BEYOND DESCRIPTION

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Anthropologies of Explanation

Edited by Paolo Heywood
and Matei Candea

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Now every theory tacitly asserts two things: firstly, that there is something to be explained; secondly, that such and such is the explanation. Hence, however widely different speculators may disagree in the solutions they give of the same problem; yet by implication they agree that there is a problem to be solved.

—Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*

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EXPLAINING THE POLITICS OF THE AUTHOR

Adam Reed

I want to begin with an extract from a conversation with one of the first Henry Williamson readers I ever met—a lovely man, now sadly deceased, called Ted. It is important to note that the dialogue reproduced here marked a noticeable shift in the tone of our exchange, from a previously easygoing and confident accounting of a life spent reading the literary works of a favorite author to a much more sober reflection, a cautious and at times uncertain stance.

> "But Henry Williamson was his own worst enemy. Er you've probably heard about the political involvement?"
>
> "In the thirties?"
>
> "Yeah, yeah. People find this quite unforgiveable. Anne [the author's official biographer] gives an excellent explanation of why he felt and how he felt the way he did. But he was a person, I think once he'd sort of locked onto an idea he would never give it up, no matter how people tried to explain to him or how events were shown to be the opposite of what he believed, he still clung to this idea right up to the very end. He felt that Hitler had, I won't go into the political side because that's not of interest, but he felt Hitler had been misled by his generals and that he was really a good bloke at heart. You know, he was terrifically loyal to people like Oswald Mosley."
>
> "Yes."
>
> "It didn't do him any good at all, and he was ostracized by the BBC, and publishers wouldn't publish his books, and all because of his attitude.

> I think that's why people branded him so much as a right-wing writer and that's why people just don't want to know him."
>
> [*Pause; we both take a sip of tea.*]
>
> "So, it's a great embarrassment to the society. It's an embarrassment to me [*Ted bows his head*], and I think it was very foolish, but I don't think a writer should be judged by his private life."

As is immediately apparent, this part of our conversation was full of references to explanation. Ted pointed out, for instance, the "excellent explanation" of the author's politics available to readers in the official biography. He conceded that Williamson (1895–1977) was known to be resistant to the counterexplanations of fascism and of historical events offered by his contemporaries. Finally, Ted presented a few comments of his own, as a rather reluctant explaining subject. These centered on the kind of person he assessed the author to be and on his interpretation of why the works of Williamson were no longer widely read.

While it's probably the case that Ted raised the author's politics with me in anticipation that I might ask him about it—this was one of my first meetings with a member of the Henry Williamson Society—I soon came to realize that such exchanges were entirely commonplace. Indeed, the offering of explanation about Williamson's politics was a regular occurrence, especially but not exclusively if members came across someone new. This was brought home to me when later that year, in early October 1999, I headed down to North Devon to attend my first annual meeting of the literary society.

Since I was without a car, the society's committee had arranged for me to be picked up from Barnstaple station. The instruction was that someone named Anna, who would be driving up from her home in Dorchester, would stop en route and provide a lift to the hotel venue. Much younger than I expected, certainly in comparison with Ted, who was in his seventies, Anna greeted me casually dressed in jeans and a pink oversize shirt. After she apologized for the mess, which she blamed on young children and the pressures of running a homemade jewelry business, we set off. Throughout the drive, a lively discussion about football and peace campaigning—I learned that Anna was the chairperson of her local Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament group—was interspersed with observations about the countryside around us. Indeed, she was able to point out various locations linked to the novels and the life of the writer.

Passing through the small village of Georgeham, for instance, Anna told me that this was where Williamson and his family had lived for many years and where he wrote many of his books. She revealed that she had herself met "Henry" there in the late 1960s when she was only seventeen years old; the author had invited her to pay a visit after receiving a letter from Anna full of enthusiastic praise for one of

his novel series. There followed what she could only describe as a wonderful, crazy couple of days in the old man's company. At this point, Anna turned and asked if I knew about Williamson's fascist past. The question was hurriedly followed by an assertion that she didn't think the writer was a "real" fascist. His politics, Anna explained, came out of the experience of serving as a soldier through the First World War and from his determination never to see such a conflict happen again. "He was a very stubborn man, too loyal to people," she went on. "That's why, even after the Second World War, he refused to fully condemn Mosley or Hitler." Anna shook her head and then laughed. She revealed that when she joined the literary society, her husband teased her remorselessly, prophesying that its members would turn out to be a "bunch of old fascists"! However, when she went to her first meeting, Anna found everyone was friendly and agreeable. "There was one old man though," she reflected as we turned into the hotel drive, who in her opinion talked about the connection between Williamson and Mosley just a little too much and seemed like he might be "a bit dodgy."

