I

Lord of the Flies
William Golding has himself supplied a starting point for discussion of *Lord of the Flies*, his first novel—published originally in 1954—and still his most popular work: “The theme is an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature. The moral is that the shape of a society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system. . . . The whole book is symbolic in nature. . . .”¹ These sentences about the book’s purpose and its method do in fact indicate the main lines along which commentary on the novel has proceeded. Much of it is concerned with Golding’s meaning, the commentators moving out from his statement of the theme to explore the different levels on which the story may be interpreted. Clearly Golding’s words themselves here provide some warrant for reading the story variously, with their references to society, individual man, ethics, and politics. As for Golding’s method, which has come in for its own share of attention, there is some difference of critical opinion, his books being called fables, allegories, symbolic structures, or even romances.² But the critics agree that his method, however one defines it, is radically conditioned by meaning: that the entire fictional structure—in all its details, some would say—is created with a view to its significance. Such a method, in its devotion to meaning, runs the risk of oversimplifying the texture of the virtual life that we commonly assume it is the job of fiction to render. The method would seem to pose a threat, also, to the story as a story, perhaps subjecting it to the imperatives of meaning rather than of narrative power.

Certainly the spareness of the controlling narrative in most of Golding’s books and the significance generated by so many local details tempt one to talk about meaning, and I shall be talking about it throughout the chapter. But in their concern to tie down his method, Golding’s critics have passed
over his artistry in narrative, though acknowledging the impact of his stories. Thus I want first to bring out the narrative structures in *Lord of the Flies*. After that, I shall take up the characters in the novel, who develop according to much the same principle as the narrative itself. Finally, I shall isolate a particular scene in order to suggest how the method of the novel is realized in its language.

As our cue to reviewing *Lord of the Flies* in its main outline, we may take Golding's statement that the book deals in part with "the defects of society." For the group of boys who find themselves on an uninhabited island—as the result of a plane crash during their evacuation from England in an atomic war—try to create a society for themselves, but experience its disintegration. The society begins to come into being when Ralph blows the conch he has discovered, the children collecting on the beach. But already there is a hint of irresponsibility in the pleasure the young ones feel at the notion of "something purposeful being done"—by others (Ralph is sounding the conch, and Piggy gathering names)—a pleasure underscored by the action of one who starts sucking his thumb (p. 16). At the first assembly, the group exercises what Golding terms the "toy of voting" to elect Ralph chief, attracted to him not by any "good reason" but by his possession of the conch (p. 22). When, after the island has been explored, Ralph guides the second assembly toward determining to light a signal fire for facilitating rescue, the group bolts off after Jack—Ralph's defeated rival for the position of chief, the leader of the choirboys designated by Jack himself as this society's "hunters"—and kindles a blaze that burns up part of the island, moves the children to delight and "awe at the power" they have "set free" (p. 49), and causes the first death on the island.
Society's attempt to build shelters proves as ineffective as its effort to keep a signal fire going. Only Ralph and Simon are still on the job when Golding first shows us this world at work, the other children having drifted off to doing whatever they enjoy, with Jack devoting himself to mastering a technique for hunting pigs. The split between Jack and Ralph, discernible when they met initially, starts to emerge as a split between different organizing principles of society (among other things) when Ralph complains that Jack hunts because he likes to, "You want to hunt," while implying that he himself builds from a sense of duty (p. 61). If the pleasures of some older children reveal their irresponsibility and latent cruelty—in one scene, Roger and Maurice kick over the sandcastles of the "littluns," Roger then throwing stones to frighten a child on the shore—Golding insists that the same qualities inhere in the "littluns" themselves, one of whom keeps throwing sand at his crying playmate, while another basks in the joy of "exercising control over [the] living things" at the waterline and "ordering them" (p. 69). Appropriately enough, the first killing of a pig, which both gratifies Jack's dark pleasure in hunting and marks the initial success of the children in having "imposed their will" on "a living thing" (p. 80), costs society a chance to be rescued, for the hunters have abandoned the signal fire as a ship passes the island—and Jack smashes one lens of Piggy's glasses, the instrument of the society for lighting its signal fire, when he is rebuked for the hunters' irresponsibility.

