Reviews

WILLIAM GOLDING: A CRITICAL STUDY, by Mark Kinkead-Weekes and Ian Gregor. *Faber and Faber*. 35*s*.

William Golding's novels have sometimes been taken up by Christians because they seem to endorse, in a modernistic way, traditional religious ideas. Are they not about original sin, man's fall from innocence, the sufferings of the damned, the responsibility of free will, the problem of distinguishing love of God from love of self?

The most obvious argument of this book is that any such easy adoption of Golding's work by Christian, or other systematic interpreters, is misguided. A close reading of the novels—and the reading behind this study is indeed close—reveals that there are many obstacles in the way of such interpretation. Golding's development has been away from the writing of modern fables (and even *Lord of the Flies* is much too complex to be labelled a fable *tout court*) towards the more complex and densely populated area of *myth*. By their fidelity to Golding's actual words, the authors make much good sense of passages hitherto obscure. Details take on a new relevance in the context of each novel understood in a more concentrated light. The significance of Golding's tense, and at times almost perverse, style becomes clear when we understand the true nature of his objectives. The authors succeed brilliantly in doing what they set out to do: to elucidate, and to 'convey something of Golding's imaginative power and resourcefulness'. They have written an indispensable companion to the novels.

The success in elucidation immediately brings into focus some problems, however. It is part of the main argument of the book that many critics have misunderstood Golding, by putting him into the wrong category. They have thought of his works as fables, instead of seeing them as myths. This argument depends, clearly, upon the establishment of a valid distinction between fable and myth. But I am not sure that this has quite been achieved. In the last chapter, where Golding's work as a whole is under review, an attempt is made (under the influence, one suspects, of Iris Murdoch's *Encounter* essay 'Against Dryness') to define myth by reference to two opposed concepts: the novel as history, and the novel as fable. In the novel of history, reality so transcends all human pattern-making that all kinds of things are included simply to celebrate the untidy multifariousness of real life. In the fable, on the other hand, the making of a pattern, or meaning, is paramount. Fidelity to common experience is of secondary, or even of no account. Myth stands between these two. It 'so deals with men as to reveal an archetypal "truth" hidden below the surface of everyday life' (p. 243). In a myth 'we begin with the world we know, and examine it in such a way that we no longer seem to know it. The essence of literary myth is process, and, more precisely, reversal and discovery.'

These categories are established by reference, in the first place to three different kinds of example: Arnold Bennett's novels are typical 'history', Aesop's stories are typical fables, and *Oedipus Rex* is a characteristic myth. The asymmetry of these three reference points for the establishment of a distinctive category of *myths* is plain. Apparently there are no ancient histories—this suggests that history in the relevant sense begins, perhaps, with the novel itself. Also, fables are, it appears, stories (Aesop) while myths are drama (Oedipus). None of these points is dwelt upon by the authors as they develop their threefold categories. But surely the differences are crucial. Myth is process, a matter of reversal and discovery, partly at any rate because it is still dramatic—that is, something enacted, in which the end is truly in the future and to that extent unknown, to be discovered in the performance. Whereas fable is, it seems, already complete and therefore the meaning it contains can be said to be wholly determined before we begin to read it. How then can a novel—which like a fable is a complete package—be also a myth, which is somehow open-ended, a process of discovery? And how is myth to be dis-

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tinguished from history when, so often, one wants to say of a particular work that it contains the essential elements of both forms? (Saul Bellow's *Herzog* seems to me to fall squarely into *both* categories as they are described by the author.) These difficulties seem to suggest that the term *myth* is a less useful critical implement than it looks at first, and even sometimes appears to be just a rhetorical device for providing critical, theoretical support for the kind of novels Golding likes to write. If myth is not a clear category, those who have misconstrued Golding have not perhaps been so demonstrably wrong as at first appeared. Certainly they may have failed to read with sufficient intelligence and care the words on the page. But they can hardly be blamed for not putting Golding into so dubious a category.

In short, the close reading of the texts that we find in the first five chapters—each devoted to one novel—is more helpful, critically, than the theoretical categorization that is attempted in the last chapter. But I am not completely happy even here: for some of the key concepts associated with the *myth* category are in constant evidence throughout the analyses. *Free Fall* is, of course, the test case, since it is that book which most obviously marks a shift of emphasis and approach, and is also most obviously obscure. The authors' analysis of *Free Fall* emphasizes that its distinctive feature is precisely that structure of process, and discovery, characteristic of myth. And the discovery is at two levels. First of all there is Sammy Mountjoy, trying to discover, in the writing of an autobiographical novel about his own past, the key to his own problems. Secondly there is William Golding 'playing a waiting game' and finding a clue to the puzzle, which eludes Sammy even up to the beginning of the last page of the book. Now, I do not dispute that this is what Golding meant the book to be. But I am still unconvinced by it as a novelistic structure. Not only is the ending, if viewed in the above light, intolerably oblique. The whole structure seems to me unsatisfactory. Why does a painter have to write a novel in order to find the key to his problems? Why doesn't he do it in his own medium—paint? (One reply would be: it would not give Golding a novel to write. But I don't think this is good enough to account for the awkwardness of the conception.) More important, the whole idea of process and discovery (insisted upon throughout this critical study) is only obliquely applicable to the novel. Of course we can read about characters discovering themselves; and in doing so we make discoveries ourselves too. But, in the novel, as distinct from the dramatic performance, there is no real future, and hence no real process in the work itself. There is, liberally, a world of difference between the notion of imitation that is present in the novel and that which applies to the drama (the drama as performance, not drama as script). The drama works by drawing us into a world apart—we enter the walls of the theatre and live there awhile with the actors. But the novel's 'world' is enclosed, not by real walls, but by the covers of a book. The novelist 'goes after reality with language' (as Herzog says). The reader makes his discoveries by his response to words on the page, whereas the theatre audience makes theirs by responding to actions performed. In so far as I understand the analysis of *Free Fall* in this book, it seems to me to be asking of the novel that it should be able to enact a discovery in a way only possible to the drama. Is this, perhaps, a matter of placing something in the wrong category?

I put the point as a question because I am not confident that I have fully understood either *Free Fall* or the account given of it by the authors of the present book. What I am sure of, however, is that they have provided an invaluable aid to understanding Golding. And their work would seem to suggest a further stage of critical study: namely a placing of Golding in the context of modern fiction generally, and a critical appraisal of his stature as an artist. I hope they pursue their work in this direction.

BRIAN WICKER

THE WARES OF AUTOLYCUS. Selected Literary Essays of Alice Meynell. Chosen and introduced by P. M. Fraser. *O.U.P.* 30s.

This collection of Alice Meynell's Essays ranges in time from 1895 to 1908 with one solitary essay written in 1917 for the *Dublin Review*. Twenty-nine of the thirty-seven essays were written between 1895 and 1899 for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The dates are important. In the strangely detached mannerisms of her style Mrs Meynell is clearly pleased with herself. And well she might be. It was rare for a woman at this date to have achieved such a secure place in literary criticism. It must be remembered that this was a double triumph: neither intelli-

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