Similar kinds of conversations occurred across the annual meeting. For instance, as we assembled in the main hall of the hotel the following morning in preparation for a planned visit to Williamson's writing hut, at the time conserved by the society, I met a member called Frank. Tall, gray haired, and balding, he introduced himself as coming from the seaside town of Worthing in West Sussex and informed me that before his retirement he used to work as a manager in the National Health Service. Frank said that compared with most members of the literary society, he came to the novels very late in life, just twenty years ago; so he had never had the chance to meet the writer, which was a great regret. And next, rather abruptly, had I heard about Henry's fascism? Frank then narrated a story he had been told about Williamson responding to the news of the outbreak of war in 1939 by speeding through a nearby town with a Union Jack flying out of one car window and a swastika flag out the other. "Needless to say," he chuckled, "this did not make him popular with the locals." But, Frank explained, Williamson was a genius and one has to be single-minded and extreme to be a writer. "You only need to look at the way Henry treated his family," he added. Frank invited me to consider the writer's decision to buy a rundown farm on the other side of the country during the 1930s. "Just on a whim! You know Henry came home one day and suddenly declared that they were all moving to Norfolk!" Frank chuckled again. "His fascism was just idealism," he explained to me. "I think Henry must have been horrified when he later heard about the Holocaust and what happened in Nazi Germany and occupied Europe during the war."

Another member took up the issue of the author's politics with me later in the day. This conversation began at the hotel bar, after the formal dinner and traditional evening talk. Initially focused on a shared interest in Williamson's

stories of school days in South London, our discussion soon became diverted toward the issue of fascism. Clearly by now a little worse for wear—it had been a long day followed by a fair amount of beer and wine—my companion started to expound on how unfair it was that the writer continued to be judged on his politics rather than his literature. "Maybe Henry didn't get it so wrong," he threw out in deliberate provocation. "After all, many people are saying it was a mistake for Britain to go into the Second World War. All that happened was that we got into terrible debt to the Americans and lost our empire." Energized by the statement, he ventured, "It's possible that atrocities like the Holocaust might not even have happened had we stayed out, that we might have been able to use our influence to stop it." The intensity in his words died down and he sighed. "Anyway, we have not got rid of prejudice. Just look at how Asians are treated today." He sighed again. "Why pick on Williamson?"

As I quickly came to realize, members of the literary society perceived the need, however hesitantly, to say *something* about the author's politics and particularly to address the question of the historical relationship between the man, his works, and the ideology of fascism. On occasion united by a shared belief in the idea that *the* explanation did exist somewhere out there or alternatively by shared recognition of actual explanations of Williamson's fascism, individual readers were just as likely to test out or innovate their own explanations. At a very basic level, then, this was a society of explanations. In fact, I want to propose that the realization of the necessity for explanation was identified by Williamson readers as one of the chief outcomes of joining the literary society. For some members, this was quite simply the case because before they came across the Henry Williamson Society, they had absolutely no knowledge of the writer's links to historical fascism; the connection only surfaces in the content of a few novels and nonfiction writings (but see Reed 2022). For other members, it was because the awareness of Williamson's politics as a problem that might require an explanation *from them* only arose in the context of committing to the literary society's aims: "to encourage interest in and deeper understanding of the life and work of the writer Henry Williamson." So while they might have initially joined the society out of a love of the novels and from a curiosity to know more about the writer who created them (and perhaps also from a desire to gain access to out-of-print books), solitary readers soon found themselves drawn into a wider struggle to defend a literary reputation.

The interjected comments of Ted and the other Williamson readers cited earlier were just the beginning of a series of explanatory musings on the author's politics that I collected over the ensuing years. Sometimes these were presented to me directly or received in the context of being an audience member at society talks; other times, I read the explanations in the articles and letters authored

by readers and published in the society's journal. In this chapter I am first and foremost concerned to describe these explanations in action. This includes a consideration not just of how they worked but also of what they were for and how they interacted. As we will see, explaining the author's politics involved readers moving between positions within the same order of explanation as well as shifting between apparently incommensurate scales of explanation. A *big* explanation, for instance one taken to be capable of encompassing or addressing the issue in its entirety, would sit alongside a whole host of intermediate and little explanatory moves and could even operate in tandem with anti-explanatory moves. I am also interested in exploring at what point an explanation of the author's politics satisfied or disappointed, and how a sense of unease could simultaneously generate and curtail an impulse to explain. As already alluded, Williamson readers often reported that explanation was drawn forth from them; its status as self-initiated action was far from straightforward. Indeed, their situation regularly led members of the literary society to ask themselves not just who explains and who prompts that explanation but who listens to explanation. It additionally led them to inquire why certain stances, events, and associations linked to the author or his works seemed to automatically demand explanation and why others clearly did not.

The Autonomy of Literature

Although the kinds of explanation for the author's politics offered by Williamson readers such as Ted, Anna, and Frank were generally fragmentary in form and apparently incomplete, it is important to note that sometimes members of the literary society highlighted explanatory moves of an entirely different order. After giving his hesitant thoughts on the origins and consequences of the author's politics, Ted, for instance, stated that he didn't agree Williamson's works should be judged on this basis. The final line of our quoted conversation makes reference to a broader argument about the proper treatment of literary authors and their works. "I don't think," Ted told me, "that a writer should be judged by his private life." While the comments of certain society members could be interpreted to mean that someone who writes oughtn't to be held up to the same moral account as others—Frank suggested that Williamson's politics or "idealism" might be excused on the basis of his genius—I read Ted as focused on a very different claim.

