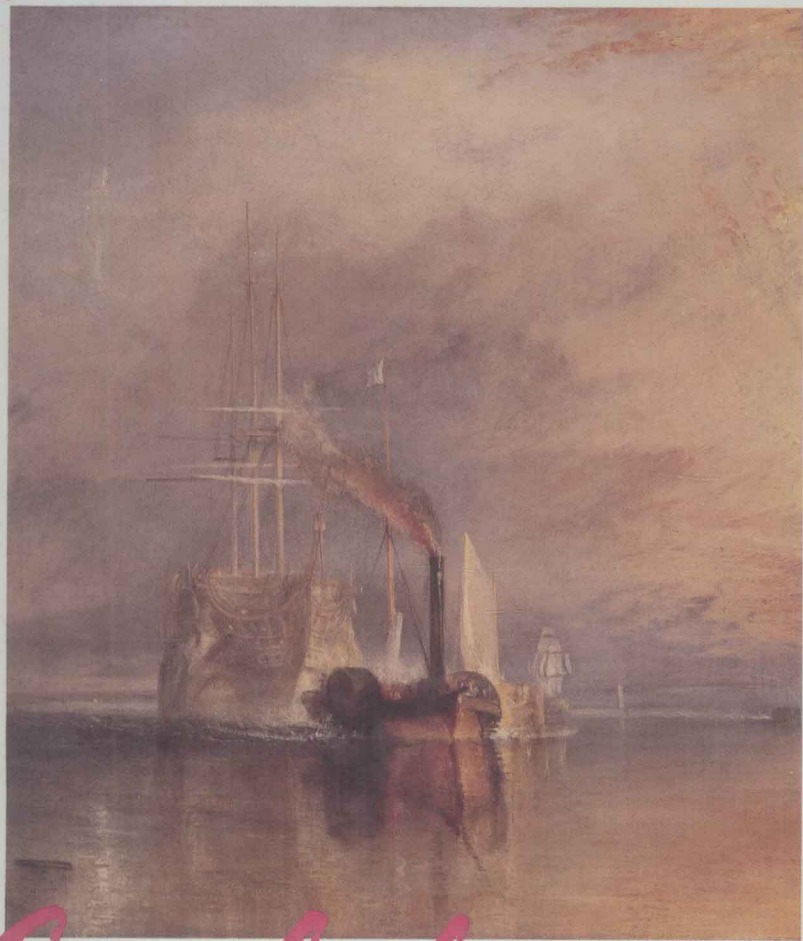


MODERN • NOVELISTS

William



Golding

JAMES • GINDIN

MODERN NOVELISTS
WILLIAM GOLDING

James Gindin

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General Editor's Preface

The death of the novel has often been announced, and part of the secret of its obstinate vitality must be its capacity for growth, adaptation, self-renewal and even self-transformation: like some vigorous organism in a speeded-up Darwinian ecosystem, it adapts itself quickly to a changing world. War and revolution, economic crisis and social change, radically new ideologies such as Marxism and Freudianism, have made this century unprecedented in human history in the speed and extent of change, but the novel has shown an extraordinary capacity to find new forms and techniques and to accommodate new ideas and conceptions of human nature and human experience, and even to take up new positions on the nature of fiction itself.

In the generations immediately preceding and following 1914, the novel underwent a radical redefinition of its nature and possibilities. The present series of monographs is devoted to the novelists who created the modern novel and to those who, in their turn, either continued and extended, or reacted against and rejected, the traditions established during that period of intense exploration and experiment. It includes a number of those who lived and wrote in the nineteenth century but whose innovative contribution to the art of fiction makes it impossible to ignore them in any account of the origins of the modern novel; it also includes the so-called 'modernists' and those who in the mid and later twentieth century have emerged as outstanding practitioners of this genre. The scope is, inevitably, international; not only, in the migratory and exile-haunted world of our century, do writers refuse to heed national frontiers – 'English' literature lays claims to Conrad the Pole, Henry James the American, and Joyce the Irishman – but geniuses such as Flaubert, Dostoevski and Kafka have had an influence on the fiction of many nations.

