

WILLIAM GOLDING AND THE NOBEL PRIZE

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Some comments on the bestowal of the 1983 Nobel Prize of Literature on William Golding seem to warrant the conclusion that not even members of such exclusive circles as the Swedish Academy are exempt from petty jealousies. Soon after the announcement of the award, one of the elder members of the Academy, well-known for his tendencies to bias his colleagues in favour of excentric parochial writers, made an unfortunate public remark: the Nobel laurel had been conferred on "a small British phenomenon," "of limited interest." With characteristic restraint, the *Times* of October 9, 1983, quoting the comment, added some information on the speaker's acknowledged taste for bizarre, minor writers and on his connection with another, recently deceased Academy member. Between them, the pair had long been able to sway the balance of power inside the Academy. The situation having been changed by death, the *Times* seemed to imply, the surviving sage had chosen to vent his pique on the latest laureate.

In the USA, *Time Magazine* wasted no time in picking the cue provided by the adverse criticism on Golding. A week and a day later, in the issue of October 17th, an obscure commentator accused the Swedish Academy of "quirkiness" for the choice of the British novelist rather than, for instance, Kobo Abe, Jorge Luiz Borges, Italo Calvino, Nadine Gordimer, Günter Grass or Graham Greene.

We do not intend to compare Golding with any of these

writers. What we do mean to argue is that the attack upon the author of *Darkness Visible* is precariously supported. It starts with a quotation from Golding himself. "An amiable, modest man, he once noted that 'my books have been written out of a kind of delayed adolescence'." The author of the attack on the novelist here seems never to have heard of the intentional fallacy, and easily mixes the writer's irrelevant explanation of his creative powers with sound critical evaluation.

The next charge is based on the popularity of Golding's first novel, *Lord of the Flies* (1954)¹. The fact that it has become required reading for millions of high school and college students also seems to be resented. The first fault, we may remember, the novel shares with the Bible — one of the greatest best-sellers of all times — and the other, say, with Shakespeare's plays and other classics of world literature, permanently included in college reading lists.

The diatribe next tries to explain away the novel's continuing popularity by its "eminently teachable symbolism" and its "heavily underscored message." If, for the sake of argument, we discuss these claims, it will be easy to recall that no major work escapes attempts at didacticism — witness the number of teach-yourself so-called critical works parasitic on almost every great novel which are to be found in any American bookshop. It would be difficult, indeed, to tell apart the more from the less "teachable."

As for attributing the success of the novel to its alleged "message" ("the inescapable depravity" of man), is it possible that the attacker is now mixing what Ingarden would call the layer of metaphysical qualities of the novel, with its

paraphraseable content? Or that he has never heard of the heresy of paraphrase? Mere paraphrase would Joyce's *Ulysses* to a tedious account of how an unglamorous middle-aged Irishman goes about the Dublin streets musing on his shabby life, of Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* to a trite footnote on the thesis of the superiority of art to life.

But the worst is still to come. The paraphrase itself, the claim that Golding's "message" boils down to a series of reflections on the depravity of man is highly questionable. It might rather be suggested that Golding's central theme could tentatively be phrased as that of the tragic flaw which evades mere mechanical statement of guilt and punishment.

To take *Lord of the Flies* itself: any identification of the central rival characters as hero and villain, angel and fiend, would be simplistic. Jack, the "wicked" boy leader, turns the innocent "fun and games" of children marooned on a desert island into destructive play. But he himself, in the end (in one of the turns in perspective familiar to Golding's readers) is seen a helpless child. On the other hand, Ralph, the "good," charismatic leader, and Piggy, his ally, forfeit their role as angels by taking part in the murder of their friend Simon. The action belies both the Satan and the Raphael in the characters. Only a simplistic reading, based on an ingenuous acceptance of the judgements implicit in some of the "voices" in the novel, could lead to a different conclusion. The fact that the infinitely complex web of moral stands is compatible, in *Lord of the Flies*, with the deceptive simplicity of a fable, only adds to the interest of the book.