In its English coinage, the sphere of "private life" is typically invoked to distinguish certain activities or opinions from the public expressions of the person—that is, from those activities or opinions that are the appropriate object of public

scrutiny and for which someone should be publicly held to account. By this measure, the writer's political views were a private matter, equivalent, say, to the issue of how he treated his family; or, reaching for an equivalence at the level of political opinion that society members could understand, to the issue of how someone voted in a general election. Just as the membership would not expect to be publicly interrogated on which political party they supported, so the author should not be interrogated for his politics. However, as we will see, Williamson's political views and allegiances were also at times very public. In fact, I suggest that the allusion was really invoked to demarcate something else, less the policing of a boundary between a private and public life and more an insistence on the autonomy of the domain of literature. Here Ted was concerned with the positive claim that a writer should principally be judged by his or her writings, or alternatively by the ideal that those writings should not be judged by the extraliterary practice (private or public) of the author.

Such a defense is very familiar. Indeed, as Pierre Bourdieu (1991, 72) points out, claims for the autonomy of works, often linked to modes of textual interpretation that seem to enable those works to "dictate the terms of their own perception," operate across the histories of art, literature, and philosophy. Bourdieu's observation is motivated by a specific desire to understand the philosophical defense of Martin Heidegger, which can include a disciplinary resistance to a political reading of his philosophical works. Bourdieu (1991, 5) highlights that to the charge of Heidegger's affiliation to Nazism, some respond by seeking to "localize him in the 'philosophical' arena"; for instance, through an account of Heidegger's particular position (against neo-Kantians) in the broader history of philosophy. This kind of explanatory move crucially assumes that "on the one hand we have Heidegger's biography, with its public and private events," and "on the other hand, we have the intellectual biography," somehow "'laundered' of all reference to events in the everyday life of the philosopher" (4). In the latter version, "the thinker becomes completely identified with his thought, and his life with his work—which is thus constituted as a self-sufficient and self-generating creation" (4). One might counter that Bourdieu's phrasing itself assumes a good deal; for instance, that intellectual matters *are* natural emanations of "everyday life" or that the detachment of one from the other must be a trick or, more neutrally, an achievement of some kind. It would surely be possible to reverse the problem and examine how much work, and perhaps trickery, is actually involved in making those connections appear (i.e., Bourdieu had to write a whole book). However, for our purposes I want simply to register the attention given to the apparent power of that explanatory move.

Indeed, more generally Bourdieu is interested in how this autonomy stance and the wider move to "the imposition of form" gets shored up by a specialized

systematized language and expert practice, "which keeps the layman at a respectable distance" and thus "protects the text" from being trivialized (1991, 89). What is perhaps immediately relevant here is Bourdieu's insistence that through this expert practice and in particular the formalist aesthetics of an internalist reading, the distinction between politics and philosophy gets enacted or experienced as a "genuine ontological threshold" (36). For example, Bourdieu is fascinated by the professional "alchemy" that allows "passage into another order, which is inseparable from . . . a change of social space which supposes a change of mental space" (36). Like the expert practice of mathematics that can "transmute" or convert "speed into a derivative or an area into an integer" or the alchemy of the judiciary that can transform "a quarrel or conflict into a trial," the imposition of philosophical form, Bourdieu argues, can convincingly alter the ontological status of the thing in front of one (at least for the philosopher) (36).

As must already be evident, in many ways Ted was far closer to a version of the "layman" whom Bourdieu recognizes as the figure precisely kept at bay by the specialized systematized language that typically supports the imposition of form. In fact, like his companion readers, Ted generally preferred to distance himself from the break with ordinary language, which most members associated with both critical and wider academic readings of literary texts. "We are not eggheads," one member once told me, echoing a widely expressed sentiment. "For us, enthusiasm is what matters, not erudition." This was evident not just because of the alienation toward critical reading practices that Williamson readers sometimes expressed but because, as the fragmentary explanations of Ted, Anna, and Frank also testify, most readers were heavily invested in the project of uncovering "the man behind the writings," or in reconnecting the books they read and loved with the life of the writer. Nevertheless, I don't believe that the principle of autonomy was invoked in bad faith. For there remained a strong sense in which Ted meant to seriously realize that ontological threshold between politics and literature. At least in the moment of uttering the phrase—"I don't think that a writer should be judged by his private life"—he sought to inhabit a recognizable version of that distinction.

