**The Well is Not the World**:
William Golding's Sense of Reality in *Darkness Visible*

At the beginning of her very useful paper on William Golding's novels, Barbara Everett notes that his writing can be hard to talk about critically – a point certainly confirmed by my recent reading in the vast secondary literature surrounding Golding's work, which tends either to point at particularly powerful passages rather than explaining how they exercise such power, or to invoke possible sources and structures of significance whose relation to the relevant primary text is so speculative as to render them entirely external to that text's effects. Everett takes this resistance to serious criticism to be internal to the nature of Golding's enterprise: 'The novels dissolve, on the one hand, into their own critique, which the interested can only re-echo; and on the other, they take the form of theory's opposite, an undiscussable whole world peculiarly substantial in itself, thingy and definite'[1]. If Golding's work resists even the theory-resistant literary critic in this way, how much more resistant is it likely to be to the philosopher, so often viewed (and sometimes rightly) as not only the source for but also a paradigm of the more theory-laden forms of such critique?

On reflection, however, both the literary critic and the philosopher might resist both branches of Everett's intuitively plausible accounting. On the one hand, why *must* 'the interested' (whether interested in the novels or their criticism) re-echo lines of critical evaluation to be found in the novels themselves, as opposed to critically evaluating them or identifying other possible lines of criticism? And on the other, the mere substantiality of a novel's world need not on the face of things render it the opposite of theory, let alone undiscussable (given that not all critical discussions of fictive worlds need be theoretical).

But of course, Everett's claim is that Golding's worlds are '*peculiarly*' substantial: and this peculiarity has something to do with their wholeness (call it their self-sufficiency), as if they were not so much composed of things as themselves thinglike ('giving a pleasure close to that of a beautifully crafted handmade toy' [GP, 111]). This is why their author can 'achieve a degree of mimetic reality, of fidelity to sense-experience, not surpassed in recent fiction' (GP, 112) - a 'sense of reality' that is 'not in itself identical with reality' but in a way exceeds it. For these thinglike worlds possess 'an intensity and coherence' of a kind that the real world does not and could not possess, since 'only a certain permeability in the real makes existence possible for us at all' (GP, 112). Everett thus implies that a fictive world is discussable in her literary-critical sense of that term only insofar as we experience it as permeable to us, as permitting us to reach into it, even to find it habitable – an environment within which we might live, move and have our (literary-critical) being.

In this paper, I will build upon Everett's intuitions about the excessive sense of reality Golding achieves and about the relation between permeability and criticism, whilst rejecting her general characterization of Golding's worlds as uniformly impermeable. In so doing, I'm driven by the need properly to acknowledge the particular Golding novel which has obsessed me ever since I read it when it first appeared in 1979: *Darkness Visible*[2]. For the fictive world with which it confronts us patently does not conjoin intensity and coherence in the manner of

[1] 'Golding's Pity', in J.Carey (ed), *William Golding: The Man and His Books* (Faber and Faber: London, 1986), p 110 – hereafter 'GP'.

[2] Faber: London.

Golding's first five novels (culminating in *The Spire*). It certainly manifests intensity, but in a peculiarly substantial way, thingy and definite, in itself rather than as a qualification of some other feature of that world (such as its coherence); indeed, its intensity appears to be a function of its refusal to cohere, even of a certain kind of willed or ragged permeability. My critical account of *Darkness Visible* (which primarily engages with its first Part) grows out of this permeability or seaminess of its fictive world, and in so doing it takes up an invitation that I claim is extended by the world-maker himself. In one way, therefore, my account may be said to re-echo something that that text already knows about itself; but what it thereby identifies is not a self-interpretation into which the novel tidily dissolves, but rather an aspiration that it can neither meet nor relinquish.

1. *Walls Are Windows*

*Darkness Visible* appeared fifteen years after *The Spire* (and twelve years after the three inter-linked novellas published under the title *The Pyramid*) - by far the longest period of silence in Golding's career. Whatever the personal reasons for this (and John Carey's recent biography[3] identifies a long struggle with writer's block, the damaging effect of a negative review of *The Spire*, an accident at sea in which Golding and his family were very nearly killed, a developing drink problem), it also suggests a phase of artistic reflection – taking stock, considering what had been achieved and what new achievements might be possible or at least worth attempting. *The Pyramid* had already declared Golding's willingness to contest the restrictive allocation of his work to the genres of myth and fable; its narrative unfolds in roughly contemporary social circumstances (that of a small English town named Stilbourne). In *Darkness Visible*, he takes on the larger task of assessing the condition (not of Britain but) of England – of finding his own terms for expressing and evaluating the sense of social, cultural and political decline or decay by which so many people in England seemed gripped in that decade (as the radical energies of the sixties dissipated and the spirit of Thatcherism crystallized).

The English town at the heart of *Darkness Visible* is called Greenfield, and it contains an ironmonger's of character named Frankley's. Early in the nineteenth century, it moved into rickety buildings next to the towpath of the newly-cut canal; it thrives until the convulsions of the First World War, after which decline sets in and accelerates inexorably, despite various attempts to avert it by diversifying the goods it sells and its ways of selling them, until in the late seventies the business closes and the building is demolished. Frankley's is thus 'an image in little of society at large', by virtue of its 'complex disorder of ancient and modern' (DV, 42): the shop gradually buried itself under the accumulating sediment or remainder of each new generation of over-stocking; and each internal re-arrangement of departments remodelled a building that was already an architectural palimpsest when Frankley's first came to occupy it.

> The buildings were indeterminate in date, some walls of brick, some tile-hung, some lath and plaster, and some of a curious wooden construction. It is not impossible that parts of these wooden areas were in fact medieval windows filled as was the custom with wooden slats and now thought to be no more than chinky walls. Certainly there

[3] *William Golding: The Man Who Wrote* Lord of the Flies (Faber: London, 2009).

> was not a beam in the place that did not have here and there notches cut, grooves and an occasional hole that indicated building and rebuilding, division, reclamation and substitution, carried on throughout a quite preposterous length of time. (DV, 38)

One innovation marks the point at which Frankley's tips from vigour to decline. After the First World War 'the place grew a spider's web of wires along which money trundled in small, wooden jars' (DV, 39): each shop assistant would propel the money and receipt for a transaction to a central cashier, who would return the change by the same means, with bells marking each stop on the jar's travels. Hence the decreasing levels of trade are marked by increasing periods of silence, which – combined with the muffling effect of the building's construction – ensure that every so often ' a jar would hiss over [a] customer's head like a bird of prey, turn a corner and vanish in some quite unexpected direction' (DV, 39). When a new Mr. Frankley abolishes the overhead railway, seeing it as a slur on the elderly, august shop assistants, and reintroduces separate tills, it becomes clear that the spider's web had done two things.

