

# The Original Power of Golding

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"I am interested in story telling  
and what gives power to a story".

W. Golding<sup>1</sup>

The late Sir William Golding, who died on 19 June 1993, was one of only four English writers to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was one of the greatest novelists in the years after the Second World War, for some the greatest. He was forty-two by the time his first and most famous novel *Lord of Flies* was published in 1954. He went on to write another ten novels culminating in *Fire Down Below* (1989), which was the final novel in the trilogy of a sea journey to Australia set in the early nineteenth century. The trilogy *Rites of Passage*, *Close Quarters* and *Fire Down Below*<sup>2</sup>, was published in one volume in 1991 entitled *To the Edge of the Earth* and could be called the journey of modern man.

Golding's second novel *The Inheritors* (1955) was his own favourite and the only one which he re-read. Critics regard it as his best novel, with some scholars regarding it as his most 'perfect' work. It complements *Lord of the Flies*, and the two novels together mark Golding's 'primitive period.' "They deserve special reading as companion pieces."<sup>3</sup>

*The Inheritors* is a difficult novel and interest in Golding somewhat waned after its publication. By the time of his fourth novel *Free Fall* (1959) interest was reviving, and with *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors* it forms a possible trilogy in which Golding explores the loss of human innocence and the consequent darkness of the human mind i.e. the emergence of evil, violence and cruelty. The 'Fall' of man is there at the emergence of human history (*The Inheritors*); it is to be found in everyone's personal loss of innocence (*Free Fall*), and it is present even in 'civilised' children (*Lord of the Flies*). These three novels give us the hallmark of Golding's works, which in conversation with Jack Biles he described as: "when we fall, we fall off into our dark side . . . the change from order to disorder means that people show the

original sin . . . in themselves”<sup>4</sup>. For Golding this makes everyman’s journey through life a crawl towards the light.

Golding rejected an over-optimistic view of man’s evolution. Although *The Inheritors* is not directly in line with the biblical views of man’s origins in an idyllic Eden, Golding does suggest that the emergence of homo sapiens involved a falling away from a state of comparative innocence.

The dynamic of *The Inheritors* is symbolised in logs going over the place of the waterfall. Neanderthal man cannot get beyond the fall, but New Man (homo sapiens) can navigate the river fall driven by a new intensity/vision. The source of power of the New People, as the novel portrays, is also their means of destruction. Their move to the top of the fall leads to a new level of experience: their power to impose their own will, which is the gateway to the beginning of evil.

From *The Inheritors* to *Free Fall* is a move from the ‘dawn’ of evil to everyman’s free-will fall. The dynamic in this novel is Sammy Mountjoy’s quest for a bridge between the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit—a search for spiritual being in the twentieth century’s social and moral chaos. Golding’s intention in *Free Fall* is to present the patternlessness of man’s contemporary existence in the West with its lack of spiritual gravity, creeds, or codes to sustain the individual.

*Lord of the Flies* was written in the light of Golding’s experience of twentieth-century manifestations of original sin. The dynamic of this novel, which was subsequently made into a film, is what happens from the perspective of child-survivors of a plane crash on a desert island shaped like a ship<sup>5</sup>. The children’s viewpoint, through Ralph their initial leader, is the social disintegration of so-called ‘civilised’ children.

In Golding’s view the innocence of children is a fallacy; something we are now learning in our society. For Golding homo sapiens by nature has a terrible potentiality for evil, which cannot be eradicated or controlled by political systems. The evil tree of Genesis 2 grows in human consciousness. Mankind’s essential illness is human consciousness, which objectifies evil rather than recognising its subjectivity. So the island children look for external manifestations of what really is in themselves e.g. the fear projected onto a dead parachutist whom the children view as ‘the beast’. This mentality of the children releases the sin of Cain.

The fallen condition of mankind runs through the rest of Golding’s stories (novels). He pointed out that the whole thing about *Pincher Martin* (1956) concerns his free will, which gives choices. Man can

turn away from the Creator because that is what free will is about. Pincher turns away to build himself, but he only builds the dark rock of self-centredness. He acts as a warning of contemporary humanity's inability to achieve any kind of spiritual vision. The novel becomes a programme of the necessity for such a vision, for religious belief.

