**The Nature of the Beast: *Lord of the Flies***

**Date:** 1988  
On *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding  
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**From:** *Lord of the Flies*, New Edition, Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations.

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And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,

And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.

—St Matthew 18. 2–3

As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' Gods;  
They kill us for their sport.

—*King Lear*

*Lord of the Flies* has become almost compulsory reading for those enduring the painful process of growing up. One has the impression that *everyone* has studied and been impressed by this novel in the latter part of schooldays. It is not difficult to give reasons for this popularity: its protagonists are schoolboys, drawn with a remarkable awareness of the realities of the playground world, its unhappy theme 'the end of innocence' (LF p. 223). The loss of innocence for which Ralph weeps at the novel's close is not, however, a matter of transformation from childish goodness to adolescent depravity, is not a growing into wickedness. It is rather the coming of an awareness of darkness, of the evil in man's heart that was present in the children all along. To acknowledge the presence of this darkness in one's own heart is a necessary but devastating condition of growing up, of becoming fully and yet flawedly human.

Golding's concern is to present us with a vision of human nature and also of the nature of the world which we inhabit through the experiences of a group of children cast away on a desert island. The two quotations above represent polar opposites of optimism and pessimism with regard to the nature of children (which we might take to be representative of essential or pristine human nature) and the nature of the universe in which we live. In the words of Jesus in St Matthew childhood is presented as a state of innocent goodness, a state which may be regarded as the kingdom of heaven on earth. As adults, fallen from this happy state, we may well hanker after a return to it and the possibility of such a conversion is held out to us in this passage by Jesus. There is room for optimism about human nature then, and there is considerable cause for optimism about the nature of our universe, for the speaker has traditionally been regarded as the creator and loving ruler of the universe, come down to earth to suffer and die so that we might be redeemed or rescued from our wickedness and restored to the original purity and happiness we see in children and remember, or think we remember, as our experience of childhood.

The tragic universe of *King Lear* is at its darkest in Gloucester's terrible words: we live in a cruel world which can only be governed by malevolent demons whose delight is to torture us; if we wish to see an image of these dark gods or devils we need look no further than children or our own childhood, need only examine 'the ghastly and ferocious play of children' (FF p. 150), where we see how little devils torture and kill insects for fun, playing god with flies. From within and without we are beset by evil, 'All dark and comfortless'.1 *King Lear* is not everywhere so hopeless in outlook but it does seem to force us to accept that nature provides no evidence of beneficent paternal care for us and that in our human nature there is a terrifying propensity towards wanton cruelty which is evident even in children.

It scarcely needs to be said that the picture of childhood, of human nature, and of the nature of things, which emerges from *Lord of the Flies* is closer to that expressed by Gloucester than that in the passage from St Matthew, though in Golding's novel and in Shakespeare's play, as we shall see, some redeeming features are suggested which have much to do with the life of Jesus. The bleakness of the novel's vision has been eloquently encapsulated by Golding himself in a sentence which recalls the despair of Lear in its bludgeoning repetitions: 'The theme of *Lord of the Flies* is grief, sheer grief, grief, grief, grief' (MT p. 163). The grief which Golding expresses and powerfully elicits in the novel is grief at man's very nature and the nature of his world, grief that the boys, and we too, are 'suffering from the terrible disease of being human' (HG p. 87). Shakespeare's tragedy and Golding's novel both present us with a fearless and savage close-up of human nature, a stripping-down of man to what essentially he is. The effect is appalling and humiliating: we are, in Golding's words, a species that 'produces evil as a bee produces honey' (HG p. 87). As naturally as the humble insect produces sweetness, we produce the wickedness and violence which sour our lives. In *King Lear* the burgeoning evil of Lear's daughters and Cornwall finds extravagant expression in the blinding of Gloucester: in *Lord of the Flies* Jack and his gang with comparable callousness steal Piggy's glasses: '"That's them," said Piggy. "They blinded me. See? That's Jack Merridew."' (p. 187). Piggy has been blinded and his complaint indicates that this action of blinding was an expression of the essential nature of Jack Merridew and friends. The blinded Piggy has been granted insight. The darkness of Gloucester's experience leads to his despairing suicide attempt at the Dover cliff. He is, however, saved from death and despair by the loving care of his son: his heart, we are told, 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, / Burst smilingly.'2 Piggy too is led to the rocks at the island's tip—'"Is it safe? Ain't there a cliff? I can hear the sea"' (p. 193)3—but for him there is to be no comforting or consolation. The deathsman Roger wantonly knocks him over the cliff and his head bursts messily: 'His head opened and stuff came out and turned red' (p. 200). Piggy's experiences seem to recall those of Gloucester, but his end is more terrible. The crass prose that records his end matches the callousness of Cornwall in transforming Gloucester's eye to 'vile jelly',4 which is exactly what Roger has done to Piggy's brain.

