

The Problem of Sensibility:
Spectacles and Mental Images in Lord of the Flies

Yasunori Sugimura

William Golding's Lord of the Flies¹ is generally regarded as an allegorical fable, and seems to be limited to a mere problem of darkness inherent in man's heart. But I think this fiction has something other than a philosophy of evil. The difference of personality between Simon and Jack is not so much due to the moral and ethical nature as to the problem of sensibility toward each phenomenon before their eyes.

In this paper, instead of considering the value system of good and evil, I'd like to throw light on the difference of the two boy's perceptive attitude toward the constantly shifting spectacles of an uninhabited island where they were forced to land.

I

It is true that Simon is a peculiar boy who sometimes predicts future, or acts independently of other boys. But this does not mean that he has some Christlike sagacity which is alien to others. It was Simon, Jack, and Ralph who first embarked on the expedition of this island, and they had some common experiences on their way. For instance, they rolled the great rock which was the harbinger of a series of murderous acts (p.30). After pushing the rock down into the forest, they arrived at the mountainside on their way to the top. There they saw a beautiful spectacle of flowers and butterflies. Such a scene once more appeared when they found the aromatic bushes during their descent (p. 33). The chances of appreciating these paradisiacal scenes are equally provided for them. Why, then, is it that Simon appears to be quite unlike Jack? I think it is not because Simon has superhuman ability but because he has an introspective tendency and 'the most inclusive sensibility among the children at this stage'². When he grasps a present phenomenon, he projects his mental images of both past and future at the same time. Consequently, the spectacle before his eyes forms a new image in his mind through the interaction between the spectacle and his mental images. This method of recognition explains his idea that the imaginary beast other boys fear vaguely is the projection of the darkness

of our soul. Jack wants to 'destroy the objectification of his fears', while Simon recognizes 'the dark terrors and evil of himself'³.

It is not that in Jack's case we can't find any interaction of spectacles and mental images. When he found a piglet caught in creepers and raised the knife in the air, his arm was transfixed long enough for the piglet to scurry into the undergrowth. Only a moment before, Jack as well as Simon and Ralph had seen rock flowers fluttering, had felt the cool breeze blowing on his face, had enjoyed the aroma of evergreen bushes with many waxen green buds. These scenes were still vivid in his mind. Moreover, he could picture what an enormity the stroke would bring about. The moment he raised his knife, these mental pictures overlapped with the piglet before his eyes and produced a new image which was not a mere piglet caught in creepers. Jack's sensibility at this time seems to be no different from Simon's. But Jack grew tired of concentrating his attention on the interaction between actualities and mental images. He gradually gave himself up to hunting a pig, urged by the unconscious drive. It is extremely dangerous to act unconsciously without paying any attention to the mental images, because such an action often incurs brutal cruelty. The constant reciprocity between the actual objects and mental landscape will keep our behaviour in check and prevent us from lapsing into corruption. I think the crucial difference between Simon and Jack comes from the ability of attending to this constant reciprocity. This is more than the problem of good and evil.

II

Animals and plants, natural phenomena of this island have so many phases that it is not easy to find out the mutual relationships among them, still less build up the interaction between such spectacles and our mental landscape. Dazzling sunshine, heat, mirages, a coral reef, the jungle, pigs, a black blob of flies, the red cliff, the calm lagoon, rough ocean, the overflow of blue flowers, aromatic evergreen bushes, birds, butterflies, bees, constellations, thunder, darkness, uncanny phosphorescent creatures--these and other various elements are joined together to form the natural environment of this island. We are confronted with this 'complex structure of experience'⁴. Even the topography of the island symbolizes this variety.

On the other side of the island, swathed at midday with mirage, defended by the shield of the quiet lagoon, one might dream of rescue; but here, faced by the brute obtuseness of the ocean, the miles of division, one was clamped down, one was helpless, one was condemned, one was--- (p. 122)