The assembly that ensues, called by Ralph in part for the purpose of "deciding on the fear" (p. 94) which afflicts the children, dissolves into a confused dance when the children testify that they are indeed haunted. And soon their fear is embodied in the dead airman—civilization's ironic response to Ralph's wish for some stabilizing "sign" from the world of
grownups—who parachutes to the island to become "the beast" in the eyes of this society. The expedition that Ralph organizes in the service of the group to discover whether the reported beast really exists, an expedition led at many moments by Jack, is itself sidetracked for a time into a hunt and dance, Ralph participating in both. Once the presence of the beast is validated—once society has thus enthroned its evil—Jack openly challenges Ralph for the position of chief in an assembly which Jack himself has called, departing to found a society of hunters himself when the group fails to support him formally.

Behaving with typical inconsequence, the children nevertheless desert one after another to Jack, whose society shows itself committed to fun and feasting, to power and its ceremonies, to hunting pigs and sacrificing to the beast—to the pleasures and terrors of savagery. The first assembly of this new group translates itself into the ritual dance eventuating in the murder of Simon, a dance in which even Ralph, Piggy, and the few still loyal to the former society take part. The split between the two societies brings on war, Jack's particular raid to bear off the last lens of Piggy's glasses leaving the remnants of the rational society fighting savagely with each other in the darkness. When these four children present themselves to Jack's group the next day, intent on holding an assembly and securing the return of the spectacles, Ralph quickly gets embroiled in a fight with Jack—who cannot stand to be named a "thief," thus to have his society publicly accused of formalizing evil. So it is Piggy who must juxtapose finally the values of the two societies that the island has known: "Which is better—to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill"; "Which is better, law and rescue, or hunting and breaking things up" (p. 216). He is answered by the rock that smashes him to death. Jack's group, which at last in-
cludes everyone except Ralph, sets its sights on killing the lone outsider and offering his head as a sacrifice, while Ralph himself is transformed into a beast in his efforts to avoid the pursuit and the fire, which, lighted to drive him from his hiding place, threatens to engulf the island. Although Ralph and the others are shocked into regaining some sense of themselves as children by the sudden appearance, at the novel's close, of a naval officer from a cruiser that has sighted the smoke of the conflagration, Golding forbids us to imagine that civilized values have indeed been effectively restored, for the adult world is thoroughly engaged in its own war.  

One rather minor indication of Golding's narrative skill is the number of ways in which his primarily expository first chapter yet anticipates the story to come. On our introduction to Ralph and Piggy, for instance, it is Ralph who strips off his clothes almost immediately, reverting more readily than does Piggy to the natural state that ultimately characterizes all the survivors on the island. Piggy is the more conscious of the adult world and of those who might have died in the plane crash—the past from which the two step forth—whereas Ralph is absorbed in daydreaming about the pleasures now lying before him of life without adults (in ironic contrast to his daydreams, as the island's society later breaks down, about the adult world that he has left behind). Similarly, Piggy announces the necessity of listing the children's names and holding a meeting, viewing the conch as a means to call all together, while Ralph simply surrenders himself to the "violent pleasure" of blowing it (p. 16). Details such as these imply what proves to be the truth: that Ralph, despite all the affection and respect that he later develops for Piggy, is at bottom much more like the other children. In this first chapter itself he is allowed to betray to
the others the nickname that Piggy has begged him to keep secret; and, in a telling image, when Ralph initially learns the nickname, he "danced out into the hot air of the beach and then returned as a fighter-plane, with wings swept back, and machine-gunned Piggy" (p. 8). None of this should be taken to mean, of course, that Ralph stands already beyond the pale of civilization. When Piggy fearfully observes, in a statement that does indeed predict what happens to him and almost happens to Ralph, "We may stay here till we die," Ralph feels "the heat . . . increase till it became a threatening weight," trots off quickly to round up his clothes, and finds that "To put on a grey shirt once more was strangely pleasing" (p. 12). In a somewhat different narrative vein, the exploration of the island by Ralph, Jack, and Simon described towards the end of Chapter 1 contains the first instance of a rock being pried over a cliff by the children, an expression here of their sheer delight in exploring, though this fun also interrupts their mission. By the close of the expedition, a faintly religious air already clings to Simon through his repeated mention of candles to describe some bushes which they pass, and Jack has encountered his first pig, though he cannot yet bring himself to strike it.