The evil of Cornwall and Roger transforms humanity into vileness. The compulsive viciousness of Roger might well provoke us to adapt Lear's exclamation concerning Cornwall's accomplice Regan: 'let them anatomise *Roger*; See what breeds about *his* heart.'5 Roger's evil is inexplicable, in part because he is a shadowy character about whose background we know almost nothing, but Golding is determined, as was Shakespeare in *King Lear*, that we should confront the Roger or Regan within us, '"the reason why it's no go"' (LF p. 158). He has himself spoken of this characteristic determination to anatomise 'the darkness of man's heart' (LF p. 223):

What man *is*, whatever man is under the eye of heaven, that I burn to know and that—I do not say this lightly—I would endure knowing. The themes closest to my purpose, to my imagination have stemmed from that preoccupation, have been of such a sort that they might move me a little nearer that knowledge. They have been themes of man at an extremity, man tested like a building material, taken into the laboratory and used to destruction; man isolated, man obsessed, man drowning in a literal sea or in the sea of his own ignorance. (MT p. 199)

In *King Lear* the trial by ordeal of human nature takes place on the inhospitable landscapes of a storm-blasted Dark Age Britain; the laboratory in which Golding's schoolboys are used to destruction is the apparently more idyllic world of a tropical island. As we shall see, there are many islands, both real and metaphorical, in Golding's fiction: in *The Inheritors* the new people (i.e. we humans) are first discovered on an island and it is characteristic of them that they are isolated from each other in a way that the Neanderthal people are not; in *Pincher Martin* the central figure finds himself utterly alone and forgotten on a mere rock in the ocean; to Jocelyn in*The Spire* the great ship of the cathedral seems to offer insulation against the evils of the dangerous sea of the world; Wilfred Barclay in *The Paper Men*, despite his credit-card-given ability to travel anywhere at anytime, is isolated from his fellow man and from his own past by his alcoholism and his spiritual crisis occurs on one of the Lipari islands. Isolation is everywhere.

In confining the boys to a small island in *Lord of the Flies* Golding is using a long-established literary method of examining human nature and human polity in microcosm, as in Shakespeare's*The Tempest* or Thomas More's *Utopia*, in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. These books provide a literary background to the boys' adventures on their island. In such works we find a tendency to present human nature at an extreme: in More's utopian fantasy and in Aldous Huxley's *Island* we see human nature and society at their best. In his introduction to the former Paul Turner remarks:

The old-fashioned method of getting to Utopia is to be wrecked on an island, preferably in the South Seas, and Huxley's last essay in the genre [*Island*] is to this extent traditional. So is William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* …, which may, I think, be considered a rather individual form of Dystopia.6

The South-Sea island setting suggests everyone's fantasy of lotus-eating escape or refuge from troubles and cares. But for Golding this is the sheerest fantasy: there is no escape from the agony of being human, no possibility of erecting utopian political systems where all will go well. Man's inescapable depravity makes sure 'it's no go' on Golding's island just as it does on the various islands visited by Gulliver in Swift's excoriating examination of the realities of the human condition.

*Robinson Crusoe* belongs in part to the world of sheer escapist boys' adventure stories which also contribute to the literary background of *Lord of the Flies*. The castaway boys themselves are reminded of *Treasure Island*, *Swallows and Amazons* and Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*: prompted by the mention of these works, Ralph assures them: '"It's a good island. Until the grown-ups come to fetch us we'll have fun"' (p. 38). The boys imagine that they can have fun not only in swimming and hunting but in imposing decent, civilised English values upon their island, as Ralph, Jack and Peterkin Gay had done on Ballantyne's island and as Robinson Crusoe had done by converting his island to an English gentleman's country estate. But their efforts in this direction are a dismal failure. Things fall apart, or 'break up' in Ralph's phrase (p. 89), into atavism, savagery and bloodshed.7 The boys regress to what might be called a state of nature, but the experience of this is not of an earthly paradise but a hell on earth.

Golding is determined to disabuse us not only of naïve optimism about the nature of children but also of the sort of faith in the goodness of all things natural described by Aldous Huxley in his essay 'Wordsworth in the Tropics':

In the neighbourhood of latitude fifty north, and for the last hundred years or thereabouts, it has been an axiom that Nature is divine and morally uplifting … To commune with the fields and waters, the woodlands and the hills, is to commune, according to our modern and northern ideas, with the visible manifestations of the 'Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe'.8

Such an optimistically Romantic view of the beneficence of the natural world is not confirmed by the visit of Golding's northern boys to the tropics. Golding has remarked of Huxley: 'I owe his writings much myself, I've had much enjoyment and some profit from them—in particular, release from a certain starry-eyed optimism' (MT p. 181). Huxley proposes in 'Wordsworth in the Tropics' that a visit to the tropics would cure any Wordsworthian of his faith in nature. The tropical island of Golding's novel, which seems to the boys paradisial in its unspoilt wildness, proves to be an inferno, a sort of pressure-cooker heated by a vertical sun which aims blows at the boys' heads in its violent intensity, which fires 'down invisible arrows' (p. 67) like an angry or malevolent god. It is just as Huxley describes: 'Nature, under a vertical sun, and nourished by the equatorial rains, is not at all like that chaste, mild deity who presides over … the prettiness, the cosy sublimities of the Lake District.'9 Prettiness and cosiness are important elements in Ralph's memories of natural wildness back in England, but Ralph's experience of nature is hopelessly limited and naïvely comfortable: 'But the remembered cottage on the moors (where "wildness" was ponies, or the snowy moor seen through a window past a copper-kettle …) is utterly out of reach and unreal; a flimsy dream.'10 The reality of nature in the tropics is profoundly sinister and threatening. From their experience of this natural environment the boys derive a sort of religion, but their theology is a demonology, their lord or god is a devil. In this they merely conform to the ways of indigenous jungle-dwellers as described by Huxley: 'The sparse inhabitants of the equatorial forest are all believers in devils.'11

