

CRITICAL ESSAYS ON *William Golding*

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*Critical Essays on
William Golding*

James R. Baker

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*Critical Essays on
William Golding*

CRITICAL ESSAYS ON BRITISH LITERATURE

The Critical Essays on British Literature series provides a variety of approaches to both the classical writers of Britain and Ireland, and the best contemporary authors. The formats of the volumes in the series vary with the thematic designs of individual editors, and with the amount and nature of existing reviews, criticism, and scholarship. In general, the series represents the best in published criticism, augmented, where appropriate, by original essays by recognized authorities. It is hoped that each volume will be unique in developing a new overall perspective on its particular subject.

James R. Baker's introduction to the present volume gives us a concise history of Golding criticism from the earlier reviewer's misinterpretations through the critical schools which have developed over more than thirty years of critical commentary on Golding's fiction. The essays, including three written specifically for this volume, represent a loose chronology of Golding criticism at the same time they provide in-depth commentary on each major Golding work.

An added dimension to the commentary is Golding's own reaction provided by a personal interview with Baker and Golding's Nobel Prize speech, both reprinted in this book. The resulting volume provides a comprehensive overview of Golding's work.

Zack Bowen, GENERAL EDITOR

University of Miami

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INTRODUCTION

William Golding: Three Decades of Criticism

Although he was born in 1911, William Golding did not enter upon his literary career until after World War II. Prior to that time he had published only a small collection of poems and had experimented (unsuccessfully) with fictional styles. But the war itself and other terrible events that may be invoked by means of only a few words—Stalin, Hitler, the Holocaust, the Bomb—made up a trial of preparation in which Golding, who served in the war, came to disillusionment with his youthful humanistic beliefs. Then, in 1954, as every schoolboy now knows, *Lord of the Flies* was published, a modern “classic” was born. This first book was not immediately praised and given such status, for it appeared in an angry decade committed to political and social change, to nothing less than overthrow of “the Establishment,” inspired by revival of the many hopes for the future that had been set aside during the traumatic war years. Golding, the reviewers explained, was a middle-aged schoolmaster who offered an exciting story (they would not dignify his book by calling it a novel) about little boys struggling for survival on a Pacific island during an atomic war of the future. It was only a clever addition to the popular literature of “science fiction”; or, since the author tried to show that adolescent “fun and games” were actually rites and rituals in a merciless struggle for power, it could be read as a moralistic “fable” or a pessimistic allegory on human depravity. Neither in its theme nor in its method of presentation did *Lord of the Flies* appear to be directly relevant to the important post-war problems confronted with brash courage by the “Angry Young Men” and the emerging proletarian writers. Given such a context for response, *The Inheritors* (1955), set in prehistoric time, and *Pincher Martin* (1956), the egoistic fantasy of a drowning man, did not substantially change the first evaluation of Golding’s fiction.

Now, thirty years later, we may look back on that chapter in literary history and find there not only some portents of Golding’s later career but also an opportunity for a little harvest of ironies. He was destined to attain greater fame than most of his contemporaries. Through the 1960s and the 1970s his readership grew enormously; he was also given more and more critical attention, becoming, as he remarked, the source of an interna-

tional "academic light industry." By 1980 he was world famous, his reputation secure. In that year he was awarded in England the Booker Prize for his seventh major novel, *Rites of Passage*, and then—greatest of honors—the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1983. Nevertheless, though he has been much praised, much honored, even revered, he has remained controversial and frequently at odds with his readers, reviewers, and critics. Fellow-writers, on both sides of the Atlantic, have attacked him: John Wain, in "Lord of the Agonies," rated him only a morbid Christian moralist; Kenneth Rexroth, writing in America for the widely-circulated *Atlantic*, denounced him as a heavy-handed writer with "no style." There have been complaintants of every kind (flower children, moral guardians, churchmen, feminists, Marxists, utopians, parents, bloodthirsty humanists) down through the years. Even the awarding of the Nobel Prize was marked and marred by controversy about the scope and worth of his art. If there is any central cause for this anger and these charges, it is that at the very outset of his career Golding set himself up as antagonist to the "scientific humanism" (his term) which was, perhaps still is, the great faith of the modern age. Inevitably, the earliest reviewers and critics favored the work of the new social realists who appeared after the war, because their efforts continued the great tradition of the literature of hope; while Golding, searching in anthropology and in the mythic structures of classical Greek tragedy for some more essential truth that would explain why human hopes had been so often defeated, began with three contributions to the literature of disillusionment. 184382