This uninhabited island exists precariously on the internal conflict which may at any moment cause the whole system to collapse.⁵ If we are to keep it from destruction, we should recognize the juxtaposed elements totally and clearly in order to produce new images through the interaction among them. Every behaviour is examined, checked, and modified by this process. Even the repeated description of butterflies is not a mere duplicate.⁶ At first, butterflies appeared at the lip of a half-cirque in the side of the mountain, which was filled with a blue flower. But the next time they appeared, only a pair of them danced in the open space in the jungle where 'a patch of rock came close to the surface and would not allow more than little plants and ferns to grow (p. 61).' The third appearance is at the same place as the second, but now the sunlight 'pelted down' and the air 'threatened' (p. 146). Into this very place the wounded sow staggered, dripping vivid blood. She was slaughtered on the spot, with the hot blood spouting. Simon and Jack always share the same scene of butterflies, although Simon does not take part in the pig hunt. It was on their first expedition that Simon, Jack, and Ralph saw butterflies 'lifting, fluttering, settling' in the mountainside filled with a blue flower. A pair of gaudy butterflies dancing in the hot air was also caught sight of by both Simon and Jack, however different their situation might be. Wherever the butterflies flutter, both Simon and Jack happen to be present. But it is just after this scene that the difference of sensibility between them becomes distinct. When Simon perceives a pair of gaudy butterflies in the intense heat of the sun, he revives his mental picture of the first butterflies in a blue flower. A contrast between the spectacle and the mental landscape must have been a little shock to him. He tries to search for some other scenery which will mediate this conflict. He is sensing the sign in the sounds, colours, smells, and the atmosphere of the island.

Evening was advancing towards the island; the sounds of the bright fantastic birds, the bee-sounds, even the crying of the gulls that were returning to their roots among the square rocks, were fainter.... With the fading of the light the riotous colours died and the heat and urgency cooled away.... Darkness poured out, submerging the ways between the trees till they were dim and strange as the bottom of the sea. The candle-buds opened their wide white flowers glimmering under the light that pricked down from the first stars. Their scent spilled out into the air and took possession of the island (p. 62).

Here gaudy colours are subdued, and antagonistic elements negate one another to produce a landscape picture of a quiet mood. This paysage settled in his mind for the time being.

III

Jack, too, must have found a pair of butterflies dancing round each other in the hot sun when he got close behind the wounded sow, but the first scene of the butterflies in a blue flower didn't come back in his memory nor did the first anticipation which had kept him from stabbing the piglet caught in the creepers. The control function of the mind was out of order owing to the absence of new images generated by the conflict between the spectacle and the mental image.

They were just behind her when she staggered into an open space where bright flowers grew and butterflies danced round each other and the air was hot and still. Here, struck down by the heat, the sow fell and the hunters hurled themselves at her. This dreadful eruption from an unknown world made her frantic; she squealed and bucked and the air was full of sweat and noise and blood and terror.... Then Jack found the throat and the hot blood spouted over his hands. The sow collapsed under them and they were heavy and fulfilled upon her. The butterflies still danced, preoccupied in the centre of the clearing. (p. 149)

Above all, the connection between spectacles and anticipation is lost to Jack more than ever. The striking example is the way he acted when he found the sow. She was a mother of many piglets.

She was black and pink; and the great bladder of her belly was fringed with a row of piglets that slept or burrowed and squeaked (p. 148).

Under Jack's direction, the sharp wooden spears flew towards pigs. One piglet had Roger's spear behind it and ran into the sea. The sow gave a squeal and staggered up as two spears stuck in her flank. She ran away with another spear sticking in her side. The atmosphere was full of blood and terror. When Jack slaughtered the sow, lugged out the coloured guts, took the meat, and offered the still dripping head in sacrifice to the imaginary beast, he could picture in his mind neither the butterflies in the blue flower nor the family of pigs resting under the trees. His behaviour is at the mercy of crude lust.

Simon, with a quiet landscape in his mind, met with the butterflies again in the same place as before. This time, however, the heat of the sunlight was more intense, and the sweat ran down from his hair. He couldn't escape the arrow of the sun and got very thirsty, when the impaled sow's head confronted him. It grinned with blood trickling from its mouth. Flies were buzzing like a saw around the head and the pile of guts. A blackness spread within a vast mouth of the Lord of the Flies. He was shocked by the violent conflict between this scene and his inner landscape, and at last he fainted.

Without building up any new image, he walked on toward the mountaintop half unconsciously, sometimes staggering. There he witnessed the decomposed body of a paratrooper who had also been slaughtered by human beings. The flies swarmed about this corpse just as they covered the sow's head. A foul smell of corruption attacked his stomach. But deep in his mind remained the honey-coloured twilight, green candle-like buds, white flowers glimmering under the first stars, and their scent spilling throughout the island. The overlap of this landscape with the decomposed parachutist gradually forms a new and ultimate image in his mind. We will soon know what it is like, though it is not described here. This new image prompts him to take a decisive action--to free the tangled lines of the parachute from the rocks so that the corpse may escape from indignity. No sooner had Simon crawled from the forest to inform other boys of this harmless beast than he was mistaken for the very beast and brutally murdered by the boys who were demented with the threatening weather. The rain began to fall in torrents