The boys' physical surroundings are terrifying and encourage in them a belief in a malevolent god; the boys' own physical condition also is not improved by their stay on the island. Their return to a state of nature, insofar as it implies a lack of toilet facilities and wholesome food, has a very unpleasant effect on them. The 'littluns' in particular quickly become 'filthily dirty' and are affected by 'a sort of chronic diarrhoea' (p. 64). One of Ralph's problems as chief is that the boys fail to abide by the rule that only one clutch of tide-washed rocks should be used as a lavatory: 'Now people seem to use anywhere. Even near the shelters and the platform' (p. 87). Man seems to be a natural producer of filth as well as evil, and the one is a symbol of the other. Of this aspect of the boys' plight Leighton Hodson writes: 'the odour of decay pervades life from the diarrhoea of the littluns … to Jack hunting the pigs by following their steaming droppings; the association of the Beast, evil, excrement, and blood is both overpowering and purposeful.'12 This physical degeneration is matched by an upsurge of cruelty, bloodlust and violent rapacity as the Beast, which they take to be a spirit or monster outside of themselves, rises up within them and takes over their lives. Overwhelmed by the horrors that have entered their lives, littluns will isolate themselves to wail, gibber and howl at the misery of their condition. Were Lemuel Gulliver to land on the island, he would instantly recognise that he had returned to a land inhabited by Yahoos.

In Book Four of *Gulliver's Travels* the hero lands on an island dominated by the Houyhnhnms, a nation of intelligent horses whose name signifies '*the perfection of nature*'13 and whose generally very admirable way of life is lived in accordance with nature or, more precisely, with reason, which they take to be the supreme gift of nature. The peacefulness, cleanliness and reasonableness of their lives make their society an ideal towards which we humans might well wish to aspire. The humanoids of the island, however, have no such aspirations for they are, as Gulliver is mortified to discover, a disgusting race of passionate, violent, irrational, greedy and lustful creatures: these are the Yahoos. Their appearance and presence are rendered particularly offensive by 'their strange disposition to nastiness and dirt'.14 They wallow in their filth, symbolising their propensity towards evil and the dark, perverse psychological forces which make them incapable of behaving reasonably or organising and maintaining a rational society. Swift thus gives us a painfully simple sketch of the human condition: we aspire to reasonableness and would like to construct and live in rational societies, but the nature of the beast within us, the innate propensity towards violence, cruelty and selfish and self-destructive wickedness, makes such optimistic schemes incapable of realisation. Swift rubs our noses mercilessly in our own filth. John S. Whitley has suggested that 'the Hebrew word "Beelzebub", though it means literally "Lord of flies", might be rendered in English as "lord of dung", that substance around which flies gather'.15

The Yahoo-nature inevitably brings about misery. It is not surprising that even the insensitive, brute Yahoo is driven at times 'to retire into a corner, to lie down and howl, and groan' like the half-demented littluns on Golding's island.16 The transformation from schoolboys to Yahoos forces upon us the bitter truth of *Gulliver's Travels*, that we are creatures whose nature renders us incapable of maintaining rational, equable and peaceful societies such as that of the Houyhnhnms. Ralph and Piggy attempt to create such a society on the island. Piggy in particular has great faith in Houyhnhnm-like values, believing in government by persuasion, deciding issues by debate, above all in reason itself. For Piggy the world is reasonable: at one point he seems amusingly reminiscent of René Descartes: 'I been in bed so much I done some thinking' (p. 102). But Piggy's rationalism is as inadequate as his grammar. His reason cannot control the boys, his belief that science can explain everything makes him unable to comprehend the reality of the Beast, his democracy crumbles before the onslaught of the atavistic Jack, intuitively adept at using the Beast for his own ends. Piggy may be the brains of the outfit but the Beast in Roger, by smashing his skull, makes those brains useless. Piggy's body is quickly swallowed by the sea, which in the chapter 'Beast from Water' was suggested as a possible dwelling-place of the Beast. When Ralph first inspects the spot where Piggy dies, the sea's motion is described by the narrator as 'like the breathing of some stupendous creature', 'the sleeping leviathan' (p. 115). The sea is an insuperable obstacle to the boys' escape and one is tempted to detect a reference to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, wherein the life of man in a state of nature is characterised as being just as Yahoo-like as the boys discover it to be. It is, in Hobbes' famous phrase, 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'.17 *Lord of the Flies* insists that this is a truth, a grim reality, from which there is no escaping.18

The boys' return to nature, then, is not an idyll but a nightmare. It is tempting to see their misadventures as a regression from the Houyhnhnm-like values of our civilisation into the caveman world of the Yahoos. This is Piggy's view of the matter: if only they would behave like grown-ups all would be well; if only a ship carrying grown-ups would spot them they would be saved. This is a comforting view of the book since it seems to put us grown-ups on the side of the angels and endorse the view that our civilisation is rational, peaceful and even salvific. To take such a view is, however, to fall into what Golding suggests is one of the most dangerous of errors: to attempt to deny that the Beast is in us and to limit its existence or operancy to some other time, place, or group of people. Such a reading of the book is untenable. Piggy's faith in grown-ups is shown to be sadly misplaced. Here, displaying typical common sense and faith in the known laws of science, he tries to reassure Ralph: '"The trouble is: Are there ghosts, Piggy? Or beasts?" "Course there aren't." "Why not?" "'Cos things wouldn't make sense. Houses an' streets, an'—TV—they wouldn't work."' (p. 101). But the horrible truth is that man's organised civilisation and sophisticated systems of communication have failed to work, have been destroyed or have broken down in the nightmare of nuclear war.