In outlining the progressive degeneration of the children and noting several of the details in the first chapter that reappear in some fashion further on, I have wanted to point towards Golding's fundamental narrative method. The principle is common enough: the recurrence of some event, situation, or fact in slightly varying form, the variations so managed that the sequence generates an ever-increasing emotional intensity. The effect of an inexorable progress towards an inevitable conclusion may remind us of the gradually accumulating pressure in a novel like Clarissa, though Richardson works by subjecting us to a series of alternatives:
when the given set is exhausted, one possibility having come
to dominate the other, the dominant possibility itself divides
into new alternatives. In *Lord of the Flies*, with its strictly
linear plot structure, Golding's narrative power derives not
only from the carefully graded variations in any particular
sequence, but from the number of these sequences that move
in parallel, as it were, towards a single destination. His
precise control over both gradation and parallels would seem
to me indirect evidence, incidentally, of the substantial
amount of fiction Golding wrote before creating *Lord of the
Flies*.

The variety of parallel sequences that help to structure the
novel, each of them revealing some kind of regression from
innocence to savagery, can be illustrated fairly briefly. Two
major points of reference are the huge fires near the begin­
ning and at the end of the narrative: the first, an attempt to
promote rescue which in fact causes a death; the second, a
means of promoting death which brings about a rescue of
sorts. In the first part of the story, the fires that the children
light are normally associated with rescue, while in the second
half they are linked with cooking the killed pigs and feast­
ing. The final conflagration, of course, not only dramatizes
the literal cruelty of the children in hunting down Ralph
but implies as well that the world which began as Eden has
become Hell. Golding centers another sequence on the drop­
ping of rocks: Ralph, Jack, and Simon, as we have already
seen, experience a communal joy when they first send a
boulder crashing down; Roger throws stones to frighten a
littlun, but with an arm still “conditioned by . . . civilization”
(p. 70); the group seeking to discover whether a beast
really exists diverts itself by toppling a rock into the sea until
called back to its duty by Ralph; Roger pries loose the rock
that kills Piggy; finally, Jack's group drives Ralph from a
thicket by heaving boulders over a cliff that smash the hiding place. Similarly, the first fight among the children is a mock affair, a testimony to the sheer joy of Ralph, Jack, and Simon in exploring: "... Ralph expressed the intensity of his emotion by pretending to knock Simon down; and soon they were a happy, heaving pile in the under-dusk" (p. 28). But this sequence proceeds through the arguments of varying intensity between Ralph and Jack; to Jack's first raid for fire after his own society has begun to take shape; to the twins—still members of the more civilized group—fighting each other in their sleep; to Jack's second raid, this one for Piggy's glasses rather than burning branches, which results in Ralph and the twins fighting with each other rather than with their enemies; to the fight between Ralph and Jack at the time of Piggy's death; to the total war that Jack's society makes on Ralph just prior to the novel's close. The repeated dances constitute still another motif: it is initiated by Jack's capering about when he first succeeds in fashioning a hunting mask; the motif evolves through the ritual dances that domesticate ever greater cruelty and culminate in the murder of Simon; by the end of the story, the dance has become a habitual ceremony of Jack's group. Finally, the actual deaths on the island and Ralph's potential death, all so artfully spaced by Golding through the book, make up a crucially important sequence. The boy with the birthmark dies accidentally, though as a result of the island society's irresponsible indulgence in the pleasure of kindling the signal fire that gets out of hand. Simon is beaten to death by the children acting as a group, but the killing is far from deliberate, for they are caught up in a frenzied dance to ward off the terrors of a storm. The killing of Piggy is the act of an individual, one who surrenders himself to the pleasure of destroying: "... Roger, with a sense of delirious abandon-
The nature of Roger's deed is underlined by Jack's attempt, as chief, to take the act to himself—"I meant that"—and by his immediate hurling of a spear at Ralph "with full intention" (p. 217), though Roger does in fact achieve an authority rivalling Jack's through the killing of Piggy. In the final hunt for Ralph, all the children know exactly what they are doing, the whole society devoting itself to murder and human sacrifice.