> First, it had accustomed the staff to moderate stillness and tranquillity; and second, it had so habituated them to the overhead method of money sending and getting that when one of these ancient gentlemen was offered a banknote he immediately gestured upwards with it as if to examine the watermark. But this, in the evolution or perhaps devolution of the place, would be followed by continuing silence and a lost look while the assistant tried to remember what came next. (DV, 39-40)

Consider the overhead railway as an image in little of the spiritual life of the larger society within which Frankley's conducts its business. Then we might conclude that that spiritual life blossoms in response to the moral convulsion of a world war; that affairs of the spirit take on a more predatory aspect the less often we traffic in them; and that their elimination on the grounds of respect for individual dignity in fact engenders disorientation, hollowing out a previously meaningful (even joyful) gesture language.

Now consider Frankley's as an image in little of the text that contains it. Then we should expect that text to be fundamentally concerned with spirituality as called forth by the extremities of war, liable to misinterpretation in malignant terms, and requiring expression in a language of gestures but crippled or deformed in the drive towards that expression by the disorientation of those to whom that language now belongs. Indeed, since the inheritors of this language – both characters and author - are also inhabitants of the society for which Frankley's goes proxy, the means of expression for which they are groping will have the same palimpsestic quality as that of their preposterously ancient society – the same layers of overlapping sedimentation, the same overstocking, the same subjection to unceasing 'rebuilding, division, reclamation and substitution' (DV, 38). In that sense, the key obstacle confronting anyone seeking a viable contemporary spiritual language may be the sheer multiplicity of available terms or modes of discourse rather than their absence: the problem is not the absence of spiritual concepts but how to recover a meaningful personal and collective means of spiritual expression from a bewildering, historically diverse and ineliminably hybrid profusion of such concepts.

It is this condition in which one of the novel's central characters – Matty – finds himself; and its first Part is devoted to recounting his attempts to make sense of his spiritual vocation, to himself and to post-war English (and, briefly, Australian) society. But the author of this

recounting is himself in a condition analogous to Matty's: for to recount Matty's struggle to articulate both his understanding of himself as a prophet, and the prophetic visions to which he is subjected, is itself to attempt to articulate a prophetic vision of the condition of England; and the nature of this task, as well as the responsibilities taken on by anyone claiming the authority to engage in it, is conditioned by exactly the circumstances Matty confronts.
There is, of course, an apparent difference between the two tasks: for where Matty directly claims spiritual authority for his visions, and so for the actions they authorise, Golding claims (need only, and perhaps can only, claim) artistic authority for his vision of Matty's spiritual life. *Darkness Visible* is not a sacred text, but rather a literary text about the sacred (both textual and extra-textual). Hence the novel's epigraph: 'Sit mihi fas audita loqui'. With these words, Virgil seeks permission from the gods to relate his vision of the Underworld into which Aeneas travels, in the company of the Sibyl and under the protection of a golden bough of mistletoe. If Matty is Golding's Aeneas, then Golding is Virgil: his authority is poetic.
But in registering that distinction, Golding also problematizes it. For these words of Virgil call on the gods to allow him to articulate a vision of Hell: in other words, this Roman poet presents his literary enterprise not only as having a spiritual subject-matter but also as subject to spiritual authorization – quite as if the poetic and the sacred are inextricably woven into one another, internally related. It thereby appears to be an essential part of Golding's vision that our disorientation in relation to religious concepts includes or entails a disorientation with respect to the inherent otherness of the religious and the poetic – one which leaves us no longer open to the claim of each to be the other's particular or intimate other. After all, Roman texts were (perhaps until yesterday) as much a part of the cultivated English mind as the texts of Ancient Greece and Christianity – as indeed was much of what eventuated in Western culture from their interaction. So if Virgil's *Aeneid* is part of the palimpsest that constitutes contemporary English culture, so too is the idea of the spiritual and the poetic as inter-penetrative. But the only way to validate that assumption is to attempt to activate that cultural resource. So the success of Golding's enterprise will turn on whether or not that attempt finds acknowledgement in his readers – on whether or not we can see what he means by invoking such reference points, and so see what he claims to see by their means.

2. *A Structure Builds Itself Up*

The opening sequence of *Darkness Visible* is rightly regarded as one of its most powerful. It describes a group of firemen who watch incredulously as a small boy walks out of an inferno of blazing buildings during the London Blitz. Since the fire is of such intensity that it melts lead and distorts iron, it seems impossible that any human being could have survived it, but – although Matty is badly burned on the left side (so that even extensive plastic surgery leaves one side of his head bald and his left ear a purple stump) – he survives, and is eventually despatched from the hospital to Foundlings School in Greenfield.
This sequence insistently raises a question about what kind of being this boy is: he appears to 'condense out of the shuddering backdrop of the glare, and at the moment of his appearance he seemed to one of the watching firemen 'to be perhaps not entirely there – to be in a state of, as it were, indecision as to whether he was a human shape or merely a bit of flickering brightness. Was it the Apocalypse? Nothing could be more apocalyptic than a world so

ferociously consumed' (DV, 15). This fireman is a bookseller, and one described as suffering 'from a romantic view of the classical world' (DV, 11); so this conceptual lens from the New Testament is no more and no less natural to him than that of Pompeii, or of seeking a piece of wood to placate Pan when he first glimpses Matty (DV, 12). And the hybridity of his interpretative framework is emphatically continuous with that of his narrator (as well as with the nature of the preposterously old country's capital):

> There was an area east of the Isle of Dogs in London which was an unusual mixture even for those surroundings. Among the walled-off rectangles of water, the warehouses, railway lines and travelling cranes, were two streets of mean houses with two pubs and two shops among them. The bulks of tramp steamers hung over the houses where there had been as many languages spoken as families that lived there. But just now not much was being said, for the whole area had been evacuated officially and even a ship that was hit and set on fire had few spectators near it. There was a kind of tent in the sky over London, which was composed of the faint white beams of searchlights, with barrage balloons dotted here and there. The barrage balloons were all that the searchlights discovered in the sky, and the bombs came down, it seemed, mysteriously out of emptiness. They fell in or round the great fire... Under the tent of searchlights a structure had built itself up in the air. It was less sharply defined than the beams of light but it was far brighter. It was a glare, a burning bush through or beyond which the thin beams were sketched more faintly... The drone of bombers was dying away. The five-mile high tent of chalky lights had disappeared, been struck all at once, but the light of the great fire was bright as ever, brighter perhaps. Now the pink aura of it had spread. Saffron and ochre turned to blood-colour. The shivering of the white heart of the fire had quickened beyond the capacity of the eye to analyse it into an outrageous glare. High above the glare and visible now for the first time between two pillars of lighted smoke was the steely and untouched round of the full moon – the lover's, hunter's, poet's moon; and now – an ancient and severe goddess credited with a new function and a new title – the bomber's moon. She was Artemis of the bombers, more pitiless than ever before. (DV, 9, 13)