Civilised values *are* endorsed by the novel—it is heartbreaking to see how friendship and fair-play are replaced by hostility and tyranny—but our actual civilisations are condemned as barbaric and monstrously destructive. Ralph and Jack, chiefs of rival gangs or tribes on the island, are 'two continents of experience and feeling, unable to communicate' (p. 60). They are thus an image of the tragic state of world politics in the mid-twentieth century and of the seemingly eternal need of civilisations to find rivals with whom to quarrel, the perennial argy-bargy of history which Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* sums up as 'wills gen wonts'.19 When the Lord of the Flies himself, the focus of evil in the book, condescends to speak, it is with the voice of a schoolmaster, whose duty it is to instil the values of our civilisation into developing children. That these values are, to say the least, defective is made very clear by an outburst from Piggy just before his fatal fall: '"Which is better—to be a pack of painted niggers like you are, or to be sensible like Ralph is?"' (p. 199). Piggy *in extremis* lets slip that being 'sensible' may well involve adhering to tribal values and loyalties, regarding whomever is judged to be alien with contempt or loathing and treating them accordingly. But then Piggy knows what it is to be an alien, because he is made an outsider in part by his being physically unattractive but also as a function of that prominent feature of English civilisation, the class system.

Golding's later novels, especially *The Pyramid* and *Rites of Passage*, make abundantly clear his deep bitterness at and hatred of the evils of class. But even in this first novel, even on a desert island, this Golding obsession is in evidence. The novelist Ian McEwan has written of his adolescent reading of *Lord of the Flies*: 'As far as I was concerned, Golding's island was a thinly disguised boarding school.'20 At one point the narrator seems to claim that class is of no importance in the alienation and persecution of Piggy: 'There had grown up tacitly among the biguns the opinion that Piggy was an outsider, not only by accent, which did not matter, but by fat, and ass-mar, and specs, and a certain disinclination for manual labour' (p. 70). But the narrator implicitly admits that accent, a mark of class, is an alienating factor ['not only'] and actually mocks, in passing, Piggy's way of speaking. The view that class does not matter in Piggy's misfortunes is scarcely borne out by events. From the very outset Piggy is isolated, stranded on an island within the island, by being lower-class. On the book's first page Ralph's 'automatic gesture' of pulling up his socks makes 'the jungle seem for a moment like the Home Counties' (p. 7) and unfortunately Piggy just does not fit into the middle-class ambience implied thereby. Ralph is a good-natured boy, but in this initial scene he seems very reluctant to accept the friendship of the one companion he has so far found on the desert island: '"What's your name?" "Ralph." The fat boy waited to be asked his name in turn but this proffer of acquaintance was not made' (p. 9). One has the uncomfortable feeling throughout this scene that Ralph has been conditioned to be unfriendly towards boys who talk like Piggy. Ralph is not slow to inform Piggy that his father is officer-class, but in response to the crucial question '"What's your father?"' Piggy can produce only the poignant reply: '"My dad's dead," he said quickly, "and my mum—"' (p. 14). The unseemly haste with which Piggy announces that his father is dead suggests a reluctance to reveal his place in life and the blank after the mention of his mum speaks unhappy volumes. Piggy has failed to produce satisfactory credentials. It is at least partly for this reason that Piggy is doomed to become 'the centre of social derision so that everyone felt cheerful and normal' (p. 164). Life seems cheery and normal provided there are the likes of Piggy around to be looked down on and derided.

Piggy's main persecutor is Jack, who from the first evinces contempt and hatred for Piggy, whom he seems to regard as an upstart. Jack's education appears to have instilled in him the belief that it is his right to give commands, to rule: '"I ought to be chief," said Jack with simple arrogance, "because I'm chapter chorister and head boy"' (p. 23). His privileged choir-school background has no doubt taught him much about the necessity of hierarchies, including the notion that head boy from such a school ought to be top man anywhere. Whitley comments: 'This assumption of leadership, bred by being part of a civilised elite, is maintained when he becomes a member of a primitive elite. The perfect prefect becomes the perfect savage.'21 It would be difficult to imagine anything more suggestive of innocence than a group of cathedral choristers, but we first see the choir as 'something dark' in the haze, as 'the darkness' (p. 20): the choir is from the outset associated with evil. A cathedral choir connotes also a certain English middle-class cosiness, a social world 'assured of certain certainties'. Here is Jack at his most 'sensible', declaring some important certainties: '"… We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we're not savages. We're English; and the English are best at everything"' (p. 47). Golding has written that such cosy English chauvinism was something he particularly wished to attack in *Lord of the Flies*:

One of our faults is to believe that evil is somewhere else and inherent in another nation. My book was to say: you think that now the war is over and an evil thing destroyed, you are safe because you are naturally kind and decent. (HG p. 89).

The English error is to objectify and externalise the Devil, as the boys do, and this self-congratulatory attitude is dangerous because it allows the Devil to go to work, evils to be perpetrated, under cover of the belief that English people are good, decent and fair-minded. The classic jingoistic expression of such an attitude might be: 'Come off it! This is *England*! Something like that couldn't happen in England!' Whoever adopts such an attitude blinds himself to the evils which do exist in English life, prominent among which is the class system. Golding tries to expose the truth about this evil by translating it from England to a desert island: Jack's hatred of and violence towards Piggy is the raw naked truth about English social organisation. Classist attitudes not only ensure that under the motto of fair play a very unfair deal is given to most members of a society, they also bring about the reification of people. Thus a person may be treated not on the merits of his complex make-up as an individual but merely in accordance with his being recognised as a component of a mass class-group. The final blow dealt to Piggy transforms the extraordinary and miraculous complexity and beauty of his brain, the seat of consciousness and what makes him the particular and unique person he is, into mere 'stuff'.