About the only contemporary, or near-contemporary, Golding could acknowledge as a spiritual cousin (and fellow fabulist) was the late George Orwell. *Animal Farm* (1945), that nearly perfect Swiftian satire, had summed up the failure of the Russian Revolution—perhaps the failure of all utopian aspiration—as a result of human inequality. On both Orwell's farm and Golding's island this natural imbalance triggers the dialectics of behavior which must end with the triumph of the strong and wily beasts. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), just like *Lord of the Flies*, projects us into a near-future to portray an apocalypse—the collapse of humanistic hopes, the defeat of man, the pyramid waiting at the end of his violent history. Orwell, apparently because of his avowed "political purpose" in writing these last classics of disillusionment, was to remain the darling of academic humanists (particularly in America), even though he shared with Golding a devastating awareness of the limitations of human nature. But time may bring them together, perhaps already it is doing so: the topical and seemingly vital literature of the angry "realists" of the 1950s now fades from view, while the great negative "fables" left by Orwell and Golding stand as dark monuments to the romantic humanism of the past.

The next decade was to be a better one for Golding. *Lord of the Flies*, a slow starter, began its rise to fame, and his fourth novel, *Free Fall* (1959), illustrated his ability to move beyond the mode of presentation common to

the first three. *The Spire* (1964) was well-received and hailed by his defenders as a truly major achievement. Thus Golding himself, in the course of his evolution as a novelist, created a positive change in his first public image; but this was also the period in which serious critics and academic scholars began to examine, and to debate, the nature of his ideas and his art. It soon became clear to them that things were more complicated, much more complicated, than the newspaper reviewers had supposed, and that their simplistic frame-up of Golding as an anachronistic Christian moralist and the Prince of Pessimism would have to be modified if not abandoned altogether.

I

In spite of their debates, the first critics were in agreement on some basic matters. Golding, they recognized, was quite unique in his intentions and in the techniques he employed to carry them out: he had created an art of counterstatement which owed little or nothing to his immediate contemporaries; therefore, there would have to be a search for sources and influences; and given the nearly identical structures of the first three "fables" (followed by the bizarre and seemingly incoherent *Free Fall*) there would also have to be an investigation of his methods.

The premier study of method, John Peter's "The Fables of William Golding," appeared in the *Kenyon Review* in the autumn of 1957. It is fair to say that this admirable essay marks the real beginning (if precise dating is possible) of Golding criticism, though it is limited in scope to the three novels then in print. Every scholar has had to deal with the terminology this essay introduced and to take sides with the issues it raised. Peter distinguishes between "fiction" and "fable," acknowledges that there are novelistic elements in *Lord of the Flies* and the others, and concludes that, on balance, the three texts fall into the tradition of the art of fable. It all sounded reasonable enough, but there soon erupted a long series of arguments (sometimes heated) over the adequacy of Peter's terminology and his reading of the texts. Golding rather liked the essay but wrote to the author to complain about a misreading of an important passage in *Pincher Martin*; again, in a now famous interview published in *Books and Bookmen* under the intriguing title, "The Meaning of It All," he argued with Frank Kermode over the critical terminology and suggested that the word "~~myth~~" would better describe his intentions; and, in 1962, on tour in America, he reentered the ongoing discussion in his lecture entitled "Fable" delivered at the University of California. Yet to come was the most thorough statement on these problems—the final chapter ("Perspectives") in the book by the English critical team Mark Kinkead-Weekes and Ian Gregor, *William Golding: A Critical Study* (1967).