Indeed, members of the literary society quite regularly highlighted claims for the autonomy of literature. Ted was certainly not the only Williamson reader to suggest that the writer shouldn't be judged by his private life, and the literary society often promoted its activities as explicitly "non-political . . . dedicated solely to its literary aim" (Henry Williamson Society, n.d.a). That these explanatory moves could be made without serious reference to the introduction of a thoroughgoing internalist reading of text or any expert practice capable of imposing form never seemed to particularly bother the readers I knew. Perhaps this was because in truth the principle was usually uttered without much elaboration,

or perhaps it was because Bourdieu is partly wrong—that is, it doesn't necessarily take that much expert work to separate the literary from the political. But either way, I regularly suspected that the chief value of the ideal of the autonomy of literature lay more in the full stop it momentarily placed on further discussions of the author's politics. For me this was not so much a means of explaining his politics away or of cynical evasion as of self-protection. I liked to imagine the action of this explanation as akin to an umbrella opening, a move that provided the explaining subject with a space of respite or shelter from accusations concerning "Henry's fascism." It was in this regard very much outward facing, usually made in response to a specific charge against the writer or his works, or in anticipation of such. The apparent contradiction—between an assertion that a writer should only be identified with his writings and the widespread enthusiasm for authorial biography both as a basis for explaining the author's politics and as a popular explanatory device for reading the novels—needs to be understood in these terms, the invocation of the principle of autonomy placed in the time and orientation of its telling.

Because

If the claim that a writer should be completely identified with his writings didn't come from or generate forms of erudition that could support it, what forms of explanation did attach to the reading practice and activities of literary society members? The question returns us to the explanatory fragments that I collected. For these explanations of the author's politics, typically grounded in the assumption that a writer and his works could not be understood without a strong sense of his ordinary life and times, dominated the discussions between Williamson readers. They regularly exchanged such explanatory moves at society meetings. These explanations were *little* in the sense that they rarely seemed to connect to wider structures of argument or to strive toward a grand conclusion or even reach a detectable point of resolution.

In searching for a methodological language that might enable a descriptive fleshing-out of these little explanations, I have found the work of W. G. Runciman (1983) useful. I am particularly intrigued by Runciman's close attention to the mundane mechanics of "because" (1983, 155), those micro-shifts in the invocation of cause or condition for explanation that Runciman identifies at work in an anthropological, sociological, or historical register and that I also think animate much of the explanatory work of Williamson readers. This includes the ways in which what Runciman terms an "event, process or state of affairs" can

become articulated as due to "something else" (155), which may itself be another event, process, or state of affairs; and Runciman's consideration of the specific aspect of the thing that is identified either as needing explanation or, in the guise of a something else, as providing that explanation. Indeed, it is that emphasis on the manner by which explanation can draw deceptively simple but nevertheless quite intense relations—"an explanation in terms of what?" (1983, 157)—that I here want to take forward.

In his wider four-stage schema of "understanding," Runciman observes that explanation always rests on a prior act of "reportage" (1983, 15). This is the apparently simple noticing of an event, process, or state of affairs whose identification leads its observers to propose that an explanation is necessary; for instance, as in my example, the noticing by members of the literary society of the author's politics or historical links to fascism. Runciman usually presents this as a relatively straightforward volitional act, but as this chapter has already well illustrated, it may also be something that the explaining subject is made to notice. Either way, the important thing is that the reported action takes on the status of "facts," in the sense that it is the thing that remains, at least initially, incontestable, out of the realm of dispute across competing explanations, and hence what makes "contrasts" available to consider or view. Reportage then is not just the noticing "of what has been observed to occur or be the case" (15), but also more specifically the noticing of actual or concrete objects of reportage (in our case, concerning the author's politics or links to fascism) that can or must be acknowledged by others.

Among society members, a much-cited example is the one-line quote by the writer found in the foreword to the 1936 edition of his tetralogy *The Flax of Dream*, which reads, "I salute the great man across the Rhine, whose life symbol is the happy child" (H. Williamson 1936, 7). This greeting, a clear nod by Williamson to Hitler and the then-new National Socialist regime in Germany, has since gained considerable notoriety. Its undeniable material existence on the page means that it continues to be an item those outside the society notice and hence that Williamson readers must respond to regularly with explanation. But that line sat alongside other objects of reportage commonly accepted by members of the literary society. Everyone I met recognized, for instance, the fact that Williamson was a member of the British Union of Fascists, that he attended some of their rallies and published occasional pieces in their party newspaper, *Action*. It is important to highlight that these are not just things that are *known*; they are also, à la Runciman, actions of reportage whose minor eventfulness should not disguise their crucial animating role in making little explanations possible. Indeed, as well as reporting this and other facts to me, members of the literary

society were constantly reporting and re-reporting what was observed to be the case about Williamson's links to fascism to each other. Here reportage could also merge into forms closer to anecdote, storytelling, and gossip. At society meetings, members loved nothing better than sharing or passing on snapshot accounts from the life of the writer, including tales that could be taken to illustrate his politics—Frank's story about Williamson's provocative and very public reaction to the news of the outbreak of the Second World War being a perfect example of this kind of more vivid noticing.

For Runciman the shift from reportage to explanation involves a sensation of moving from observing what has taken place to a comprehension "of what caused it, or how it came about" (1983, 15). Among Williamson readers, one of the most conventionally identified causes for the author's politics, mentioned by Anna and often repeated, was the writer's experience as a trench soldier in the First World War. They regarded that to be one of those events but for which his politics might have been other than it was, a compelling example of a something else that for them had an explanatory effect as a result of being brought into alignment with objects of reportage. Indeed, the notion that the First World War could explain "Henry's fascism," that he became a fascist because of the influence on him and his generation of that conflict, was the basis for a plurality of little explanations. In what follows, I want to use that much-invoked explanatory move to illustrate the dynamism both within and between those little explanations, the intensity of attention thrown on the apparently straightforward sideways maneuver between two sets of events, processes, or states of affairs.

