallen state of the lives he describes, he seems rather to celebrate their purity of purpose and nobility of being. In fact, it is in this rather neo-Darwinian view of the nature of existence that Williamson's views find some parallels in fascist thinking.

²⁷ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/49.

²⁸ J. W. Blench, 'Salar the Salmon: An Appraisal', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 32, September 1996, p. 14.

In the preface to *Salar* in *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga*, Williamson described salmon as waiting ‘in shallow water to spend themselves for the spirit, or future, of their race’ (HWAS 204). Immortality and the triumph of the race were always important ideas for Williamson, and here again the story of a single animal acts as an allegorical image that carries clear political meanings. In *Goodbye West Country*, after conveying his admiration and fellow-feeling for Hitler – ‘here at last is someone who has perceived the root-causes of war in the unfulfilled human ego, and is striving to create a new human-fulfilled world. I tried to show the same things, in an ineffectual, negative sort of way, through Maddison in *The Flax of Dream*’ (GWC 228) – Williamson returned to one of his favourite theories, that Germany and England shared a racial blood relationship that should always make them allies against the ‘other’ of Eastern Europe and, in particular, Russia:

Everyone [in Germany] was most friendly to England and the English. ‘Not because England is rich do we want to be friends’ explained a troop-leader of the SA who had appointed himself my guide, ‘but because we are the same sort of people. That last war was a terrible mistake, but we feel we have learned from it’. (GWC 242)

The destruction – but also triumph – of the heroic salmon, as often in myth and epic, is shown as only the beginning of a never-ending story. This idea is emphasised through a circularity in the narrative. ‘Salmon moving from deep waters’ echoes the opening sentence of the first chapter of the novel – ‘fish [...] come in from their feeding ledges of the deep Atlantic’ – and the ‘star-stream of heaven’ recalls the opening reference to the ‘full moon’. In a wider correspondence, the washing away of Salar’s body ‘to the sea’ parallels the

ending to *Tarka*, where the corpse of the otter drifts into the tidal waters: ‘there was a third bubble in the sea-going waters, and nothing more’ (*TO* 255). As the salmon’s journey is in some ways a more complex affair than that of the otter, so the narrative structure of *Salar* reflects this increased complexity.

The epic significance of the animal’s return to its birthplace was evident in the narrative of *Tarka*, and in the later novel Williamson seems to have been even further exercised by the idea. Anne Williamson describes a trip to Islay that Williamson and his wife made in 1931. The drive back to Devon was apparently a long and exhausting one: ‘Henry likened his feelings to the trials endured by a salmon entering the estuary and fighting its way up river, to the place “where the heart lay” – home’.²⁹ Williamson recounts a conversation with an angler acquaintance during which the salmon is seen as being activated by genetic impulses and as a creature belonging to a particular race or family group:

But, in general, the fish of each river, members of a particular clan, find their way back to the ancestral river. The instinct to return is in the egg, an inheritance from innumerable generations of salmon. (*CWS* 183)

Peter Coates has suggested that the salmon has traditionally been thought of as a very British fish and quotes Charles Dickens in support of the idea that

the salmon was peculiarly British in its rugged resolution and refusal to say die: ‘he will charge the fierce and boiling stream, he will rush at a

²⁹ Anne Williamson, *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic* (Stroud: Sutton, 1995), p. 144.

cataract like a thorough-bred steeple-chase horse, returning to the charge over and over again, like a true British fish as he is'.³⁰

The significance of race and family is a consistent theme in Williamson's work: in his nature writings, his essays and in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. In *A Chronicle*, much of the argument of the narrative is driven by a belief that crucial character traits are inherited from the family and that the racial ties that exist between England and Germany are of paramount importance in international relations. Earlier, in *A Clear Water Stream*, his musings about the physical challenge represented by the salmon's travels upriver lead him to contrast the purity of the salmon's impulses with the (implied) profit-seeking motives of men. In addition, the salmon are invested with the noble and self-sacrificial qualities of that familiar Williamsonian persona, the soldier on the battlefield:

Salmon, both rusty-red and bronze, were trying to jump up the impossible cliff face, with dozens of smaller sea-trout [...]. Every fish, as I watched, fell back as though hurt. Some were carried away belly up, each a tragic sight as I thought of the homing fish come from the security of the sea not for themselves, not for personal profit (for a salmon did not feed in fresh water) but to serve its race. I began to see these fish as noble and tragic creatures, like soldiers in battle, in the test to destruction, upheld only by tenuous dream [sic], which was honour.

(CWS 62)

³⁰ Charles Dickens, 'Salmon', *All The Year Round: A Weekly Journal*, 20 July 1861, p. 407. Quoted in Peter Coates, *Salmon* (London: Reaction Books, 2006), p. 128.

The imagery and lexis of this passage directly evoke the experience of warfare. The fish launch themselves in an attack on the face of the dam, but are forced back by the 'impossible cliff face'. They fall back 'as if hurt'; some are 'carried away', like soldiers on stretchers. They are driven by an urge to serve their 'race' and by 'honour'. Theirs is a 'test to destruction', the title of the eighth volume of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, a book that describes the final months of the First World War.

The multiple perspectives revealed here – the varying narrative functions of the salmon – connect Williamson's use of human and animal characters. Salar is portrayed through layers of allegorical meaning as a heroic figure. But he is also a fish, a creature whose being exists on its own terms, beyond any significance imparted to it by human agency. This balance between the literal and metaphorical is central to Williamson's narrative method. What is often the case in Williamson's later writings, however, especially in the last volumes of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, is that when these allegorical concerns are embodied in human characters rather than animals they lose much of their effectiveness and force.

Despite the complexity of Williamson's achievement in *Salar*, he was often disparaging about the novel. 'The book', he said, 'had not been easy to begin, to sustain, and to bring to its end' (CWS 227). Anne Williamson records that he also sardonically claimed that a stuffed bream in a glass case that he kept in his writing hut had been presented to him by the Sitwells as a prize for the worst novel of the year.³¹ In a letter to his illustrator, Charles Tunnicliffe, he went further: 'I HATE the book. It's awful; every word a drop of blood'.³² Some

³¹ A. Williamson, *Tarka and the Last Romantic*, p. 198.

³² Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 126.

critics have also seen *Salar* as the inferior novel. Jeremy Gavron firmly placed *Tarka* above all of Williamson's other works, including *Salar*:

Henry Williamson published some forty more books, among them [...] *Salar the Salmon*, another popular wildlife story, but he never again reached the sustained heights of *Tarka the Otter*.³³

Others have viewed *Salar* more positively, and there is an argument that the book has never received the critical and public attention that it deserves. John Middleton Murry referred to 'the famous *Tarka the Otter*, and the less known but even superior *Salar the Salmon*'.³⁴ Michael Morpurgo is similarly enthusiastic:

But for me, if there is a companion volume to *Tarka the Otter*, it is *Salar the Salmon*. I have to come clean and say that the narrative drive in *Tarka the Otter* may be stronger – superficially in part because the creature himself is more appealing. And the story is certainly more of a page turner. *Salar* does not quite have the same emotional punch. But the greater achievement nonetheless is *Salar*.³⁵

What is evident is that the novel picks up and develops many of *Tarka's* dominant themes and narrative motifs. Both narratives are set in a carefully realised environment; both explore the many ecological threats to that environment; both raise the problem of conveying the inner and outer

³³ Jeremy Gavron, 'Introduction', in Henry Williamson, *Tarka the Otter* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. xiii.

³⁴ John Middleton Murry, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson', in *Katherine Mansfield and other Literary Studies* (London: Constable, 1959), p. 121.

³⁵ Michael Morpurgo, 'Introduction', in Henry Williamson, *Salar the Salmon* (Wimborne Minster: Little Toller, 2010), p. 9.

experience of a non-human creature; both play with different narrative points of view; both incorporate the author, or a representative of the author, within the narrative; both are clearly multi-generic; and both follow the lives of the central protagonist to a final watery death. As in *Tarka*, the interaction of humans and animals is represented through the activity of hunting, or rather – in *Salar* – through commercial and recreational fishing; and it is the narrative significance of river fishing in *Salar* that the next chapter will explore.

5. *Salar*: Rivers, Fish and Fishing

Salar marks the culmination of a process. *Tarka* explored the amphibious existence that alternates between land and water. In *Salar*, Williamson takes on a more challenging task: the representation of a wholly aquatic world. He now integrates more deeply into his narrative an aspect of the natural environment that has featured prominently in his stories from the very beginning: the river.

Rivers seem to have operated almost as sacred things for Williamson. This is unsurprising, considering their central role in human culture, whether military, economic, spiritual, mythical, religious or artistic. Rivers contain a dense population of varied wildlife and a very complex and interactive food chain, providing Williamson with a physical setting for his narratives that is at least as wide and deep as any to be found on land or in the sky. Many of his early nature writings concern themselves with the life of rivers. In the 1923 edition of *The Peregrine's Saga* can be found 'Zoe', the story of an otter, and 'Aliens', which is set 'by the banks of the Ravensbourne stream'. At the other end of his writing career, in December 1963, he stressed the importance of water to his life and work:

Richard Jefferies [...], my master when I started to write, although he was dead, wrote this in one of his books: 'Pure water draws a dreamer' [...]. And why water has always meant so much to me is because I've gone out on the moors and I've walked up my rivers and I've watched the fish – I'd much rather watch than catch them. And the ephemeral

flies hatching and the whole beauty and the sun on the leaves, and the music of the water, that is true living.¹

Williamson here places himself in the position of the watcher and the dreamer, both naturalist—observer and poet, the two contrasting roles that frequently represent his own self-image as a writer. His familiar belief that he operates in the Romantic tradition is also evident: what Constable did for the Stour, Williamson does for the Taw and Torridge in his verbal painting of ‘the whole beauty and the sun on the leaves’; as Wagner did with the Rhine, he captures ‘the music of the water’. This chimes with a comment Williamson made about the detailed extent of his research a month before the publication of *Salar*:

I spent altogether 5,000 hours simply watching the pools and eddies, until I ‘knew’ the stream just as an author should ‘know’ the environment in which his characters live [...]. I had to learn exactly how they moved and reacted to every change of current [...]. [T]he descriptive passages, for instance, had to be true and yet have variety. They had to make the reader know the bed of the river and its changing moods.²

Williamson took some time before selecting a salmon as the central protagonist of his drama. An examination of his early sketches and short stories, and his use of different sources, sheds light on the development of his creative thinking. In the autumn of 1929, he moved his family to a cottage called Shallowford, about twenty miles east of the village of Georgeham. He

¹ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/2/1.

² Quoted by Hugoe Matthews in *Henry Williamson: A Bibliography* (Tiverton: Halsgrove, 2004), p. 93. Williamson’s writing is infused with water, as well as activities like boating and swimming that take place in the water. In almost every volume of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* there is some significant water-based activity. The threats of floods and drowning hang above the narrative, and tides and currents come to represent the vagaries of fate and the limits of human agency.

later wrote an extended account of his time here, *The Children of Shallowford* (1939), which also offers several insights into the process of composing *Salar*. The success of *Tarka* had brought Williamson some financial reward and a growing literary reputation. In 1928, *Tarka* was given the Hawthornden Prize. This was presented in London by John Galsworthy, and newspapers at the time reported that Galsworthy described Williamson as ‘the finest and most intimate living interpreter of the drama of wild life, and [...] at his best, a beautiful writer’.³

However, by 1933, when what Williamson thought of as ‘the salmon book’ was commissioned, he was again in a difficult financial position. His son Richard has described the circumstances at the time: ‘my father, Henry Williamson, was thirty-seven years of age, and needed the money. There were three children to feed and another on the way, as well as a secretary, house-keeper and gardener to pay’.⁴ The novel was written at pace. The original commission was negotiated on the basis of an advance of a third of the total payment of £750, and the remaining thirds were to be paid on completion of the manuscript and its publication. Williamson began work in earnest at the beginning of 1935; the planned publication date was October of the same year. The different chapters of the book were sent off to the publishers as soon as they were finished. These writing conditions may have had a significant effect on the structure of the book, and help to explain some of the other differences between *Salar* and *Tarka*.

³ See Anne Williamson, *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic* (Stroud: Sutton, 1995), p. 113.

⁴ Richard Williamson, ‘Introduction’, in Henry Williamson, *Salar the Salmon* (Exeter: Webb & Bower, 1987), p. 11.

In *A Clear Water Stream* (1929), Williamson describes the impetus behind the novel. He recalls the advice of a local retired judge:

‘You must write another *Tarka*. Why not about a salmon this time?’

At night, lying in bed, depression set in. How far had the old chap been joking? (CWS 185)

There is, therefore, an early acknowledgement that the novel will be in some ways a companion volume to *Tarka*. There is also evidence, however, that Williamson hoped for something more. In a letter in February 1935 to his illustrator, Charles Tunnicliffe, he expresses a need to ‘get the whole cycle. This isn’t just an old stag or Tarka [sic]. It’s got to be expert, to make the 50-year-old scientists look amateurs (I pick their brains and redress their windows for them). And so you see I want the drawings to be 100% factual! Wish you had been a salmon fisher for 20 years’.⁵ He had previously (and characteristically) lectured Tunnicliffe on his responsibilities: ‘the salmon book goes on, it will need an awful lot of work on your part to set all the various plates accurate if it is to be the supreme work one looks for’.⁶ The phrase ‘supreme work’ suggests something more than a book that is merely rushed off to earn some urgently needed funds. In an earlier letter of November 1934, he contrasted his projected novel with an earlier short story. The novel would be ‘a straight salmon story, realistic, quite a different matter’.⁷ *Salar* is clearly very different from this earlier story, ‘A Maiden Salmon’. Whether it is to be judged as ‘straight’ and simply ‘realistic’ is another question.

⁵ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 126.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

During this period, Williamson was involved in another of his fruitless passions for a young woman; this latest love interest seems to have provided at least part of the inspiration for the novel. In his introduction to the Webb & Bower edition of *Salar*, Richard Williamson describes the effect of this romantic fantasy: '*Salar* is a book that began by representing the yearnings, both physical and spiritual, for a young woman. [...] In order to retain the image [of the girl], he sketched out, desperately one senses, the crude basis for this story: salmon = poet's soul = girl; fisherman = girl's father'.⁸ However, this sketch is far closer to the pattern of 'The Maiden Salmon' than to *Salar*; Anne Williamson has since identified the woman as Ann Edmonds, the Scribe to whom 'The Maiden Salmon' is dedicated, and describes the story as 'a symbolic tale even if one is unfamiliar with its background, and once more death proves the only cathartic end for an unrequited love'.⁹ It certainly serves to warn against taking too uncritically Williamson's claims that he was driven by a search for scientific realism.

While he was writing *Salar*, Williamson was very secretive, apparently concerned that rivals might get wind of the idea. Thus the book was at various times referred to as 'the salmon book', 'Atlantic Salmon' and later 'Salar the Leaper'. The final title of *Salar the Salmon*, incorporating the same sequence of proper noun, article and species name as *Tarka the Otter*, does seem to suggest a conscious decision to draw associative parallels. Clearly, author and publisher wanted to replicate the success of *Tarka* by providing a book of the same type.

⁸ R. Williamson, 'Introduction', p. 12.

⁹ A. Williamson, *Tarka and the Last Romantic*, p. 176.

Williamson's own, barely fictionalised, account of Salar's germination comes from his late novel, *The Phoenix Generation* (1965), which covers the period 1929 to 1939. In the previous novel of the *Chronicle* sequence, *The Power of the Dead* (1963), Phillip Maddison had received an advance for a novel, in this case about a trout rather than a salmon, and it is the writing of this book that now occupies much of his attention. There are countless ways in which the composition of Maddison's book is made to parallel Williamson's experience with *Salar*.

In the first chapter, Phillip is conscious of the lack of purpose in his life: 'he must start his book on the trout' (PG 13). He researches carefully: 'he stood beside the river, watching the rise of trout [...], making notes' (PG 89). He considers the possible symbolic significance of a blind trout:

Now for a theme, to relate observation to a story, with its own life. Take several fish and relate their lives as individual fish, with the blind, black and aged trout symbol of the [sic] obsolescence, leading to its death. A symbol, hidden and never revealed directly, of dying Europe? No politics, keep to the blind trout. Relate its condition to the pollution of so many rivers due to the industrialisation and the squalor of the machine age. (PG 90)

This passage offers some significant insights into Williamson's way of working. The realism, the 'truth' of observation which he so frequently sought after, is, in the person of his fictional representative, here subjugated to a wider allegorical purpose, both environmental and political.¹⁰ A letter from Felicity (who would

¹⁰ Here Williamson acknowledges the difficulty of achieving a simple truth of observation. This is the point that Erica Fudge makes, when she talks of 'the human failure to [...] achieve the "objectivity" so desired in our wish to understand animals [...]. We see what we are able to see,

seem to represent Ann Thomas, Williamson's secretary and lover) sympathises with him for having to 'chip every word from your breast-bone' (*PG* 90), an echo of Williamson's own frequent description of the pain that went into creating *Salar*. In the epigraph to *Salar* in the *Henry Williamson Animal Saga* edition, Williamson had described this sense of exhaustion in similar words: 'at last, towards the end of summer, the feeling was that if the salmon did not die, the author would' (*HWAS* 374).