Another school of critics in this same period was intent upon searching out the main influences and specific literary sources that had

gone into the making of Golding's fiction. The task began in England with a useful essay by Peter Green, "The World of William Golding," published in the *Review of English Literature*, but his search was soon taken up and most successfully carried out by American critics. The first was Carl Niemeyer, who argued in an essay to be reprinted many times, "The Coral Island Revisited," that *Lord of the Flies* was written as a modern version of R. M. Ballantyne's Victorian novel for boys, *The Coral Island*. A far more comprehensive attempt to explain Golding's motivation as a writer and to explicate his texts as reactions to other writers was undertaken by Bernard S. Oldsey and Stanley Weintraub in *The Art of William Golding* (1965). Their strategy is made clear in the chapter on *Lord of the Flies*.

All Golding's novels, products of his peculiar literary temperament and habit, are reactive experiments. The wonder is how habitual a process this has been. Piecemeal, several critics have nicely documented certain influences or stimuli affecting his work. Yet important instances have been left undiscovered, overlooked, underestimated. What remains to be said is that this reactive method of composition has become the *modus operandi*. It provides a key as to what Golding has derived from others and what he has provided that is original. Yet Golding has insisted, "But one book never comes out of another, and *The Coral Island* is not *Lord of the Flies*." And, adamantly, that "*one work does not come from another unless it is stillborn*." Nevertheless, with Golding the process may be, if he has created counter-experiments which are original fiction, not stillbirth but birth.

Obviously, these critics were not to be deterred by the author's objections to their operating assumption, and in subsequent chapters they pursued some of the "undiscovered" connections with specific works by Wells, Shaw, Camus, Ibsen, and others—ignoring, strangely, Golding's acknowledgment of the influence of Poe and, more broadly, the influence of Greek tragedy.

The flaw in this generic approach to literature is indicated in Golding's protest: books do not grow out of other books alone; the genesis of art, he implies, is far more complex than that. *The Coral Island*, for example, serves only as a metaphor for the naive Christian humanism he ridiculed in all his early novels, but he was obliged to repeat his admonition in later years as still other critics were tempted to exercise their erudition on still other analogies and parallels. It may be natural and to some extent legitimate and useful for the scholar to pursue these literary comparisons; after all, this kind of work contributes to our understanding of the individual text and to the drawing of that larger picture in which single writers and works are assigned a place in literary history. Humanistic scholarship has always rested on the assumption echoed in T. S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent"—that every new talent is conditioned by the tradition. The danger is that the scholar who may be intent upon the historical pattern will obscure or underestimate the

originality of the individual artist. Golding, more than any novelist of his generation, has insisted upon talking back to his critics, again and again protesting that he was being absorbed in cultural history, "mummified" in the leaves of critical papers, before he could finish his life's work.

A different conception of source and influence formed the basis for James R. Baker's *William Golding: A Critical Study* (1965). As early as 1963 this critic had argued that the paradigm for human behavior and for history in *Lord of the Flies* was modeled on the tragic drama of ancient Greece, specifically the tragic pattern found in *The Bacchae* of Euripides. Baker's book covered the first five novels and simply extended the argument that Golding's models were ancient rather than modern. In this case the scholar capitalized on the author's suggestions, for Golding had repeatedly pointed to the Greeks when asked about "influences." Some twenty years later, in an interview with Baker published in the scholarly journal, *Twentieth Century Literature*, Golding, asked to place his own art in the tradition, replied as follows:

I suppose all I can really say is that I don't think my novels come out of novels. If they owe anything to previous work, and obviously they must, it's the theatre much more than novel writing. I think of the shape of a novel, when I do think of a novel as having a shape, as having one precisely like Greek drama. You have this rise of tension and then the sudden fall and all the rest of it. You may even find the technical Greek terms tucked away in the book, if you like, and check them off one by one. So the Greek tragedy as a form, a classical form, is very much there. The idea of the character who suffers a disastrous fall through a flaw in his character, that you find there, I think. So it does really stem as much from Greek tragedy as much as anything else. I don't think I would mark its line of descent from any novelist I can think of.

Only a few months after Baker's first essay had appeared, a second American, Bernard F. Dick, also noted the presence of Euripides in *Lord of the Flies*. He went on to offer a full-length study, *William Golding* (1967), documenting the influence of Greek tragedy in Golding's work as a whole. As a professor of classical literature, Dick was well-qualified to illustrate through textual evidence that Golding had indeed applied his knowledge of tragedy (as well as Aristotle's *Poetics*) to the art of fiction, thus adapting ancient means to modern ends. Somewhat ironically, therefore, the very critics who had intended to discover sources and influences cast real light on the structural principles that formed Golding's plots and guided the drawing of his characters.