Most obviously, these passages elicit conviction by their precision at the purely descriptive level: they allow us to see in a literal sense, to see what the firemen standing on the edge of what was no longer part of the habitable world would have seen. But the fourth sentence of the passage (and of the book) subverts this literality, or perhaps it subverts our sense of what it is for words and sentences to be literally employed. It asserts that there was a tent in the sky over London – not that the searchlight beams and barrage balloons looked like a kind of tent, but simply that there was one (the kind composed of beams and balloons). But Golding does not just prefer metaphor to simile, a literal falsehood to a truthful comparison; he goes on to write as if the falsehood were simply, literally true, as if its metaphorical validity immediately authorized its availability for purely descriptive purposes – proceeding, for example, to describe the extinguishing of the searchlights as the striking of a tent. And no sooner has talk of a tent become the new benchmark for literal truth than it engenders a new dimension of metaphorical significance. The fire is presented as having built itself up under the tent, as if expanding into the accommodation provided for it; and no sooner does it fill that structure

than it is re-described (not as like but *as*) a burning bush – quite as if the idea of the tent as living quarters for a desert people immediately engenders a vision of it as providing shelter for the Ark of the Covenant, which in turn discloses the fire as the self-sustaining manifestation of God's appearance to Moses. From now on the fire simply *is* a burning bush; and the literal truth of that characterization in turn licenses the later metaphorical characterization of its attendant smoke as 'two pillars', those marks of divine protection afforded the Israelites in their desert journey out of Egypt.

In this way, the most outrageously imaginative characterizations of the real become bare denotations of its actuality: the literal truth about things answers to the most extravagant of metaphors. Poetry is truth-telling, a means of entering more deeply into reality rather than of wandering away from it; and more specifically, ancient poetic forms of truth-telling are not only not made redundant by modernity: by disclosing their utterly contemporary usefulness, they disclose hitherto unsuspected ranges of their meaning. The moon of the bombers still merits the name 'Artemis', but reveals a degree of pitilessness in that divinity (and in reality) that earlier moon-worshippers could not have imagined.

From the outset, then, this novel deploys concepts from different layers in the spiritual palimpsest of English culture; but in the case of the tent and the burning bush, those elements also serve a reflexive purpose. For one can think of the strict geometry of the tent as the narrative structure of the novel in which it is presented, and the burning bush as the vision of spiritual reality (of reality as spiritual) it is designed to invoke and accommodate, even if it is fated to be first melted and ultimately dismantled or struck by that vision – the poetic equivalent of the string that is frayed and broken by divine music, as Matty's spiritual elders put it in one of his own visions (cf DV, 238). Just as God's fiery self-manifestation to Moses requires a bush in or on which to burn, so any vision of divine fire needs a linguistic and literary medium; but unlike the Creator, the artistic creator cannot prevent his creation from consuming that which conjures and contains it.

3. *Going for Ever, Sideways*

During his time in hospital, Matty's relationship to language is presented as being as unusual as language's relation to him. First there is his name, or rather the curious business of his acquisition of a name, its assignment being the responsibility of an office that, working through the alphabet in rotation, had just made use of the letter 'v'.

> The young wit who was given the job of using 'w' suggested 'Windup', her chief having displayed less than perfect courage in an air raid. She had found she could get married and still keep her job and she was feeling secure and superior. Her chief winced at the name and drew his pen through it, foreseeing a coven of children all shouting 'Windup!', 'Windup!' He made his own substitution, though when he looked at what he had written it seemed not quite right and he altered it. There was no obvious reason for doing so. The name had first jumped into his mind with the curious effect of having come out of empty air and of being temporary, a thing to be noticed because you were lucky to be in the place where it had landed. It was as if you had sat silently in the bushes and – My! – there settled in front of you the rarest of butterflies or birds which had stayed long enough to be seen and had then gone off with an air of going for ever, sideways, it might be. (DV, 17)

As its final, syntactically strained sentence makes clear, this passage operates within the assumption that the relation between name and bearer is non-arbitrary. Philosophers and other theorists of language may tell us that names are not sentences, *a fortiori* neither apt or inept characterizations of the object or person they denote; but the depth of our resistance to such assertions is already evident in the ease with which we see the malicious joke in the young wit's coining of the name 'Windup' in honour of her chief: if we didn't intuitively regard names as fitting their bearers, why would we so unquestioningly accept the idea that a person's name might woundingly declare an unflattering aspect of his character? But it is not just that the chief experiences his eventual choice of name for Matty as somehow right for him: it is that the way in which the final sentence articulates that experience (thereby hovering undecidably between his way of experiencing it and the narrator's way of imagining that experience) involves treating Matty's rightful name as if it were a thing, and indeed the very thing it names.

According to this baptismal narrative, there is a moment of (non-original, alphabetically guided) invention, then a substitution, then an alteration, before Matty's name is settled on; and it is no sooner settled on than it is subjected to slippage in other's mouths throughout the novel (into 'Wandgrave', 'Wheelwright', 'Windgraff', 'Windrave' and so on), until his full name is finally bestowed upon him only as the final moments of his life are described (DV, 247). That name is Matthew Septimus Windrove – so even the chief's initial substitution is not *ex nihilo*, since the 'Wind' element is retained throughout, and we might well suspect that the intermediate version was 'Windgrove'. One could say, then, that Matty's name - taken as a linguistic element in the baptismal passage, and in the novel as a whole - literally is unceasingly mutating, on the move, possessed of an air of moving on for ever sideways. But the final sentence portrays his name as in truth unchanging and everlasting; what is temporary is rather its availability, which is a function of its willingness to grace us with its presence and our willingness to be receptive to that presence. The right name arrives, and then departs, but it never mutates; the office's preliminary revisions are rather increasingly successful attempts to reshape our language to accommodate it, to receive an apt impression of its own beautiful, independent life. In fact, Matty's rightful name is portrayed as if it *were* that which it names, as if it were its bearer; after all it is Matty himself whom we have already been invited to think of as the rarest kind of human creature (if he is even human at all), someone whose inhabitation of this world is momentary, his presence a fortunate but temporary phase in an endless journey that passes orthogonally through our locale. According to the final sentence, then, Matty's name is Matty, and Matty is his name: this act of naming penetrates to the essence of the being named, just as Adam in the Book of Genesis is authorized by God to give each creature its rightful name.

