

A Concealed Void in the World of Golding's *The Double Tongue*

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After his sudden death at his home of a heart attack in June 1993, Golding's drafts of his last novel were published in 1995 by Faber and Faber under the title *The Double Tongue*. This was chosen by the editors from among several other titles in his handwriting written at the head of the drafts. With all its incompleteness, this novel provides more or less consistent answers to the problems he has been seeking to elucidate.

The problem of God or a god, the gaze, patriarchy and sexism, all converge on the theme of this novel. It is implied in *The Spire* that God issues the imperative that appears to fill out the gap in the symbolic world with various holy figures and rituals, but actually it breaks the symbolic order, leaving the gap larger than ever. In *The Spire*, God vanishes from Jocelin's consciousness the moment he is liberated from this imperative that has dominated him throughout his life. In *The Pyramid*, patriarchal fathers reign over Stilbourne as all-seeing gods who are supposed to see through every person and object, whereas this gaze necessarily meets with the other eyes watching it. The gaze of the gods or the patriarchal fathers abates its force when they feel other eyes watching them, and ultimately patriarchy in Stilbourne threatens to collapse. It is generally accepted that we are conscious of God when we always feel ourselves one-sidedly observed by an utterly invisible existence.¹ This nondescript existence, or rather nonentity that is impenetrable to anyone's eyes, tends

to be regarded as God. In the case of the panopticon contrived by Bentham, for example, the prisoners, who are confined in the cell and unable to observe any warder, assume that the latter always has an eye on them even when he is absent. Similarly, one feels God's absolute gaze so long as one cannot see Him, whether He is absent or not.

However, both in the panopticon and in *Stilbourne*, one monitoring gaze is always monitored by another: that is, a mutual monitoring system is established. As Michel Foucault points out, this panopticon, "subtly arranged so that an observer may observe, at a glance, so many different individuals, also enables everyone to come and observe any of the observers."² So long as a warder does exist somewhere in the building, public supervisors can keep a watchful eye on him, so that his godlike all-seeing gaze makes no sense at all. In short, this absolute gaze holds true only if the godlike entity does not exist.

In *The Double Tongue* Arieka, originally an ordinary Aetolian girl of common family and now the First Lady of over eighty years old, who was quite accidentally recommended as a candidate of the Pythia, looks back over her life and expresses her naïve suspicion about the authority and existence of a god or gods she has served by performing her duties of delivering oracles of Apollo at Delphi. The following argument seeks to trace the cause of her suspicion. In the first part I discuss the extraordinary shock and helplessness Arieka felt as a child when one of the fish, which were being burnt alive in a frying pan, opened its mouth and gaped at her. The second part deals with the social code of exclusive patriarchy and male chauvinism that has ruled Arieka both inside and outside her family, as well as with her groundless nomination as a candidate of the Pythia. In the third part, I consider how her doubts about the god spring up one after another in her mind as she concerns the oracles of

Apollo, while in the fourth, the close relationship between a cavity of the fish's mouth and the god's void is examined.

I

As early as in the opening scene, there is a significant passage that bears directly on the conclusion. When Zoileus, a house slave, dumps the house fish in the smoking oil, one of the fish gapes at the very young Arieka with its head over the edge of a frying pan. She can hardly bring herself to look at the half-cooked fish and simply goes on screaming. Zoileus manages to save the situation, explaining that the fish, having jumped out of the pan, swam away. Presumably, Arieka helplessly screams at the cavity of the fish's gaping mouth that seems to gaze back at her. She meets with impenetrable darkness of a gap that is beyond description or symbolization. The gap opens amidst the symbolic world and has no entity, refusing any symbolization. It is here that some divine power is assumed to dwell.

This novel tells us that if people feel the god's omniscient gaze it is entirely due to his nonentity or invisibility. In this sense, the plot is the more effective because Arieka, who found an open seam amid the symbolic world as early as in her childhood, gradually becomes suspicious of the oracles of the omniscient Apollo at Delphi. Slavoj Žižek argues that Christianity is the first religion that revealed God's impotence, so it is called the religion of Revelation. As Žižek puts it, God-the-Father betrays His sheer impotence and dies when Jesus Christ utters a cry of despair: "Father, why hast thou forsaken me?" God dies but immediately revives in the shape of the Holy Ghost. Similarly, he argues, Job, whose ultimate query put to God "Why did you let me suffer in such a meaning-