The parachutist slid from the mountaintop, falling and sinking towards the beach, and moved out to sea. Simon, now a dead body, also moved out slowly from the beach towards the open sea. In the following night piece we might feel his inner landscape he has ultimately acquired:

The strange, attendant creatures, with their fiery eyes and trailing vapours, busied themselves round his head.... The great wave of the tide moved further along the island and the water lifted. Softly, surrounded by a fringe of inquisitive bright creatures, itself a silver shape beneath the steadfast constellations, Simon's dead body moved out towards the open sea (p. 170)

This is the most elaborate and the most impressive among all the descriptions in Lord of the Flies. Here lies the wonderfully harmonized world of brilliant light with the grotesque scene.⁷ The innumerable silverly bright creatures during the night are eerie transparencies in the daytime which come scavenging for carcasses of any landward life. They are no different from flies in terms of scavengers. The image of paradise Simon once had in his mind negates their uncanny phase, while only a sweet, paradisaical atmosphere is modified by their avaricious nature.

IV

We might have a new perspective on the different behaviour of Simon and Jack by considering it in terms of sensibility, not from moral, ethical or religious points of view. Simon's method of grasping a present phenomenon together with his memory and prospect does not require any special ability. It is a common perceptive method we use when we appreciate music or any other work of art. It is true that Simon is a boy of receptive mind with a bit of artistic temperament, but he is an ordinary boy, neither a saint nor a man of virtue. The problem lies in other boys who always think of him as a queer man. One of the main reason for the demented society in this fiction is the corruption of our normal sensibility under the 'special circumstances'⁸ of this isolated island where there is no hope of rescue. This problem must come before the abstract argument about morality, religion, or the darkness of the soul. So with Pincher Martin in which the consciousness of a drowned sailor is vividly described, or with Rites of Passage

which deals with the abnormal conduct of a parson in the merciless condition. The author closely investigates the same situation in the society, the family, and the sexual relationships.

It is not only for 'the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart' (p. 223) but also for the very rescue from an extreme situation that Ralph and other boys wept while a naval officer was hearing the facts of the case. They had lost even the sensibility of crying. I don't think this rescue is meaningless, even though the cruiser in the distance suggests the continuance of an atomic war and the novel is 'silent about salvation.'⁹ At least we could stop the annihilation of mankind if we restored the wholesome sensibility with which Simon produces a new image one after the other from the interaction between the present spectacle and the inner landscape. He saves this novel from total pessimism.¹⁰ It might safely be said that in this novel constant introspection and fresh sensibility are more stressed than ethical or religious problems. Therefore it is an easygoing and dangerous interpretation to subordinate this work to morality or religion by limiting it to a mere allegory showing the darkness of man's soul, because characters are too young to understand clearly what the evil is like.¹¹ Just as this uninhabited island is a mixture of various inconsistent elements, so this fiction contains many irreconcilable elements of equal value, always shaking our *idée fixe*. The significance of this text lies in the ever-renewed ideas produced by constant interaction among juxtaposed elements. The text itself calls for our sensibility to perceive totally this juxtaposition in order to build up new meanings.

NOTES

- 1 William Golding, Lord of the Flies (London: Faber and Faber, 1973)
All the subsequent page references to this novel are from this edition.
- 2 Mark Kinkead-Weekes & Ian Gregor, William Golding: A Critical Study (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 30.
- 3 Virginia Tiger, William Golding: The Dark Fields of Discovery (London: Marion Boyars, 1976), p. 63.

- 4 Paul Elmen, William Golding: Contemporary Writers in Christian Perspective, ed. Roderick Jellema (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), p. 34.
- 5 Arnold Johnston, Of Earth and Darkness: The Novels of William Golding (Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 1980), p. 19.
- 6 On this point, I can't agree with Jeanne Delbaere-Garant who argues that this fiction has a 'never-ceasing reproduction' within it. I think the repeated element in this novel is not a mere duplicate of others, but the duplicate with a difference. (Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, "Rhythm and Expansion in Lord of the Flies" in William Golding: Some Critical Considerations, ed. Jack I. Biles & Robert O. Evans [Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1978], pp. 72, 86.)
- 7 Mark Kinkead-Weekes & Ian Gregor, pp. 52-53.
- 8 Mark Kinkead-Weekes & Ian Gregor, p. 55.
- 9 Samuel Hynes, William Golding (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 16.
- 10 Bernard S. Oldsey and Stanley Weintraub, The Art of William Golding (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 31-32.
- 11 Bernard F. Dick, William Golding (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1967), p. 34.

(Akita National College of Technology)