But whilst the passage operates within this Adamic assumption of fusion between name and bearer, its author simultaneously exploits the difference between the two. He tells us that Matty's rightful name is rare, beautiful, even partaking of eternal life, but he doesn't tell us what that name is until the novel's climax; he earns initial credit for his claim by virtue of the rare beauty of the passage in which the claim is made, but he builds upon that beginning by exploiting the long period of non-disclosure in two ways. First, he depicts Matty's nature and life in such a way that it can claim to manifest the rare beauty that results from participation in eternity; but the continuing mystery of his real name simultaneously leads the reader to

feel that a crucial piece of the puzzle about Matty's nature and life is always missing. As a result, when his rightful name is revealed, its claim to the rare beauty of eternal life can now draw on the sustained achievement of that long and complex portrayal of its bearer, and at the same time it appears as the culminating element in that portrait – the nominative detail that goes proxy for the whole (appearing just as Matty's life reaches its apotheosis). Name and bearer thereby become mutually implicating, inextricably interwoven: what Matty's name means to us is indistinguishable from what Matty has come to mean to us, both part of that meaning and the whole of it. Matty is Matthew Septimus Windrove (the seventh chapter of Matthew's Gospel, and in particular its seventh verse, that exemplary articulation of the mighty wind of the Holy Spirit, which drives him to rove restlessly between places and countries, and perhaps also leaves him riven, both body and soul); Matty is his name.

4. *Toads and their Jewels*

So much for language's relation to Matty; what of Matty's relation to language?

> As the various aids to recovery were removed from him and he began to speak more, it was observed that his relationship to language was unusual. He mouthed. Not only did he clench his fists with the effort of speaking, he squinted. It seemed that a word was an object, a material object, round and smooth sometimes, a golf ball of a thing that he could just about manage to get through his mouth, though it deformed his face in the passage. Some words were jagged and these became awful passages of pain and struggle that made the other children laugh. After his turban came off in the period between the primary work and what cosmetic work was possible, the ruin of his half-raw skull and blasted ear was most unappealing. Patience and silence seemed the greater part of his nature. Bit by bit he learnt to control the anguish of speaking until the golfballs and jagged stones, the toads and jewels passed through his mouth with not much more than the normal effort. (DV, 17-18)

Coming immediately after the baptismal narrative, this passage continues to envision words as material objects, whilst leaving it unclear how far that vision is the narrator's and how far it is merely the narrator's way of capturing Matty's experience of language (which means leaving the distance between Golding and his protagonist as ours to determine). But no sooner has the narrator translated his own metaphorical equivalence between words and golf balls or jagged stones into a tool for literal description than he offers a new metaphorical equivalence on that basis: golf balls and jagged stones are aligned with toads and jewels. Did these toads and jewels just leap into Golding's mind out of thin air, no more than a glancing and temporary alternative means of expression; or are we here privileged to observe an exotic form of words establishing a further staging post in its unending journey through English language and culture? In defence of the latter possibility, I adduce three sources for these toads and jewels – three layers of the English cultural palimpsest as embodied in one cultivated poetic mind.

First, there is the ancient folk-myth about toads - that their ugly exterior hides something of great value. Golding's passage (by interrupting Matty's increasing mastery of words with a reminder of his physical condition) certainly invites us to apply the myth to Matty himself - that risibly ugly creature who contains a jewel of great worth, the divine fire out of which he

originally condensed. But the passage directly applies this image not to Matty but to the words coming out of his mouth, all of which are presented as if emerging through a communicating passage from his interior, and so as all expressive of his interior jewel. This relates his divine fire to language, the Word to words; but it simultaneously discriminates within the field of language by identifying as jewels only those words which cause him pain and anguish to pronounce or exteriorize – the jagged stones (for the paratactic juxtaposition of the two metaphorical pairs offers the toads as equivalents of the golf balls). So speaking the Word, communicating it to others by externalizing its jewel-like nature will necessarily demand awful passages of pain and struggle from the speaker – indeed, deforming physical contortions.

The second source is *As You Like It*, and an early speech by Duke Senior:

> Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile,
> Hath not old custom made this life more sweet
> Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods
> More free from peril than the envious court?
> Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,
> The seasons' difference, as the icy fang
> And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,
> Which when it bites and blows upon my body
> Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say,
> 'This is no flattery: these are counsellors
> That feelingly persuade me what I am.'
> Sweet are the uses of adversity,
> Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
> Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
> And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
> Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
> Sermons in stones, and good in every thing. (II.i.1-17)

Shakespeare's character here invokes the ancient myth for new purposes. Most immediately, he presents adversity as something whose venomous ugliness brings about a sweet consequence – just as Matty's subjection to adversity will ultimately bring forth goodness. But the nature of that adversity is highly specific: the reverse the Duke suffers is banishment from court to the Forest of Arden, hence from urban civilization to the rural heartland of England – an early example of the Shakespearean green world that provides perspective on ordinary life and the means to transform it. Matty's obdurate resistance to contemporary social conventions is thereby presented as a potentially transfigurative attachment to the truly fundamental dimension of life – the basic bodily rhythms of the human animal's life form. The particular sweetness the Duke prophesies also resonates with Golding's portrayal of Matty: for he associates inhabitation of the green world with access to the true language of nature, and so to true language – for the native tongue of the natural world is presumably the most truly apt expression of the nature of things, thus the one language in which words make manifest the essence of every thing of which they speak, and indeed make it manifest as good. The Duke's way of claiming that there is such a language even takes on the lineaments

of that of which it longingly speaks: for each synonym it deploys for that language alliteratively bonds itself to each exemplary instance of the nature which speaks it – trees have tongues, but brooks have books, and stones sermons. Each of his words for language mirrors and so points us towards the respect in which each of our existing words for each natural thing already incarnates its nature. What the green world gives us is thus not a new language, but a proper appreciation of our old language as always already penetrating to the essence of things. This finding of the language of nature is in fact a refinding of our natural language (specifically of English, since these alliterative alignments involve the material properties of English words). In Matty's terms, the jewels of his spiritual language make manifest the divine fire out of which all creation is forged (although it will not be until the séance in Part Three that his words, and so words as such, will reveal their divinity – DV 232-3).

