

## THE PERMANENCE OF THE MESSAGE OF WILLIAM GOLDING'S FABLES

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William Golding (1911 - 1993) has made a permanent name for himself not only in British literature, but also in world literature, an indisputable proof of this being the Nobel prize for literature which he was awarded in 1983.

Besides early poetry published before World War II, and one play, he was mainly a novelist whose principal concern was to deal with the condition of man *sub specie aeternitatis*, man seen with his permanent inherent human defects. The most significant from this point of view is his first novel, *Lord of the Flies*, first published in 1954. For the purpose of this article and because of space restrictions I shall deal mainly with this first novel, which is an epitome of his view on man.

Critics have given different labels to Golding's novels. They have been termed myths, parables, allegories and fables. The choice of the term will depend on the angle of interpretation. In a myth an archetypal truth is revealed by the means of the work of art. In a parable the stress is on double-level writing, the action of the plot has significance only in the light of the moral idea it embodies. Allegory also implies a level of deeper significance, and a surface level which can be a drama, a fable or a story. To a large extent allegory could be identified with parable, the former being a variety of the latter. Fable is a term that has been used by John Peter<sup>1</sup>. "Fables are those narratives which leave the impression that their purpose was anterior, some initial thesis or contention which they are apparently concerned to embody and express in concrete terms." Golding himself bears out the idea of a novelist who is a fabulist. "The fabulist is a moralist. He cannot make a story without a human lesson tucked away in it. Arranging his signs as he does, he reaches, not profundity on many levels, but what you would expect from signs, that is overt significance. By the nature of his craft then, the fabulist is didactic, desires to

inculcate a moral lesson" Golding<sup>2</sup>. This variety of terminology applied to Golding's novels confirms the great diversity of appeals which his work has with different critics. I shall refer to his novels as 'fables', for their explicit didactic intention, that places him in the tradition of many English predecessors, and as allegories in structure.

The beginning of *Lord of the Flies* parallels R.M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island*<sup>3</sup>. In this latter novel, the author presents an idealized picture of human nature. Three boys are shipwrecked on an island and live together in perfect harmony and friendship. The only evil is external to them, pirates and cannibals, but the novel has a happy ending. Golding ironically reverses the ideal picture of the three boys living in harmony. Indeed in the initial stage, Golding's boys, who had been parachuted on a desert island from a plane in flames, did live in harmony and friendship. At this stage they were innocent, blind to the existence of evil. "Friendship" was the key word, it was repeated over and over again and the boys were together in a community of purpose and action.

Gradually, both the reader and the characters become aware of a change in the community. Ralph's chief concerns are the keeping of a permanently burning fire and the building of huts for their shelter. On the other hand, Jack and his group of boys are interested in hunting alone, and let the fire get extinguished. He and his followers are depicted by means of *blood* imagery, a Macbeth-like device, whereas Ralph is depicted by the *fire* imagery, and thus a separation takes place. The relationship can be epitomized man = fire-maker, animal = blood-thirstiness and no fire-maker. Golding comments on this antagonistic relationship "They walked along, two continents of experience and feeling, unable to communicate"<sup>4</sup>. Inability to communicate is a characteristic of man's alienation from his fellow-human beings.

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<sup>1</sup> John Peter, 1957. 'The Fables of William Golding' in *The Kenyon Review*, Autumn, no.4, p.577-592.

<sup>2</sup> William Golding, 1965. 'Fable' in *The Hot Gates*, London: Faber, p.65.

<sup>3</sup> R.M. Ballantyne, 1858. *Coral Island*

<sup>4</sup> William Golding, 1973. *Lord of the Flies*. London: Faber, p.76.



In the confrontation between the two groups, the two boys stand symbolically for two worlds: Ralph for the values of human civilization, Jack for savagery, dehumanization. The initial crisis leads to a climax, with Ralph, utterly isolated, forced to run for his life. Piggy, the only friend who had not deserted him, had been killed. The miraculous saving of Ralph's life, in the final scene, by a naval officer whose ship had landed on the island, brings out into bold relief the contrast between Jack, and the other savages, who had even taken the outward appearance of non-humans and Ralph, the embodiment of commonsense and attachment to the values of human civilization. Golding aimed at shocking the reader out of his complacency, he wished to violently contradict the idyllic picture of human nature given by Ballantyne, and his novel, on the outer level, is a parody of *Coral Island*.