less way?" remains unanswered, finally realizes that God is helpless and predicts His same helplessness even at His only Son's Crucifixion. On the other hand, he observes, in Ancient Greek and Roman religions, "secret initiatory rituals and orgies" always supplement the public message.³ This supplement or covering of the helpless God or gods derives from an imaginary substitute for the law or a false law that constitutes the superego. According to Lacan, the superego "arises from the misunderstanding of the law, from the gaps in the symbolic chain, and fills out those gaps with an imaginary substitute that distorts the law."⁴ This imaginary substitute for the law covers up a gap in the symbolic world and makes it appear to be completely symbolized. It is the symbolic order that continues to create a signifying chain in the symbolic gap, but the total symbolization is utterly improbable because of the residual always left behind by the symbolic world. This residual tends to react against symbolization. Symbolization upward and dissolution downward therefore occur repeatedly. On the other hand, the false law may appear to completely symbolize the gap, but the gap is simply concealed and never symbolized. Counterfeit symbolization collapses at a stroke. Every law that seems to perfectly symbolize the gap is therefore imaginary, false, or distorted. Zoileus, who forges a story of the half-cooked fish swimming away, closes the cavity of the fish's mouth with a distorted law of nature even though he does it all for the best. His witty falsehood has a great influence upon the rest of Arieka's life. It is gradually exaggerated, and turns into Arieka's supernatural power, leading to her nomination as the Pythia. It is due to this fictitious healing power that one of the boughten slaves of her family thrust her child covered with spots into Arieka's arms. The fact that, by chance, the child gets better and escapes death redoubles Arieka's reputation. In her adolescence, her

menstruation accidentally heals the unusual excitement of a domestic donkey, Pittacus which, while being engaged in turning the mill, has scented one of the most valued mares which is to be mated with her father's stallion. Zoileus' falsehood triggers a chain of fortuities, turning an ordinary girl without any special character into a protagonist with supernatural ability. Arieka's "supernatural power" is thus made up against the background of outrageous codes including the distorted law of nature, slavery, fortuitous caste systems, typical patriarchy, and male chauvinism. Above all, women are regarded as untouchable or abject, and obliged to seclude themselves during menstruation. It is an ingenious device for Golding to choose Ancient Greek society based on such a legal system for the scene of this story so as to highlight the various unreasonable codes. The episode of Pittacus reflects the author's frequent reference to the agony of the character whose patriarchal father or father figure monopolizes women and prohibits him from any access to them while issuing the imperative that he should enjoy His pleasure. Pittacus's agony may temporarily be healed by Arieka, but it will continue forever, just as the agony of those under the double bind order does.

II

Arieka's life is determined by the imperative that a gap in the symbolic world be bridged by whatever unreasonable law there is to resort to. However, this gap or what Lacan calls the real (*le réel*), which resists symbolization absolutely,⁵ is, in Kristeva's term, the drive-based semiotic.⁶ Kristeva's semiotic originates in the womb and, if treated as abject or unclean, tends to react against the symbolic.⁷ The patriarchy and male chauvinism represented by Arieka's father are eager to reject or

conceal this uncleanness. As Arieka herself points out, it is odd that people in stories distort the law of nature and never ease themselves. When these unnatural and false codes are attributed to the god, he naturally speaks with a double tongue: “The god speaks with a double tongue which he inherited from a huge snake he killed at Delphi.”⁸ Even Ionides Peisistratides, the High Priest of Apollo, who comes to adopt Arieka into the Foundation at Delphi, does not believe in gods. Furthermore, he adopts her as a future Pythia, fully realizing that her “supernatural power” wholly depends on mistakes:

He [Ionides] raised his voice. ‘It is a matter of some half-burnt fish and a child that recovered at the door of death.’ ‘Ionides, please! It was a mistake—people made it bigger—’ ‘Yes. Of course it was a mistake. Two mistakes. But you are exactly right. You are’ —and he gave a curious kind of wincing shrug—‘a virgin. And you have...what you have. You are ignorant, and ignorance such as yours makes you look a seer.’ (39)

From this passage, we are told how groundless her nomination as the Pythia is. The reason is simply that she is a girl, a virgin, and ignorant. She is to be played on as an instrument when a certain code of power politics supplements the oracle at Delphi. Naturally Ionides, who does not believe in the supernatural power nor the god’s omniscience, must have known the gap in the symbolic world, or the cavity of the half-cooked fish’s mouth, which has impenetrable darkness. He knows that the gap or cavity is not filled in but concealed by falsehood, distorted laws, secret rituals and oracles full of political connotation.