Maddison sees the trout as a symbol in both an environmental and political context. We are given a passage of his work in progress in which he bewails the pollution of a trout stream: 'once a pure English stream, there remains now but an open drain, the divine life once within the living water destroyed by an uncontrolled industrialism' (*PG* 143). This harking back to a vision of pre-industrial pastoral harmony, closely focused on a nation state, is characteristic of much right-wing thinking and writing.¹¹ It may be significant that, immediately after finishing the trout story, Phillip sails to Germany to attend the Nuremberg Rally. The counterargument that Maddison is a fictional creation, and thus cannot be read as a spokesman for Williamson's own views, has to account for the sustained and intricate weaving of autobiographical detail into *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* and Williamson's own assertion, made in an interview with Kenneth Allsop, that 'Phillip [...] is myself'.¹²

what we expect to see, what we have already decided to see, rather than what we might call the truth'. See Erica Fudge, *Animal* (London: Reaction Books, 2002), p. 130.

¹¹ Greg Garrard argues that Heidegger's georgic philosophy 'was all too congruent with the strand in Nazi ideology that stressed the relationship of German blood and soil, or "Blut und Boden"', and further suggests that 'The Nazis not only appealed to small farmers and georgic philosophers, but also to conservationists, enacting the world's first comprehensive nature conservation and animal welfare laws'. See Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 112. See also Kevin Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 110.

¹² Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/2/1, p. 12.

Another important factor in the slow germination of *Salar* is the influence of Richard Jefferies. Before *Salar*, Williamson's early writings on the lives of fish – like those of Jefferies – had both trout and salmon as their subjects. Three of Jefferies's sketches involving fish and fishing were written between 1880 and 1885. The earliest is 'A London Trout', first published in the *London Standard* in 1880. With its sustained focus on the life of a single fish, this piece is closest to Williamson's early short stories on a similar theme. Jefferies interweaves the different elements in his evocation of the scene:

The surface by the shore slipped towards a side hatch and passed over in a liquid curve, clear and unvarying, as if of solid crystal, till shattered on the stones, where the air caught up and played with the sounds of the pebbles as they broke.¹³

Here, the water is described as taking on the properties of solid crystal, and the breaking bubbles transmute themselves into air. Jefferies fixedly watches the water, as Williamson frequently presents himself doing during his researches into *Salar*, and the act of 'looking' allows him to immerse himself imaginatively into the river world. While watching, one morning he sees a trout that had escaped the notice of the mixed bag of fishermen and spectators who hung around the river and a neighbouring pond. The fact that 'no one saw the trout' is important; he refers to it as 'my favourite trout'; it assumes a wider significance as being somehow both a symbol of the life of the river and an affirmation of his own distinctive empathy with the natural world.

¹³ Richard Jefferies, *Landscape with Figures: Selected Prose Writings* (London: Penguin, 2013 [first published 1883]), p. 116.

Several features of this story – the fascination with water, the imaginative empathy with the fish, the development of an intimate personal connection with the life of the trout – find parallels in Williamson's work. An early story, 'The Old Pond', was included in the 1933 edition of *The Lone Swallows*. Like Jefferies's story, it explores the negative impact of human activity on the world of ponds and rivers. The opening sentence, 'I remember trout lying in the sluice of the mill-wheel below the culvert' (*LSP* 132), establishes a melancholy tone of reminiscence, developed into an extended threnody through a comparison between the time when 'the spirit of the water was joyous as it flowed through the green Kent country, long ago', and the present: 'nowadays the waters of the pond are false-coloured with tar and oil from the road. The trout are dead, and hundreds of metal caps of beer bottles lie below the culvert, dirty-white in the water' (*LSP* 201). Williamson frequently used the transformation of 'Kent' into 'London' as a symbol of the loss of a pastoral idyll; roads operate as signifiers of the pollution caused by an intrusive modern world, rather ironically given Williamson's own enthusiasm for motor vehicles.

In this story, the death of the trout means that Williamson has to turn to a moorhen as the chief protagonist of the narrative. In another early story, 'Trout', the fish retains a central symbolic function throughout. 'Trout' first appears in the 1953 collection *Tales of Moorland and Estuary*, but according to Williamson's dedication it relates to an early stage in his career, when he 'was discovering Devon on foot' (*TME* vi). The story opens with a panning shot whereby we are brought by car from London, via Taunton, to the town of South Dulton and the River Dull. This first part of the narrative ends with 'the inadequate town sewage plant' (*TME* 199). Later in the story, the road again

appears as a symbol and importer of pollution and other trappings of the modern world: 'the road running through the valley above the stream had been metalled and tarred for the new motor traffic which was gradually replacing the horse and the iron-shod wooden wheel. From off the sealed surfaces [...] rainwater drained quickly into the river [...]. Deadly tar-acids poisoned the microscopic life [...] on which the new-hatched trout-fry fed' (*TME* 207). These environmental concerns are connected to a wider sense of social decay, in which the health of the trout operates as a litmus test to indicate a general sense of decline and fall:

The declining weights and conditions of those fish in the photographs might have suggested to a philosophical ichthyologist a parallel in decline of the human scene and substance at Hawton Hall. For the same changes in human values had affected both land and river equally.

These changes had been accepted by nearly everyone as the changes due to modern progress. (*TME* 207)

The point is driven home when we are told that 'the Hawton estate, once of flourishing farms held by a sturdy tenantry maintaining the fertility of the farms and looking to the squire for leadership in all things, had likewise declined [...]. A syndicate of speculators interested only in making money bought the park and sold the trees to a timber merchant' (*TME* 208). The opposing figures of the squire and the speculator seem here to stand for the virtues of a rural conservative social order set against the threat posed by faceless (and presumably urban) moneymen. This binary opposition helps to tie Williamson's sense of a vulnerable natural world to a fear of modernism and a respect for traditional figures of authority, characteristic of the beliefs of many of the right-

wing thinkers of the early twentieth century. This connection was marked by E. W. Martin: 'the English rural tradition [has a] long history of domination of one group by another group [...], but the leadership principle was being magnified in the author's mind by forces nobody could control'.¹⁴

Apart from their symbolic function, trout play little part in the story. Their initial purpose is to provide an object for human predators, and to allow the author to inveigh against the power of the money-men: 'here no keeper, hired by selfish capitalist, can prevent men from taking their rights' (*TME* 200). There are many forms of fishing, however, and the focus of the story soon comes to rest on a familiar and presumably autobiographical figure from Williamson's early work: the sensitive and nature-loving young boy. The motif of fishing serves to unite the different generations of a family, set against the background of war. The boy's ultimate success in catching a trout, carefully recorded on a photograph, places him securely in the line of succession from his fly-fishing ancestors. This is essentially another rite of passage story, and the trout is finally reduced to a frozen trophy, an image within a photograph in a silver frame, at which the matriarch of the family proudly gazes as the story draws to a close.

In these early stories, therefore, Williamson had not yet settled on a subject that allowed him to build a narrative around the imagined life of a fish. But with the last of these precursors to *Salar*, 'The Maiden Salmon', a degree of development is apparent. The story first appears in *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine* in 1934, a year before the publication of *Salar*, and is included as the last chapter of *Devon Holiday* (1935). This story offers a far more detailed and scientific account of the life of a fish, and the change of subject from a trout to a

¹⁴ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 309/1/1/2.

salmon is significant in terms of the more complex narrative of *Salar*, on which Williamson was at that time working. The two stories, however, are very different. 'The Maiden Salmon' contains many features that are later developed in *Salar*, but the background to its composition suggests a set of rather different priorities.

Williamson's letters to Charles Tunncliffe provide further thoughts on the short story. On 11 February 1934, he wrote: 'I'm doing a beauty, called THE SALMON. God, it's a counterpart (to THE FALCON); but no cruelty in it; no despair; the finest love story, without the word or anything being mentioned in the language. It will amuse you to see how I have jumped off from the form of the Falcon, to write it'.¹⁵ His letters at this time show his tendency to identify himself with the creatures of his creation and see them in some ways as representing the spirit of the writer-artist. 'I'm an unmended kelt', he wrote in January in the anguish of his unrequited love. 'Fungus creeps over me. I long for heaven's spate, to take me to the divine sea'. Tunncliffe was the very unwilling recipient of Williamson's frequent outpourings regarding some failed love affair or other,¹⁶ and in February he received another letter claiming 'soon I shall be free; free of the old dying kelt stuff, anyhow. If there is a return to the springwater, it will be as springwater; I may be reborn, baptised, a new bright person'. In more defiant spirit, Williamson wrote in March, 'don't let the salmon bow his head before mullheads. That's the spirit'. Williamson is presumably represented here by the salmon and the unnamed mass of hostile critics by the less physically impressive fish, the mullhead.

¹⁵ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 126.

¹⁶ See Ian Niall, *Portrait of a Country Artist* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1980), p. 53, where Niall describes the slow deterioration of the working relationship between Williamson and Tunncliffe: 'their collaboration inevitably resulted in an involvement in Williamson's romantic attachments and this impinged not only upon Tunncliffe's work but his domestic life'.

In the light of these comments, it is unsurprising to find that 'The Maiden Salmon' is an uneasy mix of realistic description and spiritual yearning. The story begins, rather like Jefferies's 'A London Trout', with a piece of scene-setting that incorporates the elements of earth, air and water, and also evokes a response from the different senses:

Here lies the moor, wild with green bog and curlews' song in the spring,
grey with granite tors ceaselessly carved by the winds of centuries, the
winds bringing Atlantic clouds which in the cold air over rock and valley
fall as rain and fill many rivers flowing rapidly to the ocean again.

(*DH 296*)

The salmon are immediately introduced as being born into these rivers 'save those polluted by man with his mines and factories', and, significantly, as fish who will ultimately 'return to their native rivers [...] for the sake of love'. While there are snatches of description that are largely realistic, more often we are presented with a more spiritual, allegorical approach: 'its own golden power or faith returns unto its being, and it hurls itself out of the foaming pool and bores its way into that which gives it immortality'.

The Williamsonian character of the 'watcher from the moor', who is also a poet and an ex-soldier, quickly takes centre stage in the story. It is he who sees the salmon as 'noble travellers', returning to the river 'on the only true aristocratic impulse of life, the instinctive search for immortality through love' (*DH 299*). Thus the salmon is used to embody the human concepts of rank, romance and the yearning for immortality. We have been already informed that 'the man watched them, identifying himself with them', and in the following page

the salmon comes also to represent the spirit of the poet (who, we presume, in turn represents the author), in that both were in some way upheld by faith.

The rest of the story is concerned with the man's attempt to protect some newly-spawned salmon eggs. Another familiar figure in Williamson's fiction, an anonymous 'young girl', appears from nowhere and establishes an immediate but unspoken rapport with the poet. The story then progresses slowly towards its elegiac ending. The poet establishes some sort of relationship with the one surviving young fish, in an echo of the probably apocryphal story of the otter that, Williamson claimed, provided the inspiration for *Tarka*. It is emphasised that salmon possess 'a beautiful, natural memory of place' and are distinguished from trout in that 'they alone of fish are noble' (*DH* 306). The social and political symbolic significance of the salmon for Williamson is becoming apparent, and these layers of symbolism that run through this story, often quite pushing aside any treatment of the salmon as a real living creature, help to suggest the appeal of the salmon as a subject for his allegorical approach. In *Salar*, Williamson's use of allegory is combined with more detailed descriptions of the lives of salmon. These descriptions necessarily involve exploring the watery worlds of sea and river.

Salar is full of the movement and the nature of water. The river is seen as a sentient, purposeful thing, interacting over time with its own environment, just as the salmon does: 'so Salar came at last to the natural river, where it wound widely and was allowed to make its own pools and backwaters, to cut into its ancient bed and form its own islets. Its gravel was clean and its music was sharp after the sombrous rhythms of the sea' (*SS* 101). The conjunction of river and sea is a significant aspect of the narrative of *Salar*, both in terms of the journey that the salmon must make from the one to the other, and in terms

of the different experiences they offer. The sea is potentially hazardous in its immensity: 'sometimes a fish fails to find [sic] way to its parent river because it has lost the guiding currents of familiar fresh water, spreading root-like into the sea' (SS 34). In contrast, the river is represented as a familiar guide and 'parent', whose currents take on some of the qualities of earthbound trees, 'spreading root-like'. The sea carries with it the burden of knowledge, marking a contrast with the airborne freedom of the gulls: 'calmly and in silence they return to their roosting ledges in cliffs, above the sea whose entire being is fretful. The gulls have risen from the land to find aerial beauty, while the sea grows more bitter-blind with the centuries' (SS 37). Here again, Williamson uses animals to show the essential interconnection of the elements, tied together within the web of the wider natural environment.

Williamson refers to the lives of other animals for a similar narrative purpose. In Chapter 10, the brief life of another water creature, the mayfly, also illustrates the interdependency of living creatures within an elemental world:

Not only was the spirit released in life, but also in smaller forms of water life. Nymphs of the olive dun, which since hatching from eggs the summer before had lived under stones and among the dark green fronds of water-moss, were now leaving the element of water for the element of air. They [...] were rising into the hymenal brightness of the sky. Trout and salmon parr shifted into the eddies, watching forward and upwards, rising to suck them into their mouths. (SS 132)

The changes that Williamson made to an earlier draft underline this emphasis on the interconnectedness of the elements. The original phrase – 'were now leaving their homes and swimming to the surface' – is replaced by 'leaving the

element of water for the element of air', and 'hymenal brightness of the sky' is also added. Now the mayfly nymphs rise from stone to water to air, metaphorically associated through the adjective 'hymenal' with maturity and marriage, and are then in death made part of another life, that of the fish who devour them.

Another form of elemental connection is explored at the opening of Chapter 7, the beginning of the section 'Spring Spate'. Here, the description is of the movement of water from sky to river, and the way that it imparts energy to the various forms of life within it:

Rain fell from grey clouds over the estuary at flood tide, and Salar leapt for the change in the water. From the hills, clouds in close pack could be seen apparently following the valley which was the estuary; but this was condensation in the colder, windy air above water. Wind from the south-west pressed skits on the waves, and the rain spread to the hills and the moor, and by nightfall every drain and runner and ditch was noisy with falling water. (SS 93)

Williamson substituted 'Salar' for the phrase 'the fish' in an earlier draft, thus firmly establishing the central protagonist at the beginning of the action. The passage moves structurally from the sky down to the valley, and then in a linear and narrowing movement from the estuary to the hills and then to the minor water-courses of drain and runner and ditch. A sequence of active verbs – 'fell', 'leapt', 'following', 'pressed', 'spread' – maintains this sense of urgency first conveyed through the swelling associations of a 'flood tide'. Williamson's coinage of the noun 'skits' adds to this general effect, suggesting a lively scampering over the surface of the water. Through the addition of the phrase 'in

close pack' to the first draft, the clouds are portrayed as acting like hounds pursuing a quarry; the various components of the scene, animate and inanimate, are drawn together in an apparently common purpose.

Williamson is sufficiently focused on the nature of water to devote whole passages of the novel to its different forms. In one paragraph from Chapter 15, while describing the river below the humpbacked bridge, he identifies 'deep water', 'the throat of the pool', 'swifter water', 'the current', 'water rebulging' and 'the clarity and taste of the water'. At different times in Chapter 8, he uses a series of more technical terms to distinguish different water forms: 'eddy', 'spate', 'backwater', 'freshets', 'tripping shallow', 'stickles' and 'eddy-tail'. Precise but evocative, these noun phrases illustrate Williamson's attempt to meet the considerable challenge of capturing something essential about the watery element in which his animal protagonists exist. 'Running water', says Williamson, 'usually does the opposite of what is expected of it by those not water-minded' (SS 146). Even more than in *Tarka*, the river becomes at times the focus of the narrative, an object of fascination and a protagonist in its own right. Williamson is certainly 'water-minded'.