The treatment meted out to Piggy makes the view that the boys' story is one of simple regression and degeneration a very difficult one to hold. But such a view is completely undermined by the adventitious arrival of the naval officer at the close. Every reader of the novel must have felt profoundly relieved when Ralph stumbles upon this white-clad saviour. All will be well now that the authority and values of civilisation have returned in the figure of this man, who might indeed almost be Ralph's father come to rescue them all. Critics have long recognised, however, that this warrior who stops the boys' war is anything but snowy-white morally. Virginia Tiger sums the matter up thus:

There is no essential difference between the island world and the adult one and it is the burden of the fable's structure … to make it clear that the children's experiment on the island has its constant counterpart in the world outside.22

The officer is a warrior, a killer, and he is right to regard the boys' war as mere 'Fun and games', because compared to the massive death-dealing of the nuclear war in which he is involved it is very small-scale indeed. But the officer is nonetheless dismayed that a group of British boys should have degenerated into savages, should have failed 'to put up a better show than that'. Show, the keeping-up of a good appearance, is what this ultra-English officer is all about. The white uniform, the gold buttons, the 'trim cruiser' of the closing sentence are all signs of the officer's belief in orderliness, cleanliness, and of his and his nation's belief in their moral rectitude. The officer's first, and apparently kindly, thought about Ralph is that he 'needed a bath, a hair-cut, a nose-wipe and a good deal of ointment' (pp. 221–3). An advocate, no doubt, of the stiff upper lip, he is embarrassed by Ralph's heartbroken tears. The officer is no saviour at all. He is doubly guilty: of being a warrior on behalf of one of the world's two tribes and of sanitising the killing, the vast butchery, involved in such conflicts, of cleaning and dressing it up so that it seems sane and sensible. He is able to masquerade as a peacemaker, a bringer of light to the savages. He dislikes the blood and filth of the boys, he is embarrassed by Ralph's open display of emotion, but the blood and filth are the true symbols of war or warriors and Ralph's grief is an absolutely human and appropriate reaction to the revelations of the island.

The officer comes ashore like Lemuel Gulliver to discover a pack of Yahoos. Like Gulliver, he finds them distasteful. But Gulliver gradually comes to see that supposedly civilised humans are worse than Yahoos because they have all the filth and vices of the Yahoos, though they hide these under clothes and a clothing of pride in their own supposed moral rectitude, and have abused what reason they have by employing it in the invention of new ways in which to express their viciousness. It is a uniform-wearing Yahoo that has come to rescue the boys: there is even more reason than Ralph thinks to weep for 'the darkness of man's heart'. The phrase describes succinctly enough the central concern of Swift's writing but asks us specifically to think of Conrad. The overall picture of man's nature which emerges from *Lord of the Flies* is indeed similar to the one we find in *Heart of Darkness*. A return to the state of nature, an escape into primitivism such as that attempted by Conrad's Kurtz, leads only to the unleashing of brutality, greed for power, and sadism in the most naked and brutal forms, to the horror of orgiastic and murderous midnight dances and human heads stuck on poles. But the forces of civilisation, clad in shiny white to proclaim their moral excellence, are mere whited sepulchres, every bit as guilty as Kurtz and lacking even the honesty of open savagery. Both books offer this grim view of the human condition: there is no rescue, no way out, and the ending of *Lord of the Flies* is anything but happy. To regard it as such would be to ignore the prophetic voice of Simon.

In *The Coral Island* Ballantyne's three young adventurers had the names Ralph, Jack and Peterkin Gay. In Golding's novel we find a Ralph and a Jack but two boys seem to share the derivation of their names from the third member of Ballantyne's jolly-sounding trio: Piggy's name is an approximate and unpleasant contraction of Peterkin Gay, but the name Simon, we know from the Bible, was the original name of St Peter, so Simon has a claim too. Simon and Piggy are, indeed, alike in sharing a role in *Lord of the Flies*, the role of outsider, scapegoat and victim of murder. Though the two are alike in this way, however, they are otherwise very different from one another and represent, indeed, two mighty opposites, two warring ways of looking at the world, which occur again and again in Golding's fiction. Faith in science and rationality, with a marked disbelief in anything supernatural, is characteristic of Piggy. Simon, by contrast, is intuitive, introspective, other-worldly; his central insight is gained in a vision or trance; Simon represents and has access to a dimension of experience it is proper to call religious. Piggy cannot understand Simon and thinks him mad.

This conflict between the contrasting world-views of science or ratiocination and religious or visionary experience, between worldly commonsense and other-worldly mysticism, is dramatised time and again by Golding: in the figures of Nick Shales and Rowena Pringle in *Free Fall*, in Roger Mason and Jocelin in *The Spire* and in Edmund Talbot and Robert James Colley in *Rites of Passage*. This conflict is clearly of great importance to Golding and it would be true to say that, though he is at pains to be fair to and make a strong case for the scientific or worldly side, his sympathies ultimately lie with the Simons, Jocelins and Colleys. In an essay on education he writes: 'it cannot be said often enough or loudly enough that "Science" is not the most important thing' (HG p. 129). This too has a Swiftian air to it. In Book Three of *Gulliver's Travels* Swift demonstrates powerfully that the analytical intellect, alone and unaided by any higher insight, cannot even begin to offer solutions to the problems of being human. Golding has expressed admiration for Copernicus, whom he characterises as a man devoted to the quest for scientific truth but who nonetheless bears the signs of an inclination towards mysticism.23 In *Lord of the Flies* Golding's bias in this matter is perhaps most clearly seen in the differing degrees of respect accorded to Piggy and Simon by the narrative in their deaths. Leighton Hodson describes this succinctly:

Golding manages to deepen his meaning of what the boys' attitudes represent by providing them, in their common ends, with descriptions that correspond to the limited practical intelligence in the case of Piggy—dry in tone—and the intuitive depth of understanding in the case of Simon—eloquent and transfiguring.24

The limitations of Piggy's practical intelligence are, indeed, particularly highlighted by comparison with Simon. Piggy's clever and sensible schemes fail to bring about the rescue the boys desperately need; his rational approach is unable to sway the mass of boys in debate or preserve order among them; above all, he rejects Simon's suggestion that the Beast is a reality within the boys themselves. Piggy rightly condemns the notion that there is an external Beast that lives in the forest or the sea, but under great pressure comes to believe that Jack is the Beast or Devil, failing to see that this too is an externalisation, an avoidance of his own guilt. Piggy's scientific views dictate that there is no Devil in the world, but if he must allow that there is evil he is determined to 'believe that evil is somewhere else' and in someone else. He is himself, however, involved in the murder of Simon, for all his predictable attempts to exculpate himself and explain the killing away as an accident.

Simon is murdered by the boys when he emerges from the forest into the frenzy of their dance, supposedly a charm against the Beast. Their defence against an imagined external Beast allows the beast within them to gain absolute control and transform them into murderers. Simon had come to tell them that the creature on the mountain they thought to be the Beast was merely the horribly damaged body of a pilot, evidence of the effects of the beast within us in the world of warring adults. Simon had come to bring them confirmation of the truth that he had proposed earlier and for which he had been shouted down and derided, the dark truth that the Beast is within them, each and every one of them. The reception he is given proves his point once and for all. The truth which Simon offers is a grim one, but Simon himself is not at all a grim or dark figure. He is affectionate, gentle and kind, helping the littluns to find good fruit, for example, but also a loner, a 'queer' boy who isolates himself in a forest glade reminiscent of a church and goes into reveries. It is small wonder that the other boys regard this youthful mystic as mad or 'batty', a fool. We must take Simon a great deal more seriously. The traditional role of the prophet is to awaken men to the truth of their own sinfulness: this Simon does, and he also succeeds in fulfilling the popular view of the prophet's task by foretelling the future. He tells Ralph that he will get home safely and his voice comes back to Ralph just before he is in fact rescued. The boys are living in the dangerous error of believing that the Beast is an evil creature at the mountaintop, so Simon the prophet goes to the mountain to discover the truth. On his way he finds a forest glade desecrated by a sow's head on a stick, a gift for the Beast. Simon falls into a fit, or hallucination, or vision, in which the Lord of the Flies, the Devil, speaks to him through the foul mouthpiece of the head and tells him that he is '"part of you"'. He warns Simon to go back and fall into line or the boys will 'do' him (pp. 157–9). Simon defies the threat, climbs the mountain, finds the parachutist and descends to the beach to be slaughtered.

Amidst the bloody chaos of the storm and the demonic dance we are told that 'Simon was crying out something about a dead man on a hill' (p. 168) as he is being assaulted. He refers of course to the parachutist, but we must hear also a suggestion of the death of Christ on Calvary and realise that, in killing the true prophet who had come down to reveal to them their real nature, their sinfulness, and thus set them on the road towards saving themselves, the boys are re-enacting the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Simon's life and death are an imitation of Christ. In ascending the mountain and returning to the boys, despite the warnings of the Lord of the Flies about what will happen to him, he takes up and shares the Cross like his namesake from Cyrene: '"Simon. He helps"', as Ralph earlier remarks (p. 59). His self-sacrifice does not, however, achieve an instant conversion of the boys to goodness. Nor did Christ's with regard to mankind as a whole. Piggy blames him for bringing his death on himself: '"Coming in the dark—he had no business crawling like that out of the dark. He was batty. He asked for it"' (p. 173). He walked right into his own death, so he must have been mad, a fool, a Simple Simon.

To suggest that a person or character is a fool would normally undermine any confidence we might have that the person or character concerned had wisdom to offer us. Here this is not the case. Simon imitates the folly of that supreme fool Christ, who allowed himself to be crucified and whose teachings must seem foolish to the worldly-wise. Christ the holy fool is admirably described by Erasmus in the *Praise of Folly*:

Christ too, though he is the wisdom of the Father, was made something of a fool himself in order to help the folly of mankind, when he assumed the nature of man and was seen in man's form … Nor did he wish them to be redeemed in any other way save by the folly of the cross and through his simple, ignorant apostles, to whom he unfailingly preached folly.25

To those in darkness, to those under the sway of the Lord of This World who is the Lord of the Flies, the wisdom of Christ must indeed appear utter folly. Simon is the first of Golding's holy fools, characters who in many respects are holy or Christ-like and yet, almost by that very token, are ill-fitted for survival in the world of fallen man: two clear examples, whom we shall examine later, are Nathaniel in *Pincher Martin* and Matty in *Darkness Visible*. The holy or prophetic fool dares to challenge the cosy but delusive beliefs of the majority and so must be laughed at, dismissed, driven out or slaughtered by that majority.