The relationship between the author's politics and the First World War could be invoked through accounts of typification—that is, Williamson's politics was expressive of the attitudes and beliefs of a trench generation—or alternatively it could be invoked by emphasizing the specific and exceptional experiences of the writer. In fact, micro-shifts often occurred between those positions; very quickly, the identification of a cause that might explain how Williamson's particular engagement with fascism came about turned into an explanation of the man as a product of his time and cohort, and vice versa. Many readers liked to highlight, for instance, the impact on Williamson of personally witnessing the famous Christmas Truce of 1914, which saw German and Allied soldiers briefly leave their trenches to shake hands and greet one another. For some, that and other experiences of trench warfare left Williamson determined at all costs to avoid a second war; it also led the writer to be suspicious of any postwar demonization of Germany and to have a natural sympathy for other frontline men, including political leaders such as Hitler and Mosley. Such observations could be accompanied by individual thickenings of explanation, through reference to authorial biography, which could also provide a rationale for further reportage of what was taken to have occurred.

Ted, for instance, subsequently chose to expand his explanation for the influence of the First World War on Williamson's politics by describing the writer's family history:

> When people criticize him you can only try and explain why he felt the way he did and what the influences were. The biggest influence was the First World War. And he had a German great grandmother, so he was sort of German stock, you could say, on his mother's side, and he had this affinity towards Germany. He also had a German nurse when he was very young, who had been his father's nurse. He went through the war, he did his bit as a soldier and there was no sort of pro German influence, but he was greatly perturbed afterwards the way the German nation was treated. The fact that they were bled white in reparation for the cost of the war, and that sort of thing, and he believed that it was because of that that Hitler rose to power and the [next] war resulted from it.

This narrative introduced new secondary causes for the author's politics, such as his German ancestry, but in a fashion that on this occasion didn't mark a path of divergence between little explanations. The oscillation between typification and original biography could also result in debates about the limits of the war's influence on the author's politics. Take for example the frequent reflections of Williamson readers, including Ted and Anna, on the writer's heightened sense of "loyalty" as an explanation for his reluctance to recant his past politics or unequivocally condemn fascist leaders. Society members regularly switched between putting that quality down to the effects of trench comradeship—in one talk an invited speaker told us that "it was no longer loyalty to their country or cause that moved the majority of men in the trenches but loyalty to their friends at the front"—and putting it down instead to just an ordinary aspect of the writer's character, such as the stubbornness reported by Anna.

The causal assumption that Williamson's politics came about because of the impact of the First World War could also feed into theories of diminished responsibility. Society members exchanged versions of this kind of argument all the time; while very rarely offering a defense of fascism, they did advocate their little explanations as forms of greater understanding. A sense of mitigation could be achieved by putting the author's politics "in the context of the time"—once again a move to typification—or alternatively by zooming in on the diagnosis of a specific flaw in the writer; Anna's highlighting of Williamson's stubbornness suggested that his political stance was to a degree involuntary. Indeed, all kinds of variances on these shifts could be innovated. I recall one society member, for example, telling me, "I think the reason that Henry didn't go back on

his views on Hitler is because I don't think he blamed him as an individual, I think he blamed circumstances and everything else." In this account, the reader invited me to see Williamson's politics in context but then attributed the actual case for diminished responsibility—that is, the influence of the First World War on a whole generation—to the writer himself. Here, the individual was not the proper unit of blame but "circumstances," and Williamson was not just a product of those circumstances but also a victim of explanation itself, or at least of the theory of mitigating circumstance, which, in this account, prevented him from blaming Hitler or any other individual in the manner expected.

As already mentioned, Runciman is interested in the dynamism between rival explanations but also in the "contrasts" within "the causal field on which a given explanation rests" (1983, 160). The First World War may chiefly explain Williamson's politics for society members, but it is not the only influence that readers recognize. Indeed, as we have seen, they sometimes offer other kinds of little explanation. These can present as complementary, as with Ted's invocation of the writer's German ancestry, but they can also be figured in competition with or even as eclipsing other little explanations. For instance, one society member I met asserted, "I think that Henry got involved with fascism because he supported Mosley's agricultural policies when he was a farmer, and I think that was as far as it [the author's politics] went." More elaborate bases for convergence or tension between explanations could also be found by appealing to the relatively sparse number of secondary commentaries on the writer and his works. Readers could cite the familiar claim that Williamson's fascism was in fact shaped by "two catastrophic historical experiences: the First World War and the economic and political events of the 1930s" (Higginbottom 1992, 2–3) or the less familiar claim that his fascism was a product of the writer's constant need for a prophetic figure (Yeates 2017; also see Cunningham 1989). They could invoke the official biography, much praised by Ted, in order to stress the coeval influence on the author's politics of Romanticism (A. Williamson 1995, 196–197). But even if their little explanations were in divergence, each one was still generally concerned to spotlight clusters of contrasts or modulations between identifications of how something came about.