Meanwhile, in England, the most valuable early work on Golding was accomplished by Frank Kermode. In a series of essays and interviews he did perhaps more than anyone to clarify the basic themes and aims of the fables, and when *The Spire* appeared in 1964 his review in the *New York Review of Books* proved at last that it was possible to write an

intelligent review of a Golding novel. Kermode was one of the very few predecessors credited in the important critical volume by Mark Kinkead-Weekes and Ian Gregor, although by 1967 it was nearly impossible to write without reflecting one influence or another out of the growing body of critical literature. The most original contribution made in their book was to show the evolution of Golding's art from *Lord of the Flies* through *The Spire*—confirming his claim that he never wrote the same book twice or, as he was to put it many years later, that he was “a moving target” and constant challenge for his pursuers.

II

There were always critics, plenty of them, waiting for whatever came next and, in the interims and silences which must occur in the life of any writer, busy bickering among themselves or coming out with ingenious “new” approaches overlooked by their colleagues. One must not forget that Golding's own evolution unfolds in the same years that saw the great “bulge” in post-war higher education and the production of unprecedented numbers of theses, dissertations, articles, and books on every conceivable subject, examined from every conceivable point of view. These were the years in which we saw the development of a Faulkner industry and a Hemingway industry, a Joyce industry and a Lawrence industry, and, inevitably, a Golding industry—though his never rivaled the others mentioned. If Golding was indeed “a moving target,” he was all the more likely to catch the eye of every hunter in the field. Such extraordinary scrutiny, initially pleasant enough and flattering, will in time become a source of irritation and then a burden for the living writer. Only fifteen years after publication of *Lord of the Flies*, so much critical commentary (and much of it repetitious) had been written that it was necessary to draw up lists and bibliographies and to gather the flying leaves into source-books, guidebooks, casebooks, and anthologies. In the 1970s, although a few useful articles and books provided something needed, Golding's critics too often repeated with minor variations what had already been said, or they lapsed into carping criticism of criticism, or they advanced zealous (often jealous) claims to heretofore unrecognized dimensions. The work of the first generation led to a battle of the paper men.

Howard S. Babb, in *The Novels of William Golding* (1970), sought through a series of “formal analyses” to improve upon our grasp of meanings and structures, yet behind the facade of objective method ran the old conviction that all of the novels (except *The Pyramid*) “comprise a sustained investigation into the nature of man from a Christian perspective.” The recurring question of Golding's religious attitudes was better answered (though in truncated form) in Stephen Medcalf's 1975 booklet *William Golding*, written for the “Writers and Their Work” series. Here we read that a common concern with the principle of “darkness” links

Golding with the post-Puritan American writers, Hawthorne and Melville, among others, rather than Christian orthodoxy.

The most elaborate and successful investigation of these issues was Virginia Tiger's *William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery* (1974). In a striking introductory chapter, Tiger promised to do what had not been adequately done—"to discover the religious dimension toward which the technical devices of the structure, as well as other fictional features, are always directed." Her premises, based in part on promptings by Golding himself, given in correspondence or conversation, were clearly stated:

William Golding's fiction plays with the puzzles of Proverbs xxiii. 18 that "where there is no vision, the people perish." This is, in the widest sense, a religious exploration and without stating so explicitly, all the fiction embodies this dictum for it deals in the primordial patterns of human experience. . . . In the fiction, Golding consciously tries to construct a religious mythopoeia relevant to contemporary man since he agrees generally with the anthropological notion that it is through myth that the imaginative substance of religious belief is expressed, communicated, and enhanced. As he has remarked in conversation: "Myth is a story at which we can do nothing but wonder; it involves the roots of being and reverberates there." In Golding's view, contemporary man lacks vision. How is he not to perish? In each of the novels, there is the effort of bridge-building between the physical world which contemporary man accepts and the spiritual world which he ignores. . . .