*The Pyramid* (1967) looks at modern society driven by the 'god without mercy' i.e. the struggle to climb the social pyramid no matter what the cost. This is a form of death involving an inability to love. This is the disease of Stillbourne, the town of the Pyramid, which is a symbol of contemporary society, which erodes the heart out of love leaving only dull respectability and illicit sex. Society's class structures, with all of their consequences, involve the stillbirth and entombment of genuine love.

In *The Spire* (1964) Golding turned to the society of the Church, exploring the conflict between faith and reason, represented by Dean Jocelin the faith builder and Mason the reason builder. Both are servants of the Church, who build in different ways. Both have a stake in the building of the spire on top of the 'cathedral ship'. The spire is Jocelin's aspiration of faith in contrast to the doubt of Mason. Miraculously the spire is built, but the whole enterprise is steeped in corruption on both sides. Jocelin is Everyman aspiring to God in whom man can discover the unity of knowledge and love—aspiring through darkness in the Church to the light.

*Darkness Visible* (1979) is Golding's only novel with a woman as a central character. Sophy is foil to Matty whose symbolic path goes from Eden to the Apocalypse, as he suffers the fate of the Old Testament prophets along the way. In contrast Sophy is the temptress recognising the powers of evil to be exploited. She embarks on a journey of breaking into darkness going the way of the flesh, in contrast to Matty's way of the spirit.

In *The Paper Men* (1984) the central character is Barclay, a famous writer (Golding himself?). Golding seems to conjecture that we are in hell, but hell is complicated and it is difficult to distinguish the mysterious moves of both God and the devil. He does not believe that the powers of darkness are in sole control, since that would be too great a concession to fatalism.

One of the surprises of *The Paper Men* is that the moral bankrupt Barclay (Bar,clay—son of clay) is a Christian!—"I being a true Christian child of the twentieth century . . . I am sin"<sup>6</sup>. Barclay (representative of the westernised Christian?) has freedom and most things which the world admires, but he is adrift, a wanderer (running away from himself) with nothing to say. He is the opposite of Matty in

*Darkness Visible*, who is trying to speak to the world through prophetic signs. Barclay is aware of the issue of freedom, saying “people should be warned against freedom” because there is freedom to sin and destroy, or freedom to be in harmony with others.

Golding is a religious writer in the broad sense of ‘religious’. He does not refer to God in his novels but he regards humanity as having more than a human destiny. He believed that the journey of life involves a spiritual dimension, which bisects that journey at right angles.<sup>7</sup> That view, of course, involves encountering a cross-roads.

Golding believed that there is a signature in the human soul, a sign transcending the horrors and terrors of hell on earth. There is Good, which is ultimate and absolute. Amid the darkness of a world of evil there is hope, seen and unseen: therefore, Golding called himself a universal pessimist, but a cosmic optimist. He described himself as a writer watching the greatest mystery of all—human life. A writer on Golding called him a spiritual cosmologist—a man in search of cosmological truth.<sup>8</sup>

What gives power to Golding’s stories? Professor Bergonzi may have found the answer when he comments: “Whatever he wrote, he was a truly original writer, not just in the everyday sense of operating in ‘his own way, but in the older meaning of the word,’ going back to origins. For Golding, original sin lay at the beginning of things”<sup>9</sup>.

- 1 In an interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, 15 July 1993, which was a repeat of the interview in 1980.
2. *Rites of Passage* (1980), *Close Quarters* (1987), and *Fire Down Below* (1989),
- 3 B. Oldsey and S. Weintraub, *The Art of William Golding*, New York 1965, p. 43.
- 4 Talk: Conversation with William Golding, J.J. Biles, Harcourt Bruce Janovich N.Y. 1974, p.44.
- 5 The ‘ship’ theme appears in *The Spire* (the cathedral ship), *Pincher Martin* *shipwrecked*, and the sea trilogy.
- 6 *The Paper Men*, London, 1984, pp. 127 & 128.
- 7 W. Golding, *Utopias, Antiutopias in a Moving Target*, Faber & Faber 1982, p. 128.
- 8 P. Green, ‘The World of William Golding’ in N. Page, *William Golding’s Novels 1954—‘67*, London 1985, p. 79.
- 9 Bergonzi, ‘William Golding’s Vision’, *The Tablet* 376 June 1993, p. 815.