For Runciman, the play between such contrasts within a causal field also draws out the need to distinguish between at least two ordinary uses of *because*: one to identify a "cause" and the other to identify something perhaps better described as a "constraint" (1983, 156). "Causes," Runciman elaborates, are perceived to be "the contingent antecedent conditions, both immediate (or 'proximate') and background (or 'ultimate'), by which outcomes are determined; constraints are rather, necessary limitations on the outcomes which any combination of causes is able to effect" (156). That difference, between identifying what

determined Williamson's politics and what constrained it, was constantly coming in and out of focus in the little explanations of society members. This was the case both in terms of which assembly of causes any member privileged and in terms of the degrees of autonomy she or he wished to attribute to the author's character. So some readers, including the official biographer, would identify Romanticism itself as a cause but also a constraint on his politics, perhaps because it was ultimately "a concept of freedom, an opening of horizons" (A. Williamson 1995, 196). Others would speak of the necessary limitation placed on Williamson's fascism by the writer's humanity or writerly capacity for sympathy, which they experienced and understood through reading the novels (Reed 2022).

Although these little explanations did not add up, in any cumulative sense, to a total explanatory apparatus for interpreting the author's politics, there was, I believe, something satisfying in considering the fragments in a dynamic system. Indeed, the movement internal to a little explanation—whether figured through shifting identifications of cause and constraint or through transformations or reversals in which event, process, or state of affairs gets marked as the thing to be explained or as the "something else" with explanatory power—necessarily coexisted with the movement between explanations. This was obviously the case when the same reader invoked a new explanatory move or when readers directly exchanged explanations in conversation. However, it might also be reasonable to include the interactive status of seemingly more dissociated explanatory fragments. One can do this in a strong sense, by for instance finding an immediate point of connection between them. The explanations expressed by Ted, Anna, and Frank may have occurred separately, but they were also all told to me; each society member was likewise the custodian of multiple little explanations offered to them by diverse Williamson readers. It can also be done in weaker fashion, by appeal to the ecology of such explanatory moves—the fact, for instance, that little explanations no doubt got repeated, reproduced, and innovated as they continually circulated between explaining subjects over the years.

Just Dad

But what of the politics of the explanations (of the author's politics) offered by Williamson readers? There is a literal question to answer here but also perhaps a much broader one; I take the latter first. According to Gayatri Spivak (1990, 380), at the most "general level" any likelihood of explanation always "carries the presupposition of an explainable (even if not fully) universe and an explaining (even if imperfectly) subject." More specifically, Spivak argues, every actual

explanation "must secure and assure a certain kind of being-in-the-world, which might as well be called our politics" (380). That political dimension especially revolves around the issue of what gets articulated as being inside or at the center of a particular explanation and what gets pushed outside it or to its "prohibited margins" (381). If "the centre is defined and reproduced by the explanation that it can express," Spivak posits, then it is beholden on us to consider that explanation from the perspective of its points of exclusion (381).

It is of course immediately possible to identify the margins of at least some of these little explanations. When the Williamson reader I met at the hotel bar suggested that "maybe Henry didn't get it so wrong," his argument rested in part on the supposition that the costs of fighting fascism had been too high "for Britain." The possibility that loss of empire could still be a cause of regret, at least occasionally or for some literary society members for some of the time, spoke to normative ways in which both race and nation got more broadly invoked among the white men and women who made up the membership. Take for example those explanations that rested on accounts of typification. The claim that Williamson's political orientation was expressive of the attitudes and beliefs of a trench generation risked obscuring the fact that the politics of that generation was itself deeply polarized. But it also assumed that the effects of trench comradeship had naturalized endpoints. Readers who put forward this explanation generally understood that Williamson's politics was expressive of wider attitudes and beliefs among British veterans, assumed to be white, and not for instance of attitudes and beliefs among the trench generation as a whole. On the British side, that included men from all parts of the empire; as well as troops from white settler colonies, there were colonial troops from India, the Caribbean, and West Africa. Although it was true that a sense of solidarity across traditional lines of enmity could also be identified as an explanation for the author's unwillingness to automatically condemn Hitler and the politics of National Socialism in the 1930s, it is noteworthy that this kind of explanation was often backed up by appeal to the principle of ancestry. So Williamson's "affinity towards Germany" was also sometimes assumed to have arisen from the fact that he was at least partly "of German stock." To many in a literary society whose members largely identified as English, a status taken for granted precisely on the grounds that common ancestry naturally attached one to nation or place and hence to each other, this kind of explanation seemed self-evidently compelling, if never sufficient.

