

of modern science to China, and thus wins the West a thousand years' reprieve from gunpowder, the printing press, steam, etc., and from all the "unrest, ferment, /453/ fever, dislocation, disorder, wild experiment and catastrophe" which they will bring. This should corroborate Sir Charles Snow's recent thesis of the hostility active between the literary and the scientific cultures, and of its consequences for modern writers. Golding is perhaps the most extreme example of that sullen distaste for the contemporary which Snow describes as cankering modern literary intellectuals and as deriving from their rejection of science.

## LORD OF THE FLIES

C. B. COX

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, published in 1953, is a retelling in realistic terms of R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*. A group of boys, shot down during some kind of atomic war, are marooned on an island in the Pacific. In contrast to the boys in Ballantyne's story, who after a number of exciting adventures remember their time on the island as an idyllic interlude, the children in *Lord of the Flies* soon begin to quarrel, and their attempts to create an ordered, just society break down. On one level the story shows how intelligence (Piggy) and common sense (Ralph) will always be overthrown in society by sadism (Roger) and the lure of totalitarianism (Jack). On another, the growth of savagery in the boys demonstrates the power of original sin. Simon, the Christ figure, who tries to tell the children that their fears of a dead parachutist are illusory, is killed in a terrifying tribal dance. The Lord of the Flies is the head of a pig, which Jack puts up on a stick to placate an illusory Beast. As Simon understands, the only dangerous beast, the true Lord of the Flies, is inside the children themselves. Lord of the Flies is the Old Testament name for Beelzebub.

*Lord of the Flies* is probably the most important novel to be

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published in this country in the 1950s. A story so explicitly symbolic as this might easily become fanciful and contrived, but Golding has mastered the art of writing a twentieth century allegory. In contrast to the medieval audience, the general reading public today does not believe that correspondences exist between the material and spiritual world, and they do not automatically expect every incident or object to have symbolic importance. No conventions of allegory exist, and the writer cannot introduce colours, animals, flowers or any of the other emblems which were available for the medieval writer. In these circumstances, many novelists have given objects an arbitrary symbolic meaning. In Iris Murdoch's *The Bell*, for example, there is no inherent reason why the bell under the lake should represent absolute values, and so her fanciful developments of plot to illustrate this meaning often appear rather forced. This type of allegory can fully succeed only if the literal sense is dramatically coherent in its own right, as in Camus's *The Plague*. There are other methods of writing twentieth century allegory, of course, as in Kafka's use of fanciful situations to explore psychological and religious experiences; but if a story based on real life is used, then there must be no unlikely situations or fanciful embroidery. A modern audience will accept the underlying meanings only if they are conveyed in a completely convincing, true to life series of events.

To find an exciting, stimulating plot which is both dramatically credible and capable of allegorical interpretation is exceptionally /112/ difficult. The idea of placing boys alone on an island, and letting them work out archetypal patterns of human society, is a brilliant technical device, with a simple coherence which is easily understood by a modern audience. Its success is due in part to the quality of Golding's Christianity. He is neither puritan nor transcendentalist, and his religious faith is based upon his interpretation of experience, rather than upon an unquestioning acceptance of revelation. Although his four novels deal with the depravity of man, he cares deeply about the condition of human life, and shows great compassion for men who suffer and men who sin. His religious sense does not make him turn from life in disgust, but proves to him the dignity and importance of human action. In development of plot, descriptions of island and sea, and treatment of character, he explores actual life to prove dramatically the authenticity of his religious viewpoint.

*Lord of the Flies* is a gripping story which will appeal to generations of readers. It is easy to despise the power of a good story, and to think of moral implications as an alternative to the obvious de-

vices of surprise, suspense and climax. But to succeed, a good story, needs more than sudden deaths, a terrifying chase and an unexpected conclusion. *Lord of the Flies* includes all these ingredients, but their exceptional force derives from Golding's faith that every detail of human life has a religious significance. This is one reason why he is unique among new writers in the '50s, and why he excels in narrative ability. Typical of the writers of the '50s is an uncertainty about human values, a fundamental doubt about whether life has any importance whatsoever. In contrast, Golding can describe friendship, guilt, pain and horror with a full sense of how deeply meaningful these can be for the individual. The terrible fire which kills the young children, the fear of Ralph as he is pursued across the island, and Piggy's fall to his death on the rocks make us feel, in their vivid detail, Golding's intense conviction that every particular of human life has a profound importance. His children are not juvenile delinquents, but human beings realising for themselves the beauty and horror of life.