The development of the central theme becomes increasingly

complex in the subsequent novels. It would be difficult wholly to condemn *homo sapiens*, as he meets and destroys a family of Neanderthal man in *The Inheritors* (1955)². The sinister outcome of the meeting is largely due to a misunderstanding: the *homo sapiens* hunters had taken the ogre-like Neanderthal for dangerous, cannibalistic monsters. At least partly, *homo sapiens* acts in putative self-defense. It takes the deeper vision of Tuami, the artist, to try to conciliate the extremes of love and hate evoked by the events. The turn in perspective at the end thus reveals that the condemnation of *homo sapiens* is largely enclosed in the kindly but severely limited Neanderthal consciousness. To take this as the total vision suggested by the novel is to fatally miss the ironic play of countervoices in it, and the corrections of judgement made necessary by the context as a whole.

The reviewer in *Time* fails to detect the ever more complex web in *Free Fall* (1959)³. The novel addresses not so much the theme of evil, but that of free will, with hints at the possibility of salvation. It thus returns to one of the sub-themes in *Pincher Martin* (1956)⁴. Confronted with the idea of having consistently "eaten," that is, destroyed all who had crossed his path, Martin, the drowning sailor, asks the Creator: "Why should you torture me? If I ate them, who gave me a mouth?" (p. 197). The theme of guilt and choice is echoed in *The Spire* (1964)⁵. Here, more than ever, it would be difficult to give the questions raised by the novel any facile answer. Jocelin, a medieval dean, mistakes sexual passion for divine longing. By sacrificing several lives, in order to add an impossible spire to a church lacking the proper foundations, he is building a phallic symbol, not a "prayer in stone." This much is clear. Several questions, however,

remain to be answered. Is Jocelin really guilty? Isn't he really a victim of the repression and narrow-mindedness of his education? Given a little more luck and light, couldn't he have been the saint he once took himself for? His self-condemnation is not supported by Father Adam, the only saintly figure in the novel who thinks of Jocelin's as "a small sin, as sins go" (p. 190). Again the novel suggests a tragic error of judgement, rather than evil or depravity. The "dormitory determinism" Golding is accused of is nowhere to be seen, nor is the easy cause-and-effect relationship that would justify such a label. The problem of evil and free choice emerges as infinitely intriguing. In the words of Jocelin it is "a plant with strange flowers and fruit, complex, twining, engulfing, destroying, strangling, a riot of foliage and flowers and overripe bursting fruit... There was no tracing its complications back to the root." (*The Spire*, p. 194). This passage can be conveniently read as a warning against facile interpretation of Golding's treatment of the theme of evil - a warning the reviewer in *Time* would do well to heed.

What could be readily granted is that Golding's novels, most apparently the first five, do turn on a central theme. This, however, could be hardly seen as a flat statement on the "depravity" of man. It might rather be put as a series of questions on the mysteries of evil and free will. This in no way detracts from Golding's achievement. Which great novelist ever failed to aim at a central core of meaning, pointing to an existential puzzle which repeatedly defies analysis? One of the roles of art can reasonably be taken as an attempt to deal with some aspect of life's great mysteries. We may here quote Merleau-Ponty:

The work of a great novelist rests on two or three philosophical ideas. For Stendhal, there are the notions of the Ego and Liberty, for Balzac the mystery of history as the appearance of a meaning in chance events; for Proust, the way the past is involved in the present, and the presence of times gone by. The function of the novelist is not to state these ideas thematically but to make them exist for us in the way that things exist, Stendhal's role is not to hold forth on subjectivity; it is enough to make it present.

Another charge against Golding: his alleged views that "it is the wickedness in human beings that creates... evil systems" are "attractive to those who want no responsibility for the state of the world." This charge ignores Golding's sense of social responsibility, reflected in the social side of his fiction. There is a connection between Samuel Mountjoy's opportunism and his origins as a child of the slums (*Free Fall*). Again, however, no simple cause and effect relationship can be established. A more direct criticism of the results of social snobbery is found in *Rites of Passage* (1979), where class prejudice is shown to interfere with moral judgement. One cannot ignore, either, the hints at the small town cant which ring through *The Pyramid*, Golding's attempt at a comedy of manners. His moral and mystic concerns obviously include the social as one of the webs in a perplexing pattern. The political strand is there as well. The horrors of Vietnam and of a possible nuclear war loom over *Lord*

of *the Flies* and *Darkness Visible* (1980). The impact is all the more powerful for completely evading the pamphletarian tone or that of a moral crusade: the appeal is to the imagination, not to the intellect.