But the Shakespearean context problematizes any attempt to derive from the Duke's speech a straightforward endorsement of the Adamic myth of language by which *Darkness Visible* appears to be orienting itself. This is because that speech is an exercise in the familiar literary genre of pastoral, bequeathed to the Renaissance by classical antiquity, according to which Nature stands opposed to art, and is to be praised for its very artlessness (its refusal of painted pomp, its embrace of the reality of the seasons and the body). But this genre suffers from what A.D. Nuttall has called a 'central psychosis': the fact that it is in art that the artless is celebrated[4]. The pastoral is a product of urban life, as the Duke is the product of the court; its generic identity is a poetic articulation of the very mode of existence it condemns. The paradox is evident in the Duke's attempt to dispraise language by praising the language of nature; as one of his courtiers immediately points out, he has translated 'the stubbornness of fortune into so quiet and sweet a style' that it constitutes an exemplary instance of that against which he claims to be taking a stand. It does not follow that the Duke, or any other pastoral poet, does not genuinely love the simple green world; but the very success of his loving depiction of it only confirms his exile from it.

Is the same true of the play in which the Duke makes this speech? Shakespeare plainly attempts to avoid the trap, since *As You Like It* not only contains a critique of the Duke's pastoralizing, but offers a counter-version of it, by making its green world real in a way that the Duke's speech does not: for it contains genuine rustics, of the earth earthy – such as Audrey, Corin and William, the rawness of whose imagery and existence mounts a counter-attack by nature against pastoral's defeat of nature by style. When Corin tells us 'that the property of rain is to wet and fire to burn; that good pasture makes fat sheep; and that a great cause of the night is the lack of the sun' (III.ii.23-8), his wisdom approaches tautology, but precisely because of that it conveys a strange strength and fullness of meaning; it is no less a deployment of words than the Duke's speech, but perhaps it approaches more nearly the linguistic condition to which the Duke's polished alliterative allusions to the tongue of the trees or the stone's sermons self-subvertingly advert.

So by alluding to this play, does Golding's talk of toads and jewels align him more with the Duke, or with the Duke's creator? How far does *Darkness Visible*'s Greenfield collude with the classical models and modes it draws upon (including that of pastoral), and how far does it

[4] A,D,Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2007), p 231.

disrupt or displace them, in order to find or re-activate the reality to which they aspired? Is Matty an artful representation of spiritual artlessness, or the real thing, in all its raw harshness? Like Shakespeare's generation of a genuinely English pastoral out of a critique of its prior forms, Golding's regeneration of raw spirituality (call it an English spiritual) out of a collage of inherited spiritual forms cannot avoid a version of Nuttall's pastoral psychosis: for both inevitably create a new artistic form, one which engenders a realistic effect rather than reality itself. It does not follow that either artist does not love what each aspires to depict; but it does mean that both confront the apparent paradox that their success in depicting it only confirms their exile from it. The real question is: can any artist, and indeed any human being, hope for anything other than exile – whether from pastoral or from spiritual reality – in our present cultural condition, or indeed in any cultural conditions we can recognize as pertinent to art?[5]

The third source invoked by Golding's toads and jewels is one of Hans Christian Andersen's fairytales or fables, 'The Toad' (1866). The youngest, smallest and ugliest member of a family of toads who have tumbled into a well is frustrated by the restrictions of their admittedly safe environment; having imbibed her mother's tale of the precious jewel that one family member carries in her head, she declares that she certainly doesn't possess it, before climbing out of the well to explore the larger green world surrounding it. She meets a variety of more or less threatening inhabitants of that world – a disgusted farmer, some welcoming frogs, a hubristic caterpillar, a poet and a naturalist (the former saving her from the latter's specimen jar) – until the head of a family of storks take her to their rooftop nest, a final voyage that she thinks indicates their willingness to have her join their coming migration to Egypt but which is in fact a result of their need for food.

> 'I must go to Egypt' said she.. 'All the longing and all the pleasure that I feel is much better than having a jewel in one's head'.
> And it was just she who had the jewel. That jewel was the continual striving and desire to go upward – ever upward. It gleamed in her head, gleamed in joy, beamed brightly in her longing...
> The Stork's beak pinched her, and the wind whistled; it was not exactly agreeable, but she was going upward – upward towards Egypt – and she knew it; and that was why her eyes gleamed, and a spark seemed to fly out of them.
> 'Quunk! – ah!' The body was dead – the Toad was killed! But the spark that had shot forth from her eyes; what became of that? The sunbeam took it up; the sunbeam carried the jewel from the head of the toad. Whither?
> Ask not the naturalist; rather ask the poet. He will tell it thee under the guise of a fairy tale...
> But the jewel in the head of the toad?
> Seek it in the sun; see it there if you can.

[5] For more on this issue, in relation to modernist realism as a project in the arts and in philosophy, see my *The Wounded Animal: J.M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton University Press: Princeton N.J.: 2009), especially chs 9 and 10.

> The brightness is too dazzling there. We have not yet such eyes as can see into the glories which God has created, but we shall receive them by-and-by; and that will be the most beautiful story of all, and we shall all have our share in it.[6]

Andersen's adaptation of the ancient myth transfigures the jewel from an object to a drive – the continual striving and desire to go upward; it is what one might think of as a perfectionist intimation that the well is not the world, that another, better state of the world always lies just beyond the limits of the world one currently inhabits. There is no final, complete or attained state of that world and so of the self or soul that inhabits it; rather, there is either a lethal willingness to accept one's currently attained world, or a refusal ever to regard any attained world as final or complete. The little toad's vitality lies in her striving, not in anything she already possesses or might come to possess; otherwise put, it is the impossible desire to become one with the incomprehensibly transcendent sun, which is at once beyond the gaze or reach of mortal beings and yet always already one with those beings insofar as they yearn for it.

But Andersen also tells us that the incomprehensible nature of jewel and sun can nevertheless be comprehended – if not by the naturalist then by the poet, and in the form of a fairy tale (*this* fairy tale). What grants this genre its power is, however, its willingness to acknowledge that its own grasp of this dazzling brightness takes the form of acknowledging its own utter inadequacy in comparison with another mode of story-telling, that of God's narrative for creation and for human beings within it. And just as we shall all have our share in that most beautiful of stories, so the fairytale's portrayal of the jewel's participation in the sun is successful only by declaring its own willing dependence upon, and so its ultimate participation in, the Christian story of the Son (, the Father and the Holy Spirit). By declaring its own nothingness in relation to that divine narrative of (and doing so in terms provided by the sacred texts which convey it, such as 'Now we see through a glass darkly; presently we shall behold Him face to face'), it identifies the mode of its participation in that narrative – namely, that of withdrawing any claims to authority of its own by crediting such authority as it may presently have to another Author. Since its nothingness is manifest only in relation to that unattained but attainable narrative perspective, any proper declaration of that nothingness relates it and its readers to that other perspective, and so makes of itself a way into that divine story – a spark thrown off its dazzling sun.