This faith in the importance of our experiences in this world is reflected in Golding's vivid, imaginative style. He has a fresh, delightful response to the mystery of Nature, with its weird beauty and fantastic variety. The conch, which Ralph and Piggy discover in the lagoon and use to call the children to assemblies, is not just a symbol of order. From the beginning Golding does justice to the strange attraction of the shell, with its delicate, embossed pattern, and deep harsh note which echoes back from the pink granite of the mountain. When towards the end of the story the conch is smashed, we feel that sadness which comes when any object of exquisite beauty is broken. The symbolic meaning, that this is the end of the beauty of justice and order, is not forced upon us, but is reflected through our emotional reaction to the object itself.

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In this way Golding expresses his passionate interest in both physical and moral life. His narrative style has an unusual lucidity and vitality because he never forgets the concrete in his search for symbolic action:

Now a great wind blew the rain sideways, cascading the water from the forest trees. On the mountain-top the parachute filled and moved; the figure slid, rose to its feet, spun, swayed down through a vastness of wet air and trod with ungainly feet the tops of the high trees; falling, still falling, it sank towards the beach and the boys rushed screaming into the darkness. The parachute took the figure forward, furrowing the lagoon, and bumped it over the reef and out to sea.

With admirable simplicity this passage conveys a multitude of effects.

The incident is part of an exciting story, a surprising climax to the murder of Simon; at the same time the dead parachutist is the 'beast' to the children, a symbol of adult evil, which, by their own act of killing, they have shown to be part of themselves. But the passage achieves its strong emotional impact because it is so firmly grounded in physical awareness. Water cascades from the forest trees, the parachutist 'furrows' the lagoon. These precise words describe with physical immediacy a situation which is real and dramatically poignant. And the picture of the man treading the tops of the high trees recalls the mystery of human life, with its incredible inventions, and yet also makes us feel deep compassion for the ungainly feet, the horror of death.

The island itself is boat-shaped, and the children typify all mankind on their journey through life. In the opening scenes the island has the glamour of a new-found paradise. With the green shadows from the palms and the forest sliding over his skin, Ralph is overcome by wonder. He lolls in the warm water, looking at the mirages which wrestle with the brilliance of the lagoon. But soon the terrifying fire transforms the island, and illusion gives way to reality. In nightmares the children begin to be afraid that this is not a good island; they become accustomed to the mirages, "and ignored them, just as they ignored the miraculous, throbbing stars". The beauty of the earthly paradise grows stale to their eyes. At the end they leave behind them "the burning wreckage of the island", whose loveliness has been degraded by their presence.

As his attempts to discipline the boys begin to appear hopeless, Ralph, on a search for the illusory beast, sees beyond the lagoon out to open sea:

The lagoon had protected them from the Pacific: and for some reason only Jack had gone right down to the water on the other side. Now he saw the landsman's view of the swell and it seemed like the breathing of some stupendous creature. Slowly the waters sank among the rocks, revealing pink tables of granite, strange growths of coral, polyp, and weed. Down, down, the waters went, whispering like the wind among the heads of the forest. There was one flat rock there, spread like a table, /114/ and the waters sucking down on the four weedy sides made them seem like cliffs. Then the sleeping leviathan breathed out—the waters rose, the weed streamed, and the water boiled over the table rock with a roar. There was no sense of the passage of waves; only this minute-long fall and rise and fall.

This creature becomes a part of Ralph's consciousness, a symbol of a reality he tries to avoid. As he watches the ceaseless, bulging passage of the deep sea waves, the remoteness and infiniteness of the

ocean force themselves upon his attention. By the quiet lagoon he can dream of rescue, but the brute obtuseness of the ocean tells him he is helpless. It is significant that the two boys who are killed, Simon and Piggy, are taken back to this infinite ocean.