The fact that all these sequences move in a single direction helps to explain, I think, the effects of clarity and simplicity that the narrative produces on a first reading. Certainly the fact contributes to the pace. The story rushes forward, with the few interruptions—such as Ralph's memories of his former life or the brief glances back to the children's first days on the island—serving less as breathing spaces for the reader than agonizing dramatic reminders of how far events have gone. But at the risk of laboring Golding's narrative method, I want to treat one last motif, the matter of the "beast," for it will show us how relentless a power can be developed through a sequence of meticulously graded variations, and the motif is also central to the novel's meaning.

The beast first appears as the "snake-thing" reported to an assembly by the boy with the birthmark, who imagines it as moving about in the dark—though this "beastie" achieves, properly enough, a kind of public definition further on when the children scream, on seeing creepers burn up in the fire that rages out of control and has killed the boy, "Snakes! Snakes! Look at the snakes!" (p. 52). On the earlier announcement of the "snake-thing," however, Ralph denies the claim flatly, while Jack, with appropriate illogic, already accommodates the irrational, saying in one breath, "There
isn’t a snake-thing,” and in the next, “we’ll look for the snake too” (p. 40). When the topic crops up again during a lull in the building of shelters, with only Simon having the courage to verbalize what Ralph and Jack do not wish to—the fear of the littluns that “the beastie or the snake-thing” is “real”—Ralph betrays uneasiness, yet remains “incredulous,” whereas Jack testifies that he knows how the younger children feel and that he has experienced a sense of “being hunted” by a beast, not when “getting” the “fruit” on which the civilization still feeds, significantly, but when he is on his own, hunting to kill pigs (pp. 58–59). So far the beast has been associated with this society’s fear, irrationality, and dark pleasure in wielding power—precisely the qualities that inhere, of course, in its first killing of a pig with the attendant neglect of the signal fire. It comes as no surprise that the ensuing assembly, called by Ralph in some hope of “deciding on the fear” and then settling the matter of the beast, reveals instead how pervasive the terror is. Ralph admits to his own fears, though terming them “nonsense” (p. 94); Jack declares that all the children must “put up with being frightened” even if “there is no beast” (pp. 95–96); Piggy, in keeping with his rational attitudes, denies both beast and fear, but immediately qualifies his denial—“Unless we get frightened of people” (p. 97)—in words that to some extent anticipate Simon’s; Simon hazards that there may be a beast, but that “it’s only us” (p. 103); when a voice proposes that Simon means “some sort of ghost” (p. 104), the children vote in overwhelming numbers that they believe in ghosts, and the assembly breaks up with Jack whooping, “If there’s a beast, we’ll hunt it down! We’ll close in and beat and beat and beat” (p. 106). The vast majority of them having thus endorsed their irresponsibility, the children are prepared to
take the dead airman who drops to the island as the beast itself.