Each volume in the series is intended to provide an introduction to the fiction of the writer concerned, both for those approaching him or her for the first time and for those who are already familiar with some parts of the achievement in question and now wish to place it in the context of the total *oeuvre*. Although essential information relating to the writer's life and times is given, usually in an opening chapter, the approach is primarily critical and the emphasis is not upon 'background' or generalisations but upon close examination of important texts. Where an author is notably prolific, major texts have been selected for detailed attention but an attempt has also been made to convey, more summarily, a sense of the nature and quality of the author's work as a whole. Those who want to read further will find suggestions in the select bibliography included in each volume. Many novelists are, of course, not only novelists but also poets, essayists, biographers, dramatists, travel writers and so forth; many have practised shorter forms of fiction; and many have written letters or kept diaries that constitute a significant part of their literary output. A brief study cannot hope to deal with all these in detail, but where the shorter fiction and the non-fictional writings, public and private, have an important relationship to the novels, some space has been devoted to them.

To Jim and Kate

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1

Introduction

Between 1952 and 1955 a number of new and articulate voices in British fiction began to claim public attention. For several years before, commentators had speculated about where or what the new generation was, wondered how the Second World War might be treated in serious fiction and worried that fatigue or public austerity might have been instrumental in a premature atrophy among the potentially creative. When their fiction reached enthusiastic public notice, in the early 1950s, the work of Kingsley Amis, Iris Murdoch, John Wain, Doris Lessing, Angus Wilson (who was slightly older but did not publish a novel until 1952), Thomas Hinde and Philip Larkin (who had written two novels in the late 1940s before publishing his poetry) began to be regarded as representative of a new post-war generation. In the initial and often superficial responses to their fiction, the new voices emerging from the war seemed to many comic and limited, often insular, interested in questions of food and class, and influenced, in one way or another, by a vaguely Sartrean or existential version of experience. For good or ill, depending on the point of view, and most often for both good and ill, they did not seem to demonstrate much concern with eternal verities or transforming visions of human experience. Alone among these emerging writers, although eventually noticed nearly as much as any of them, William Golding, from the appearance of *Lord of the Flies* in 1954, was seen as a visionary dealing with universal and essential human issues, was not part of a group or a generation. Somewhat older than the others (although only two years older than Angus Wilson), Golding seemed an anomaly among the novelists of the early and middle 1950s. For some, in both England and America, Golding was immune from the dominant temper of the age, from the bland muted, non-charismatic, comic safety of

the carefully limited survivor; for others, Golding was both surly and reactionary, seen, as late as 1960 in an article in *The Nation* by Martin Green, as motivated by a 'sullen distaste for the contemporary'.¹

Golding's singularity seemed confirmed by his distance from the London literary world. He was a schoolmaster teaching English and Greek literature at Bishop Wordsworth's in Salisbury, living nearby in Wiltshire in a cottage called Ebble Thatch. Forty-three years old, married, with two children, and part of no discernible literary group, Golding seemed an isolated figure to the literary public. Only gradually through the latter years of the 1950s, as his work assumed considerable prominence and generated interest in the man, did the facts of his early life begin to appear publicly.

William Gerald Golding was born in Cornwall on 19 September 1911, one of two sons born to Alec Golding, who became Senior Master at Marlborough Grammar School, and his wife, Mildred, an active worker for women's suffrage. For a time, in Marlborough, they lived next to the church graveyard. A pupil at his father's school, Golding has since frequently described his father as an overwhelming influence on his early life. In an essay entitled 'The Ladder and the Tree', Golding recalled his father as 'incarnate omniscience'. Alec wrote textbooks on various scientific subjects, including astro-physical navigation, and played at least five musical instruments: 'He could carve a mantelpiece or a jewel box, explain the calculus and the ablative absolute.'² As Golding has described his father, there was something almost intimidating about his omniscience and omnicompetence, as if the growing young William had little room to work out anything for himself. Alec Golding also campaigned for the Labour Party among local workmen, although apparently never himself a candidate for office. More significantly for William's future development as both person and novelist, Alec was a consummate rationalist, always learned and logical, according to his son in a series of conversations with Jack I. Biles, not 'a man who scoffed at God' but one who 'regretted God so profoundly that he almost believed in Him'.³

