The Coral Island Revisited

CARL NIEMEYER

William Golding is the author of four novels, three of which have been published in the United States. They are *Lord of the Flies* (1954), which is the subject of this paper; *The Inheritors* (1955), which has not appeared in this country, the story of the death of the last Neanderthal men at the hands of human beings, who surpass them in ruthless cruelty and cunning; *The Two Deaths of Christopher Martin* (1956)—the English title is *Pincher Martin*—about an English naval officer who lives through a purgatorial and ultimately redemptive experience at the moment of drowning; and finally *Free Fall* (1959), which concerns an English artist in a Nazi prison camp, who at some time in his life made a wrong moral choice and who seeks in retrospect to find the moment at which he freely chose to fall. There is also an extended short story, "Envoy Extraordinary," which Golding has turned into a play called *The Brass Butterfly*. It is about an inventor who invents things at a period of history when the world is not ready for them.

Despite the wit of Golding's stories and the excellence of his writing, he has not always fared well at the hands of the critics, particularly the Americans. Anthony West in *The New Yorker* (April 30, 1960) does not make the grounds of his disapproval altogether clear, but the disapproval is evident. In England Golding is more highly regarded, as shown by John Bowen's article in *The Times Literary Supplement* for August 7, 1959, which discusses him along with Angus Wilson, Lawrence Durrell, and Iris Murdoch as artists seriously concerned with moral issues.

One interested in finding about Golding for oneself should probably begin with *Lord of the Flies*, now available in a paperback. The story is simple. In a way not clearly explained, a group of children, all boys, presumably evacuees in a future war, are dropped from a plane just before it is destroyed, on to an uninhabited tropical island. The stage is thus set for a reworking of a favorite subject in children's literature: castaway children assuming adult responsibilities without adult supervision. Golding expects his readers to recall the classic example of such a book, R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857), where the boys rise to the occasion and behave as admirably as would adults. But in *Lord of the Flies* everything goes wrong from the beginning. A few boys representing sanity and common sense, led by Ralph and Piggy, see the necessity for maintaining a signal fire to attract a rescue. But they are thwarted by the hunters, led by red-haired Jack, whose lust for blood is finally not to be satisfied by killing merely wild pigs. Only the timely arrival of a British cruiser saves us from an ending almost literally too horrible to think about. Since Golding is using a naive literary form to express sophisticated reflections on the nature of man and society, and since he refers obliquely to Ballantyne many times throughout the book, a glance at *The Coral Island* is appropriate.

Professor of English and Chairman of the Division of Humanities at Union College (Schenectady), Carl Niemeyer has translated Rilke and published a recent article, "Gide and Dostoevsky," in *Modern Fiction Studies* (1958).

Page references will be to this edition, which includes a critical discussion by E. L. Epstein, in Capricorn Books (Putnam's, 1959).
Ballantyne shipwrecks his three boys—Jack, eighteen; Ralph, the narrator, aged fifteen; and Peterkin Gay, a comic sort of boy, aged thirteen—somewhere in the South Seas on an uninhabited coral island. Jack is a natural leader, but both Ralph and Peterkin have abilities valuable for survival. Jack has the most common sense and foresight, but Peterkin turns out to be a skillful killer of pigs, and Ralph when later in the book he is temporarily separated from his friends and alone on a schooner, coolly navigates it back to Coral Island by dead reckoning, a feat sufficiently impressive, if not quite equal to Captain Bligh's. The boys' life on the island is idyllic; and they are themselves without malice or wickedness, though there are a few curious episodes in which Ballantyne seems to hint at something he himself understands as little as do his characters. One is Peterkin's wanton killing of an old sow, useless as food, which the boy rationalizes by saying he needs leather for shoes. This and one or two other passages suggest that Ballantyne was aware of some darker aspects of boyish nature, but for the most part he emphasizes the paradisiacal life of the happy castaways. Like Golding's, however, Ballantyne's story raises the problem of evil, but whereas Golding finds evil in the boys' own natures, it comes to Ballantyne's boys not from within themselves but from the outside world. Tropical nature, to be sure, is kind, but the men of this non-Christian world are bad. For example, the island is visited by savage cannibals, one canoeful pursuing another, who fight a cruel and bloody battle, observed by the horrified boys, and then go away. A little later the island is again visited, this time by pirates (i.e., white men who have renounced or scorned their Christian heritage), who succeed in capturing Ralph. In due time the pirates are deservedly destroyed, and in the final episode of the book the natives undergo an unmotivated conversion to Christianity, which effects a total change in their nature just in time to rescue the boys from their clutches.