It becomes increasingly clear as Part One of *Darkness Visible* develops that Matty can only become himself precisely by such an act of directed or dialectical self-abnegation – by declaring himself as nothing in relation to the God of the Old (and New) Testaments, and thereby aspiring wholly to identify his life with the Christian form of life, to become an individual in whom that impossibly perfected story condenses or crystallizes. But the author of *Darkness Visible* makes no such vow: Christian concepts and traditions remain prominent throughout the text, but they are frequently interwoven with (and sometimes put into conflict with) resources deriving from other layers of the cultural sedimentation that helps constitute the English society out of which it was written.

This is evident in the very phrase whose palimpsestic significance we are currently delineating: Golding's toads and jewels inherit and revivify ancient folk-myth, the pastorals

[6] Quoted from the translation at http://hca.gilead.org.il/the_toad.html.

of classical antiquity and Shakespearean revaluation, and European fairy tale. He thereby acknowledges his indebtedness to the genres of myth and fable, whilst presenting them not as limits upon his present project but as elements in a broader field of its poetic resources – more specifically as conventions that his project aspires to reconstruct in order better to realize their orienting aspiration to represent the reality of things. But this heterogeneity of genres also shows that, unlike Andersen, Golding resists the subordination of poetry to any particular religious authority, the absolute subsumption of his literary authority within that of Christianity; he is not Aeneas but Virgil, not a religious visionary but rather the artistic envisioner of Matty's religious visions. And yet: when Golding reaches the point of envisioning the Hell that Matty seeks to avert but which is as integral to his religious sensibility as Heaven – when in Parts Two and Three he follows Sophy, the metaphysical twin of twentieth century terrorism, from her initial nihilistic intuitions to her whole-hearted creative imagining of their realization in the world – the question of his authority to relate what he has seen unavoidably recurs. Virgil asks divine permission to say what he has seen of the Underworld; when that request re-appears as the epigraph to Golding's novel, to whom does he imagine that it is directed, and in what spirit?

5. *Vulnerable Skin*

By the end of his stay in Australia, Matty's agonizing struggle to find a way of meaning Christian words and deeds – to find himself in those religious resources – comes to a climax[7]. After the apparently castrating crucifarce or crucifiction he undergoes at the hands (or feet) of an Aborigine named Harry Bummer, he performs his own version of the Old Testament prophetic practices of Elijah and Ezekiel in downtown Darwin, to disruptive effect; and before returning to England, he searches for somewhere low down, a place at once hot, fetid and supplied with water, in which he can undertake a ritual (at once final and initial or initiatory). Watched only by uncomprehending frogs and lizards, he strides into and through a deep, isolated pool at night-time, dressed only in a chain fastened around his waist from which heavy steel wheels are slung, and holding a lit, antique lamp over his head; at the mid-point, his head is wholly submerged, with only the hand and arm grasping the lamp remaining above the surface of the water. Once he reaches the other side, he heaves the lamp four times at each point of the compass; then he goes on his way (DV, 72-6).

Matty remains silent throughout, but his actions speak for themselves: more precisely, they *say* themselves, as Wittgenstein puts it when characterizing what he calls a gesture language, or the gestural dimension of language[8]. The medium and the message are one; what it signifies and its mode of signification are inextricable. One might say that Matty's actions are perfectly adapted to their purpose: their meaning would be altered or diminished if any

[7] If the present essay could contain another essay, this would be the point to explore the connections between Golding's Matty and Stanley Cavell's interpretation of Kierkegaard's diagnosis of Magister Adler, the defining question of which is 'How far a man in our age may be justified in asserting that he had a revelation?' – that is, whether anything any longer could conceivably count for us as a revelation of the Christian God. Matters of spiritual disorientation, empty forms of life, and the internal relations between religion, politics and art prove central to answering that question. Cf 'Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation*', in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge Unversity Press: Cambridge, 1976).

[8] For more on this, cf my *Inheritance and Originality* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2001), Part One, sections 45-6.

element of the ritual were other than it is (intuitively, the shape and raw material of the steel wheels matters as much as their weight, as does the old-fashioned design of the lamp). On the other hand, the significance of those actions in that place is importantly dependent on the wider context within which the ritual is performed; in particular, our sense of its meaning is inseparable from our knowledge that Matty is performing it, and so from everything we know about Matty's life up to this moment (which means pretty much everything in *Darkness Visible* up to this point). These are not contradictory responses, any more than saying of the expression in someone's eyes that it is unique and that it expresses what it expresses only in the context of her face.

When Wittgenstein discusses Sir James Frazer's account (in *The Golden Bough*) of the annual ritual in which the priest-king of Nemi is slain by his successor, he offers the following response:

> Put that account of the King of the Wood at Nemi together with the phrase 'the majesty of death', and you see that they are one.
>
> The life of the priest-king shows what is meant by that phrase.
>
> If someone is gripped by the majesty of death, then through such a life he can give expression to it. - Of course this is not an explanation: it puts one symbol in place of another. Or one ceremony in place of another. (RFGB, 3e[9])

One way of giving expression to our understanding of Matty's ritual would be to put it together with the following passage: 'and the light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not'; another would be to put it together with the phrase 'you have been baptized with water; you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit'. Either phrase might crystallize what is compelling about Matty's ritual, and so about his life; or they might leave us cold, dissatisfied. But even if they satisfy us, it is not by finding a non-ritualized or unceremonial equivalent for the meaning of the ritual; they rather amount to the substitution of one ritual symbol or ceremonial gesture for another. Such phrases, insofar as they capture the impression the ritual makes, do not so much represent its meaning as re-enact it: one might equally well say that the ritual gives expression to what grips us about the words. Each is the other's explanation; the meaning of both is equally ceremonial or gestural.