In 1930, Golding entered Brasenose College, Oxford. He had been well trained in science and had learned to play the piano, the cello, the oboe, the violin and the viola. At Oxford, he studied the sciences for two years, then switched to English

Literature, taking an additional three years to finish his degree. He was particularly interested in Anglo-Saxon. In talking with Biles, Golding has stated that he had wanted to switch from science to literature earlier, but had delayed because 'it would hurt my father so much'.⁴ Golding had been interested in stories and literature since childhood, having written a play about ancient Egypt at the age of seven and begun what was planned as a twelve-volume history of the trade unions in England, reflecting the interests of his parents, at the age of twelve. At Oxford he wrote poetry. A friend of his sent a collection of his poems to Macmillan, then publishing a series of 'Contemporary Poets'. To what the later Golding has consistently maintained was his complete surprise, the editor accepted his work and twenty-nine of them were published as *Poems* on 30 October 1934. The poems justify Golding's later dismissal of them as inconsequential and adolescent. A number are rather vague, vapid and generally derivative exercises in romantic feeling. Some, like 'Vignette', satirise the confidence of the working-class rationalist storming the barricades; others, like 'Non-Philosopher's Song', work on the impossibility of reconciling the dichotomy between the worlds of 'Love' and 'Reason', heart and head. One poem depends on the culturally conventional denigration of 'Mr. Pope', the apostle of rationalism who, amidst the ordered garden, complains to God that the stars are out of line and concludes with rather laboured irony:

If they would dance a minuet
Instead of roaming wild and free
Or stand in rows all trim and neat
How exquisite the sky would be!

Poems received virtually no attention and Golding was not part of an articulate university group of poets like that of Auden, Spender, MacNeice and Day Lewis some years earlier, or that of Amis, Wain and Larkin, known as 'The Movement', some years later. When Golding offered further poems to his editor, Macmillan showed no interest.

After leaving Oxford in 1935, Golding moved to London, writing, acting and producing for a small and non-commercial theatre far from the West End. He once acted the part of Danny, the sinister scholarship boy in Emlyn Williams' *Night*

Must Fall. In 1939, Golding married Ann Brookfield and took a position as schoolmaster at Bishop Wordsworth's School in Salisbury. He joined the Royal Navy in 1940, serving throughout the rest of the Second World War. Golding's retrospective accounts of his war-time career, in his essays and conversations, are likely to be casual and to undercut any suggestion of the heroic. He began as an ordinary seaman. In taking an examination to become an officer, he answered a question on the difference between a propellant and an explosive with such elaborate knowledge, including graphs, that he was sent almost immediately to a secret research centre under the direction of Professor Lindemann, Churchill's scientific advisor who later became Lord Cherwell. Golding reports having enjoyed doing research on explosives until he accidentally 'blew myself up'. After recovering, he requested that the Admiralty 'Send me back to sea, for God's sakes, where there's peace'. He was sent to a mine-sweeper school in Scotland, then to New York to wait for six months while a mine-sweeper was built on Long Island. By the time he returned, mine-sweepers were no longer necessary and he was given command of a small rocket-launching craft in time for the 1944 invasion of the Continent. In one invasion, that of the small Dutch island of Walcheren, Golding reports, his craft was assigned a difficult role without air support. Preparing to go through a narrow channel in which 'everybody was throwing stuff in every direction', Golding transfixed his face with a grin and his men assumed that the job could not be as dangerous as it looked because he seemed to be enjoying it so much. When orders were changed, assigning his craft a much safer function, Golding's 'grin fell off' and his face 'collapsed'. His crew said to each other, 'Do you see that old bastard up there? When he learnt we weren't going in, he was disappointed!'⁵

Of course the war lingered more deeply and crucially in Golding's mind than these anecdotes suggest. In fact, in various interviews, he has attributed the compelling quality of his subsequent fiction to the fact that during the war 'One had one's nose rubbed in the human condition'.⁶ He recognised that in the past he had been naïve and adolescent, that the war had demonstrated all the horrendous cruelties of which man was capable. He took little comfort in being on the 'right' side, for he recognised that only the accident of 'certain social sanctions'

or 'social prohibitions' prevented most people in the Allied countries from acting with a brutality and disregard for humanity similar to that of the Nazis. He thought many of the British and Americans after the war too complacent, too confident of their own distance from what Nazism represented. Golding's concerns, however, took considerable time to emerge in fiction. After the war, he returned to Bishop Wordsworth's and, in his spare time, wrote a number of novels he now calls 'pot-boilers' that were not published. He finally discovered a form for what he wanted to say and wrote *Lord of the Flies*. The novel was rejected by twenty-one publishers before Faber & Faber brought it out in 1954.