Other little explanations relied on different blind spots. However, I think it is worth reiterating that, as explaining subjects, the readers I knew generally considered themselves to be occupying a place at the margins of other people's explanations. In fact, joining the literary society was often an education in how a

certain kind of center, sometimes identified as the literary establishment, excluded through explanation. As generally reluctant explaining subjects, Williamson readers felt compelled to explain the author's politics precisely because they felt the power of explanation's effects—for them, manifest not just in the neglect of a favorite author but also in the resulting marginalization of their own enthusiastic reading practice. Indeed, individual readers and the literary society have been periodically stung by just such kinds of explanatory practices, most notoriously in 1980 when the fledgling society was asked to contribute to a BBC documentary, which purported to be sympathetically reassessing the works of the writer. In the end the program chose to present the faces and words of a group of readers interviewed by the documentary makers alongside black-and-white images of Hitler speechifying and shots of marching jack boots. More recently, a political reading of Williamson and his works published in a popular literary magazine dismissed anyone who still admired the writings or supported the author as a "small band of cultists" (Law 2012, 7); this article was still causing consternation among society members five years later.

But that sense of exclusion came from other, more troubling directions too. As well as explanations that denounced the writer and his works because of his politics, readers had sometimes to grapple with explanations that positively embraced the author on the same basis. In the early days of the literary society, this occasionally included explanations sourced from within its own ranks. Indeed, a few old members of the British Union of Fascists and its postwar reincarnation, the Union Movement, initially joined; this included Mosley's longtime secretary Jeffrey Hamm, who occasionally contributed to the letters section of the journal and who acknowledged the author and the society in his memoir (Hamm 1983). An early journal issue also contained a brief essay by Diana Mosley. Even more troubling for present-day society members was the growing awareness, especially because of the way internet search engines responded to the entry of the author's name, of the fact that neo-Nazi or extreme English nationalist groups with explicitly racist agendas were increasingly claiming the writer and his works as part of the new Far Right canon. Not surprisingly, this news generated anxieties among readers about how these groups might also explain them, and how the general public might in turn read those explanations. In 2011, this concern led the literary society to post a "Statement on Fascism" on its website. Addressed to those whose "prime reason for visiting this site" might be an interest in the author's politics, it read, "The Henry Williamson Society does not support nor promote Fascism in any way whatever and entirely dissociates itself from any organisations which have misrepresented it as doing so" (Henry Williamson Society n.d.b).

Indeed, part of the appeal of the dynamic system of little explanations, for instance its inherent resistance to any stable identification of cause or constraint, was precisely that it enabled explaining subjects to constantly shift and hence differentiate themselves from unwanted associations or other explaining subjects. This might include differentiations from historical fascist figures such as Diana Mosley; her short essay remained uncomfortable reading precisely because she invoked a range of very familiar little explanations. This included an insistence that Williamson's fascism was chiefly due to sympathy for her husband's agricultural policies and support for his "dedication to peace" or antiwar campaign (1981, 21). Within the literary society, the dynamic system allowed individual members to share an explanatory move while simultaneously distinguishing themselves on the basis of a divergence within the terms of that something else or by reference to the explanatory potential of an alternative event, process, or state of affairs. Neither Anna nor Ted would have been comfortable with a little explanation for the author's politics grounded in imperial nostalgia; however, they might happily have united in sentiments of exasperation with my hotel bar companion when he asked, "Why pick on Williamson?" Likewise, the outburst at the hotel bar should not obscure the fact that in this member's calmer, more sober reflections he too chose to privilege the claim that Williamson was a fascist *because* of the First World War. I suspected that the same work of dissociation often took place within explaining subjects; each one, so it seemed to me, constituted by their own moving field of little explanations regularly foregrounded and then withdrawn, invoked, and then displaced.

But this constant uneasy shifting between little explanations could also exhaust. There was never the moment of respite or space of shelter that Williamson readers sometimes felt, despite the air of unreality around it, as a result of embracing the principle of the autonomy of literature. The unsustainability of that latter big explanation and the never-ending micro-shifts of the dynamic system might be expected to generate some despondency. However, there was another explanatory or anti-explanatory resource available to members of the literary society, an outlook on the writer and his works that seemed on occasions to provide them genuine relief from their largely unwanted status as explaining subjects.

As already explored, a number of members identified character traits in the author as an explanation for his politics. In this move, rather than typification, the focus fell on political attitudes or beliefs as an expression of the temperament of the man. That invitation could work by drawing attention to flawed aspects of Williamson's personality (his reported stubbornness, for instance) or to aspects that might otherwise be adjudged more positively (his reportedly fierce

loyalty toward friends, for instance). But each of these explanations additionally relied on a broader explanatory move, which worked by simultaneously highlighting both the ordinary and extraordinary qualities assigned to the individual. Here the author's politics was another, albeit embarrassing, instance of what made "Henry" distinctly Henry, the remarkable, sometimes infuriating, unpredictable, yet engaging character that he was usually appreciated to be. "Oh, that's just Henry," members frequently offered by way of a refrain. Alongside it, however, one commonly heard a reminder that Williamson was also "just a person." Closely tied to the complaint that the author was being unfairly singled out, perhaps best embodied in that exasperated utterance, "Why pick on Williamson?" the appeal this time was to the fact that Williamson lacked the kind of distinctiveness that warranted special criticism.