Thus Ballantyne's view of man is seen to be optimistic, like his view of English boys' pluck and resourcefulness, which subdues tropical islands as triumphantly as England imposes empire and religion on lawless breeds of men. Golding's naval officer, the deus ex machina of Lord of the Flies, is only echoing Ballantyne when, perceiving dimly that all has not gone well on the island, he says (p. 248): "I should have thought that a pack of British boys—you're all British aren't you?—would have been able to put up a better show than that—I mean—"

This is not the only echo of the older book. Golding boldly calls his two chief characters Jack and Ralph. He reproduces the comic Peterkin in the person of Piggy. He has a wanton killing of a wild pig, accomplished, as E. L. Epstein points out (p. 253), "in terms of sexual intercourse." He uses a storm to avert a quarrel between Jack and Ralph, as Ballantyne used a hurricane to rescue his boys from death at the hands of cannibals. He emphasizes physical cruelty but integrates it into his story, and by making it a real if deplorable part of human, or at least boyish, nature improves on Ballantyne, whose descriptions of brutality—never of course performed by the boys—are usually introduced merely for their sensational effect. Finally, on the last page Golding's officer calls Ralph mildly to task for not having organized things better.

"It was like that at first," said Ralph, "before things—"
He stopped.
"We were together then—"
The officer nodded helpfully.
"I know. Jolly good show. Like the Coral Island."

Golding invokes Ballantyne, so that the kind but uncomprehending adult, the instrument of salvation, may recall to

This content downloaded from 137.48.5.79 on Wed, 19 Oct 2016 20:03:01 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms
the child who has just gone through hell, the naiveté of the child's own early innocence, now forever lost; but he suggests at the same time the inadequacy of Ballantyne's picture of human nature in primitive surroundings.

Golding, then, regards Ballantyne's book as a badly falsified map of reality, yet the only map of this particular reality that many of us have. Ralph has it and, through harrowing experiences, replaces it with a more accurate one. The naval officer, though he should know better, since he is on the scene and should not have to rely on memories of his boyhood reading, has it, and it seems unlikely that he is ever going to alter it, for his last recorded action is to turn away from the boys and look at his "trim" cruiser, in other words to turn away from a revelation of the untidy human heart to look at something manufactured, manageable, and solidly useful.

Golding, who being a grammar-school teacher should know boys well, gives a corrective of Ballantyne's optimism. As he has explained, the book is "an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature" (p. 250). These defects turn out, on close examination, to result from the evil of inadequacy and mistakenness. Evil is not the positive and readily identifiable force it appears to be when embodied in Ballantyne's savages and pirates. Golding's Ralph, for example, has real abilities, most conspicuous among them the gift of leadership and a sense of responsibility toward the "littluns." Yet both are incomplete. "By now," writes Golding, "Ralph had no self-consciousness in public thinking but would treat the day's decisions as though he were playing chess." Such detachment is obviously an important and valuable quality in a leader, but significantly the next sentence reads: "The only trouble was that he would never be a very good chess player" (p. 145). Piggy on the other hand no doubt would have been a good chess player, for with a sense of responsibility still more acute than Ralph's he combines brains and common sense. Physically, however, he is ludicrous—fat, asthmatic, and almost blind without his specs. He is forever being betrayed by his body. At his first appearance he is suffering from diarrhoea; his last gesture is a literally brainless twitch of the limbs, "like a pig's after it has been killed" (p. 223). His further defect is that he is powerless, except as he works through Ralph. Though Piggy is the first to recognize the value of the conch and even shows Ralph how to blow it to summon the first assembly, he cannot sound it himself. And he lacks imagination. Scientifically minded as he is, he scorns what is intangible and he dismisses the possibility of ghosts or an imaginary beast. "'Cos things wouldn't make sense. Houses an' streets, an'—TV—they wouldn't work" (p. 115). Of course he is quite right, save that he forgets he is now on an island where the artifacts of the civilization he has always known are meaningless.