Although treated respectfully, sometimes even enthusiastically, in reviews, *Lord of the Flies* was not an instantaneous public success. Nevertheless, its reception encouraged Golding to follow it quickly with other similarly original and distinctive novels, *The Inheritors* published in 1955 and *Pincher Martin* in 1956. Golding has always worked in spurts of intense energy, recalling, with his wife's help, that he had written *Lord of the Flies* in three or four months, *The Inheritors* in twenty-eight days while teaching, and the first draft of *Pincher Martin* in three weeks over a Christmas holiday.⁷ He still thinks over a work for a long period of time, then writes quickly. Golding's unusual fictions began to receive both more serious critical attention and wider popular acclaim, *Lord of the Flies* in particular, becoming enthusiastically read and absorbed in universities and schools in both Britain and America. *Lord of the Flies* was made into a popular film. Golding published another novel, *Free Fall*, in 1959, one that although expectantly anticipated and publicised achieved less of a public because it was different from the others. This, however, barely affected the rapid growth of Golding's public reputation. Frequent interviews, invitations and popular success led Golding to resign from his position as a schoolmaster in 1961, travel to teach at Hollins College in Virginia for the 1961–62 academic year, work as a frequent book reviewer for *The Spectator* from 1960 to 1962, and eventually earn his living solely as a writer.

In the years since, Golding has travelled a good deal, lecturing and granting interviews. He has spent considerable time on his boat, cruising through the English Channel, the Dutch waterways, and ports along the North and Baltic Seas.

He had planned to sail to Greece in 1967, but his boat capsised after a collision in the English Channel off the Isle of Wight. He retains something of his interests in engineering and mechanics, in how things work. And, despite the fact that others have sometimes too simplistically, from his fictions, labelled him as politically conservative or reactionary, he described himself in 1970 as a non-Marxist Socialist, left of centre, 'bitterly left of centre'.⁸ Most importantly, however, he sees himself as a writer who is constantly changing and responding to his universe. As he often says, he sees no point in writing the same novel twice. In fact, his striking fictions, although of course some have some elements in common with others, are all substantially different from each other. He tends, still, to finish or to publish in spurts, although the clusters of fiction may contain novels that, at least on the surface, do not resemble each other at all. Respect for his fiction has built fairly consistently: he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1955 and made a CBE in 1966. After *Free Fall*, he published the widely heralded *The Spire* in 1964 and *The Pyramid* in 1967. In 1971, he published three short novels under the title *The Scorpion God*, one of which, 'Envoy Extraordinary', had been published in 1956 in a collection, along with two novella by other writers, entitled *Sometime, Never*. 'Envoy Extraordinary' was also the basis for Golding's play, *The Brass Butterfly*, performed in both Oxford and London in 1958 with Alastair Sim in the principal role of the emperor. Golding published little during the 1970s until another burst of fictional energy manifested itself at the end of the decade. *Darkness Visible* came out in 1979 and *Rites of Passage* (which won the Booker prize for fiction) in 1980. Another novel, *The Paper Men*, was published in 1984. Golding's non-fiction, his essays on his travels, his ideas and the genesis of his fictions also seem to have emerged in the two different spurts that echo the periods of intense critical and public attention given him. *The Hot Gates and Other Occasional Pieces*, collecting the essays from the early 1960s, appeared in 1965; *A Moving Target*, comprised of pieces from the period of resurrected attention in the early 1980s, came out in 1982 and was the immediate occasion for awarding Golding the 1983 Nobel Prize for fiction. Golding has followed that with an account of his extended 1984 trip on a small boat down the Nile in *An Egyptian Journal* published in 1985.