The mythical qualities of rivers seem to have interested Williamson almost as much as their physical nature and the range of life forms within them. The Thames and the Rhine occupied a central place in his writing for a variety of reasons, one being his belief in the essential brotherhood of the two nations, England and Germany. In *The Phoenix Generation*, Phillip Maddison's story, 'The Blind Trout', transforms rivers into symbols of the reborn spirit of the wider nation, analogous to the musical representation of myth and legend:

Will all our English rivers die, or will the spirit of resurgence, now animating the few, spread until our nation is reborn? There is still time.

There is still hope. And there is faith. For in all those rivers of Great Britain which are pure in spirit the smolt are going down to the sea.

That to me is a marvellous thing, like the music of Delius, and green corn growing [...] like the Rhine music of Wagner, when the lyric gold of life is safe with the Rhine-Maidens. (PG 144)

This passage reworks some of the ideas that Williamson had presented in the introduction to *Salar* from *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga* and concludes with a wider evocation of racial unity and an ecstatic vision of the future, both metaphorically represented in the image of the fish within the river: 'we are passing through an age of industrial darkness; but beyond it, I can see salmon leaping again in both the Rhine and its ancient tributary Thames' (PG 145).

The reference to the Rhine illustrates one of the ways in which Williamson's animal sagas invite allegorical, and at times political, readings. *Salar* is depicted as a heroic creature, to some degree a Nietzschean *Überfisch*: his return journey is described as being driven by blood-instinct in the service of the immortality of the race. As with the peregrine falcon, it is hard to dissociate this form of representation from the complex mixture of political philosophy and Romantic aesthetics that generated Williamson's fascist sympathies. Significantly, it was during the process of writing *Salar* that Williamson's involvement with fascist Germany increased. In 1933, he began discussions about the book with Richard de la Mare at Faber. In early 1935, he began what was then provisionally entitled 'Atlantic Salmon'. The book was published in mid-October. During that period, Williamson was seeing a great deal of John Heygate, a Nazi sympathiser, and a man by whom, according to

Anne Williamson, he was 'very influenced'.¹⁷ It was in September 1935, around the time of the publication of *Salar*, that Williamson made his notorious trip to Germany with Heygate, described in some detail in *Goodbye West Country*, during which his admiration for Hitler grew to such a degree that he was able to see the Nazi leader as 'someone who has perceived the root-causes of war in the unfulfilled human ego, and is striving to create a new, human-fulfilled world' (GWC 228). For Williamson, the river Rhine acted as a symbol for Germany in the same way as the Thames (polluted or not) did for England. Thus river and salmon, fish and water, all become part of Williamson's political worldview.

Williamson's reference to an 'age of industrial darkness', in the passage from *The Phoenix Generation*, exemplifies another central concern that he was able to articulate through the choice of a river setting within his narratives. In the essay 'The Sun in Taurus' that introduces *Salar* in *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga*, he describes the murderous impact of industrial effluent on British rivers: 'yet pollution has temporarily despoiled many of our rivers. In some, inanimate sludge has taken the life out of the water – the oxygen – without which plants cannot grow, mayflies arise, or fish breathe' (HWAS 204). There is no feature of the English countryside, not fields, not woods, not hedges, that so regularly acts within Williamson's work as a symbol of a poisoned and polluted environment as the river. In *Salar*, the most significant inhabitant of the river is the salmon, and the salmon is and always has been an indicator of environmental health. J. W. Jones offers the view that

for more than 150 years the Salmon and his humbler cousin, the trout, have been the first indicators of the insidious pollution of our rivers [...].

¹⁷ A. Williamson, *Tarka and the Last Romantic*, p. 192.

[I]t is the sensitivity of the Salmon itself that has so often been the first inspirer of remedial action. The Salmon tolerates pollution hardly at all [...]. It is the Salmon that has aroused public awareness of the dangers of pollution and touched the conscience of industry over the disposal of the wastes of trade.¹⁸

The structure of *Salar* is built on the relationship between the fish and its wider environment, the changing seasons and the shifting riverscape. The novel is divided into four books: 'Tideways', 'Spring Spate', and 'Summer River' follow the movement of the seasons towards the final 'Winter Star-Stream'. Almost a third of the twenty-five chapters that make up these four books have titles which make reference to time or date: for example, 'Estuary Night', 'June Morning', 'Night Sun'. Over half are given names that refer either to a form of water ('Shallows', 'Pool', 'Clear Water') or to the weirs and valleys that confine and shape it. This pattern of reference is reinforced by the ways that chapters begin. The opening (and at times redrafted) sentences of the first five chapters gradually establish a cinematic narrowing of focus:

At full moon the tides swirling over the Island Race carry the feelings of many rivers to the schools of fish which have come in from their feeding ledges of the deep Atlantic. (SS 15)

During the time of one wave-crest breaking white and reforming again in phosphoric streaks, nearly a thousand salmon which were resting in the tail of the Island Race had broken formation and were zigzagging into the northerly sweep of the tide (SS 25). [Draft version: 'During A moment

¹⁸ Jones, *The Salmon*, p. 2.

late~~r~~ the time of a wave-crest breaking and reforming again in phosphoric streaks ~~from white to silver~~, nearly a thousand salmon which ~~had been~~ were resting in the tail of the ~~Great White Horse Race~~ were Island Race had broken formation and were zigzagging into the northerly sweep of the tide'.]

Now sometimes a fish fails to find way to its parent river because it has lost the guiding currents of familiar fresh water, spreading root-like into the sea. (SS 34)

An hour before midnight, in bright moonlight, a dozen crews of four men each, silently in rubber thigh-boots, went down to their salmon boats moored on the sandbank on the edge of the deep water of the fairway. (SS 48)

Again Salar went up to the tide-head, again he shifted back with the ebb to avoid cold streams of fresh water. (SS 62)

In Chapter 1, we are given an establishing shot, in which the focus of the narrative moves from the deep Atlantic to the 'many rivers' that feed into the estuary. In Chapter 2, the fish that were mentioned in Chapter 1 as having 'come in' from the deep Atlantic are now shown moving towards the river mouth. Williamson's changes to his first draft sharpen the sense of immediacy and help to tie together the movements of fish and water. During the third chapter, that seemingly inexorable movement is broken as fish lose touch with the 'guiding currents'. The openings of all three chapters show fish and water operating in harmony, at times with what is apparently a common purpose. The first sentence of the fourth chapter introduces men 'in their salmon boats' into

this pattern of movement of the waters, and the salmon's remorselessly driven journey – 'again Salar went up', 'again he shifted back' – is re-emphasised in Chapter 5. Every opening sentence has water as a central focus, and in every sentence the movement of time is either directly stated or suggested. The story of the salmon is set from the start in the mould of a journey in time and space, and into this journey are woven elements of legend and epic, partly conveyed by the sense of cosmic forces operating above and beyond the salmon's journey – tides carrying the feelings of rivers; water currents guiding the fish; the story beginning under the full moon – and partly through the elevated and emphatic rhythms and cadences of the narrative voice: 'during the time of one wave-crest breaking white'; 'now sometimes a fish fails to find way to its parent river'.

None of the twenty-five chapter titles includes references to salmon; the various narrative frames of time and place dominate, outlining the wider environment in which the fish live. Something rather different, however, happens at the beginning of all these chapters. More than half of the opening sentences of the first four books make direct reference to the salmon, or Salar himself, thus foregrounding the fish as the protagonists of the developing tale. Only in the fifth and final book, 'Winter Star-Stream', does Williamson change this pattern. Here, he shapes the chapters in a very different way. No named fish features in the first page of these chapters. The seasonal movements of the waters are charted; the physical structure of Steep Weir is described; the deeds and words of Shiner the poacher provide a different perspective on the action; the flight of birds high above the river valley provides another. But the chapters gradually narrow their focus onto the fish, who are the central protagonists of the tale, and dominate the last sections of the chapters. Indeed,

the first four of the five chapters of 'Winter Star-Stream' name either Salar or Gralaks in their final sentence, and the first two of these conclude with a rhetorical flourish or celebratory appellation: 'such was the return of Salar – the Leaper', and 'above in the pool it leapt again – Salar'. In this way the narrative structure emphasises the significance of the salmon and the integration of the fish within its watery world.

This integration is combined with a sustained exploration of the interaction between the lives of humans and fish. One of the significant characteristics of *Tarka* is its representation of the connections between humans and animals within the country of the Two Rivers. This connectedness is deepened and broadened in *Salar*. It illuminates both Williamson's environmental concerns and his response to the challenge of representing animals from a human perspective. It also illustrates Williamson's predilection for including himself, or a representative of himself, within his animal stories. *Salar* builds up carefully to the inclusion of a partial representative of the author by extended descriptions of human activity.

In Williamson's stories, hunting is the dominant activity that draws man and animals together. Otter hunters significantly feature in the action of seven out of the twenty chapters of *Tarka*. They are generally anonymous figures; the Master is identified simply by his title, and only the otter hounds are given individual names. Equally anonymous figures occur sporadically during the narrative: gamekeepers, men and dogs, and a marshman-farmer. The author, or a representative of the author, makes three appearances, but essentially as a spectator of the action. In the last chapter, a girl and her father also act as significant spectators. The only human character who is specifically named is the poacher, Shiner, who loses a finger in a struggle with the otter in chapter

five. Apart from the otter hunters, therefore, the human cast list is limited in number and in range, and we are only given glimpses of the way they live.

Human characters play a more important part in *Salar*, and fishing replaces hunting as the most significant human activity. Fishing is a very specific form of hunting with its own cultural significance. Emma Griffin has indicated the many ways in which attitudes to fishing have been influenced by social and political views.¹⁹ In Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler* (1653), Piscator asserts that angling is an art worth the knowledge of a wise man. John Buchan argues a similar case: 'the angler [is] the sportsman, I love to think, who can feel all the old primeval excitement of his sport, and yet the man of culture to whom nature is more than a chalk-stream or a salmon-river, who has ears for Corydon's song as well as the splash of trout below the willows'.²⁰

Throughout his writing career, Williamson dramatized the ways in which hunting invested animals with a form of nobility, often acknowledged by the hunters themselves. The narrative of *Tarka* (1927) is built around a series of otter-hunts; the climax of 'Stumberleap' (1926) occurs during a stag hunt; in 'The Epic of Brock the Badger' (OS 1933) and 'Chakchek the Peregrine' (PS 1934), the eponymous badger and falcon are hunted to their deaths. In the last chapter of *The Phasian Bird* (1948), the pheasant is shot by a group of poachers. In *Salar*, fishing is an equally significant activity, but it operates in rather different ways. There is no single group of antagonists ranged against the salmon; instead, Williamson constructs his story around a series of adversarial interactions. The salmon are vulnerable to the attacks of a series of animal predators: otters, porpoises, killer whales and parasitic fish. In addition,

¹⁹ Emma Griffin, *Blood Sport* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 152-162.

²⁰ John Buchan, 'Introduction', in Izaak Walton, *The Compleat Angler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935 [first published 1653]), p. xxiv.

they have to contend with individual fly-fishermen, gangs of poachers and a crew of salmon-fishers.

Williamson provides an extended account of the working lives of the fishermen and fisherwomen whose existence is dependent, like the salmon, on the river and sea. Onno Oerlemans has identified a resistance within environmentalism to the 'Romantic' tendency of valuing the culture of self over nature:

The solution, varyingly put, is to expand subjectivity to include all of nature, to make it cease to be fully other, as well as stressing the objective sources of our own consciousness. Ecocritics from [Patrick] Murphy to Karl Kroeber argue that this can be accomplished through an ecological awareness, an ability to see the radical interdependence of beings or objects within an ecosystem.²¹

This 'interdependence' is exactly what *Salar* explores. In *Tarka*, within such passages as the great winter chapter (Chapter 10), Williamson represents nature as essentially interconnected. In *Salar*, he expands that sense of connection to embrace more fully both the human and animal world.

In the first book of *Salar*, 'Tideways', the local fishing community is depicted in detail. At the end of Chapter 3, Williamson introduces the familiar figure of the watcher, 'a fisherman in a small boat off the North Tail of the Estuary of the Two Rivers' (SS 46). The narrative perspective here changes to include that of the fisherman, whose free indirect speech is woven into the third-person narrative, so that the different voices coalesce:

²¹ Onno Oerlemans, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 10.

The 'errin 'ogs, he told his companions later in the inn, lay roughly in a ring. First one would take the living fish in its mouth and throw it up; a second would catch it, toss it in the air, the others would roll up and bump it with their snouts. Once the fish got away, but was caught again underwater, and the game continued nearer his boat. After a while the 'ogs tore a bite out of the fish. Then a master great 'og, four or five times as big as the others and big round as a tar-barrel, came up and they cleared like as if the devil was after them. When they had gone the fisherman tried to pick up the salmon, which was floating head down, on its back, white belly showing, but there was too much swell and broken water on the Tail. As the tide was beginning to flow strong, he hoisted sail and went home to the fishing village with news of what he had seen. Other fishermen had seen the porpoises, too, and there was much swearing. The lawful season for nets was not yet begun, and here was the spring run of fish, no water in the rivers for them to go up, being protected by law for the sake of 'erring 'ogs apparently. (SS 47)

In this section of *Salar*, the fisherman is a witness rather than a participant. He is separated from the action; even his attempt to gather up the salmon that the porpoises have killed is a failure. This detail was added in Williamson's final draft, suggesting the importance to the narrative of emphasising the limits of human powers. The fisherman's position as a viewer does not imply any superiority over the objects of his gaze. Unlike the animals he watches, he is at the mercy of the elements. The swell of the water prevents him from picking up the fish; when the tide begins to 'flow strong' he has to hoist sail and return home. The reader may, however, see him as a reliable narrator. His use of dialect in referring to the porpoises as 'erring 'ogs suggests a familiarity with the

animals, and the detail of his description marks him out as a careful observer. The fisherman's final dry comment about the law being seemingly on the side of the porpoises was also added in the final draft; this and the concluding sardonic adverbial 'apparently' give a particularity to the narrative voice.

What this passage also adds is a sense of a hierarchy operating within the locality. The fisherman is connected to the lives of the other animals through the processes of predation. Like the porpoises, his existence is based on hunting the salmon. In Williamson's novels, hunters of various kinds are accorded a degree of understanding, even imaginative empathy, in relationship to their quarry that justifies their being seen as possessing unique insights into the animal's being and consciousness. Philip Armstrong makes a similar point in his discussion of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*:

The hunt, then, comes closest to apprehending the reality of the whale for two reasons. First, only the whaler (prior to the advent of underwater marine biology and whale-watching) meets the whale in its own element [...]. Second, the hunt alone confronts the human with the new dimension of the whale which escapes or defeats all other modes of cultural mediation, scientific, artistic or economic: the animal's agency, its embodied resistance to human plans.²²

Williamson's otter hunters and fishermen, of necessity, have to encounter the hunted animal in its own watery environment, an environment which has to be understood, if not mastered. Thus, through the actions and points of view of his

²² Philip Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 113.

human protagonists, Williamson is able to offer a very specific insight into what it means to be an animal.

It is the process of the hunt which draws humans and animals into a shared existence, even if their relationship is hardly an association of equals. However, this hierarchical order, itself a constant preoccupation in Williamson's work, operates within the separate worlds of animal and man. During the brief period of action witnessed by the fisherman, the salmon are hunted by the porpoises, which are in turn pursued by killer whales, the 'master great 'og, four or five times as big as the others' referred to by the fisherman. There is also a suggestion that the fishermen are caught in a contest with a superior force, represented by the officers of law enforcement. The chapter ends with a return to the omniscient narrative voice, the alternation of which with the voice of the fisherman conveys a shared perspective and sympathy. The fishermen are depicted as a long-standing and natural part of the local world of sea and river, unlike the intrusive law-makers: 'fishermen had been taking salmon in the estuary in nets at that time of year for scores of centuries before the Two Rivers Conservancy Board had made its bye-laws' (SS 47). The fisherman's apparent fascination with the predators whose world he shares does not obscure the fact that theirs is in some ways a more carefree existence. While hunting the salmon, the porpoises seem to perform actions whose sole purpose is their own amusement: 'first one would take the living fish in its mouth and throw it up; a second would catch it, toss it in the air, the others would roll up and bump it with their snouts'. 'The game', the fisherman tells us, 'continued nearer his boat'. Earlier, the killer whales have been described as casually chopping sea creatures 'for fun'. In contrast, the work of the fishermen is frequently depicted as being arduous and often frustrating. Despite the power relationship implied

by hunting, it is not always the case that Williamson's hierarchies place humans in a position of power and superiority. He often suggests that they struggle to survive in, and make sense of, a world in which animals are more naturally proficient and at home.