During the children's search over the island to verify the presence of the beast, Ralph may still at bottom doubt its existence. But in the hunt that interrupts the search, he offers the opinion that the pig he has struck may be the beast, and worse, from the point of view of maintaining order, though he well knows that they should wait until daylight to conclude the search, he yields to Jack's challenge that they climb the mountain in the darkness, with the result that they cannot see the beast to be a dead man. Society's fears now translated into a substantial form, it follows naturally that Jack should break away to found a group of his own on everything that the beast represents. Indeed, the beast is enshrined as the dominant principle of Jack's society when the hunters sacrifice to it the head of a slaughtered pig. This is the head referred to by Golding as "the Lord of the Flies" (i.e., Beelzebub), the head that says, when Simon confronts it, "I'm the Beast," "I'm part of you," the reason "Why things are what they are" (pp. 171-72), and thus declares man's allegiance to cruelty, irrationality, and fear. When Simon returns from the mountain to tell the children the truth about the dead airman, they regard him as the beast, but Golding's language converts the children themselves into a beast as they kill Simon: "... the crowd ... screamed, struck, bit, tore. There were no words, and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws" (p. 183). Since society has thus taken evil to itself, the beast in which it earlier objectified its terrors—the body of the airman—may appropriately disappear from the island.

The beast becomes a permanent institution when Jack, asked by his own group whether it did not die with Simon,
replies, "No! How could we—kill—it" (p. 192), his words in part refusing to acknowledge the actual killing, but also making of the beast an indestructible living presence. The raid for Piggy's glasses is so narrated by Golding that Jack's hunters are again identified as a beast (p. 199). But even more significant, by the end of the novel Ralph, the sole survivor of civilized society, has turned into a beast himself. He may scream at Jack "You're a beast" when they fight just prior to Piggy's death (p. 214). But on his subsequent flight from the hunters, he obeys "an instinct that he did not know he possessed" (p. 217), keeps wishing for "a time to think" that he can never seize on (p. 235), and at last emerges from a thicket with "screams" that "became continuous and foaming. He shot forward . . . was in the open, screaming, snarling, bloody. . . . He forgot his wounds . . . and became fear" (p. 239). In accordance with an apparently inexorable logic, the novel has rendered a civilization deteriorating step by step until it lies in ruins.

What I have said so far about the plot will have made clear the impossibility of talking about narrative structure apart from meaning in Lord of the Flies, and I hope to have suggested as well the varieties of meanings—social, psychological, religious—that obtain simultaneously in the story. These multiple meanings can also be traced, of course, in the main characters of the book. But before treating the characters separately, I had better state that—the opinion of many critics to the contrary—Golding seems to me for the most part successful in preventing his figures from becoming simplified allegorical types, and extraordinarily successful in sustaining the representation of the children as children. With regard to the first point, I suspect that we may be
unduly influenced by the sort of statements that Golding makes from time to time, as omniscient author, which comment explicitly on the significance of a character: "... there was a mildness" about Ralph "that proclaimed no devil" (p. 7); as Jack and Ralph face each other, "There was the brilliant world of hunting, tactics, fierce exhilaration, skill; and there was the world of longing and baffled common-sense" (p. 81); "Simon became inarticulate in his effort to express mankind's essential illness" (p. 103); "Samneric protested out of the heart of civilization" (p. 214). But such statements should not obscure the fact that, in their behavior, the children normally reveal contradictory impulses which complicate them as individuals: Piggy, for example, is eminently rational yet very frightened; and Ralph, though trying to cling to civilized forms and common sense, feels the pull of the anarchic and the pleasure of emotional release. As for the childishness of the characters, Golding strikes me as having taken great pains to incorporate in the run of terrifying events a series of passages which keep insisting precisely that the children are indeed children. One might cite Piggy's speech when he wants to accompany Ralph on the first expedition over the island (p. 24), or Ralph's assertion of his leadership and rebuke to Jack by forcing Jack to build the signal fire in a different spot (p. 83), or the wonderfully true-to-life scene in which Jack leaves the assembly because he is not voted chief (p. 152). But the example I shall quote appears near the end of the story, when Jack and Ralph are about to fight and Piggy is about to be killed:

With ludicrous care he embraced the rock, pressing himself to it above the sucking sea. The sniggering of the savages became a loud derisive jeer.
Jack shouted above the noise.