At times, these ideas were set aside for criticism (and occasionally imprecise readings) of other critics. Nevertheless, the Tiger book remains the most significant critical study of this decade, not because of the theory of "ideographic" structures it advanced but because it clarified Golding's evaluation of the modern age and modern man. It also revealed the artist for what he really was—a seeker after a vision.

A contribution of another kind was made by Jack I. Biles in his *Talk: Conversations With William Golding* (1970)—a distillation of the longest interview ever done. Biles was not only on very friendly terms with Golding, he was also an avowed humanist and well-read professor of modern British literature. These qualifications made him the perfect interrogator, friend and antagonist at the same time, and, though Golding rather severely edited the tapes, Biles was able to get useful statements on a number of points that had long vexed the critics. Like many other writers in the post-war era, Golding was to be interviewed again and again. Much of value has been revealed in these exchanges. The interview, in fact, has emerged as an important critical medium; most academicians now recognize that an informed interviewer, such as Biles or Kermode, may do more valuable work than the autonomous academician who markets his ideas in little magazines. The participation of the living author is a new thing in literary history: he is immediately drawn into the critical tasks of explication and evaluation of his own art; he is flattered,

elevated to a position of authority over the treacherous ambiguities of his own imaginative world, a moment later forced into debate or a humiliating confession of his own limitations. Golding has shown a considerable ambivalence about these occasions, sometimes coming forth to correct or reprimand this critic or that critic, then retreating into silence and the supposedly perfect autonomy of the creative artist. Finally, his long concern with these problems produced a novel, *The Paper Men* (1984) — a novel that has been ill-understood and demeaned. In reality, it is a kind of “first” in the field (based on long experience and presented with admirable wit) on a truly contemporary phenomenon.

In 1978 Biles and his co-editor Robert O. Evans published the first anthology of original critical essays, *William Golding: Some Critical Considerations*. If only a few of the thirteen essays were truly new and useful, the volume, nevertheless, was made indispensable by the inclusion of Biles's exhaustive bibliography of primary and secondary sources. The long list of secondary items showed that it was high time to take stock in the Golding industry, time to count it all up, and (like any other industry) face the fact that quantity threatened quality and might lead to inimical inquiry into the whole enterprise. We had already heard one form of protest in Susan Sontag's essay *Against Interpretation*; it was not to be long before the “deconstructionists” would make their assault on the proud towers of academe. Golding, as if cognizant of some change or threat, slowed in these years. After *The Pyramid* (1967), he produced only the relatively slight trilogy, *The Scorpion God* (1971), and then came the long silence before *Darkness Visible* appeared in 1979.

III

The first critical book of the new decade, Arnold Johnston's *Of Earth and Darkness* (1980), illustrated some of the virtues of academic scholarship — the absorption and synopsis of the work of predecessors combined with careful but inventive application of this knowledge to the task of clarifying basic themes and methods from *Lord of the Flies* through *Darkness Visible*. In his opening chapter Johnston summed up the “general characteristics” of Golding's fiction:

- 1) his desire to be seen as a “maker of myths”; 2) his general reliance on simple situations and plots that either partake of or suggest mythical archetypes; 3) his concern in making his novels the concrete expressions of spiritual and moral assumptions; 4) his suggestion of an inevitability in human actions akin to the ancient concept of Fate; 5) his primary use of irony as a major narrative technique.

Missing from the list was Golding's very strong desire — evident in *The Pyramid* and *The Scorpion God* — to overcome his reputation as a “pessimist,” a tragic visionary, and to emerge as a writer of comedy. This was to

become a sort of project in the years ahead, and he worked at it without much success, insisting in interviews, then in his Nobel Prize speech, on the elemental optimism behind his work and on his capacity for humor. But it seems we do not want him genial or jolly. Johnston, like most of the new critics, recognized that what "pure" humor there was could be found mainly in the few short stories and not in the "black" and biting comedy that made its debut in *The Pyramid*, appeared even in *Darkness Visible*, and again (after Johnston's book) in *Rites of Passage* (1980) and *The Paper Men* (1984). This turn of events made it increasingly difficult to settle comfortably into critical generalizations and clichés. It was no longer possible to rely on the established assumptions or to trust the old critical apparatus as a means of extracting a stable, elemental Golding.