Simon is another character of special significance in the novel. He was once described by Golding as a "Christ-like" figure<sup>5</sup>. He is an exceptional man, endowed with intuition, he is a visionary man, ready for the supreme sacrifice. He could be termed heroic as well. It is Simon who solves the mystery of "the beast". They are all afraid of a beast, who becomes in fact, the central symbol of evil. It comes out that the beast is in fact a dead parachutist whose skeleton frightens the children. But, ironically, the beast, of which all are afraid is not the real danger. Simon, the visionary character of the novel, approaches the beast, and sees there is no real beast there. In his revelation he says: "Maybe there is a beast.... Maybe it's only us"<sup>6</sup>. Simon makes it quite clear: the source of evil, the 'lord of the flies', is in man himself. Evil is not outside evil as in Ballantyne, it is inside. While trying to impart the news to the others, and in this way to relieve them from fear, he gets killed by the savages. But Golding has put into Simon's words his own interpretation of human nature: "However Simon thought of the beast, there rose before his inward sight the picture of a human at once **heroic and sick**"<sup>7</sup>.

In this way Golding expresses his view on the duality of human nature: man has a propensity to evil but is also able heroically to resist it. Jack feels pleasure in hunting, in killing both beasts and men and lets himself carried away, without restraining by reason his instincts of a killer. He thus becomes the embodiment of dehumanization, the expression of

man's sickness. On the other hand, Ralph, too, finds pleasure in hunting, he has the same natural inclination like Jack. But what distinguishes Ralph from Jack is the former's rational control of instincts, in other words his restraint. In the light of the ethical theory of vice and virtue, as formulated by Aristotle<sup>8</sup>, Jack practises killing until it becomes a habit, and a vice, which I shall term incontinence. The opposite character Ralph, is virtuous by his control of instinct by reason. His virtue I shall term temperance, or continence and self-control. Structurally I see "Lord of the Flies" as an allegory, and one of the allegorical patterns is the confrontation between vice and virtue, as Vera Calin<sup>9</sup> pointed out.

Ralph, unlike Simon, is not an exceptional man. He runs for his life, he is not prepared for the supreme sacrifice as Simon was. Ralph is a common-sensical average man who has taken instincts under rational control. That is why, symbolically, he comes to the fore when the naval officer, the rescuer, turns up. In the meantime, Jack makes himself scarce, he gives up the claim to be the leader.

Golding uses irony all over. The ironic reversal of the *Coral Island* picture of human nature is but one example. The naval officer himself, is the herald of a world at war, and is unable to grasp the real state of things on the island. The rescue device has been considered a sort of *deus ex machina*, an artificial device conducive to a happy ending, which however does not lead to an optimistic view on man. I see it differently. From my point of view the message of the fable, or allegory is that man must be aware of the duality of his nature, and keep the evil instincts under control, and in this way be more humane. This could not be called pessimism, just awareness-raising and why not some sort of optimism, an expression of confidence in the average man's capacity to keep things under rational control.

But let me quote from Golding's Nobel Lecture a few lines that might stress the idea that I have pointed out in the present paper:

"Twenty five years ago I accepted the label of "pessimist" thoughtlessly, without realizing that it would be tied up to my tail, as it were... Similarly critics have dug into my books until they could come up with something that looked utterly hopeless. I can't think why. I don't feel hopeless myself.... Under some critical interrogation I named myself a universal pessimist but a cosmic optimist. ... I am optimistic

<sup>5</sup> William Golding, 1965. 'Fable' in *The Hot Gates*, London: Faber, p.97.

<sup>6</sup> William Golding, 1973. *Lord of the Flies*. London: Faber, p.97.

<sup>7</sup> William Golding, 1973. *Lord of the Flies*. London: Faber, p. 113.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

<sup>9</sup> Vera Calin, 1969 *Alegoria si esentele*, Bucharest: ELU.

when I consider the spiritual dimension which the scientist's discipline forces him to ignore... There is hope that we may learn to be temperate, provident, taking no more from nature's treasury than is our due... We need more humanity, more care, more love". (William Golding, 1984 'Nobel lecture' in

*A moving Target* p.203-204; 212). In these lines I find a support for my interpretation of *Lord of the Flies*. And the message Golding conveys to us is valid today and will be tomorrow, too. For he sees man in what characterizes his nature, permanently, *sub specie aeternitatis*.