The facts of concealment are disclosed little by little. First of all,

the vulgarity of her predecessor, "a fat slug," who dies eating too many honeycakes. Then, the words Ionides blurts out: "We can say what we like and if anyone complains we can say we are inspired" (72), which reveals the falsehood of the very existence of the Pythia. It is not Arieka's cry of pain nor meaningless monologue but Ionides' purposeful utterance, fraught with political nuances, that actually answers the crowd of people gathering in search of oracles. The Pythia's dignity is yet more eclipsed when Arieka trickles too much laurel dust onto the brazier, almost causing a conflagration, and losing consciousness before she is carried indoors. No other saying shows more explicitly the Pythia's nominal status than Ionides' severe irony referring to Arieka's blunder: "You were highly recommended. But then so was that fat slug" (93).

III

Arieka, although she has come to believe in gods since she lived in Delphi, feels suspicious about Ionides' speech and behaviour, as well as the god's miraculous efficacy. Her suspicion about gods begins with their prophecy's double-tongued nature, and she actually feels that the words of the oracle could be interpreted in different ways. The impression she feels of the oracle is attributed to the fact that it is based on the double bind order intrinsic to any false code full of contradictions. The oracle may apparently bridge the gap in the symbolic world, but actually has no effect. Should the double-tongued oracle that conceals the gap be issued by Apollo, the oracle would be the means by which Apollo's impotence is also concealed. Arieka intuitively finds out the god's void: "So that void which I felt I had come across and before which I lay in grief was—a kind of god?" (125) She finds out that almost all the oracles are escape clauses,

and that they are faked and controlled by Ionides who intends to make them equivocal. As if to prove her insight, the ancient temple or “god boxes” encounter a crisis of collapse. When Arieka and Ionides visit Athens to raise money for the reform of the temple, a young atheist reproaches him for contriving the oracle at Delphi. Although Ionides argues against him, Arieka also reproaches him in her mind: “So Ionides, cynic, atheist, contriver, liar, believed in god!” (136)

They depend for the last hope of raising money on the temple of Dionysus in vain. On their way to the temple, a large crowd rushes to take a glimpse of Arieka, causing a panic that leads to mobilization of the police who kill many citizens. The casual declaration of the priest of Dionysus that the sacrifice was made [to Dionysus] is commentary enough upon the god’s void.

Arieka and Ionides are at last offered a “godlike sum” by their wealthy Corinthian friend who treats them very kindly, but in his house Ionides is suspected by Lucius Galba, the Proprætor of Southern Greece, of a traitor to the Romans. After that, Ionides gets more alert and less talkative than ever. With the repairs on the temple finished and Meroe adopted as a candidate of the Second Lady, Ionides suddenly disappears. Then it transpires that his faking up of the oracles, his information gathering by using pigeons, and the speed of communication have constituted part of his plots against the Romans. Above all, the oracles at Delphi and some of the lesser-known ones are used to persuade Greece to liberate itself from Roman rule. When Ionides’ conspiracy is uncovered, he is arrested by Romans and detained, but Perseus, a faithful slave and librarian of the bookroom of the Foundation, who accompanied Ionides to Epirus, is released. Perseus is told by Ionides to give Arieka a silver key of an extraordinary shape. Even a Roman officer, Perseus says, was

most respectful of the key and would not touch it. Curious to know Apollo's mysteries, Arieka with his key, veils herself and steals along to the holiest place in Greece and in the world. She goes through the dusk of the Adyton and stands before the curtains; the left-hand one into which is woven an image of Apollo, and the right-hand one is that of Python, a misshapen monster. Her curiosity about this place is not new. She has ever thought of discovering what is hidden behind the curtains:

But what I had not noticed before was that there were two curtains side by side, drawn together by draw-strings. It only needed a pull on one of the strings to draw the curtains apart and reveal what they covered. I had a mind to go forward and solve a part of Apollo's mysteries. (100)

However, she decides not to draw the curtains apart before Ionides comes back. Set free by Lucius Galba, Ionides comes home, utterly stripped of his dignity. He is deranged and loses his identity. He rapidly dwindles and dies, but he has been spiritually dead for a long time.