This modest apology of Golding's novels needs to be restricted, as it so far has been, to unity of theme, breadth of outlook and relevance of material, which frontally oppose the accusation of "limited interest" levelled against the artist by the member of the Swedish Academy. More than anything else what this and the American attack most unforgivably ignore is that touchstone of literary achievement, the novelist's handling of his medium - language, imagery and symbol - which place Golding's works among the most daring and imaginative of the century. A demonstration of this fact would spread far beyond the scope of this paper. A few illustrations can nevertheless be attempted.

Golding's use of language is indeed remarkable. In this respect, M.A.K. Halliday's article on *The Inheritors*⁷ has become a classic. Halliday, a scholar gifted with a rare blend of ingenuity for linguistic analysis and sensitivity to literary values demonstrates Golding's amazingly subtle and consistent use of transitivity in order to convey the Neanderthal point of view.

We would like to briefly study other linguistic markers - all of them basically simple devices, like the blurring of the distinctions/ + animate/ and/ - animate/, /+ human/ and /- human/, or the use of nouns indicating parts of the body where the whole individual would normally be alluded to. These devices contribute to the presentation of the author's personae, of the characters' different voices and to the total polyphonic effect, becoming a hallmark of Golding's style. They are also associated with the

effect of "estrangement," which he often achieves: the presented world comes out "as if it had never been seen before," forcing the reader into an effort of interpretation which amounts to the discovery of a new reality.

The close relationship between the linguistic level, imagery, symbolism and the fictional context can be illustrated by reference to any of the novels. We may take, as an example, the use of what we here call stylistic marker 1 (SM-1) - the blurring between the categories / + animate/ and /- animate/ -in *Lord of the Flies*.

The stylistic marker appears in passages describing the environment in the desert island where a group of boys gets lost after a plane crash. Verbals indicating actions or qualities usually attributed only to living beings are predicated of lifeless natural objects like *rock, forest, breeze, fire, tree, root, sun*. As a consequence, these elements of the natural setting seem endowed with animal-like force. An important stylistic choice has been made. The fictional speaker has chosen to present the physical surroundings, not under the traditional description of a passive physical background, but as something approaching the quality of narrative - the narrative of a series of actions by quasi-living beings. This contributes to an impression of extraordinary activity in the world of nature. On the other hand, the actions involved, and the living creatures evoked by them, are almost invariably destructive. Both facts, extremely important for the interpretation of the novel, will emerge from the discussion of a number of examples.

During the boys' first exploratory expedition in the island, we are told that "the forest stirred, roared, flailed"

(p. 32). Not much later on, as the children try to set up their version of an ordered, democratic, society, we are informed that "the fire growled at them" (p. 50). The verbs *roar* and *growl*, from the examples, deserve attention. Not only are they primarily used of animals, but of those thought of as hostile and/or dangerous. We are being given a first hint that the beautiful tropical surroundings announce something quite different from the Edenic life or the Romantic return to nature that we might have expected from other, idyllic pieces of description also present in the novel, and from allusions to *Coral Island*, the classic of children's literature.

The effect of the SM in the sentences quoted thus depends on the general context, the stored knowledge of the "real" world that we bring to the reading of a novel. We all know that only wild or angry animals really growl and roar, and that we had better beware of them when they make these unfriendly noises. Contextual interaction between SM-1 and the general context begins to warn us that the children are somehow threatened. Strange forces, so far presented as outside them, seem to lurk around. The SM seems to anticipate some fearful action. Later on, when such an action does take place, or even later, when it has led to further tragedy, other instances of SM-1 will support and recapitulate the initial effect. At the same time a new interaction will take place: that between the SM and the fictional context - the communication situation inferred from the text.