Throughout these chapters, there is an extended treatment of this world through a focus on the working lives of the fishermen. This treatment forms a thread within the wider narrative, the thread itself made up of a series of mini-dramas. Chapter 4 opens with 'a dozen crews' going down to their salmon boats an hour before midnight. The chapter is entitled 'Estuary Night', and the fishermen become creatures of darkness, moving silently down to the water. They are subordinated, however, to what Williamson presents, at times in rather self-consciously poetic form, as the greater power of the planets and the elements:

The night was in the moon's unreal power [...]. The Pool buoy rolled with the weight of assaulting water, leaning ocean-wards on its iron chain which the salt never ceased to gnaw in darkness, sunlight and the moon's opalescent glimmer. Ocean's blind purpose is to make all things sea; it understands nothing of the Spirit that moves in earth and water.
(SS 50)

Again, the limits of human agency are suggested. Later in the chapter, this limitation is further illustrated through the failure of a haul: 'the seine, or purse net, came in swiftly, seeming to hiss in the water. There was nothing in the net. The fishermen showed no disappointment. They had been wet in sea-labour since boyhood' (SS 53).

The narrative slips in and out of the perspective of the fishermen through a combination of direct speech (“let’n come,” said one’), unmarked direct speech (‘the Board, they said, stops us fishing’), external narration (‘all the fishermen felt an angry but subdued sense of injustice’), and free indirect speech (‘they keep the nets off in order to stock the rivers for the rich gentry’s pleasure’). Williamson is here blending the perspective of the external narrator with that of the fishermen, but never resting for long in any one form of speech representation. This resembles his practice in the representation of the consciousness of his animal characters, where the narrator’s external observation of behaviour alternates with internalised suggestions of how the animals are feeling and responding to various stimuli.

The narrative connection between men and fish is developed throughout the chapter. As the fishermen finally escape the clutches of the water bailiffs through a comic bit of subterfuge, so Salar and Gralaks escape capture when a porpoise is caught in the net and prevents its secure hauling in. A further, also faintly comic, correspondence between the worlds of men, fish and mammals is established through the description of the skipper of the fishing boat, a man ‘not dissimilar from [sic] the shape of a herring hog’ (SS 58).

This developed correspondence is a central feature of *Salar*. It takes different forms. The combat between man and fish is represented (twice) in this section of the novel by a single fisherman. On the first occasion, we are shown a fisherman spinning for bass. The main narrative significance of his introduction is to provide the occasion when Salar is attacked by the lamprey, Petromyzon. The fisherman, sailing his solitary boat, can also be seen as acting as a representative of the author, another figure watching events from the sidelines. The second fisherman is also a witness, this time of the prologue

to the conclusion to Salar's ordeal, when the lamprey is itself devoured by an even more primitive creature, the hag-fish *Myxine*. This fisherman, reintroduced into the story, is the one who 'had seen Meerschwein and the other porpoises play with a salmon off the North Tail a fortnight previously' (SS 73). In this way, the narrative ties together the experience of fish and man.

The village fishermen are located at the heart of the narrative. They are presented as an essential and natural element of the changing seasons. As the wind moves from the north to the west, and as the curlews' cries over the moor 'become more tender', the coming spring is also marked by the way the 'fishermen in the estuary village hung their nets out on walls and lines'. Again, the chapter opens with a narrative voice that drifts in and out of a representation of the fishermen's thoughts. The developing chapter explores the parallel experiences of the fishermen and the seal, Jarrk. The seal is introduced early in the chapter, both as a predator on salmon and as a competitor to the fishermen. Thus the seal and the men are bound together in physical space and intention; they use similar tactics to isolate and trap the fish, and are similarly presented as having learned from their long experience of the local waters: 'Jarrk the seal had fished in the estuary of the Two Rivers for more than a dozen years [...]. Jarrk, intelligent and percipient – with subtlety of mind developed and widened in every generation – [...] quickly learned to wait until a net was closed before swimming under it' (SS 82). Williamson is applying the same judgements here to man and animal. Both are being assessed as hunters against the same criteria; both, ironically, make use of the fishing nets.

At the climax of the chapter, however, the seal achieves another, involuntary, result. Terrified by his advances, the trapped fish force themselves

through the net, and conclude the chapter with an escape depicted in heroic terms: ‘the mesh twine was new; a single strand could not be broken by a steady pull between a man’s hands. The sea-trout had broken nine meshes, and through the rent all the fish had escaped’ (SS 89). In ‘Tideways’, Williamson has deliberately presented the experience of men and animals as being essentially one. Within their shared context of mutual combat, men do not necessarily emerge the stronger. This is a clear development from *Tarka*, where the lives of men and humans were rarely contiguous, and only during the hunt were we shown a brief period when both were drawn closely into the same world of physical experience.

As the story develops, and the action largely moves inland, Williamson’s interest in the human actors in the drama shifts from the sea fishermen to the poachers who work the Devon rivers. The most significant poacher that we meet in *Tarka* is Shiner, and this character reappears in *Salar* to much greater effect. (Despite his generally conservative social and political views, Williamson seems to have been fascinated by the persona of the poacher. It may have been that he saw something of himself in this isolated and outcast figure, a Romantic artist operating on the fringes of respectable society.²³) In terms of narrative function, there is no equivalent to this developed human character in *Tarka*. In the second half of the novel, Williamson presents the life of the salmon as being increasingly connected to and even dependent on Shiner, and

²³ Williamson may again be indebted to the example of Richard Jefferies here. In ‘Mind Under Water’, Jefferies celebrates the activity of poaching, where ‘the intelligence of the man is backed against the intelligence of the fish or animal and the poacher tries to get himself into the ways of the creature he means to snare’. See Jefferies, *Landscape with Figures: Selected Prose Writings* (London: Penguin, 2013 [first published 1883]), p. 134.

important moments in Salar's life are often shown through the poacher's perspective.²⁴

The motif of 'seeing' runs through Chapter 12. Williamson's acknowledgement of the instability of this 'seeing' as a route to understanding would seem to connect with the argument of John Berger that 'it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled'.²⁵ The fourth paragraph of the chapter acknowledges the limits to what can be understood through human sight: 'had Salar and the larger fish been visible to a human eye, they would have appeared to be moving forward against rapid water while remaining immobile' (SS 143). A heron is presented as a more perceptive watcher; and as in an earlier chapter the fishermen were matched against a seal, here the heron and the poacher are pitted against each other in competition for the salmon. The heron takes up a position on the treetop, where 'his suspicions of possible enemies had slowly been stared away'; and, we are told, 'quite half the bird's working hours were passed in waiting and watching lest one of its enemies appear suddenly to surprise it' (SS 149). The poachers also watch over the river, keeping out of the heron's sight lest it alert the water bailiffs to their presence: 'they kept still, knowing that the heron's eye would detect the least movement'. At length, heron and poachers fall into an unacknowledged alliance where the bird acts as 'an unconscious sentinel for

²⁴ Williamson retained the salmon fishermen, but omitted the character of Shiner, in 'Atlantic Salmon', his adaptation of *Salar* for radio broadcast (Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 309 1/1/2). He instead conveyed a human perspective on the action through the use of three alternating 'voices', respectively representing a 'poetic' vision, an 'excited observer' and a 'prosaic commentator'. In practice, however, the distinction between these three voices is not altogether clear, and the adaptation cannot be judged an unqualified success.

²⁵ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 7.

the men waiting there'. One of the poachers, 'known as Shiner for his work during moonlight nights', is in fact directly compared to the heron, 'waiting, stiller than a heron but not so well clad [...], staring at the water' (SS 156).²⁶ Having bluffed his way out of trouble with the bailiff, Shiner ironically claims a concern for the heron's interests: "us mustn't keep th' old crane from his dinner, must us?". The chapter ends with 'the heron passing over high, flying slowly, legs straight out behind and neck tucked in'.

By the last chapter, Shiner's contribution to the story has been considerably developed, and he is portrayed as an observer with a perception that stretches beyond the human:

The pale mask in the water moved forward. 'That's right, midear, Shiner knoweth.' And talking to himself, the old man ambled away along the river bank, peering into the water, seeing almost everything that happened. (SS 316)

The final words of the original draft read 'ambled away, peering and talking to himself'. The change to a patterned repetition of phrases built around verbs of seeing emphasises the knowing 'look' that is always so significant to Williamson. Even the dialectical 'knoweth', with its biblical suffix, helps to suggest an empathetic understanding that allows for a very special form of consciousness. The moment of perception becomes for Williamson almost an end in itself. The crucial act of knowledge gained through 'seeing' establishes a creative connection with the natural world; the watcher engages with the

²⁶ For Williamson, herons operated as totemic birds, particularly in connection with fishing. A heron appears in the first sentence of *Tarka*, and references to herons occur at intervals throughout *Goodbye West Country* (1937), *The Children of Shallowford* (1939), and *A Clear Water Stream* (1958).

physical reality of what is seen and, for a brief moment, imaginatively becomes what he beholds. This stress on the importance of observation connects Williamson with the principles and practice of ethology, which is more interested in the study of spontaneous behaviour than in laboratory experiments such as those carried out by the behaviourist B. F. Skinner. Erica Fudge, however, argues that this pursuit of objectivity is in some ways doomed to fail in that 'we can only see what we can see [...]; we can only describe what our language allows us to describe'.²⁷ Williamson's combination of realism and allegory might therefore be considered an effective response to this conundrum.

Williamson's earlier stories used the figure of an intradiegetic watcher, often a representative of the author, to provide an interpretative perspective for the reader. In *Salar*, this function is largely confined to the developed character of Shiner. During the summer months, he witnesses the changing colour and shape of the ageing salmon: 'Shiner saw him, on his side, pushing his head along the surface, half roll, half leap. His colours revealed his staleness' (SS 217). The quality of the camouflage of the chaffinch's nest in Chapter 18 is demonstrated by the fact that it 'had not been seen even by the sharp eye of Shiner' (SS 225), and in Chapter 21 he witnesses the return of Salar to the spawning waters, as the fish surmounts the barrier of the weir and gives meaning to its name: 'as Shiner watched, it shot forward out of sight, to leap high from the calm deep water of the mill-pool, and reveal, in the moment of rest at the top of the curve, a soldered mark on its side, as of a wound healed. Such was the return of Salar – the Leaper'. The image of the watcher by the side of the weir is also captured in a well-known photograph of Williamson, and

²⁷ Fudge, *Animal*, p. 132.

the knowledgeable observer is a staple constituent of his early narratives.²⁸

Many of these earlier watchers were clearly representatives, overtly or covertly, of the author. In *Salar*, these complex forms of representation find expression in more subtly allusive ways than in *Tarka*, where Williamson is more frequently and directly present in the narrative.

In Chapter 13, for instance, the dominant human character is ‘the fisherman’ who temporarily hooks Salar before the salmon breaks the line. The patient, delicate and practised actions of the fisherman are depicted in detail, and find a parallel in Williamson’s descriptions of his own fishing exploits. We are given a list of the rows of flies the fisherman has at his disposal: ‘Mar Lodge and Silver Grey, Dunkeld and Black Fairy, Beaully Snow Fly, Fiery Brown, Silver Wilkinson’, reminiscent of the sequence of resonant names that Williamson used to identify the otter hounds in *Tarka*. He finally settles on a particular fly: ‘then in one corner of the case he saw an old fly of which most of the plumage was gone: a Black Dog which had belonged to his grandfather. Grubs of moths had fretted away hackle, wing and topping. It was thin and bedraggled’ (SS 169). This incident is echoed in Williamson’s retrospective account of a fishing trip to Scotland he made in autumn 1931, recorded in *A Clear Water Stream* (1958): ‘I went fishing, having chosen my fly, a moth-spoiled Black Dog from my grandfather’s japanned circular iron case’ (CWS 162).

In fact, Williamson does not fully separate himself from the story of Shiner. In Chapter 20, ‘Water Death’, he is represented by ‘the man living in the cottage, for whom Shiner worked’ (SS 254) and who listens to the cries of travelling otters. In the last book of *Salar*, ‘Winter Star-Stream’, we are provided

²⁸ See Appendix 2 for a copy of this photograph, which appears as a frontispiece to *The Illustrated Salar the Salmon* (Exeter: Webb & Bower, 1987).

with a little more of Shiner's back-story. In conversation with a gamekeeper, he speaks of his employer, 'my chap', who we are told is 'proper mazed about salmon, writing a book about'm [sic] he did tell me' (SS 291). The modifier 'mazed' establishes a further connection. Two pages later, the gamekeeper muses that 'the old fellow [Shiner] was proper mazed', and according to various sources Williamson was himself often seen as 'mazed' – crazily eccentric – by his fellow villagers.

Nevertheless, the intrusions of the author-figure are short-lived, and the narrative returns to focus on Shiner's actions; these increasingly relate to the fish over which he regularly watches. In Chapter 21, 'Drowning World', Williamson returns to one of his favourite subjects, a flood. We see the hierarchies of the world temporarily suspended:

Eels ate the dough in a baker's ovens where fires had burned an hour since. Two cormorants sat together on the gilt weathercock of the church spire above a jabble of brown water hiding tombstones. A heron fished from the radiator of an abandoned motorcar on the new concrete highway, perched beside the mascot of a miniature heron in white-metal.
(SS 270)

The 'natural' world has taken over, and signifiers of modernity and human supremacy have been ironically displaced. Shiner watches all this, but from a perspective in sympathetic identification with the fish: 'he was there because most of his life thought with the way of salmon. All day he had stood there, watching them. He ate no food; his hunger was to see the fish' (SS 274). But he does more than watch: he acts decisively. Chapter 22 finds him at Steep Weir, 'the most harmful weir in the country of the Two Rivers'. A half-rotten sluice with

its seized-up fender prevents the easy passage of the salmon. We are told that 'since he had come to watch salmon for their own sakes, Shiner had appointed himself a sort of honorary elusive water bailiff', and he proceeds to open the fender and allow the water to gush through, despite the furious opposition of a couple of poachers. In this way, Shiner establishes himself as a sort of guardian figure; his close knowledge of the salmon, gained through the pursuit of poaching, is now put to a more protective use.

Once again, Williamson seems to have adapted an incident from his own life in the creation of this scene. In so doing, the distinction between the author and his literary representative again become blurred. This is the passage where Shiner raises the fender:

Levering against the cross-piece, he tried to raise the fender. It was wedged in the lower grooves of the posts, held tight by the weight of silt against its other side. By crashing the bar against the plate, Shiner at last shifted the wood and immediately the gush below changed to mud colour. (SS 286)

In this passage from *The Children of Shallowford*, Williamson describes a trip with his children to the river beside his house:

We saw several salmon trying to jump the weir, but none got up. There was a fish-pass at the side of the weir, but the wooden door was closed. We tried to lever up the fender with rotten sticks, but it was stuck too tight. So I stood in the water to my waist and heaved it up with my fingers underneath the half-rotten bottom. Then we went back to below the weir and watched the mud being swept away. (COS 233)

In a later book, *A Clear Water Stream*, Williamson reworks the same material:

Moved by the sight of many peal jumping vainly out of bashing water on the rock below [...], I climbed down into the walled spillway below the fender, and examined a jet of water spurting between two of the big, faced stones [...]. How much strength was needed to shift one of the blocks, so that the spurt became a gush, washing the hole larger until the wall was breached [...]. I returned for hacksaw, hammer and cold chisel; and when I left, the water was pouring under the fender, and no more fish vainly trying [sic] to get up the weir. (CWS 155)

A clear pattern emerges in these extracts. In all three cases, Williamson, or his literary representative, struggles with seemingly intractable earthbound physical obstacles. The successful outcome to the struggle is signalled by a freeing of a different element, that of water, which is then able to 'gush' and sweep away the mud. There is something almost ritualistic about these endeavours, something that suggests the labours of myth or legend. The ultimate purpose, in every instance, is to assist the salmon in its own heroic journey. Thus Williamson and Shiner enact the part of what Vladimir Propp identified as the 'helper' in terms of narrative function. They are also exercising a form of stewardship, engaging with the world of animals in an enabling rather than predatory or utilitarian manner.