"You go away, Ralph. You keep to your end. This is my end and my tribe. You leave me alone." (p. 211)

Despite the encompassing terror here, the words of Jack—with their petulant emphasis on "my" and "me"—might be heard on any playground.

In terms of what the characters signify, one of the sharpest juxtapositions in Lord of the Flies pits Jack against Piggy, the two presented as instinctively antagonistic from the start. Although Jack turns out to be the leading force in destroying the society established originally on the island, he stands forth at first as an advocate of civilized values, inquiring for the adult in charge when he appears on the beach with his choir and later declaring to an assembly: "After all, we're not savages. We're English; and the English are best at everything. So we've got to do the right things" (p. 47).

Through these opening pages too, of course, Jack betrays his delight in sheer power—by bullying the choir—and his incipient cruelty: "We'll have rules. . . . Lots of rules! Then when anyone breaks 'em—" (p. 36). Soon he realizes himself in hunting. Through this activity, Golding associates him with the abandoning of civilized restraints, "Jack hid [behind his hunting mask], liberated from shame and self-consciousness" (p. 72); with, as opposed to the rational, the primitively—even bestially—instinctive, as in "He . . . breathed in gently with flared nostrils, assessing the current of warm air for information. The forest and he were very still" (pp. 53–54), or in "there were droppings that steamed. Jack bent down to them as though he loved them" (p. 132); with the spilling of pig's blood, which Jack may at first try to clean from his hands (p. 79), but which he finally uses to initiate another hunter (p. 162). In the assembly for "decid-
ing on the fear," Jack repudiates the organizing principle of Ralph's society—"Why should choosing make any difference?"—and utters his commitment to power, "Bollocks to the rules! We're strong—we hunt" (p. 106). This is the sort of power on which Jack's society proves later to be based, a power manifested in the ceremonial obeisance to himself that Jack requires of his tribe, and expressed in another way through those sacrifices by which the tribe creates its beast, thus sanctifying the forces of irrationality and fear that reign in the children themselves. Jack, we remember, has acknowledged his fear much earlier in the story, even though questioning the existence of a beast. And on that search for the beast which brings the boys to the mountain, Jack challenges Ralph to climb with him to the top in order to assert his own powers, his own capacity to lead—not in order to serve society, certainly not in order to outface the beast. Once the beast materializes in the body of the airman, the triumph of Jack and all he represents is virtually assured.

Whereas Jack lawlessly thrusts aside the restraints of civilization, makes a principle of fear, and relentlessly pursues power, Piggy is devoted to the orderly processes of civilization, constantly brings to bear what rationality he can muster, and proves woefully weak. Even for Ralph's society he is an outsider, a comic butt because of his fatness, asthma, and dependence on spectacles—a figure already faintly discredited by his trips to the bushes when "taken short" in the opening pages of the novel. If we are to imagine him as vaguely Promethean because he provides the means by which society kindles its fires and later has "the intellectual daring to suggest moving the [signal] fire from the mountain" (p. 154), Piggy nevertheless reveals the limitations of mere rationality. He may stand out against the assembly in denying the existence of ghosts, but he thinks Simon
“cracked” for intending to search out the beast (p. 158). And when confronted by the fact of his own participation—compelled by his terror—in the murder of Simon, he tries to evade his responsibility, first by explaining what has happened as “an accident” and then by clutching at the only straw left for the rationalist, “We got to forget this” (pp. 187-88). Although in this matter Piggy is less willing than Ralph to acknowledge his guilt, in the affairs of society Piggy becomes Ralph’s guide, calling him back again and again to the thread of some argument about signal fires or rescue which Ralph has lost under pressure. It is appropriate that Piggy should want finally to demand his glasses from Jack on the grounds simply that “what’s right’s right,” and that Ralph should want Piggy to carry the conch during this last stand of reason (p. 205)—as appropriate as it is that, with the death of Piggy, rationality should disappear from the island.