It is another important character, Simon, who understands that there may indeed be a beast, even if not a palpable one—"maybe it's only us" (p. 111). The scientist Piggy has recognized it is possible to be frightened of people (p. 105), but he finds this remark of Simon's dangerous nonsense. Still Simon is right, as we see from his interview with the sow's head on a stake, which is the lord of the flies. He is right that the beast is in the boys themselves, and he alone discovers that what has caused their terror is in reality a dead parachutist ironically stifled in the elaborate clothing worn to guarantee survival. But Simon's failure is the inevitable failure of the mystic—what he knows is beyond words; he cannot impart his insights to others. Having an early glimpse of the truth, he cannot tell it.
Simon became inarticulate in his effort to express mankind's essential illness. Inspiration came to him.

"What's the dirtiest thing there is?"

As an answer Jack dropped into the uncomprehending silence that followed it the one crude expressive syllable. Release was like an orgasm. Those littluns who had climbed back on the twister fell off again and did not mind. The hunters were screaming with delight.

Simon's effort fell about him in ruins; the laughter beat him cruelly and he shrank away defenseless to his seat (p. 111).

Mockery also greets Simon later when he speaks to the lord of the flies, though this time it is sophisticated, adult mockery:

"Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!" said the head. For a moment or two the forest and all the other dimly appreciated places echoed with the parody of laughter (p. 177).

Tragically, when Simon at length achieves a vision so clear that it is readily communicable he is killed by the pig hunters in their insane belief that he is the very evil which he alone has not only understood but actually exorcised. Like the martyr, he is killed for being precisely what he is not.

The inadequacy of Jack is the most serious of all, and here perhaps if anywhere in the novel we have a personification of absolute evil. Though he is the most mature of the boys (he alone of all the characters is given a last name), and though as head of the choir he is the only one with any experience of leadership, he is arrogant and lacking in Ralph's charm and warmth. Obsessed with the idea of hunting, he organizes his choir members into a band of killers. Ostensibly they are to kill pigs, but pigs alone do not satisfy them, and pigs are in any event not needed for food. The blood lust once aroused demands nothing less than human blood. If Ralph represents purely civil authority, backed only by his own good will, Piggy's wisdom, and the crowd's easy willingness to be ruled, Jack stands for naked ruthless power, the police force or the military force acting without restraint and gradually absorbing the whole state into itself and annihilating what it cannot absorb. Yet even Jack is inadequate. He is only a little boy after all, as we are sharply reminded in a brilliant scene at the end of the book, when we suddenly see him through the eyes of the officer instead of through Ralph's (pp. 247-48), and he is, like all sheer power, anarchic. When Ralph identifies himself to the officer as "boss," Jack, who has just all but murdered him, makes a move in dispute, but overawed at last by superior power, the power of civilization and the British Navy, implicit in the officer's mere presence, he says nothing. He is a villain (are his red hair and ugliness intended to suggest that he is a devil?), but in our world of inadequacies and imperfections even villainy does not fulfill itself completely. If not rescued, the hunters would have destroyed Ralph and made him, like the sow, an offering to the beast; but the inexorable logic of Ulysses makes us understand that they would have proceeded thence to self-destruction.

Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

The distance we have travelled from Ballantyne's cheerful unrealities is both artistic and moral. Golding is admittedly symbolic; Ballantyne professed to be telling a true story. Yet it is the symbolic tale that, at least for our times, carries conviction. Golding's boys, who choose to remember nothing of their past before the plane accident; who, as soon as Jack commands the choir to take off the robes marked with the cross of Christian-
Towards a Definition of the "Decadent Novel"

RICHARD A. LONG and IVA G. JONES

If one accepts as a task of literary scholarship the careful classification of genres, one must recognize the existence not only of classes, but also of subclasses. In the strict sense, the novel is one of the newer genres of literature, and its subclasses have emerged only in the last century and a half. Our concern is with that species of the novel that emerges decisively in 1884 with the publication of Karl Joris Huysmans' *A Rebours*. We may call this species the "decadent novel" for reasons, some genetic, some historical, which will emerge as we proceed. The "decadent novel" belongs to and is usually classified uncritically with the "literature of decadence," a subject which has enjoyed a wide share of attention, chiefly of the popular and impressionistic type, beginning with Paul Bourget in his *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (1881). An interesting study of a portion of this literature is

Richard Long is Assistant Professor and Iva Jones Associate Professor of English at Morgan State College (Maryland).