Shiner's adopted position of the watcher and occasional facilitator places him as a knowing observer during the important final stages of the narrative. He watches the conflict between Salar and the cannibal trout during the first spawning; he sees one of Salar's last leaps; and on the final page of the novel he is there as a witness to Salar's death:

And a hundred yards below the Fireplay, Shiner found a kelt with fungus on its head and tail and flank, lying on its side in water not deep enough to cover it. Salar had got so far with the last of his strength, and had died in the darkness. (SS 319)

Here, Shiner performs a ritualistic act where due respect is given to the dead warrior, a response that is similar to the awed wonder that Williamson describes the huntsmen as feeling at the conclusion of *Tarka*. In addition, the dead fish are shown to provide food for scavenging foxes, and as Salar dies, 'in the gravel of the moorland stream the eggs were hatching' (SS 319). Life feeds on death; nature is revealed as inexhaustibly self-generating. Here Williamson is working in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau, when he acknowledges the inevitable and necessary materiality of all animal life, human and non-human:

We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander. We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us and deriving health and strength from the repast [...]. I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can afford to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another.²⁹

From his earliest writings, Williamson focused the structure of his narratives on the inexorable movement towards death, and used the climactic moment of death as a means to connect human and non-human experience. It is as an

²⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971 [first published 1854]), p. 318.

example of this connection and as a witness that the narrative function of the character of Shiner is most significant.

He also operates as an allegorical figure, and this again connects him with an important feature of the wider novel. In Chapter 22, as Shiner prepares to open the iron fender in the sluice, his physical appearance is described in detail. The ways that Williamson worked on his early draft of this passage illustrate his narrative purposes:

He was tall and thin, looking like a ~~humanisation of~~ <humanised> alder trunk. His coat was shredded and grey like lichen, his arms and legs long and loose, ~~his boots like bark~~. He had a small face with pointed goatee beard and high pointed ears sticking up beside the upright brim of a very ancient and discoloured billy-cock hat. His eyes appeared to see nothing, he never turned round or glanced about him; yet he saw all he wanted to see. He was a grey heron of a man, ~~with a child's heart; owning no property, owing no man money. He never borrowed, and never owed money, always paying his way. He lived in various places~~ owning only his clothes, a few gardening tools, and himself. In summer he often slept out, beside ricks or in lofts of cattle sheds ~~among the hay~~. He knew <white> owls which nested in the barns, and they knew him. He liked wandering about alone, in the open air. (SS 281)³⁰

Through a series of metaphors, he is here associated with a range of non-human living things, both animal and vegetable. He is 'like a humanised alder trunk', the alder being a tree commonly found by fresh water. The bark of old trees is characteristically grey and fissured, and Shiner's coat is 'shredded and

³⁰ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/39.

grey' like the lichen which grows upon the tree trunk. This seems to work better than the original, and rather inexact, phrase, 'his boots like bark'. The face is goatish and faun-like, 'a small face with pointed goatee beard'; his 'billy-cock hat', a sort of battered bowler, suggests a verbal analogy with 'billy-goat'.

The motif of greyness continues with his being identified as 'a grey heron of a man', 'sleeping out' like wild things beside ricks or in lofts, and 'wandering about alone, in the open air'. In this last respect, he is also clearly connected with the author; in many of his autobiographical or semi-autobiographical writings Williamson describes himself as living a semi-nomadic life, sleeping as often outside as within the walls of his cottage. The elaborate and somewhat distracting sentence in which Shiner is dissociated from the contamination of 'money', a familiar object of scorn in Williamson's political writings, is removed, but a further connection with Williamson is established through the later addition of the modifier 'white' before 'owl'. This identifies the bird as the white (barn) owl, the regular colophon of Williamson's books. Shiner here operates as a semi-allegorical figure, both as a knowing observer – 'he saw all he wanted to see' – and also more widely as an embodiment of the natural world.

This presentation of the intricate relationship between man and fish, marks out *Salar* as in some ways a more complex work than *Tarka*. To a far greater degree than in *Tarka*, there is an extension of that sense of species interaction that incorporates humans within his narrative world of river and sea. A note added at the end of Williamson's earlier draft of *Salar* reads 'finished 5 August 1935, in the field above Ham, hot sunshine and the author exhausted and flat now that it is all over'.³¹ Despite his frequently disparaging comments

³¹ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/39, p. 293.

about both the process of composition and the final text, his nature writings were never again to reach the standard of *Salar*.

6. Later Works:

The Phasian Bird* and *The Scandaroon

The Phasian Bird (1948) is set in Norfolk during the early years of the Second World War, Henry Williamson having moved in 1936 to Norfolk from Devon to live and work on a farm. As an animal biography, the text is markedly different from both *Tarka* and *Salar*. In some ways, this story and *The Scandaroon* (1972), Williamson's last animal novel, demonstrate a falling away from the standards of the earlier two novels and thus indicate by contrast what is most successful about Williamson's nature writing. *The Scandaroon*, the tale of a pigeon, is Williamson's last animal novel. Based on events from the time when he was starting out as a writer, it returns to the themes and relationships of his early short stories, such as 'Raskil the Wood Rogue' and 'The Chronicle of Halbert and Knarr' (*PS* 1923), where an interaction between animals and small boys is a central feature of the narrative. To a degree, this novel is a retreat rather than an advance, further evidenced by Williamson's random insertion into the story of animal characters from his early works. The problem with a chronological approach to Williamson's writing is that in some ways it charts a decline, and yet through this approach the qualities of his earlier and greater nature novels are brought into sharper focus. What clearly emerges through a study of *The Phasian Bird*, for instance, is how delicate was the balance between allegory and realism that Williamson achieved in *Salar* and *Tarka* and how easily that balance could be lost.

Hugoe Matthews makes the point that 'from 1942 to 1948 the only books that Williamson produced were based on material from the past, and four of these were small undistinguished volumes subject to wartime restrictions on

paper and printing'.¹ *The Phasian Bird*, therefore, represented a significantly new literary direction. Set in East Anglia during the Second World War, and drawing on material from *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (1941), it tells the story of Chee-Kai, an oriental pheasant. The choice of a pheasant as the central protagonist of the tale marks a change from Williamson's previous practice. Most of his earlier subjects were predators: falcon, badger, otter and – to a degree – salmon. A pheasant, a seed-eating bird, does not obviously fall into this category. It is, however, frequently the object of a hunt, and is indeed often preserved for that purpose, and so in this sense it can be associated with Williamson's earlier choices of animals whose stories were largely constructed around narratives of pursuit and flight.

John Middleton Murry got it wrong when he identified *The Phasian Bird* as being the story of a golden pheasant (*Chrysolophus pictus*), and the cover of the Country Library (Boydell Press) edition of 1948, which depicts a common pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*), also confuses one subspecies with another. Williamson's subject is a Reeves' pheasant (*Syrnaticus reevesii*), a forest-dwelling Chinese pheasant introduced for sporting purposes into various European countries, including the United Kingdom. Two features of this bird may have made it an attractive literary choice: it has the longest natural tail feather of any bird species, which gives it a striking appearance that Williamson made full use of in the story; and it behaves in an unusually aggressive manner to other birds, again a characteristic that Williamson wove into his tale. However, the pheasant plays a more passive role within the story than was the case for either Tarka or Salar. Rather than undergoing extended physical journeys, it is essentially confined to one place. It is very much a foreign bird,

¹ Hugoe Matthews, *Henry Williamson: A Bibliography* (Tiverton: Halsgrove, 2004), p. 114.

with a mystical aura, and is described as being set apart from its local environment instead of wholly integrated within it.² This is also true of the eponymous Scandaroon. Williamson emphasises the pigeon's exotic appearance and its association with Middle Eastern romance:

Here before me is a bird of a thousand Persian autumns, of leaves turning red as they strive to gather more of solar life before the fall, of the snow's pure whiteness on the feathers slimming the body. (SC 65)

The bird has a timeless, mythic quality – 'a thousand Persian autumns' – and is aligned with the operation of the elemental forces of sun and snow. Such examples of this characteristic Williamsonian insistence on the heroic qualities of the bird make it possible to support Hugoe Matthews's claim that the novel has 'a flavour of *Tarka* and *The Phasian Bird*'.³

There has been some dispute about exactly what sort of book *The Phasian Bird* is. John Middleton Murry argues that it 'is a combination of nature book and novel; or rather something in between',⁴ and goes on to suggest that:

concentrating on the novel-element, we are immediately struck by the fact that it is one more repetition of the pattern of *The Pathway*.⁵ [...] The identity of pattern is so emphatic as to compel the conclusion that for Mr. Williamson the period of nearly twenty years from *The Pathway* to *The*

² The writer and naturalist Kenneth Allsop, a friend and admirer of Williamson, also chose what was at the time an exotic bird – a little ringed plover – as the subject of his novel *Adventure Lit Their Star* (London: Macdonald, 1962). Allsop's narrative has many features in common with Williamson's story, including the use of the bird's point of view, an interest in environmental concerns, a wartime background, and the sense that the well-being of the main human protagonist is bound up with the fate of the bird.

³ Matthews, *Henry Williamson: A Bibliography*, p. 174.

⁴ Murry, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson', p. 143.

⁵ *The Pathway* (1928) is the last of the four books that comprise Williamson's tetralogy *The Flax of Dream*.

Phasian Bird had been one of creative stasis [...]. *The Phasian Bird*, in this respect, was deeply disappointing.⁶

Richard Williamson, Henry's son, took indignation with Murry's classification: 'oh, how I hate this dumbing down. Nature book indeed. Francis Pitt's nature notes! It is like calling *Tarka* a children's book'.⁷ Michael Coultas offers a more nuanced judgement, albeit one that acknowledges the difficulty in ascribing a specific genre to the text: 'a generous view would perhaps look upon it as an experimental novel, of mood more than movement [...]. It is certainly not a novel of realistic human action'.⁸

In *The Phasian Bird*, the complex web of realism and allegory, of symbolism and scientific fact that Williamson spun in *Tarka* and *Salar* begins to unravel. An examination of the wider contexts of production provides some important insights into the nature of the text and the process of its composition. It was written, according to Richard Williamson, during 'a haunting and unhappy time for Father, with his marriage finally dissolving, his eldest son permanently estranged, and his early literary promise more or less in ruins, not to speak of his mistaken political beliefs coming home to roost'.⁹

Williamson himself commented in a notebook about the conditions under which the novel was written and emphasised its autobiographical quality:

⁶ John Middleton Murry, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson', in *Katherine Mansfield and other Literary Studies* (London: Constable, 1959), p. 144.

⁷ Richard Williamson, 'The Phasian Bird', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 35, September 1999, p. 78.

⁸ Michael Coultas, 'Literary Aspects of *The Phasian Bird*', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 51, September 2015, pp. 66-67.

⁹ R. Williamson, 'The Phasian Bird', p. 78.

A most difficult book to write: it swerved and collided with and absorbed to the author's distress some of *Lucifer before Sunrise*, due to the same author, the same scene, the same time, the same theme.¹⁰

Although *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (1940), the account of Williamson's time as a farmer that provides much of the background to *The Phasian Bird*, ended on a relatively positive note, the years between the writing of the two books had been so personally, politically and creatively problematic that it is tempting to identify them as the source of the mood 'of disenchantment and disillusion' that Murry saw as dominating the novel.¹¹ *The Phasian Bird* was Williamson's first new self-contained work of fiction since *Salar* (1935), and not until *The Scandaroon* in 1972 did he write another.¹² Although some of the reviews of the book were very positive, it was not a commercial or critical success. The first edition was reprinted in 1984 and an American edition published in 1950, but Hugoe Matthews cites an unpublished note by Williamson in which he says that 'the book was remaindered within a few years as the first printing was unsold'.¹³

The degree to which *The Phasian Bird* constitutes a falling away from the standard of Williamson's major animal biographies can be judged by an analysis of those features of the text which were also significant in *Tarka* and *Salar*: the representation of the life and consciousness of an animal; the use of allegory, in particular in connection with right-wing political thought; the focus on aspects of violence and hunting, at times as a metaphor for war; the presence of the author within the text; and the expression of environmental

¹⁰ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/LIT/1/35.

¹¹ Murry, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson', p. 143.

¹² In this context, Williamson's *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* is seen as a developing sequence of narratives.

¹³ Matthews, *Henry Williamson: A Bibliography*, p. 124.

concerns. Many of these features are apparent in the opening chapters of the novel, which is dominated by alternating accounts of farm work and brief sketches of the animals who live in the woods and fields. At the end of the chapter, we are introduced to a 'sportsman' who, while shooting 'wildly', wings the hen pheasant who is to hatch the Phasian bird.

From the beginning, Williamson adopts a slightly mannered storytelling style. The first sentence, with its repeated use of definite articles, places the reader within a world which is described as if familiar: 'At the western end of the meadow there was a wood called the Carr'. The Carr is established as an important stage for the unfolding action, and at its northern end is 'an ivy-clad pine tree'. This tree will recur at significant moments in the story and becomes closely associated with the life of the pheasant. In this sense, the pine tree occupies a similar place in the narrative to the oak tree that is described at the beginning of *Tarka*. There are also similarities in the ways that the two trees are introduced. In each case, Williamson gives a brief history of the growth and maturity of the tree. In *Tarka*, however, the tree is placed firmly within the wider environment and is shown as having been twisted and shaped by the actions of animals and the elements.¹⁴ In *The Phasian Bird*, the description is comparatively static or slow-moving. It is overladen with adjectival phrases and dreary, negative imagery:

Thus the pine lived, its surface roots drawing nourishment from the compost of dead leaves and decayed twigs that lay upon the mounded earth; and round its copper-scaled trunk were twisted heavy thongs of

¹⁴ See Chapter 2 of this thesis, pp. 87-88, for a wider analysis of this passage.

ivy, whose dark leaves had reached and spread nearly to the crest of the pine. (*PB* 12)

It is also stressed that the Carr is an old place. It was planted as a covert for game birds

in a past century, in the time when the power and strength of England was in the land, before the cities and the factories had absorbed both and taken control and so had begun the slow decadence of the land and of the people sprung from the land.

In those days before the general use of coal, before the idea of the steam engine, the power was vested in the great lords of land, and there was unity of life upon their estates. The beauty of the English countryside arose out of this unity. (*PB* 11)

Close scrutiny of this passage reveals several of the preoccupations of the novel. The description of the landscape acts as an elegiac lament for a land of lost content, driven home by the triple repetition of 'before'. This arcadia seems to be based on a semi-feudal hierarchy through which the commonwealth is protected and preserved. The archaic language of the phrase 'the power and strength of England was in the land' establishes 'land' as a signifier of national identity and a repository of moral value, and the significance of the word is then emphasised through its recurrence in the subsequent sentences. The exercise of power is established as another central concern. Destructive power is exercised by cities and factories; we are told later that gold had 'become the master of the many'. The agricultural land of England is being identified as a stage for a morality play in which the forces of good and evil will battle it out.

There are several indications that the ultimate outcome of this battle might not be wholly positive. The general decline and decay of the land since the First World War is insisted upon. The colour of the fields has been 'drained in the dereliction on farming' caused by a 'multi-headed misdirection of life'. The dereliction of the farmlands is represented in the sorry physical state of the 'thin and unmatched horses, fed on poor hay and few oats, their fetlocks shaggy with the grease of neglect' (*PB* 14), and the farmlands themselves reflect the state of the nation, drained of goodness and life. Compare this to a description of the farmland through which the otter travels in *Tarka*:

At sunrise he had crossed two miles of woods and field – stubble with lines of sheaves, stacked in sixes and tied in fours, fields of mangel and sweet turnip, where partridge crouched, and pasture given over to sheep [...]. Hazels grew on the bank above. Their leaves took on the golden-green of spring in the beams of the low autumn sun as Tarka crept under the rock. (*TO* 179)

The richness and fecundity of the imagery here – 'lines' of sheaves, packed high in 'sixes' and 'fours', and hazel leaves that reflect and absorb the sunlight – has been replaced in *The Phasian Bird* by signs of decay and blight: pastoral has become anti-pastoral.