If we acknowledge this ritual and these phrases (both from the beginning of John's Gospel) as one, then we acknowledge an internal relation between the meaning of the ritual and the meaning of Christianity; but this ritual is not a Christian rite, not a rite of passage into or within the Christian church – it is Matty's remaking of Christian elements into a language that articulates what he (prophetically) feels, something that he has just distinguished from what he (prophetically) sees (DV, 71). The same holds of his culminating spiritual insight, during his employment as a caretaker at Wandicott House, an exclusive private school outside Greenfield. Having just had his sexual potency restored by a dream in which Sophy appears as the woman in the Apocalypse (to which he responds by dancing to the sound of Beethoven's Seventh, the symphony Wagner ceremonially characterized as 'the apotheosis of dance'), he has a vision in which his fellowship with his two spiritual elders is revealed, and all three throw down their crowns at the feet of a great spirit in white, who will stand behind the schoolchild Matty has been asked to guard, and whom he will save from a terrorist kidnap

[9] 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', (ed) R.Rhees, (trans) A.C.Miles, (Brynmill Press: Doncaster, 1979).

attempt. Surely here, one might think, the intense colours of his spiritual passion have finally come neatly and evenly to fill in the outlines provided by the Christian story (cf DV, 22); but even here, those outlines are broken – the specificities and exclusivities of doctrine bypassed, the orthodoxies of liturgy and rite dispensed with. Christianity remains Matty's sole spiritual language until the end; but he works only with those elements that work for him, and is more than willing to fuse or stitch them together with any extra-Christian elements that also seem to work.

How does Golding make his depiction of Matty's immersion ritual so powerfully impressive – conveying its ceremonial meaning without lapsing into attempts to explain or summarize that meaning non-ceremonially? His description of Matty's actions is both like and unlike the book's opening description of his entry into the world. They are alike, in that this scene comes vividly to life primarily by an absolutely receptive transcription of its external physical details, so that the reader seems to be standing at the edge of the pool observing everything that happens; every element of deed and context exhibits itself before our eyes in such a way that we are simultaneously convinced that the man's purpose is utterly inscrutable (because hidden away inside his head, a point of view from which Golding scrupulously excludes us) and utterly transparent (wholly manifest in what the man does). But unlike the opening account of the Blitz, this radically external description reduces its metaphorical content to the barest minimum – no tents or bushes, no goddess of the outback, nothing figurative that is no sooner invoked than deployed as if literally true. Any reasonable natural scientist or anthropologist could accept the descriptive resources employed here; but the result is that the basic constituents of the natural world disclose themselves as capable of being (even perhaps as always already) irradiated with spiritual meaning.

Crucially, however, before this vivid transcription of the ritual, Golding writes a kind of prologue to it - two long paragraphs cast in predominantly subjunctive or counterfactual form, in which the narrator imagines someone walking into this hidden environment, and reports on what every available sense would have supplied such a person:

> Human feet would have felt the soft and glutinous texture, half water half mud, that would rise swiftly to the ankles and farther... The nose would have taken all the evidence of vegetable and animal decay, while the mouth and skin... would have tasted an air so warm and heavy with water it would have seemed as if there was doubt as to whether the whole body stood or swam or floated. The ears would be filled with the thunder of the frogs and anguish of nightbirds...
>
> Then, accustomed to the darkness by a long enough stay and willing – it would have to be by sacrifice of life and limb – to trade everything for the sight, eyes would find what evidence there was for them too. It might be a faint phosphorescence round the fungi on the trunks of trees ... or a swift flight of sparks flashing between tree trunks... By then, feet that had stayed that long would have sunk deep, the mud moving to this side and that, the warm mud; and the leeches would have attached themselves down there in an even darker darkness, a more secret secrecy and with unconscious ingenuity, without allowing their presence to be felt would have begun to feed through the vulnerable skin.

> But there was no man in that place; and it seemed impossible to one who had inspected it from far off and in daylight that there ever had been a man in the place since men began. (DV, 73)

Suppose we were to put this passage together with the following sentence from the Book of Genesis: 'And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep': we would, I think, see that they are one. But it is not just that the distinct natural elements of the scene blur and blend into one another (liquid earth, watery air, animal decay), to the point that natural form as such dissolves; a similar effect simultaneously occurs at the level of narrative form. For what begins as an act of imagining what someone else – no-one in particular – might experience quickly dissolves into an act of imagining what such experience would have been like for the narrator, and one so intensely detailed and penetrating that it quickly takes on the aspect of a report from someone who really did walk into the pool in the encroaching dark, even someone who is currently standing – all senses alert - in that softly glutinous water. In this way, distinct imaginative acts blur into one another, and acts of imagination blur into transcriptions of experience.

The uncanniness of all this compels the narrator to think of his imaginary person in the pool – that is, himself - as risking life and limb for the experience, and to associate his imaginative residence in the water with suffering leeches to feed silently on him. Here, the blurring or blending goes into reverse: the realities conjured up by the narrator's imaginative capacity to penetrate the experiences of others now begin to penetrate him, disclosing the porousness of his own identity and beginning to leech his lifeblood. Why this sudden sense of lethal vulnerability? Because the narrator's act of imagination places him in the very position that Matty will occupy later that night: it is a kind of trial effort, a preliminary attempt at taking on Matty's perspective or view on the world, becoming that incarnation of 'the Spirit of God moving upon the face of these waters' for which the previously cited verses of Genesis directly prepare the way. This (un)holy essay is something from which the narrator withdraws as a seeming impossibility, but an impossibility encountered specifically from the point of view of someone who had inspected it in daylight - from Matty's perspective.

In short, Golding tries to imagine the context and core experience of the ritual from Matty's point of view, and the experience so disturbs him that he denies its very possibility and retreats to the perspective of an observer for the ritual itself. He experiences his own character, when driven by deep spiritual feeling to inscrutable but exquisitely apt ritual gestures, as threatening to drain away his creator's vitality; he fears the uncanny porousness of his imagination to its own creations, and in particular the secret ingenuity with which this imaginative creation threatens to destabilize every boundary or limit within and between authorial self and authored world - to dissolve the structure of reality altogether. What lesson should Golding's readers draw from this ceremonial double gesture of immersion-and-withdrawal about the porousness of the barrier between themselves and the world of *Darkness Visible* – about the risks of allowing its creator to draw us into that world? And remember: the protagonist of this ritual scene is Matty – the good man, the prophet, the saint. What might happen when we are invited to imagine Matty's opposite, his dark twin?