As the waves creep towards the body of Simon beneath the moonlight, the brilliantly realistic description of the advancing tide typifies all the beauty of the world which promises eternal reward to those who suffer:

Along the shoreward edge of the shallows the advancing clearness was full of strange, moonbeam-bodied creatures, with fiery eyes. Here and there a larger pebble clung to its own air and was covered with a coat of pearls. The tide swelled in over the rain-pitted sand and smoothed everything with a layer of silver. Now it touched the first of the stains that seeped from the broken body and the creatures made a moving patch of light as they gathered at the edge. The water rose further and dressed Simon's coarse hair with brightness. The line of his cheek silvered and the turn of his shoulder became sculptured marble. The strange, attendant creatures, with their fiery eyes and trailing vapours, busied themselves round his head. The body lifted a fraction of an inch from the sand and a bubble of air escaped from the mouth with a wet plop. Then it turned gently in the water.

Here we become aware of the Christian meaning underlying the story. For Ralph the sea typifies the insensitivity of the universe, but this is to see it from only one point of view. The multitudinous beauties of the tide promise that creation was not an accident; after our suffering and confusions are over, a healing power of great beauty will solve all problems. The advancing waves are like moonbeam-bodied creatures, gently washing the body of Simon free from all stain, and dressing him in pearls, silver and marble in token of the richness of his love for the other children. Instead of seeking to introduce ancient myths into the modern world, Golding creates his own, basing his symbols on the actual wonder of life itself. The intricate beauty of the waves is not merely a pleasing arrangement of light and matter, but an incredible manifestation of the wonder of creation, with a valid life in our consciousness. As Simon's body moves out to open sea under the delicate yet firm lifting of the tide, it seems impossible that his sacrifice has had no ultimate meaning.

The island, the sea and the sacrifice of Simon all show Ralph the /115/ truth of the human situation. His mind finds the burden of responsibility too great, and he begins to lose his power to think coherently: "He found himself understanding the wearisomeness of this life, where every path was an improvisation and a considerable part of one's waking life was spent watching one's feet". Jack's re-

turn to savagery, taking all the children with him, is portrayed with frightening realism. The lust for killing grows too strong, and Ralph's inadequate democratic machinery cannot keep it in check. Behind their painted faces, the children can feel a security, a lack of personal responsibility for the evil they perpetrate, and this desire explains the growth of Jack's prestige. When he tells them they will not dream so much, "they agreed passionately out of the depths of their tormented private lives", and he is amazed by their response. Only the intelligence of Piggy is not tempted by the tribal dances, and his character is presented with great compassion. His fat, asthmatic body is a natural butt for children, and continual mockery has taught him to be humble and to enjoy being noticed even only as a joke. But he has a powerful belief in the importance of civilised order, and gradually Ralph learns to appreciate his value. His death is a poignant reminder of the unjust treatment given by society to so many good men.

Simon is perhaps the one weakness in the book. We see his friendship for Ralph, when he touches his hand as they explore the island, and his love of all people when he ministers to the dead body of the parachutist, but alone among the characters his actions at times appear to be motivated not by the dramatic action, but by the symbolic implications of the story. At the beginning, when he withdraws at night from the other children, his motives are left uncertain. But the scene where he confronts the lord of the flies is most convincing. In this pig's head covered with flies, he sees "the infinite cynicism of adult life". He has the courage to face the power of evil, and, knowing that the beast is in all of them, he climbs the hill to find out the truth about the dead parachutist.

The whole story moves towards Simon's view of reality. The growth of savagery forces Ralph to make strange speculations about the meaning of human identity. When they hold an assembly at nightfall, he is surprised at the different effect made by the darkness:

Again he fell into that strange mood of speculation that was so foreign to him. If faces were different when lit from above or below—what was a face? What was anything?