Williamson places this earth-based world within a wider environment of powerful elemental forces to emphasise its vulnerability: 'already the high winds of the equinox had passed through the Carr, and the leaves of sycamore, beech, elm, and ash had fallen on the woodland floor, on the drift or path beyond the river, and in the water swilling slowly through the meadows to the sea' (*PB* 13). The changes Williamson made to an earlier draft show his

emphasis on charting the global movement of the weather and the implied fragility of the land which lay in its path:

~~At the time of the winter solstice there began to move over water and land of blow the western hemisphere the long thrust of Siberian air which moved drove down every winter from the Pole to the equator scoring discolouring crossing water and land and pouring through the passes of mountain ranges on its way to the Equator discolouring land and scoring water, until, pouring <through> the passes of mountain ranges on its way to the Equator until where its impulse was expended in the rebuffets of blue ocean the sun upon deep blue ocean set with coral isle and palm.~~¹⁵

He finally brings the story to an end against a desolate winter background, and in the opening chapter he anticipates this apocalyptic conclusion with a faintly Joycean description of a landscape rendered smooth and harmonised through the unifying effect of a snow fall:

Again the wind was drifting as the spirit of ice over water and land, the snow streaming as spectral smoke with the moving airs. [...] Brambles that during the years had over-grown fallen gates and posts, in tangled overarching from uncut hedges, were filled with snow. The horse-plow on the headland was smoothed of its framed purpose, becoming as a hulk of snow with broken spars, ensulped and emblanched above the frozen waves of furrows. (*PB* 16)

This passage also indicates Williamson's fondness for coinages of his own making. 'Horse-plow' is a recognisable archaism or North Americanism, but

¹⁵ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/LIT/1/35, p. 4.

‘ensculpéd’ and ‘emblanchéd’ are examples of what Michael Coultas has identified as characteristic features of Williamson’s writing style in *The Phasian Bird*. Through such coinages, Williamson is testing the ability of language to convey the essential nature of the physical world – what Gerard Manley Hopkins referred to as ‘inscape’.¹⁶

Also characteristic of Williamson’s writing, here and elsewhere, is his tendency to create antagonists who act not only as enemies of the central characters, but also as representatives of wider social and political forces.¹⁷ In *The Phasian Bird*, this role is in part occupied by the ‘sportsmen’, largely anonymised and standing for the morality of a time when ‘the theme of living among most men was profit, and the biggest profit, for any outlay of money’ (*PB* 19). In the final words of the chapter, the sportsman bewails the fact that a shortage of cartridges has prevented him from slaughtering even more birds than ‘the fifty-seven woodcock laid in line on the snow’: “‘We were damned fools not to have brought twice as many. It would have paid, you know, old man, it would have paid’”.

Another ‘sportsman’ appears as a disreputable figure in one of Williamson’s earliest nature stories, ‘Sportsmen of the Rubbish Heaps’ (*LS* 60-64), and in *The Phasian Bird* sportsmen take on an increasingly menacing role. They are later disturbingly linked with a ‘syndicate’ and ‘moneylender’. Here and elsewhere in the opening chapters, it is possible to see Williamson’s allegorical purposes as being driven by his fascist

¹⁶ See, for example, W. H. Gardner, ‘Introduction’, in Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Penguin, 1953), p. xxii.

¹⁷ This sort of opposition is not found in *Tarka* and *Salar*. In these stories, humans and animals – even when matched against each other – are consistently represented as operating within what is essentially a shared world.

sympathies. In the changes to an earlier draft recorded in a manuscript notebook, he reinforces the idea of the destructive effects of an alien culture:

Bright decline upon Merrie England of St George, the money-power which behind the mask of the British lion the features of the slow, the dim-witted unemployables of peacetime have opportunities in war of oriental calculation and indifference to the true values of the soil and the people who drew life and strength from it.¹⁸

This insistence on the importance of the idea of the land, the 'soil', in establishing a sense of Englishness is one such instance.¹⁹ There are others, at first sight less obvious. More than once in this opening chapter, Williamson makes reference to the hardship caused by the obligation on farmers to pay tithes: the money they earned from renting out shooting rights 'did not cover the tithe on the land, which had to be paid every year to the Church of England' (*PB* 14), and 'the shooting of the farm had been rented for half a crown an acre – less than the sum of the tithe upon the land, which was seven shillings an acre' (*PB* 20). During the 1930s, one of Oswald Mosley's most prominent policies was to support the 'tithe war' in English agricultural areas.²⁰ There is none of this rather obtrusive political subtext in *Tarka* and *Salar*.

The complexity of Williamson's artistic purpose may help to explain the way that the pheasant is positioned within the story. In both *Tarka* and *Salar*,

¹⁸ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/LIT/1/35, p. 266.

¹⁹ This is just one example of the way in which Williamson's sense of the symbolic significance of the land echoes that of Jacquetta Hawkes in *A Land* (London: Cresset Press, 1951). Robert Macfarlane quotes a letter from Williamson setting out his admiration for Hawkes: 'you indeed have married poetry with science and [...] revealed what wonder there is in the seed of the poppy'. See Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015), p. 277. Macfarlane elsewhere describes Hawkes as an 'imaginative naturalist', a phrase which seems equally applicable to Williamson. See Macfarlane, 'Introduction', in Jacquetta Hawkes, *A Land* (London: Collins, 2012), p. xxiii.

²⁰ See Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998), p. 73.

the central animal protagonist is clearly established as such in the opening chapter. In *The Phasian Bird*, the narrative focus of the first chapters is often elsewhere. The pheasant is not born until the end of the fourth chapter, and the earlier cataleptic references to the bird have tended to portray it largely in terms of its social and political significance:

This is the story of a game bird, a hybrid pheasant, in the period of change that came upon the countryside, and these facts are set down as part of the background to the bird's life: for all background in England at this time was man-made, or man-mismade. (*PB* 12)

It therefore seems that in his portrayal of Chee-Kai, the Phasian bird, Williamson is doing something with his nature writing that is rather different from his way of working in *Tarka* and *Salar*. This new approach seems clearly linked to his frequently-stated intention to leave behind the world of his earlier animal tales, partly represented by his move from Devon and his increasing determination to embark on what he saw as the culmination of his life's work, *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, the novel sequence through which he hoped his wider political and social theories would be more fully expressed.²¹ The first volume of *A Chronicle*, *The Dark Lantern*, was published in 1951, three years after *The Phasian Bird*, in which earlier novel Williamson can be seen to be rehearsing some of his socio-political views.

²¹ That this remained his hope is illustrated by 'L'envoi', the epilogue to *The Gale of the World* (1968), the final volume of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, where Williamson explained how – on completion of the novel sequence – he felt 'love and gratitude that one had been born in England, that one had been privileged to experience hardship that had burned away the selfish dross of oneself, and thereby, perhaps, made one worthy of an attempt to speak for those who had not come back from the Western Front' (*The Gale of the World*, p. 364).

However, Williamson's interest in representing the natural world is not altogether submerged. There is plenty of evidence in *The Phasian Bird* of Williamson acting as a biologically accurate recorder of the lives of animals. He gives a close account of the feeding habits of partridges: 'they took the fibrous seeds of meadow foxtail and crested dogstail, of timothy and fescue, the small black nodules of white clover with those of the soft brome grass' (*PB* 90). His description of the plumage of a common pheasant is equally close and detailed:

The forehead of the cock pheasant was a deep green and the naked skin around his eyes and sides of his face was scarlet. The feathers of his neck and throat were green, sometimes glowing with purple. The feathers of his breast, plump with good feeding, were a rich rufus hue, shot with purple sheens and edged with black. His flank feathers were buff, tipped with violet. (*PB* 46)

The language here is straightforward and plain; there is a simple and repeated syntactical patterning based on a sequence of noun phrase, verb and complement, with nine colours listed in the three sentences. The more florid and convoluted language of an earlier draft has been cut away:

The forehead of the cock pheasant was a dark green, ~~as of moss upon the exposed roots of the riverside trees when the sun shone upon them for a while~~ and the naked skin around his eyes and side of his face was scarlet.²²

²² Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/LIT/1/35, p. 48.

Williamson's style changes significantly when, later in the same paragraph, the bird is given a more symbolic function. The cock pheasant here is made to represent the gender stereotype, also depicted in *Tarka* and *Salar*, where the male occupies a dominant and at times protective role:

The cock bird shone and glowed with colour as he showed his power and beauty to the near-colourless hen, whose plumage was drab as sere leaves and dry nettle stalks. He jockled as he strutted and ran in curves about and about her. [...] To the resurgent feeling of the hen was lured the power of the cock; she ran, she paused, she quatted; triumphant, he trod her. (*PB* 46)

Williamson here revives his practice of using his own coinages – 'jockled' and 'quatted' – to convey the different attributes of the male and female birds. 'Jockled' suggests an arrogant self-confidence, reinforced by 'strutted'. The binary opposites of the cock and the hen are further emphasised in rather ornate and Lawrentian terms, through which the female is clearly subordinated: 'to the resurgent feeling of the hen was lured the power of the cock [...] triumphant, he trod her'. The account of her plumage – depicted as 'drab' and, through a poetic and rhetorical term, 'sere' – is also made to signify her lower status. When Williamson returns to a degree of scientific objectivity through the provision of a close anatomical description of the flight of the pheasant, the result seems laboured: 'the thick pectoral muscles threw in forward and backward sweep the short wings, while the tail feathers expanded and quivered with the thrusts of the wing-bones linked by sinew to the prow-shaped breastbone'. The series of noun phrases, with the determiner–modifier–noun pattern, becomes a little mechanical.

Richard Williamson claims that in *The Phasian Bird* the ‘animal characters are every bit as accurately observed and finely described as anything in *Tarka*’,²³ but it is not easy to find much evidence to support this judgement. Any attempt to convey a thorough and realistic account of the life of the pheasant is steadily overridden by a different priority: to use the bird as a figure of allegory in which the absence of the pheasant from the narrative is at times as significant as its presence. A brief overview of the structure of the narrative confirms that Chee-Kai is far less integrated into the pattern of the story than was the case with *Tarka* or *Salar*. Williamson’s animal biographies tend to incorporate several elements of the picaresque; the travels of the protagonist involve them in various adventures and encounters with a range of colourful characters. This is what happens, for instance, in *The Scandaroon*, where a central focus of the narrative is the sport of racing ‘homing’ pigeons. During its journeys, the eponymous pigeon has to evade the attacks of hawks and falcons, and its ultimate survival is shown to be dependent on the conflicting ambitions of various local residents.

Chee-kai’s travels are far less extensive than those of either *Tarka* or *Salar*, but he is given one familiar feature of the picaroon – the state of an orphan: ‘it was the only survivor of the nid [sic] from under the pine tree, for after the hen’s death the other chicks had been hunted down and eaten’ (*PB* 66). Although Williamson insists at different times on the pheasant’s martial qualities, the bird is often shown as a distant or passive figure upon whom others energetically act. Chapters 9 to 12, for instance, largely focus on the farming process, and in Chapters 11 and 12 the pheasant is barely mentioned. Increasingly, Chee-Kai is an occasionally glimpsed but generally elusive quarry

²³ R. Williamson, ‘*The Phasian Bird*’, p. 81.

for the sportsmen's guns. By the halfway point, the most important character in the story seems to be Wilbo, the artist-farmer, and by Part Four of the novel, other human combatants also begin to dominate the narrative. The pheasant is increasingly portrayed as a creature whose importance is less in its own independent biological existence than in the reactions it generates in others. It becomes an object of superstition. Wilbo, we are told, 'knew that if he lost his farm, the bird would die. Its survival during the hazard of the years, and now its return, was to him a miracle; and a portent' (*PB* 252). This objectification of the bird is further evidenced through its becoming the subject of one of Wilbo's pictures, which are used to reveal his artistic integrity to the local doctor – 'there was a true poetic imagination, the very spirit of the creation of life itself in the work' – and thus also to the reader.

Throughout the novel, however, the special quality of the bird is emphasised. We learn that 'he had inherited from his splendid ancestors a wariness greater than that of the ordinary hybrid pheasant, and a stronger frame for running and flying' (*PB* 97). As he grew, he developed 'greater powers of flight, of wariness, and sense of safety' (*PB* 133). He 'was a bird matchless, and therefore solitary' (*PB* 161); and it is his solitary existence that marks him out as a representative of the romantic hero and, therefore, to some degree of the author himself. As often in Williamson's stories, the heroic attributes of the animal protagonist are further developed by a series of minor conflicts through which we are prepared for the final epic confrontation. In the last chapter of *The Phasian Bird*, Chee-Kai beats down and kills the Flockmaster's previously invincible game-cock, Jago. Two chapters earlier, the cockerel was set for sport onto Kock-karr, the common pheasant. Their claw-to-claw combat, in which the game-cock is victorious, is described in urgent detail,

both in terms of the violent action and in the effect it has on the watching

Flockmaster:

He felt the emotions of the bird moving in his blood, he breathed quickly and thickly. The first terrific dart into attitude was to him strikingly grand and beautiful, and the wary sparring, watching, dodging, shuffling for the first cut held him fixed with curiosity: they were beak-point to beak-point, until they dashed up into one tremendous flirt, with the noise and action of two wet umbrellas suddenly forced open, a mingling of powerful, rustling wings and nervous heels in one furious confused mass. The leap – the fire – the passion of strength were fierce and loud, and obsessed by it, the Flockmaster began to growl and hurr, as his pulse beat faster and passion stirred in him. (*PB* 303)

The intensity of this description is striking. Adjectives such as ‘grand’ and ‘beautiful’ convey an unsettling frisson, engendered by the violence of the conflict; ‘tremendous’, ‘powerful’ and ‘furious’ suggest something increasingly awe-inspiring. Successive adverbs – ‘quickly’, ‘thickly’ and ‘strikingly’ – maintain the narrative tension. The unexpected image of the two umbrellas – an addition to an earlier draft – reinforces the impression of something ‘confused’, even beyond human comprehension. The opening indication that the man has somehow identified with the birds through a feeling in his ‘blood’ is reinforced at the end when he can only articulate bestial sounds, and an almost sexual urgency breaks out in the beat of his pulse. The power of the action to excite the spectator is insisted on: ‘the leap – the fire – the passion of strength were fierce and loud’. It is in descriptive passages such as this that Williamson’s

writing often seems to gain its greatest force and urgency. As in many of his narratives, scenes of violence and death drive the story on.

The Admiral, an important narrative voice in *The Scandaroon*, also sees violence as an integral, even necessary, fact of life:

It's all part of Nature's scheme of things. Nature 'red in tooth and claw', as Tennyson wrote. [...] Without death, there would be no 'meat soil', as Devon farmers call the good earth. Our food comes from a compost of once-living plants and animals, including man. (SC 105)

The novel concludes with a maelstrom of violence. The pigeon and a prowling cat are shot during a conflict between an old married couple. In the final chapter, entitled 'Last Flight', Williamson concentrates with characteristic intensity on the death pangs of a poisoned falcon. Through the perspective of another central character, the Doctor, the bird's death is conveyed in terms that recall the suffering of gassed soldiers in Williamson's battlefield stories:

Those full-dark eyes staring up at him, the twitching shudder as the backbone seemed to be bending backwards in wrench after wrench of pain. [...] The poison spread more rapidly into the arteries, and with more violent jerks and gasps – clawed feet impaling their own flesh – the tiercel died. (SC 149)

In *The Phasian Bird*, it is not only animals who are shown to suffer. Certainly, the narrative concludes with the death of Chee-Kai, shot by the poachers during a scene of seemingly random violence, but Part Two of the novel opens with the suicide of an 'unhappy farmer, confronted by an ultimatum from his bank manager', and Wilbo's death in the final chapter is given as much

significance as that of the pheasant. Richard Williamson contends that ‘the last pages of the story have easily the impact and power as found in Tarka’s last hunt’,²⁴ but Murry, more convincingly, found the synchronicity of the pheasant’s death and Wilbo’s far too contrived.²⁵

There are significant differences between the last pages of *The Phasian Bird* and those of *Tarka* and *Salar*. In *Tarka* and *Salar*, the actual deaths of the otter and the salmon are comparatively understated. Tarka’s death is marked by a bubble breaking the surface of the water ‘and nothing more’; Salar gets as far as he can with the last of his strength and dies ‘in the darkness’. The death of the pheasant, however, is accompanied by intrusive layers of allegorical significance. In a series of extracts from his working notebook for *The Phasian Bird*, Williamson sets out the effects he intends to achieve. He sketches out the position of the dying bird with heavily accentuated religious imagery: ‘spread-winged on the top of the pine, lifts his head, as though to take a last look at the golden eye of a god’. In a later note he explicitly connects the pheasant’s death with that of the bombardier who had befriended Wilbo: ‘the 8th AF Bombardier floating down sees the bird shot: all Eastern imagery etc. passes thro’ his consciousness. The red flare from the Fortress, the red flare of blood from Phasian’.²⁶ In a note added on 11 November 1947, Williamson considers whether the farmer, a supposed fifth columnist, should also be shot at the same time ‘accidentally on purpose’.²⁷

²⁴ R. Williamson, ‘*The Phasian Bird*’, p. 83.