Looking back, one could see that some new entity had been born out of the moral simplicities of the early "fables." That initial certainty had given way to a sense of rich and incomprehensible ambiguity, first in *Free Fall*, then with gathering force in the conclusion of *The Spire*; the sad social comedy of *The Pyramid* and the attempt to "send up" the idea of history in *The Scorpion God*, though not entirely successful, had been steps in the evolution of a more comprehensive vision. Comedy and tragedy were now intermixed, entangled, so that one could no longer rely upon neat Aristotelian definitions of genres or prescriptions for the drawing of characters proper to those genres. Golding, rather like young Talbot awakened at the close of *Rites of Passage*, seemed overwhelmed by "too much understanding": he had crossed "the line" and now voyaged toward a new world. The classical models for this experience, this progression, are found in Dante and Milton, their modern counterpart in the rites of passage endured by Eliot.

Recognition that the new Golding presented another challenge and need for adaptation on the part of critics formed the basis for a special issue of *Twentieth Century Literature* (1982), edited by James R. Baker. At the end of a long interview, Baker attempted to sum up the central purpose of Golding's art: ". . . as I look back over all of your work, it seems that in an atheistic age you have been one who insists upon mystery, on the neglected or perhaps forgotten religious dimension of human experience. Has this been a deliberate course on your part, a sort of counteraction or corrective to our diminished sense of the numinous, the religious, the mysterious?" Golding's reply was cautious, self-effacing, as perhaps it had to be in the face of such a question: "I'd like to think it was a corrective to what you call a diminished sense of the numinous. Whether it is or not, whether that kind of Holy-Joeing may not just simply put people off, I don't know. But it seems natural in me to do it." No novelist would wish to claim such a grand strategy and lofty purpose, and, obviously, there have been interims in which Golding turned away from this high seriousness; but there is always a steady drift, some general theme, that becomes apparent in every writer's career. Golding, from the

very beginning, set out to expose the limitations of “rational” man, his inability to measure and grasp the greater reality that mocks all his arrogant claims to knowledge. In the leading essay for the *Twentieth Century Literature* collection, “The Later Golding,” Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor were more struck by the differences than the similarities between the late novels, *Darkness Visible* and *Rites of Passage*; yet they concede that the differences are mainly in manner and means, rather than basic purpose, affirming that both novels seek to be true to “the paradoxes of Golding’s imagination” and attempt to “focus into unity.” In 1984 these faithful critics revised and expanded this essay for an updated edition of their book. The effort to keep abreast of Golding’s progress won no great applause from reviewers or fellow-critics, for it merely appended their essay to the text of the first edition. We still await a genuinely definitive critical study.

The most conscientious and thorough effort to understand the new Golding was Donald Crompton’s *A View From the Spire: William Golding’s Later Novels* (1985). Although Crompton’s thesis—that *The Spire* “marked a watershed in Golding’s career” and a turning point—was not original, his introductory chapter on Golding’s evolution since 1964 remains the best commentary on that subject, and his essays on *The Spire*, *The Pyramid*, *Darkness Visible*, and *Rites of Passage* rank among the best explicatory and evaluative essays produced on this period of struggle and transition. Unfortunately, Don Crompton died before he was able to finish his book, but the manuscript was ably edited by Julia Briggs, who also emerged as a Golding critic in her own right with excellent chapters on *The Scorpion God* and *The Paper Men*.

IV

What has been accomplished in three decades of criticism? A general survey reveals that most of the work done has been quite specific in its aims—seeking either to explicate a single novel or to trace the development of characteristic themes and techniques through examination of two or three related novels, and sometimes the entire sequence. This narrow focus of attention may be typical of the critical literature developed on a living writer, yet it reflects also the unique complexity of Golding’s art. Each new novel has been a new knot to untie; and the novelist, irritated by an academic industry that seeks to categorize him while he is still in motion, and angry over his own complicity in this paper game, has declared (half-seriously) that he makes a point of pride out of leaving behind another “critic proof” novel as he moves elusively into the landscape of his own imagination. It has been the critic, not the novelist, who has played the role of “reactive writer.”

What can be done? In the deliberately unscholarly anthology edited by John Carey, *William Golding: The Man and His Books* (1986), some