He faces the possibility that there is no absolute perspective to human life, and that all experience may be meaningless. He longs to return to the world of adults, and the irony of this illusion is shown when, after a battle in the skies, the dead parachutist comes down "as a sign from the world of grown-ups". At certain stages of the /116/ story, Golding deliberately makes us forget that these

are only young children. Their drama and conflict typify the inevitable overthrow of all attempts to impose a permanent civilisation on the instincts of man. The surprising twist of events at the end of the novel is a highly original device to force upon us a new viewpoint. The crazy, sadistic chase to kill Ralph is suddenly revealed to be the work of a semi-circle of little boys, their bodies streaked with coloured clay. But the irony is also directed at the naval officer, who comes to rescue them. His trim cruiser, the sub-machine gun, his white drill, epaulettes, revolver and row of gilt buttons, are only more sophisticated substitutes for the war-paint and sticks of Jack and his followers. He too is chasing men in order to kill, and the dirty children mock the absurd civilised attempt to hide the power of evil. And so when Ralph weeps for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the death of his true, wise friend, Piggy, he weeps for all the human race. /117/

## THE CORAL ISLAND REVISITED

CARL NIEMEYER

William Golding is the author of four novels, three of which have been published in the United States. They are *Lord of the Flies* (1954), which is the subject of this paper; *The Inheritors* (1955), which has not appeared in this country, the story of the death of the last Neanderthal men at the hands of human beings, who surpass them in ruthless cruelty and cunning; *The Two Deaths of Christopher Martin* (1956)—the English title is *Pincher Martin*—about an English naval officer who lives through a purgatorial and ultimately redemptive experience at the moment of drowning; and finally *Free Fall* (1959), which concerns an English artist in a Nazi prison camp, who at some time in his life made a wrong moral choice and who seeks in retrospect to find the moment at which he freely chose to fall. There is also an extended short story, "Envoy Extraordinary," which Golding has turned into a play called *The*

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*Brass Butterfly*. It is about an inventor who invents things at a period of history when the world is not ready for them.

Despite the wit of Golding's stories and the excellence of his writing, he has not always fared well at the hands of the critics, particularly the Americans. Anthony West in *The New Yorker* (April 30, 1960) does not make the grounds of his disapproval altogether clear, but the disapproval is evident. In England Golding is more highly regarded, as shown by John Bowen's article in *The Times Literary Supplement* for August 7, 1959, which discusses him along with Angus Wilson, Lawrence Durrell, and Iris Murdoch as artists seriously concerned with moral issues.

One interested in finding about Golding for oneself should probably begin with *Lord of the Flies*, now available in a paperback.<sup>1</sup> The story is simple. In a way not clearly explained, a group of children, all boys, presumably evacuees in a future war, are dropped from a plane just before it is destroyed, on to an uninhabited tropical island. The stage is thus set for a reworking of a favorite subject in children's literature: castaway children assuming adult responsibilities without adult supervision. Golding expects his readers to recall the classic example of such a book, R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857), where the boys rise to the occasion and behave as admirably as would adults. But in *Lord of the Flies* everything goes wrong from the beginning. A few boys representing sanity and common sense, led by Ralph and Piggy, see the necessity for maintaining a signal fire to attract a rescue. But they are thwarted by the hunters, led by red-haired Jack, whose lust for blood is finally not to be satisfied by killing merely wild pigs. Only the timely arrival of a British cruiser saves us from an ending almost literally too horrible to think about. Since Golding is using a naive literary form to express sophisticated reflections on the nature of man and society, and since he refers obliquely to Ballantyne many times throughout the book, a glance at *The Coral Island* is appropriate. /241/

Ballantyne shipwrecks his three boys—Jack, eighteen; Ralph, the narrator, aged fifteen; and Peterkin Gay, a comic sort of boy, aged thirteen—somewhere in the South Seas on an uninhabited coral island. Jack is a natural leader, but both Ralph and Peterkin have abilities valuable for survival. Jack has the most common sense and foresight, but Peterkin turns out to be a skillful killer of pigs, and Ralph when later in the book he is temporarily separated from his

<sup>1</sup> Page references will be to this edition, which includes a critical discussion by E. L. Epstein, in *Capricorn Books* (Putnam's, 1959).