²⁵ A similar objection might be made to the ending of *The Scandaroon*, where the impact of the pigeon’s death is largely dissipated by the sentimental and unconvincing account of a violent squabble between the bird’s owner and his wife.

²⁶ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/LIT/1/45.

²⁷ Extract from the notebook quoted in Anne Williamson, *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic* (Stroud: Sutton, 1995), p. 260.

In the text itself, the bird rises 'like a golden rocket'; but after being shot, its dead body rests on the branches at the top of the frozen pine tree, becoming part of 'a new world made of crystal', before falling to earth during the thaw on the following day. In his notes, Williamson sees the bird as being 'dissolved. As the battlefields which dissolve their dead'.²⁸ Through these insistent metaphorical associations, Williamson variously connects the bird's death with an image of a phoenix, the figures of angels, the Christian symbolism of Christmas Day, the mingling of the elements, the farmer as sacrificial victim and the dead of two world wars. As the frozen pine branches cannot hold the weight of the dead bird, the signifier of the pheasant rather struggles to support all the significance placed on it. In contrast, the deaths of Tarka and Salar gain narrative impact through the restrained manner in which they are represented.

The pheasant's death is only one example of the range of allegorical references to war within the novel. The farmlands themselves are at different times depicted in terms that recall the battlefields of the First World War. The farm machinery operates like a tank: 'the cutter came near, clanking its iron nerves; it passed and the farmer, an old infantry soldier, saw the shrapnel-like puffs in the grass-heads' (*PB* 81). During a rainstorm the fields take on the form of shell-torn battlegrounds: 'the surface of the earth was a-leap with driven sheets of spray. Hailstones shrieked upon the rotten sugar-beet leaves, which broke and were torn helpless' (*PB* 111). There is a general sense that the natural world is suffering under a bombardment, and again Williamson draws a comparison with the effects of shrapnel: 'he looked at the crop of sugar-beet. Many of the leaves had holes torn in them as though by shrapnel' (*PB* 113). In *Tarka*, the experience of war is conveyed through otter-hunting; here warfare is

²⁸ A. Williamson, *Tarka and the Last Romantic*, p. 260.

represented by the sport of game-shooting. As early as the first chapter, the actions of the beaters in driving the birds towards the guns are presented in ways that invite parallels with the effects of the machine-gun batteries of the First World War: ‘the beaters had gone through the Carr, striking bole of tree and branch with sticks, and uttering low cries to drive the birds to the line of men with guns spaced on the far meadow’ (*PB* 13). The allegorical connection continues. The birds are positioned like soldiers waiting in their trenches for the signal to go over the top: ‘they must be held there, by men posted soon after dawn with flags on sticks, until the beaters came in line to drive them over the first stand of concealed guns’ (*PB* 136).

In a wider and different martial context, the story unfolds against the historical background of the Second World War. The villagers ‘hearkened [sic] to one cock pheasant after another crowing in the woods, before they themselves heard the dull and rolling reverberations of bombs’ (*PB* 236). The troops who arrive in the district only bring destruction with them: ‘into the villages [...] came untrained troops from the industrial towns, to make their camps, of tent and marquee, on grassland at the edges of woods; to tear off branches of trees for camouflage and firing, to take hay and straw from stacks for bedding; to remove doors of stable and granary’ (*PB* 238). Williamson stresses through a series of active verbs – ‘tear’, ‘take’ and ‘remove’ – how both the natural world and the farming world are stripped bare. The damage brought by the troops is not confined to the land. They wreak slaughter on the local wildlife; in growing collusion with the village black marketeers and speculators, they move in on Wilbo’s farmland, until to the background of sounds of overhead war they cut down both the pheasant and the farmer in a fusillade of

submachine fire. The destruction caused by war is thus finally represented both literally and allegorically.

This allegorical element in the novel incorporates aspects of right-wing political thought, with particular reference to the period leading up to the time of composition. Here the focus of the novel begins to drift from the biography of the pheasant and loses the structural cohesion that marked *Tarka* and *Salar*; in those earlier novels, the wider allegorical elements of the narrative are firmly contained within the life stories of otter and salmon. The representation of war brings with it clear allusions to political issues of the time, but there are many other ways in which Williamson's delineation of the countryside and the wider natural world reflects elements of fascist ideology.²⁹ Anne Williamson has given an account of the events in the late 1930s that led to Williamson's meeting with Oswald Mosley and the consequences of that meeting:

Henry had found a new hero. He admired Mosley, who also had a strong and magnetic personality, and whose views on agricultural policy reflected exactly what Henry himself felt about farming being the backbone of British life and economy. But although associated with the British Union of Fascists and openly admiring its leader, to label Henry a political fascist is to grossly misrepresent him.³⁰

There are a few questions being begged here. In a footnote, Anne Williamson further argues that Williamson held little importance to Mosley other than as 'a

²⁹ Mark Rawlinson has persuasively argued that, in *The Story of A Norfolk Farm*, the later volumes of the *Chronicle* and *The Pheasant Bird*, Williamson is engaged in developing a discourse of decadence and rebirth that employs some of the central cultural myths of twentieth-century fascist politics. See Rawlinson, 'Dead Chickens: Henry Williamson, British agriculture and European war', in *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline?*, ed. Paul Brassley, Jeremy Burchardt and Lynne Thompson (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp. 87-101.

³⁰ A. Williamson, *Tarka and the Last Romantic*, p. 222.

loyal friend'. But this is a comment on Mosley's views, not Williamson's; and, in the article from which Anne Williamson quotes, Diana Mosley also observes that 'in any interview [Williamson] gave to the newspapers, or on the wireless or for television, he seldom let an opportunity pass to praise Mosley's political beliefs and ideas and his opposition to the Second World War'. Much of the material in *The Phasian Bird* is a reworking of material from *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (1941) and is itself further reworked in the thirteenth and fourteenth volumes of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight: A Solitary War* (1966) and *Lucifer Before Sunrise* (1967). One of the two epigraphs to *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* is a quotation from a rallying cry by Mosley in 1936, in which he asserts that there are 'more terrible things than death' (SNF 3). *A Solitary War* is dedicated to 'Oswald and Diana Mosley', and the first edition has a swastika prominently displayed on the spine of the dust cover. The character of Birkin, in *A Solitary War* and elsewhere in *A Chronicle*, is closely modelled on Mosley. If this is merely loyal friendship, it was remarkably sustained.

Williamson was certainly in close contact with Mosley during the period of composition of *The Phasian Bird*. In a letter to Mosley written on 13 February 1948, he comments that 'the book about the pheasant has not got itself done yet', and goes on to offer Mosley some words of encouragement:

If I may express a purely personal opinion of one who lives and has his being among ordinary people [...] it is that these ordinary people are ready for a public man, proven in selflessness and known, or rather recognised by a long purgatory in the wilderness, who shall lead their thoughts out of themselves and through the bewildering voices of party politics [...]. It did occur to me that if you could concentrate on your

positive constructive dream only, on such occasions, people would perhaps be able to know more of the real you.

He then makes an explicit connection between Mosley's thinking and *The Phasian Bird*:

It was in the hope of bringing this about in a small and limited way that I have written *The Phasian Bird* and tried to make an artistic thing of what fourteen or fifteen hours of every day has seemed to be an impossible amalgam.

He goes on to offer this comment on the book:

I think it has come out as a Phoenix; it is true in spirit [...]. If 100,000 people read it and say at the end that Mosley, or what he stood for, was after all only that which we now see to be clear, then indeed he has been our man all along, though we have not known it until now.³¹

It seems evident that Williamson saw *The Phasian Bird* as an opportunity to delineate through fiction the views of Oswald Mosley and his party. These views emerge in more ways than the indirect celebration of a specific political figure. At several points in the novel, Williamson returns to the idea of the symbolic significance of the soil. The soil is referred to as 'the only true begetter of life' (PB 32). It symbolises betrayal during a corrupted period of history: 'in the time of these happenings the soil of Britain was most neglected by the town-mind, which considered it to be the worst investment for its money' (PB 87). It is also used to contrast the attitudes of the country and the town and

³¹ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43.

reveal the destructive rapacity of moneymen: ‘the sun shone [...] so helping to feed the soil for the orient and immortal corn which the town-mind despoiled of golden skin in its mills set above the slums of the half-lost, the dispossessed, the detonated flesh-fragments of Midas-wars’ (*PB* 190). This sense of the significance of the soil echoes that of the nineteenth-century writer, Maurice Barrès, often regarded as one of the earliest fascist thinkers.³²

The characters who deal in money appear throughout *The Phasian Bird* as enemies of those who have the interests of the land genuinely at heart: ‘nearly gone forever the old English harvest scene, the Constable immortality of everlasting England’ (*PB* 119). They are represented by the group called ‘the syndicate’. The syndicate exploits the countryside ruthlessly, determined to exercise its shooting rights until there is nothing left to shoot. The founder of the syndicate has become a moneylender and an investor in property. Williamson describes him as ‘a red-haired fleshy man in the late thirties [...] [N]early all of his thinking was in terms of what could be made use of, or turned to a profit’ (*PB* 122). One of his ‘guests’ is an ex-alcoholic who shoots at birds without restraint or discretion simply for practice. His addiction to drink had made him, it seems, ‘sexually impotent’. There is nothing very nuanced about Williamson’s character sketches, either here or later in the text. Towards the end of the novel the forces represented by the syndicate, the villainous and equally avaricious Flockmaster, and several assorted poachers, begin to pose a steadily increasing threat to Wilbo and the pheasant. At this point, Williamson rather gratuitously connects one of the poachers to a character who plays no further

³² See Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 110: ‘Barrès assumed that the peasantry imbibed Frenchness through centuries of contact with the national soil. He held, moreover, that Jews were urban creatures who could never be fully French because they had never tilled the soil. This “blood and soil” nationalism was widely prevalent on the European right, fascist and non-fascist, in the inter-war years’.

part in the novel, but is given features that are even more explicitly Semitic than those previously hinted at:³³

The poacher had shot the otter, whose skin he had sold for three pounds to an East End furrier who had migrated with some of his co-racials from the bombed Whitechapel Road and set up a flourishing furrier's business in the nearby market town. (*PB* 244)

For Williamson, the actions and even the very existence of the syndicate and those like them are symptomatic of a general decline in social and cultural standards. England, and here East Anglia, in particular, is revealed as a land suffering under the influence of the corrupt and inferior. 'Nature' has become a moral touchstone, the countryside a battlefield on which opposing forces of good and evil are ranked against each other. Social hierarchies and the practice of game-shooting are closely associated

with the passing of the power, or the money, of the quality to the quantity through the industrial revolution, the manners of the gentleman might be imitated, but not always the matter, [sic] of his living [...]. Honest yeoman, serving their land first, became poor; the smaller squires likewise. So the Game Syndicate arose dominantly upon the countryside of East Anglia [...]. [T]hey were not concerned with the standards of sportsmanship of a former age. (*PB* 135)

The decadence of the political and economic system is reflected in the state of the natural world. The motif of the polluted river, which threads through

³³ That this was an effect deliberately created may be deduced from the fact that in an early draft Williamson substituted the phrase 'migrated with some of his co-racials' for 'migrated with his relations'. See Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/35, p. 266.

Williamson's work from his earliest short stories to *Tarka* and *Salar* and then to *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, here reappears: 'the river [...] for many years had been regarded as sewer and rubbish-dump of the formless village' (*PB* 70). *The Phasian Bird*, however, is a novel which focuses on the elements of earth and air rather than water, so it is to be expected that Williamson's characteristic environmental concerns will here relate to farmland. The activities of the soldiers billeted upon the farms and the general neglect of the farmland because of the war are synecdochic representations of the wider environmental destruction of the industrial age and the twentieth century in particular:

Upon those wide forsaken lands where tillage was stopped, the dominant weeds arose yet once again [...]. But a power stronger than that of the urge of solar floescence was in motion from the inhibitions and frustrations of industrialised man [...]. [L]esser country roads ended abruptly in chaos, beside orchards of young apple trees that had been torn from the ground, or plantations of conifers scraped out of the soil.
(*PB* 239)

Yet again, the soil, the land, is shown as having been subjected to a brutal assault driven by the frustration of men who, we are told, have lost 'the essential rectitude of the farm worker'. The destruction of the countryside is represented as a rape of 'mother earth'. In addition, the requisitioned farmland is being treated with liquid pesticides. The results are described through images that again suggest acts of warfare: vegetation and men 'perished' and 'died'; the land is 'scorched'; men need gas masks to protect them from the effects of a chemical assault:

The sprayed liquid withered all life that it covered; weeds with broad leaves perished, but from the drooping leaves of corn the liquid dripped, thus preserving the stems [...]. Men working with the stuff wore no gasmasks but they had been warned to wash their hands before eating their dinners; for two Irishmen had already died [...]. When parents and child returned that way the next day, a Sunday, interested to see what the field would look like, they saw twenty acres of corn that appeared to have been scorched by flame. (*PB* 263)

This section of the novel constitutes an anguished warning of the consequences of an uncontrolled and uninformed use of pesticides that anticipates the argument of the hugely influential ecological text, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). It is no coincidence that Carson frequently expressed her admiration for Williamson's work. The theme of environmental desecration is less overt in *The Scandaroon* but not wholly absent. Here, a different form of poison is used by humans in pursuit of their own blinkered vision. The villagers have developed the practice of smearing pigeons with strychnine in an attempt to poison hawks. In a horrible parody of a lover's caress, Sam Baggott anoints the pigeon: 'with the fingers of the other hand he stroked slowly from the throat down to the lower breast feathers of the bird. Beside him on the chest-of-drawers was a jar of lard mixed into a paste with strychnine' (*SC* 141).

The passage from *The Phasian Bird* that describes the process of applying pesticides is set within a wider context of destruction: a few fields away is an aerodrome 'which had been fields, trees, hedges and country lanes a year or two before; now from the long dark runway aircraft, loaded with rockets for the destruction of shipping off the Dutch coast, were taking off'

(PB 263). The various allegorical stands of Williamson's narrative are being woven together. What is absent from the story at this stage is a close and sustained focus on the life of the eponymous pheasant. Instead, there is an increasing emphasis on the experience of the character, Wilbo. In *Tarka* and especially in *Salar*, Williamson largely restricted his own appearance in the text, or the appearance of any character who operates as his representative. However, this is very far from the case in *The Scandaroon*. Here, the first-person pronoun, 'me', in the opening sentence announces the presence of the author, and he rarely absents himself thereafter. His part in the novel regularly involves imparting information to his irritatingly dutiful and deferential pupil through passages of clumsy question-and-answer. When Williamson is temporarily silent, other characters enthusiastically take up the same pedagogic role.

In *The Phasian Bird*, the numerous parallels between Wilbo, Philip Maddison – the fictional version of Williamson in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* – and his own autobiographical self as portrayed in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* are so numerous as to leave little doubt that we are intended to understand Wilbo's experience as essentially replicating Williamson's own. This creates some familiar problems for Williamson in terms of distancing himself from his creation and also shifts the balance of interest in the novel away from the Phasian bird. One example of this tendency of Wilbo to take over the narrative occurs during the chapter when he is taken away by the security forces. The source for this scene was the occasion, on 14 June 1940, when Williamson was briefly detained under the wartime defence regulations. According to Anne Williamson's account, he was taken to Wells Police Station over one weekend, and in his diary he recorded that 'I was locked in a little

white-washed cell. I spent a curious afternoon in the cell [...]. The police in Wells were very kind. I wrote the farm story sitting on my narrow bed'.³⁴ On the Monday he was released. In *The Phasian Bird*, however, Williamson takes full advantage of the dramatic opportunities of this incident. Wilbo suffers 'years of imprisonment' when 'he had never known, from one moment of vacant day to another [...] whether he would be allowed to live or die' (*PB* 248).³⁵

The character of Wilbo is given dramatic emphasis in other ways. He is the victim of malicious gossip and spying on the part of some villagers, much as Williamson claimed to have been during his time in Norfolk. He is repeatedly portrayed as the lonely, sensitive artist of romantic legend. At one stage, his credentials as a sort of modern-day St Francis are bolstered when he rescues and restores to life a partridge chick, again performing the sort of rescue act that Williamson claimed as his own experience when looking after an orphaned otter. One effect of the growing prominence of Wilbo in the novel is that the pheasant, Chee-Kai, is increasingly reduced to being little more than Wilbo's metaphoric representation. Both are isolated figures; both symbolise the fragile ecological oasis that has been created on the farm; both are hunted down by malevolent forces; both in different ways stand for the need to cherish what is beautiful.