The message or wisdom which Simon offers—that the Beast is in us, that we must acknowledge the 'thing of darkness' as our own—is disturbing and negative. He does not appear to bring the good news of redemption or salvation. But his life and death offer some hope in the book's pervasive gloom inasmuch that among all the boys, so to say, at least one good man has been found, one person who is capable of imitating Christ's redemptive example. At the mountaintop he is able to free the dead pilot, according to Golding a symbol of the nightmare of human history (HG p. 90), and allow him to fly off, just as Christ, from an orthodox point of view, changed the nature of history by freeing man from the bondage of sin, offering the *possibility* of escape from the endless backsliding and tribulations of human and personal history. There is, furthermore, the 'eloquent and transfiguring' description of the sea's disposal of Simon's body. Simon is carried 'towards the open sea' by the tide, attended by 'strange, moonbeam-bodied creatures with fiery eyes' who weave a halo of brightness around his head (pp. 169–70). These beautiful and seemingly magical little entities we have seen before in broad daylight:

There were creatures that lived in this last fling of the sea, tiny transparencies that came questing in with the water over the hot, dry sand … Perhaps food had appeared where the last incursion there had been none; bird droppings, insects perhaps, any of the strewn detritus of landward life. Like a myriad of tiny teeth in a saw, the transparencies came scavenging on the beach. (p. 66)

But there is no beauty or magic or mystery. The creatures are simply the lowest point in the ugly world of living nature, vile scavengers as coldly destructive as sawteeth. It is Simon's self-sacrifice that transforms them to beauty, goes some way towards redeeming the world of nature and reestablishing its beauty and harmony.

What light there is in the book does, indeed, seem to be concentrated around Simon. There are, however, certain other aspects of the novel which may be seen as mitigating the generally excoriating treatment of human nature. 'I am by nature an optimist' Golding has remarked 'but a defective logic—or a logic which I sometimes hope desperately is defective—makes a pessimist of me' (HG p. 126). Though this is rather a dark utterance, it does make explicit that tension between optimism and pessimism, between hope and despair, which is characteristic of Golding's fiction. Indeed, from *The Spire* onwards it seems appropriate to characterise his fiction as broadly tragi-comic. Though comedy is a grotesquely inappropriate term to apply to *Lord of the Flies*, the outlook of the novel is not entirely pessimistic.

There is first the essential decency of Ralph, 'the fair boy' whose eyes proclaim 'no devil' and who tries to keep the other boys' eyes on the values of civilisation, tries 'to keep a clean flag of flame flying' (pp. 8, 11, 45). Though the book suggests that we should be sceptical about such an ocular proclamation and about 'Rally round the flag, boys!' sentiments, there is no doubt that Ralph does strive earnestly and sincerely to be fair and decent. There is also the goodness, the sheer vitality, of the twins Samneric, Ralph's most loyal supporters. Not only are they kind, loyal and generous, but their apparent blending into one another makes them seem representative of average everyday man, the 'man on the Clapham omnibus'. Moreover, we sympathise strongly with this group and abominate Jack and Roger. It seems that we can at least say of ourselves that we would *like to be* decent, fair and good. Our sympathy or even identification with Ralph is also very effective in intensifying the 'thriller' aspect of the novel: in the final chapter we have the very unpleasant feeling that *we* are being hunted by Jack and Roger. How we fear and loathe their extravagant and insatiable evil! There is some comfort to be taken in this, but we must remember that Ralph and Samneric, those models of decency, were involved in the murder of Simon and, like another decent man caught up in evil, they try to wash the innocent martyr's blood from their hands by their denial that they were present at the killing. Further, Samneric are coerced into joining Jack's tribe and in Ralph's final interview with them they have become, for all the kindness towards Ralph which they cannot quite fight down, guardians of a regime where all rules have disappeared except the rule of sadism. Samneric, like other ordinary men before them, have been transformed into concentration camp guards, porters at the Gate of Hell. Ralph's conversation with them at the Castle Rock is perhaps the most heartrending section of the entire book and there is every reason why that should be so.26

Just as we sympathise with the nature of Ralph, Samneric and, indeed, even Piggy, so too we are attracted to the democratic system they create. The gentle, exhortatory paternalism of Ralph and Piggy seems both fair and sensible as a way of organising government. It is manifestly preferable to Jack's absolutist tyranny. Again our hearts seem to be in roughly the right place. And yet Jack's system has greater attraction for the boys, who desert Ralph's tribe in droves. In fairness to Jack it must be said that in certain important respects his reign of terror is a more effective form of government than Ralph's. He gives the boys meat and he is able to keep them in order, to put a stop to quarrels, fragmentation and even sheer laziness in a way which Ralph was not: '"See? They do what I want"' (p. 198), he pointedly remarks to Ralph, who has just become a one-man tribe. Once again the Leviathan raises its head: Hobbes' pessimistic view is that human fractiousness requires to be quelled and governed by an absolute monarch. *Lord of the Flies* could never be said to advocate Jack's monarchy however, since though in some ways it clearly 'works' it also panders to and is an expression of the worst aspects of human nature; greed, cruelty and lust. Like a vicious Roman emperor he provides food and entertainment for his mob, entertainment taking the form of beating littluns, murderous ritual dances, and the obscene and rapacious violence of the hunt: 'The sow collapsed under them and they were heavy and fulfilled upon her' (p. 149). Jack intuitively knows all about the lowest and vilest elements in our nature and how to exploit them:

Simon became inarticulate in his effort to express mankind's essential illness. Inspiration came to him.