Describing a seemingly very different context for acts of explanation, Jacqueline Nassy Brown (2005) points out how this appeal can further work as a form of self-recusancy. Among "Liverpool-born Blacks" (LBB), who sometimes claim to be "the oldest Black community in Britain" (5), Nassy Brown reports, explaining subjects occasionally express the desire to resist the positioning or explanatory logics tied to a dominant politics of race, place, and class. "She prefers to be 'just a person,'" Nassy Brown observes of one interlocutor, in this case a white woman recognized as part of that LBB community by dint of marriage and children (206). As well as "refusing racial distinctions," the woman concerned insisted that she in turn treated others in like fashion. Friends were "just her friends and kids just kids." In this explanatory or anti-explanatory universe, other forms of explanation were surplus to requirement; in particular, to say someone was Black or white explained nothing essential about who they truly were. There was an equivalent kind of move, I believe, in the preference expressed by Williamson readers to regard the author as just a person. Here Henry was Henry alone, not something more. To call him fascist likewise explained nothing essential about him. Indeed, it rang false precisely because members knew Henry as Henry, a knowledge that affirmed, to requote Anna, that the writer was not a "real" fascist (i.e., because he was Henry).

But in Nassy Brown's account the appeal to be regarded as just a person also remained unsustainable. This was partly because, as Nassy Brown points out after Frantz Fanon, "a chief consequence of race" was exactly "the unfulfillable desire to be 'just' a self" (2005, 201). More pertinently, in the example provided, the woman's desire risked evading the issue of white privilege—that is, that the refusal of racial distinctions in favor of just being a person might not appear a viable option to others within the LBB community. In fact, as Nassy Brown goes on to describe, that explaining subject's project failed most dramatically at home, where her daughter insisted not only on identifying as Black but also on

identifying her mother as "decidedly White" (207). While on one level the problems with such a comparison are self-evident—responses to the author's politics or to explanations of his fascism hardly equate with responses to the politics of race, particularly those grounded in the historical experience of racism—nevertheless I find Nassy Brown's descriptions apt. For the just-a-person appeal offered by Williamson readers, which included an invitation to refuse political distinctions, also didn't really work as an anti-explanatory resource. Indeed, it failed for much the same reasons: because others found it unconvincing or kept insisting on holding the author's politics in mind. "But wasn't he a fascist?" remained the recurring question that individual members and the literary society as a whole had to keep on addressing.

However, as Nassy Brown further testifies, that was not necessarily the end of the matter. While the white mother just discussed might have had her preference to be regarded as just a person pointedly rejected by her daughter, in different cases it was that very type of kin relation that provided a template for an apparently effective limit on explanations, at least those derived from the politics of race. For as Nassy Brown recounts, some other sons and daughters of white mothers in the LBB community insisted that race didn't come into that relationship. This was not because they regarded their mothers as just people but rather because they viewed them as "just me mum" (2005, 77). Indeed, the particularity of that relationship seemed to be central to its effectiveness as an anti-explanatory resource. Nassy Brown reports that for these sons and daughters, the "kinship role is paramount and determining: it nullifies race altogether" (76). Although Nassy Brown's wider emphasis falls on the contested nature of this nullification and the broader interactions between all available explanations—members of the LBB community were on occasion capable of identifying the same white women as Black based on the perception of a shared politics (203)—I find the observation once again instructive.

For among literary society members, the shift of outlook on the author's politics that resulted from adoption of a borrowed stance of son or daughter (and sometimes of wife) could be crucial. Or put another way, it was when Williamson readers imaginatively refigured the writer as father (or husband) rather than just a person that I believe they came closest to finding the kind of respite from continual explanation that they desired. Such a move was not entirely speculative. In fact, one of the distinguishing features of the literary society for many members was precisely that it brought them into contact with the writer's grown-up children and, before her death, with Williamson's first wife (in addition to running the literary estate, several of these sons and their wives regularly attended society meetings [see Reed 2011]). The appreciation and initial excitement generated by this contact, especially for new members, may have been

further enhanced by the fact that family members also featured as minor characters in the novels and some of Williamson's nonfiction (see Reed 2019). However, what interests me more, by way of conclusion, is the way in which the perspective offered by these family members seems to have had the effect (or illusion) of finally making explanation appear unnecessary.

It was as if the introduction of that kin perspective in some mysterious sense settled something. Notably, Williamson's sons told innumerable stories about their father, many of which ended with the punchline, "To us, that's Just Dad." Perhaps those stories, quite often critical in tone, were reassuring because the concrete particularity of the kin relations invoked resisted co-optation. Extreme nationalist groups might claim the writer as part of their Far Right canon and critics might explain the author and his works through his politics, but neither could ever make an explanatory claim on Williamson quite like that. Alternatively, the relief that members clearly felt on hearing those stories and receiving that punchline might have been the result of the effect of shifting between kin terms. If each perspective (that of wife, son, or daughter-in-law) inevitably prompted awareness of these other possible kin perspectives on the writer, then this might render the person of the author too multifaceted to be contained by any accusation. Phrased another way, it might nullify Williamson's politics by drawing attention to something far more encompassing and momentarily incontestable—that is, the writer's status as Dad and the corresponding status of his sons, who apparently couldn't help but frame their explanations of the writer from the perspective of this relation.

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