None of his work other than *Lord of the Flies* has achieved the exciting appeal and public force of seeming to represent a generation. Yet each of the fictions is singular, original, a condensed version of human experience compressed into distinctive form. Each has also generated considerable discussion, and what Golding has seemed, at particular moments during his career, to be doing in fiction has not always been what, seen retrospectively, he in fact has done. His fictions are dense, difficult and can appeal in ways that are simpler than the complexities they reveal. His background in terms of ideas, influences and abstractions requires further exploration before possible patterns within particular novels and common to a number of the novels can more helpfully be examined.

2

Background Themes: The Propellants

Although his statements are sometimes arch or cryptic, Golding's own essays and the interviews he has given are generally the best sources for the genesis and development of his ideas. In 1970, he acknowledged that he had, in his fiction, always been an 'ideas man' rather than a 'character man', although he hoped that he might some day combine the two. He saw the concentration on 'ideas', like that in Aldous Huxley's fiction, as a 'basic defect'. Citing Angus Wilson's *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot* as an example of the opposite kind of fiction, he stated that he admired such fiction that could create 'fully realized, rounded, whole, believable' characters.⁹ In more recent accounts, as in a 1977 lecture on his first visit to Egypt in 1976, Golding has tended to see the concentration on ideas or things at the expense of character as an accusation, which may or may not be true, that others level at his work. In this particular instance, he resolved to include character sketches in his journal.

Golding's interest in Egypt and archaeology began in childhood. As he explains in 'Egypt from My Inside', an essay first published in *The Hot Gates* and reprinted in *A Moving Target*, when he wanted, at the age of seven, to write a play about ancient Egypt, he decided to learn hieroglyphics so that his characters might speak in their appropriate language. He persisted with the symbols although the play never got very far. He also reports that, whenever his mother took him to London, he 'nagged and bullied' to visit the Egyptian mummies and papyri in the British Museum. On one occasion, Golding stood transfixed before a showcase. The curator, noticing him, asked if he would like to assist and led him to a part of the Museum

closed to the public to see a huge sarcophagus and help unwrap a shrouded mummy. Golding's enthusiasm for Egyptian artifacts slightly antedated the exhibition of the relics from the recently unearthed tomb of Tutankhamen that so excited London in 1922, but there is little doubt that both Golding's interest and that of the large public were imaginative responses to a whole series of archaeological discoveries in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Golding's fascination with ancient Egyptian relics continued, even though he was unable to visit the actual land for more than half a century. Inevitably, the visit was something of a disappointment. Planning to tour Egypt by car, with his wife, he was understandably distracted by the difficulties in finding hotels, the unreliability of arrangements, the dirt of travel and accommodations, the suffering from constant diarrhoea, and the 'swarm' of people. Crowds and discomfort impeded his appreciation of the Great Pyramid. Only when he and his wife joined some American tourists more knowledgeable about contemporary Egypt did he see more of the tombs and antiquities around Cairo. Something of Golding's removal from people is apparent in his description of these tourists. Although grateful for their knowledge and friendship, he concludes his account of the episode, in the essay entitled 'Egypt from My Outside', with a flatly chilling emphasis on the fact that 'I don't suppose we shall ever see each other again'.¹⁰ Later, through these friends and others, Golding and his wife stayed at a large archaeological encampment in Luxor, run by the British and the Americans. There, with frequent guides and minimal comfort assured, he was able to explore the pyramids and other antiquities, to live within the Egyptian 'Mystery' of his imagination. His second trip, piloting the boat down the Nile in 1984, was more efficiently prepared. Even so, he found it difficult not to be distracted or appalled by the Egyptian dirt, sloth, helplessness and random violence. In trying to conclude *An Egyptian Journal*, to match the ancient with the contemporary or the imaginative with the physical reality, as well as to satisfy his commission by 'having an opinion on everything', Golding can only summarise by appealing to 'strange and nonsensical complexity' and hope that the reader can share something of the 'irritations and excitements of our absurd journey'.¹¹

Egypt as a specific locus is less significant for Golding than what it represents as excavating a buried past. Growing up in