## 6. *The Rabbit, or: sit mihi fas audita loqui*

At the end of Part Three, Sophy's plot to kidnap a child from Wandicott House School is falling apart: her terrorist sister has hijacked the plan (together with Sophy's boyfriend) for her own purposes, the arrival of unlooked-for visitors means that the stable room in which she grew up cannot be used to incarcerate the kidnapped child, and Matty has anyway forced her key accomplice to abort the kidnap itself. Having been ejected from the stables, but before discovering that the kidnap attempt has failed, in the depths of the countryside outside Greenfield, her attention is caught:

> There was a loud thumping noise in the hedge and it stopped her dead. Something was bouncing and flailing about and then it squeaked and she could make out that it was a rabbit in a snare, down there by the ditch that lay between the towpath and the woods. It was flailing about, not knowing what had caught it and not caring to know but killing itself in an effort just to be free, or it may be, just to be dead. Its passion defiled the night with grotesque and obscene caricature of process, of logical advance through time from one moment to the next where the trap was waiting. (DV, 249)

Still before receiving the bad news from her accomplice, but ecstatic at the sight of the conflagration at Wandicott House painting the sky red, 'she saw what the last outrage was and knew herself capable of it. She shut her eyes as the image swept round her' (DV, 251). Within that image is the kidnapped boy, now incarcerated in the stinking toilet of an abandoned, rotting barge she had previously explored on the towpath outside Greenfield. The child's arms are bound behind his back, as are his feet and knees; more ropes hold him on either side to the boat's walls, and a huge pad of sticky stuff covers his mouth and cheeks. His violent struggles against those bonds 'sound like a rabbit thumping' (DV, 251), and are redoubled when he hears her voice; but somehow, as she enters the confined space, inhales its disgusting smell of ancient and fresh urine, and removes the child's jersey and shirt, her boyfriend's commando knife is in her hand.

> She swept her hand over his naked tum and belly button, the navel my dear if you must refer to it at all and she felt paper-thin ribs and a beat, beat, thump, thump at left centre. So she got his trousers undone and held his tiny wet cock in her hand as he struggled and hummed through his nose. She laid the point of the knife on his skin and finding it to be the right place, pushed it a bit so that it pricked. The boy convulsed and flailed in the confinement and she was or someone was, frightened a bit, far off and anxious. So she thrust more still and felt it touch the leaping thing or be touched by it again and again while the body exploded with convulsions and a high humming came out of the nose. She thrust with all the power there was, deliriously; and the leaping thing inside seized the knife so that the haft beat in her hand, and there was a black sun. There was liquid everywhere and strong convulsions and she pulled the knife away to give them free play but they stopped. The boy just sat there in his bonds, the white patch of elastoplast divided down the middle by the dark liquid from his nose. (DV, 252)

Few commentators fail to note this passage, although only in passing, and those who do go into more detail typically misdescribe what actually goes on: they report Sophy as castrating the boy, or as stabbing him through his genitals[10]. These critical lapses are striking, and

[10] Cf V. Tiger, *William Golding: The Unmoved Target* (Marion Boyars: London, 2003), p 195, and M. Kinkead-Weekes and I. Gregor, *William Golding: a Critical Study of the Novels* (Faber: London, 2002), p 252,

deeply significant. Specifically, they occlude the fact that Sophy stabs the child through the heart, which the passage repeatedly describes as leaping and thumping, thereby presenting it as going proxy for the boy's whole body (as it thumps and leaps in its confinement), and so characterizing both heart and body in terms first applied to the trapped rabbit in the ditch – a creature already identified with Sophy herself, the human animal whose obscene passion defiles the night as she flails hysterically in her desire to be free, or to be dead. These commentators thereby fail to note that Golding equates her murder of the child with self-murder, understanding it as an attempt to annihilate not just that frightened anxious, far-off part of her self that retains some connection with goodness, but her existence as such, which she conceives of as nothing more than an grotesque and obscene caricature of process or narrative.

This specific failure of vision is also, however, a way of averting one's critical gaze from the scene as a whole; it is a way of covering it up and so of ushering it off-stage even whilst appearing to do the reverse. Just like those who can hardly bring themselves to mention the scene at all, such critics deny its true reality, and so participate in the general critical reluctance to admit that we have indeed read every word of it, and so that Golding has compelled us to read every word of it. He has here exercised his unequalled imaginative powers in such a way that Sophie's imagining of the final outrage appears to us as the narrative of an actual event, and our reading of it is as a kind of participation in that event. The boundary between imaginative representation and reality dissolves within the world of the novel, together with the boundary between that imagined world and its readers; and we experience both dissolutions as the result of that world's creator's willingness to dissolve the boundary between himself and his creation – to immerse himself in the reality of Sophy's evil, which means devoting his imagination to making that evil real in a way which seriously problematizes Everett's bracingly clear-headed distinction between reality and a literarily-engendered sense of reality.

Put this account of child-murder together with the phrase 'darkness visible', and you see that they are one. But if this scene really epitomizes the meaning of the novel's title, and so of the novel itself, why has no critic of the novel ventured to quote extensively from it, let alone to cite it in its entirety? If to do so is to experience once again what it depicts, and so to inflict it on those who read that criticism, one can hardly blame them. Such a refusal is, after all, the most direct way of registering the perception (at once critical and moral) that this scene is ob-scene, something whose outrageous content ought really to remain off-stage (as the etymology of the term requires) because, staged in this way, it literally makes a deep impression on us: as one of Coetzee's characters puts it when confronted with an analogous case of the literary representation of evil, 'it made an impress on me the way a branding iron does. Certain pages burn with the fires of hell'[11].

If we will not quote this passage – this exemplary element of the palimpsest that is *Darkness Visible* – we seem to imply that Golding should not have created it, and so should not have created the whole fictional world for which it goes proxy (however much praise we lavish on every other aspect of that world); but if we do quote it, we seem to risk violating basic tenets

respectively.

[11] J.M.Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (Secker and Warburg: London, 2003), p 171. I discuss this episode in more detail in chapter 12 of *The Wounded Animal* (op. cit.).

of literary criticism and morality alike (by failing to keep what is, precisely insofar as it is poetically successful, beyond the pale of rightful representation). But we might rather think of such citation as the critical equivalent of the creative strategy at work in Golding's depiction of the pool ritual – that is, as one of immersion-and-withdrawal. For if a critical immersion in Sophy's vision reveals the artistic means by which Golding creates in us the sense that this evil is no literary artefact but the thing itself, it necessarily reveals that impression to be a literary creation or effect, and thereby allows us to withdraw from any identity-threatening participation in it.

On that basis, would some of my readers extend retrospective permission for me to relay what William Golding saw on his visit to the Underworld? Others might rather stay true to their initial sense that these pages really do burn with the fires of hell, and conclude that this text genuinely disables criticism. Golding himself vowed never to talk about *Darkness Visible*, and he was true to his word. Many readers will take this as a ceremonial gesture intended to encourage a similar act of self-abnegation by those whose passionate interest in the text is precisely what tempts them to talk about it critically; but I think there are ways of acknowledging that gesture without so taking it – for example, by finding ways of talking critically about the novel which bring out the fact that, and the ways in which, it says itself. Do I need to add that I may be wrong?

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