The effect of the SM, suggesting the presence of destructive forces in the island, is also supported by the linguistic context. This may happen at vocabulary level. Recalling the idea of violence, the removal by the boys of a rock

barring their way, is once called an *assault*. So also, on the very first page of the novel, the clearing made by the clashing plane is called a *scar*. The implication is clear: man's presence in the island has inflicted a wound upon nature. Attacked, the natural world hits back, which explains phrases like *the unfriendly side of the mountain*, used twice (p. 48 and 51).

Support for the rhetorical intent of the SM as conveying the presence of malevolent forces threatening the boys comes from the linguistic context also under the form of different comparative constructions. In the next example, comparison of the movement of trees with that provoked by the passage of an angry monster makes the verb *shake*, predicated of *forest*, suggest the trembling of a living creature in the grips of a terrible fear: "the forest further down shook as with the passage of an enraged monster" (p. 30). Similes with *like*, likening "actions" by elements of nature to those of hostile living beings, play the same role: "the sun gazed down like an angry eye" (p. 62). So do similes with *as though*: "The flames, as though they were a kind of wild life, crept as a jaguar creeps on its belly towards a line of birch-like saplings" (p. 48). In this quotation, a quasi-simile brushes shoulders with a comparison introduced by *as*. Both suggest the similarity between the elements of nature and some violent wild animal.

Implicit comparisons between natural objects and animals similarly support the effect of the SM in the linguistic context. Here is an implicit comparison between *fire* and *horse*: "Couldn't a fire outrun a galloping horse?" (p. 218). At this stage, plot — an element from the fictional context — again interacts with the SM: fire, first meant to be used as a sign calling for

rescue from the "civilized" world, now threatens to burn up the island. There is also the interplay between dialogue and the SM. In one of the examples above, when the creeping of the flames is compared to that of a jaguar (p. 50), Piggy, one of the central characters, has been talking. Besides warning against the danger of the fire, left unattended, he has just noted the disappearance of one of the children. This, in turn, portends further loss of life.

Another aspect of the fictional context – description – further supports the rhetorical intent of the SM, hinting at the existence of occult malevolent forces in the island. This is clearly felt in descriptive passages closely preceding the episode of the ritual dance which culminates in the killing of Simon: "Evening was come, not with calm beauty, but with the threat of violence" (p. 165). "Between the flashes of lightning, the air was dark and terrible" (p. 167). So also descriptive phrases of the type "skull-like coconuts" and "the snake-clasp of his belt" (both on p. 10) call up images of death and evil, of the serpent responsible for the Fall lurking in the Garden.

One of the consequences of the interplay between SM-1 and such descriptive passages is that a number of dead metaphors undergo a kind of "ressurrection." Expressions like "the head of the mountain" (p. 131), the "pink lips of the mouth of the conch" (p. 17), "the silence of the forest" (p. 153), call to mind human-like beings. The mountain recalls a living shape, the conch a creature with pink lips rather than a shell with an opening; the forest becomes a conscious creature voluntarily refraining from making noise. So also, elsewhere, fire and vegetation seem capable of spontaneous movement, like animals.

"Tall swathes of creepers rose for a moment into view, agonized and went down again" (p. 51). "The heart of flame leapt nimbly across the gap between the trees (p. 48). The modifier *dead* and *dying* used of trees on p. 48, may, for similar reasons, evoke the end of animal, rather than vegetal, life.

The children are evidently surrounded by evil forces. Their association with the elements of nature might suggest that these forces lie outside them, tempting them, like the Serpent in Eden. Accordingly, the smaller children soon begin to whimper that there is a beast somewhere, a snake-like "beastie," which, as the older boys get to accept the idea, gradually becomes a Beast. On the other hand, the repeated allusion to the *scar* in the jungle brought about by man's presence there, suggests otherwise. So do the even more sinister aspects of plot and character, the quick crumbling of the attempt at a semblance of civilized life, the blood-thirsty lust for hunting and killing. As Simon finally puts it, speaking of the Beast: "maybe it's only us" (p. 97). The mystery of evil, inside or outside man, the alternation between the two possibilities which never completely exclude each other will recur again and again in Golding's fiction. Modulated with increasing complexity, it is inextricably connected with Golding's style.