In a review of *The Phasian Bird*, S. P. B. Mais approvingly quoted George Painter's opinion that Williamson's books focus on 'wild creatures in whose endless peril and pain he finds an emblem of human suffering and his

³⁴ A. Williamson, *Tarka and the Last Romantic*, p. 233.

³⁵ In an early draft, we are told that Wilbo's wife knew of no other reason for his imprisonment 'beyond his association with other Englishmen who had opposed the war on the grounds that it was a money-lenders' quarrel' (Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/LIT/1/35). In the final draft this last phrase was removed.

own'.³⁶ In this book, however, the emphasis on the emblematic quality of the pheasant threatens the delicate balance of the real and the allegorical that works so effectively in *Tarka* and *Salar*. Form and content are no longer so effectively blended and controlled. The intrusive figure of the author is no longer kept at bay; unsubtle displays of sympathy for his human and semi-autobiographical protagonist distort the balance of the narrative. Nevertheless, much of what makes Williamson distinctive as a nature novelist is still in evidence in *The Phasian Bird*, particularly his treatment of environmental issues and the complex relationships between humanity and the animal world. The novel, for all its flaws, occupies a significant place in the line of progress from Williamson's early sketches and short stories to his extended animal biographies. Williamson became a novelist who wrote about nature, exploring the ways in which a novel could convincingly represent the lives of non-human protagonists, setting the world of the novels in a physical environment where humans and animals share ownership, and exploring that complex and even troubling interaction in detail and sympathy.

³⁶ S. P. B. Mais, 'The Phasian Bird by Henry Williamson', *Oxford Mail*, 30 December 1948 (copy printed in *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 35, September 1999, p 86).

Conclusion

The argument of this thesis has been that Henry Williamson is a writer whose work is unjustly neglected and deserves reevaluation. The complexity of his literary achievement has never been fully recognised, and due recognition involves an analysis of exactly what sort of writer he is. Such an analysis has formed the basis of this reappraisal of his work.

Williamson's literary legacy has been unhelpfully obscured by undue concentration on his flawed and uneven novel sequence, *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, and his reputation damaged by his association with fascist politics. Equally harmful in a different way is his frequent categorisation as a writer of children's nature stories. The natural world that he describes is not a comfortable place. Dark forces, both literal and metaphorical, operate within it; there is no pastoral Eden here. This thesis has aimed to reassess his literary representation of the lives of animals. No previous treatment of his work has charted in such detail his development as a writer or explored the narrative significance of his use of drafts, source materials and early sketches. This study has revealed the slow germination of a nature novelist, a novelist who uses the conventions of many literary genres, including epic, myth, picaresque and tragedy, to explore the problem of representing animal consciousness through works of fiction.

As a naturalist and observer in the field, Williamson is at pains to convey with unsentimental accuracy the lives of the mammals, birds and fish that he studies. He uses the novel to represent the ways that animals think and feel, but his animals also tell us something about what it means to be human. In this context, Williamson also operates as an allegorist, using hunting as a metaphor

whereby the interactions of humans and animals come to parallel the world of war, in particular the First World War in which he served. In this sense, and in a wider political context, his stories of the lives of animals have a political relevance, both in terms of their celebration of conservative social values and in the ways through which they draw attention to environmental issues.

This study has also emphasised that Williamson was a regional writer, much of his work being firmly situated within North Devon and, more specifically in the region of the two rivers, the Taw and the Torridge. His exploration of the life of this region drew together human and animal experience by exploring their interrelationship within a closely realised geographical environment. His treatment of that environment involved a detailed imagining of what it means to exist in the different elements of earth, air and water.

In his early works, he gradually identifies what were to become characteristic themes: the necessary acknowledgement of the cruelty of nature, the often destructive interaction of humans and animals, the beauty and heroic endurance of his animal protagonists. The question, or accusation, of his anthropomorphism has been addressed in this thesis. It is argued that the application of the term is itself often problematic, and any criticism of Williamson's work as being anthropomorphic needs to take into account the degree to which recent studies have suggested that there is more overlap between human and animal experience than has previously been recognised.¹

Throughout the thesis, however, it has been emphasised that Williamson is a writer who is very much in the tradition of country writing but who also

¹ See, for instance, Peter Wohlleben, *The Inner Life of Animals* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017).

achieves something new. He clearly operates as a successor to such figures as Gilbert White, Richard Jefferies, W. H. Hudson and Jack London. E. W. Martin considers that it was Williamson's concern to represent his world with honesty and fidelity, which was his greatest quality and one that placed him firmly in the long tradition of country writers.² Williamson was certainly concerned about his place in this 'tradition'. In an interview with Kenneth Allsop in 1954, he reflected:

It may be that my writing's no good. I mean – on the other hand it may mean that I'm in the tradition and that the faithful few will keep me alive ... the small minority which keeps all artists alive. Which kept Jefferies alive – and Hardy.³

However, he should not only be seen as a figure working in an established genre, but as an inspiration for those who followed. As has been previously shown, many important writers about the natural world, including Rachel Carson and Kenneth Allsop, were consciously indebted to him. Perhaps the most significant example is Ted Hughes, with whose encomium for Williamson this thesis began.

Although, as has been indicated, this thesis is essentially a single-author study, it has engaged with various areas of criticism: forms of narrative, genre and the novel, nature writing, literature and the environment, and human–animal relations. In so doing, it has offered a different view from previous treatments of Williamson's work. John Middleton Murry, for instance, regards *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* as Williamson's best work and argues that 'it is a little ironical that the excellence of Mr. Williamson's nature-books should have

² Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 309 1/1/2.

³ Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/B 48.

induced so many critics to forget his achievement and still more his potentialities as a novelist'.⁴ This thesis suggests that it is Williamson's 'nature-books' that represent his greatest achievement, and these are often best seen as novels.

W. J. Keith has a different perspective, but – while he is often perceptive about the impact of the First World War on Williamson's work and his obsession with reworking his own experiences – the focus of his study is on *The Flax of Dream* and Williamson's non-fictional accounts of countryside life.⁵ Glen Cavaliero is similarly interested in Williamson as a writer in the rural tradition.⁶ He acknowledges that the greater length of *Tarka* and *Salar* enables Williamson to portray both human and animal lives as struggles for survival, but does not find space to explore the wider significance of this connection. Most of his discussion centres on *The Flax of Dream* and Williamson's habit of using his novels as a form of self-revelation.

Anne Williamson's biography does not pretend to offer a detailed literary analysis of Williamson's work.⁷ She presents a detailed portrait of the artist as a troubled man and writes informatively about the various social and biographical contexts of his writing. The wider effect on his work of Williamson's political allegiances, however, is never fully addressed, and the focus on the writer as romantic tends to elude the significance of the darker aspects of his nature writing. J. W. Blench's studies of *Tarka* and *Salar* see the nature novels as

⁴ John Middleton Murry, 'The Novels of Henry Williamson', in *Katherine Mansfield and other Literary Studies* (London: Constable, 1959), p. 121.

⁵ W. J. Keith, *The Rural Tradition: William Cobbett, Gilbert White and Other Non-Fiction Prose Writers of the English Countryside* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1975).

⁶ Glen Cavaliero, *The Rural Tradition in the English Novel, 1900–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

⁷ A. Williamson, *Tarka and the Last Romantic*.

studies in redemption and regeneration, and nature itself as a moral healer.⁸ His rather generalised assertions about Williamson's powers of imaginative sympathy and impressionistic description add little to our understanding of Williamson as a nature novelist. He also tends to take Williamson's pronouncements rather too much at face value. In fact, Williamson is another critic whose judgements about his own work have at times been called into question during this thesis.

Opportunities for future research in several areas have been opened up by this study of Williamson's nature stories. Some necessarily brief reference has been made to the ways in which Williamson uses the natural world in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* as a means of exploring the consciousness of his central character, Phillip Maddison. There is much more to be said about that novel sequence regarding the wider narrative significance of animals and the environment.⁹ Williamson's use of allegory to connect the experiences of hunting and warfare has been analysed in detail during this thesis. This analysis might be extended to a more detailed exploration of the function of natural images in narratives of war.¹⁰ A central focus of this reevaluation of Williamson's work has been his distinctive method of representing animal consciousness. Any further studies in animal representation might profitably make reference to Williamson's work. The many different ways in which Williamson features in his own narratives have also been considered.

⁸ J. W. Blench, 'How Good is *Tarka the Otter* as Literature?', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 22, September 1990, pp. 22-37; 'Salar the Salmon: An Appraisal', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 32, September 1996, pp. 5-17.

⁹ For a brief introduction to this area of study, see Anne Williamson, 'A Brief Look at Nature and the *Chronicle*', *Henry Williamson Society Journal*, vol. 52, September 2016, pp. 62-73.

¹⁰ For a treatment of this theme, see, for instance, John Lewis-Stempel, *Where Poppies Blow: the British Soldier, Nature, The Great War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016).

Examination of his narratives might usefully contribute to debates about the nature of authorship and the place of the author within a text.

These different areas in themselves point to the wide and complex significance of Williamson's work. As earlier indicated, one writer who acknowledges this significance is Ted Hughes. Jonathan Bate argues that within the great winter sequence of *Tarka* – a section of the novel which Hughes much admired – there are to be found the elements of Hughes's poetry in embryo: 'the violent forces of nature played out against a cosmic backdrop, figures of myth, creation and destruction, bird of prey, blood on snow, moon, stars, apocalyptic darkness'.¹¹ This selection of features also serves to highlight many of the central concerns of Williamson's nature stories that have been identified in this thesis. The complexity of his literary achievement has never been fully acknowledged, and this is the more surprising at a time when nature writing in all its varied forms has become a dominant literary genre. Henry Williamson deserves to be seen as a dedicated craftsman who expands the reach of the novel, responds to the need for fiction to constantly explore new experiences, and – in the age of the Anthropocene – addresses issues that could not be more important to life on this planet. As Williamson himself insisted, it was a writer's duty to emphasise our responsibility for the natural world:

William Blake wrote – with the vision like that of an Old Testament prophet, 'Everything that lives is holy'. So let us live with Nature, and let live – men of all races, animals (a comprehensive term) of all species.

¹¹ Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: Collins, 2015), p. 50.

[...] Let us go with Nature; that is the crying necessity today; for in destroying Nature – our Earth Mother – we are destroying ourselves.¹²

¹² 'The Vanishing Hedgerows' (Fourth Treatment July 1970), *Henry Williamson Society Journal* vol. 53, September 2017, p. 75. See also *The Vanishing Hedgerows* [film], directed by David Putnam (BBC, 1972).

Appendix 1. First Page of Draft Version of Tarka the Otter

Henry Williamson Collection, University of Exeter, MS 43/1/48/3/1. Reproduced by permission of the Henry Williamson Estate.

73.1.48/3/1

The Rough Draft of
THE OTTER'S SAGA
by
Henry Williamson.

(1)

At ~~last~~ ^{with} ~~reeling~~ ^{chirrup} ~~warbler~~ ^{warbler} began to sing by the river, and the ~~oak~~ ^{oakwood} rocks in the distant ~~oaks~~ ^{oaks} ceased their cawing, and settled to the evening star ~~streamed~~ ^{streamed} with water. By the ~~unrooted~~ ^{unrooted} oak the ~~river~~ ^{river} ~~sleep~~ ^{sleep} beside their nests. The stream flowed deep and black; by the ~~tree~~ ^{tree}, which ~~was~~ ^{was} hollow, and a ~~year~~ ^{year} ~~uprooted~~ ^{uprooted} oak and the stars shining on the water were gold and steady. The tree was a yard thick at ~~its~~ ^{the} base, and it lay along the bank. Its earthy roots had been washed by winter floods which had scooped out the bank, and it had fallen only two months. Near the water, and half way along the trunk, was a hole; the tree was hollow.

A reed bunting ~~awoke~~ ^{awoke} and joined its harsh ~~sweet~~ ^{sweet} chatter with the ~~chirrup~~ ^{chirrup} of the grasshopper warbler. ~~Far up the river~~ ^{Far up the river} Old Hog the ~~heron~~ ^{heron} was fishing. A trout rose, and ripples spread to the tree. When it was quiet again, an animal looked out of the hole. She had ~~set~~ ^{set} with ~~sharp~~ ^{sharp} ~~eyes~~ ^{eyes} and ~~stiff~~ ^{stiff} ~~grey~~ ^{grey} whiskers. Her movements were quick. She was an otter who had been sleeping and dozing during the daylight. She was using ~~her~~ ^{her} sight, smell, and hearing to detect any danger. For nearly a minute she remained ~~there~~ ^{there}, then after a stealthy movement and a faint scratch of claws on the wood she was listening and peering under water. Her hindquarters remained out, and she was clinging to the tree by the aid of her long tapered rudder, or tail, pressed ~~on~~ ^{against} the wood. The scratch of claws on wood, so distinct in the water, had been heard by a fish with scarlet-speckled back and sides. ~~It~~ ^{It} with a sweep of tail and sweep of fins had darted upstream. ~~So precise~~ ^{So precise} however, had been the otter's movement, that it was both seen and heard in its first straight rush. Slipping under the water without ~~any~~ ^{any} movement in the dim water about them.

Appendix 2. Frontispiece to *The Illustrated Salar the Salmon*

This photograph appears as a frontispiece to *The Illustrated Salar the Salmon* (Exeter: Webb & Bower, 1987). Reproduced by permission of the Henry Williamson Estate.



Henry watching for salmon at Sloping Weir. Photographed about the time of writing 'Salar'. He is wearing the leather coat worn for fast journeys in his Alvis sports car.

Appendix 3. Chronological List of Works by Henry Williamson

1. *The Beautiful Years* (1921)
2. *The Lone Swallows* (Collins) (1922)
3. *Dandelion Days* (1922)
4. *The Peregrine's Saga* (Collins) (1923)
5. *The Dream of Fair Women* (1924)
6. *The Old Stag* (Putnam) (1926)
7. *Tarka the Otter* (1927)
8. *The Pathway* (1928)
9. *The Wet Flanders Plain* (1929)
10. *The Patriot's Progress* (1930)
11. *The Village Book* (1930)
12. *The Wild Red Deer of Exmoor* (1931)
13. *Devon Holiday* (1931)
14. *Tarka the Otter* (illustrated) (1932)
15. *The Lone Swallows* (Putnam) (1933)
16. *The Gold Falcon* (1933)
17. *The Star Born* (1933)
18. *On Foot in Devon* (1933)
19. *The Peregrine's Saga* (Putnam) (1934)
20. *The Linhay on the Downs* (1934)
21. *Salar the Salmon* (1935)
22. *The Flax of Dream* (1936)
23. *An Anthology of Modern Nature Writing* (1936)

24. *Goodbye West Country* (1937)
25. *The Children of Shallowford* (1939)
26. *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* (1941)
27. *The Sun in the Sands* (1945)
28. *Tales of a Devon Village* (1945)
29. *Life in a Devon Village* (1945)
30. *The Henry Williamson Nature Books* (1945–1946)
31. *The Pathway* (illustrated edition) (1946)
32. *The Phasian Bird* (1948)
33. *The Scribbling Lark* (1949)
34. *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* (1951–1969)
35. *The Dark Lantern* (1951)
36. *Donkey Boy* (1952)
37. *Tales of Moorland and Estuary* (1950)
38. *Young Philip Maddison* (1953)
39. *How Dear is Life* (1954)
40. *A Fox Under My Cloak* (1955)
41. *The Golden Virgin* (1957)
42. *A Clear Water Stream* (1958)
43. *Love and the Loveless* (1958)
44. *The Henry Williamson Animal Saga* (1960)
45. *A Test to Destruction* (1960)
46. *The Innocent Moon* (1961)
47. *It Was the Nightingale* (1962)
48. *The Power of the Dead* (1963)
49. *The Phoenix Generation* (1965)

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------|
| 50. <i>A Solitary War</i> | (1966) |
| 51. <i>Lucifer Before Sunrise</i> | (1967) |
| 52. <i>The Gale of the World</i> | (1969) |
| 53. <i>Collected Nature Stories</i> | (1970) |
| 54. <i>The Scandaroon</i> | (1972) |

Posthumous collections

- | | |
|---|--------|
| 55. <i>Spring Days in Devon</i> | (1992) |
| 56. <i>Threnos for T. E. Lawrence</i> | (1994) |
| 57. <i>The Notebook of a Nature Lover</i> | (1996) |

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