"What's the dirtiest thing there is?"

As an answer Jack dropped into the uncomprehending silence that followed it the crude expressive syllable. Release was like an orgasm … The hunters were screaming with delight. (p. 97)

Obscenity can be delightful: that is a symptom of our essential illness.

Jack may be successful in satisfying in the short-term certain basic and base human cravings, but his system offers no hope of rescue. Behaviour such as Jack indulges in and encourages seems to preclude redemption or salvation, even if salvation is no more than the imitation of Christ in *this* world which we see in Simon, whom Jack and his minions kill. The symbol of his terrible régime is the stick sharpened at both ends, the support of the totem Lord of the Flies, a weapon which seems to suggest that its killing-power may rebound against the user. It is a symbol which reminds us of the self-defeating nature of the weaponry deployed for nuclear war by those who build fortresses and bunkers against imagined external threats and evils in the world outside the island. The spear is sharpened by Roger and, for all that has been said about Jack's ability to command obedience, it is not difficult to imagine this sinister figure returning Jack's violent means to power upon him and completing his bloody and Macbeth-like career by sticking *his* head on a pole.

At the close the naval officer arrives to find the island paradise lost and burning, the scene 'with dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms'.27 Coming from his warship, he is a veritable *deus ex machina* descending from the 'above' of the adult world to set things right and rescue the erring children. Despite the sinister associations of the naval officer, might he not still be seen as the caring and omnipotent God who finally intervenes in man's world to stop the course of the bloody history of fallen man and restore peace forever? Such a view would offer a glimmer of religious light at the end of the tunnel. Such a reading is perhaps allowable, but there is evidence in the novel which counts against it and which ought not to be ignored. There seems to be no haven for the boys to be rescued *to*. We are told much earlier that 'Roger's arm was conditioned by a civilisation that knew nothing of him and was in ruins' (p. 67). When the boys first spot a passing ship on the horizon the narrative speaks of 'the smoke of home' beckoning to them (p. 73), a touching phrase since it suggests both the homeliness the boys long for and the smoking ruins that are all that remain of home. Having been terrified by the dead parachutist that seems to be the Beast, Ralph complains that the 'thing squats by the fire as though it didn't want us to be rescued' (p. 138), and the corpse is, indeed, a sign that the civilisation which might rescue them has been destroyed by war. The naval officer has played a part in that war. Perhaps there is no comfort in seeing him as an image of God, because the image is of a flawed and irresponsible god, perhaps like the forgetful or lazy creator of the island's reef: 'The coral was scribbled in the sea as though a giant had bent down to reproduce the shape of the island in a flowing, chalk line but tired before he had finished' (p. 31). The creator's signature does not inspire confidence in his character and evidences from nature generally, as we have seen, from the 'enmity' of the sun, that traditional symbol of the Godhead, downwards, are not such as to encourage faith in absolute beneficence (pp. 13–15). The weight of evidence would seem to indicate that any creator must be a cruel selfish wielder of power, that the gods are indeed as Gloucester described them, swatting men like flies with an ease the naval officer might well envy or might even match, a source of no comfort or hope. What desperate hope the book offers is simply the example of Simon, the acknowledgement of our guilt, of the 'thing of darkness' within us, and the overcoming of this guilt and darkness in generous, if unsuccessful, self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Simon, like Cordelia, allows a little room for hope, but the book's abiding impression remains like that of *King Lear*: 'grief, sheer grief, grief, grief, grief'.

**Notes**

1. *King Lear*, III. 7. 81.

2. Ibid., V. 3. 197.

3. Compare *King Lear*, IV. 6. 4.

4. *King Lear*, III. 7. 81.

5. Ibid., III. 6. 74.

6. More, p. 20.

7. Alastair Niven suggests that 'Ralph's words are an uncomprehending child's expression of what W.B. Yeats wrote in his poem "The Second Coming"'. Niven, *William Golding*, p. 21.

8. Huxley, *Do What You Will*, p. 113.

9. Ibid.

10. Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor, *William Golding*, p. 40.

11. Huxley op. cit., p. 114.

12. Hodson, *William Golding*, p. 38.

13. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, p. 190 (Book IV, Chapter 3).

14. Swift op. cit., p. 212 (Book IV, Chapter 6).

15. Whitley, Golding p. 43:

16. Swift op. cit., p. 213 (Book IV, Chapter 6).

17. Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, p. 186 (Book II, Chapter 13).

18. The importance of Hobbes as background-reading for *Lord of the Flies* is stressed by Alastair Niven. See Niven op. cit., p. 38.

19. Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 4.

20. Ian McEwan, 'Schoolboys', in Carey, *William Golding*, p. 158.

21. Whitey op. cit., p. 28.

22. Tiger, *William Golding*, p. 51.

23. See 'Copernicus' in *The Hot Gates*.

24. Hodson op. cit., p. 29.

25. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, pp. 198–9.

26. *The Tempest*, V.1. 275.

27. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, XII. 644.

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*Source*: "The Nature of the Beast: *Lord of the Flies* (1954)." In *The Novels of William Golding*, 1–23, 200. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

Citation Information Citation InformationH:\English 10 Honors\The Individual and Society\C in C Explanatory Essay\LOTF Article 2_files\spacer.gif MLA Chicago Manual of Style

Boyd, S. J. "The Nature of the Beast: *Lord of the Flies*." *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 5 Nov. 2013. <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE34&SID=&iPin=MCILOTF004&SingleRecord=True>.

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