Winter comes and there is an intermission of giving oracles. Arieka once again enters the sanctuary and stands before the curtains with the key hanging round her neck. She draws the curtains apart this time, and there is a double door behind them. After standing before it for a long time, she puts the key into the silver lock and turns it. The doors are easy to open, and behind them is not Apollo but the "solid, impenetrable rock of the mountain" (165).

IV

This is just what she had expected before she turned the key: “I stood before it for a long time but the only thought that came to me was that whatever happened it did not matter much” (164). She had foreseen the Void, as professed in her monologue: “A god, that’s what you expected. They turned their backs on you. They vanished and there was grief before the void. The Void” (162). Her gaze cannot penetrate the rock, any more than she could look into the cavity of the fish’s gaping mouth. The god once for all turns his back on her and vanishes behind the rock, leaving the Void. Arieka now realizes that people feel the god’s omniscience simply because he always hides himself. Similarly, Zoileus’ desperate wish to invest the fish with some divine power by contriving a fantastic tale arises from the impenetrable void of the fish’s mouth. At the same time, she learns that the god is helpless even when he is urgently needed.

Various imaginary codes conceal the void and make up a notion of the god much in the same way as the distorted law of nature plugged up the cavity of the gaped mouth of the half-cooked fish and invented Arieka’s supernatural power. The false law that conceals the god’s void is none other than the falsehood that plugged the cavity of the fish’s mouth. What ought to have filled out the cavity of the fish’s mouth is not the distorted law nor the falsehood but the god, who has proved to be also void and utterly helpless. Both the cavity and the void are the remnants left behind by the symbolic world and both equally repudiate symbolization.

Although it is eternally impossible to symbolize the void or the gap, endeavours to symbolize them are also eternal. However terribly inter-

rupted or repressed, the symbolic chain continues to run, seeking to repair the gap.⁹ It is of great significance that Arieka calls on Athens to erect a simple altar inscribed with "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD" instead of a stone image of her the city wishes to build. Provided the fluctuating metaphor, which is a characteristic of Golding's fiction, reflects the conflict over the ways of bridging the gap in the symbolic world, this novel is a case in point. The temple gets more decrepit and the landscape around it more desolate as the gap hidden by false codes unveils itself. Depiction of the season accentuates the snow and the freezing. It is in winter that Arieka detects the god's void. However, the very next day she receives a letter to the effect that the city wishes to build a stone image of her among the altars on the Field of Mars and she writes back to the Archon of Athens, asking for the erection of the altar with an inscription. Thus, the conflict over the way to bridge the god's void continues to the last. The executive authorities still lay emphasis on the god's dignity and the Pythia's prestige by insisting on the building of the stone image of Arieka, which she believes will once again conceal the god's void. She thus turns down the executive's proposals and prefers to expose the god's void rather than conceal it.

While the void refuses symbolization, Arieka dares to symbolize it by means of the inscription in the altar. As discussed, the symbolic chain is never broken under any interruption or repression. In fact, the unknown god of Apollo might well have been replaced with a Christian God, or St. Paul's new god.¹⁰ Since St. Paul's god is also an unknown one, there is still a void left to be occupied with another divinity or spirit, which will reproduce another void, and so on.

It is not known whether the symbolic chain is woven into the void or a distorted law yet again conceals it, but in any case there always

remains a void. The repeated trial and error of filling out or concealing the void will continue to create fluctuating metaphors.

Notes

- 1 See Miran Božovič, "An Utterly Dark Spot," *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, vol. 3 (London, 2003) 252-73.
- 2 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York, 1979) 207.
- 3 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003) 126-27.
- 4 Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London, 1996) 200-01.
- 5 See Evans 159. The real is "the domain of whatever subsists outside symbolisation." The real is "'the impossible' because it is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order, and impossible to attain in any way."
- 6 John Lechte and Mary Zournazi, eds., *The Kristeva Critical Reader* (Edinburgh, 2003) 217.
- 7 Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York, 1984) 83.
- 8 William Golding, *The Double Tongue* (London, 1995) 8. All further citations and references given in the text are to this edition.
- 9 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire Livre III: Les Psychoses* (Paris, 1975) 97-102.
- 10 Ian Gregor and Mark Kinkead-Weekes, *William Golding: A Critical Study of the Novel*, 3rd ed. (London, 2002) 360. See also J.H. Stape, "The Artful Equivocation of William Golding's *The Double Tongue*," *Twentieth-Century Literature* (2001): 403-04.

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