It would be easy to demonstrate the connection between SM-1 and the imagery. Throughout the novels images mixing up the categories / + animate/ and / - animate / are to be found. In *Lord of the Flies* itself there is the image of the lagoon, compared to a "sleeping leviathan," with the movements of the tide resembling the "breathing of a stupendous creature." Recalling

earlier literary periods, the image of the moon as Diana in *Free Fall* helps to present a plastic artist's vision of the world as animate, especially in moments of particular emotional strain. One of them occurs when Samuel Mountjoy and his friend Johnny Spragg go into General Plank's garden – a forbidden place, where wild animals reportedly roam. At that moment, the two children have become what a visual artist's eyes ideally are: two points of perception, wandering in paradise (p. 45). In *The Inheritors*, ice-caves become identified with the temple and bodies of primitive earth-goddesses. In *The Spire*, the cathedral behaves like a living, rebellious body, singing with "the noises of all the devils out of hell" (p. 175).

The connection between SM-1 and SM-2 – the blurring of the opposition / human / and / - human / is also clear. The traits / /animate/ and /human / are obviously associated, one being a subdivision of the other.

SM-2 can be illustrated by the sentences "the birds talked" and "He / = Martin / was jerking his tail like a seal and lifting himself forward with his flippers" (*Pincher Martin*, p. 47 and 60). In these examples, birds perform the typically human action of talking, while a man's movements are described like those of a seal. Animals are treated as humans, humans as animals. One may well take this interchange as a single marker, with a common rhetorical intent. As man falls a prey to evil, he loses his humanity, becomes beast. Conversely, animals or lifeless objects used as heads to verbals requiring humans usually reflect undesirable human qualities. This is not a far cry from the effect of SM-1, already mentioned. SM-1 and SM-2, interacting with each other and with the context, at different levels, point to the

semantic core of the novels, contributing to their stylistic and thematic unity.

Imagery again supports the language used. Again and again – also in the nickname *Piggy* given to one of the central characters – the children are seen as animals – mostly pigs – in *Lord of the Flies* – both as agents and victims of a gory drama. This happens most obviously in the scene where Ralph, trying to escape his tormentors, successively sees himself as a cat, a horse a boar and a pig. Animal imagery also abounds in the other novels. In *The Inheritors*, *homo sapiens* has "teeth that remembered wolf" (p. 174). In *Pincher Martin*, the central character's hands, symbols of his greediness, are repeatedly compared to a gigantic lobster's pair of claws. In *Free Fall* the subservient Beatrice, once seduced by Sammy, watches him with "doggie eyes," "puts the lead" in his hand. In *The Spire*, there of the central characters are likened to animals. Rachel, the master builder's wife, is implicitly compared to a hen, "clacking and circling" around her husband; he, in turn, is repeatedly described as having the clumsy movements of a bear. But the most telling example occurs when Jocelin, the would-be saint, is likened to a snake, the traditional Christian symbol of evil. In each of a multitude of similar examples, a comprehensive image of man as Beast, both as hunter and hunted one, at once instrument and victim of evil, gradually but firmly established itself.

The fitting between style, imagery and theme, which such examples illustrate, coupled to the relevance and imaginative appeal of Golding's novels, apparently contributes to the projection of their author as one of the great verbal artists of our time – one no doubt deserving of the Nobel Prize.

NOTES

- ¹ William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, Bungay, (Suffolk: The Chaucer Press, 28th impression, 1981. First published by Faber and Faber Limited, 1954). All quotations refer to this edition, so only pages will be mentioned.
- ² *The Inheritors*, (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1955. Sixth impression, 1974). Quotations refer to this edition.
- ³ *Free Fall*, (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1964. Rpt. 1974). Quotations refer to this edition.
- ⁴ *Pincher Martin* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1956. Sixth impression, 1974). All references are to this edition.
- ⁵ *The Spire* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1964. Rpt. 1974). Quotations refer to this edition.
- ⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, translated with a Preface by Herbert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Northwestern University Press, 1964).
- ⁷ M.A.K. Halliday, "Linguistic Function and Literary Style: An Inquiry into the Language of William Golding's 'The Inheritors'," Chatman, Seymour (ed.), *Literary Style: A Symposium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).