The most striking fact about Ralph is his inch-by-inch regression—so much slower than Jack’s—to savagery. To be sure, he keeps striving to preserve a civilized order, learns to value Piggy’s brains and to like him as a person, is even represented as growing intellectually to some extent (“With a convulsion of the mind, Ralph discovered dirt and decay” [p. 88]), and shows himself readier than Piggy to admit his share in Simon’s death. But Ralph’s weakness is marked by his lapses in logic (in contrast to Piggy’s physical disabilities), lapses often accompanied by the sense of emotional release that so exhilarates the irresponsible among the children. Ralph’s failures in reasoning are dramatized by those recurrent sentences that trail off in “because—” (pp. 11, 89, 170); and, towards the end of the novel, Piggy must supply him with the logical connective itself, for Ralph can only grasp the immediate necessity:
"I said 'smoke!' We've got to have smoke."

There was silence. . . . At last Piggy spoke, kindly.
"'Course we have. 'Cos the smoke's a signal and we can't be rescued if we don't have smoke."

"I knew that!" shouted Ralph. . . . "Are you suggesting —?" (p. 207)

Despite his affection for Piggy, Ralph betrays again and again his fundamental emotional kinship with the others: when he must force himself to look "away from the splendid, awful sight" of the first destructive fire (p. 50); when he attempts to repress his memory of the first death on the island (p. 99); when, in one of the ritual dances, he is "carried away by a sudden thick excitement" to strike at Robert with a spear and struggles "to get a handful of that brown, vulnerable flesh" because "The desire to squeeze and hurt was over-mastering" (p. 136); or when he joins with the other children in laughing at Piggy, who has been burned by a chunk of roast pig, "Immediately, Ralph and the crowd of boys were united and relieved by a storm of laughter" (p. 178). The knowledge by which Ralph acts at the end of the book, when he is becoming an animal himself, is quite explicitly instinct, the reverse of Piggy's rationality: "He argued unconvincingly that they would let him alone. . . . But then the fatal unreasoning knowledge came to him again. The . . . deaths of Piggy and Simon lay over the island like a vapor. These painted savages would go further and further" (p. 220). And when he comes at last upon the pig's head on a stick, the Lord of the Flies whom Simon has faced and gone beyond, Ralph can only hit out at the skull, which—in a significant phrase—"bobbed like a toy and came back," and "Then he backed away, keeping his face to the skull that lay grinning at the sky" (p. 222).
Simon is as much an outsider as Piggy, but for different reasons. Although he too has his weaknesses—his liability to fits and his inarticulateness in public—he constantly reveals a kindness that no other child possesses, and he is gifted with suprarational insight. A saint, Golding has called him, and Simon's charity declares itself in his comforting of Ralph, his offering of food to Piggy, or his getting fruit for the littluns. Predictably enough, he is regarded as "batty" by the rest of the children, in part because the more-than-logical truth about man which he intuits does not lend itself to sheerly logical statements: after confusingly proposing to the assembly that the beast may be "only us," he tries again with an analogy—"What's the dirtiest thing there is?"—which is morally valid, but which is turned by Jack into a dirty joke that overjoys Simon's uncomprehending listeners (p. 103). Nevertheless, Simon holds fast to his intuition: "However Simon thought of the beast, there rose before his inward sight the picture of a human at once heroic and sick" (p. 121). Alone among the boys, he insists that the beast must be faced, accepts—in the scenes with the pig's head, to one of which I shall return shortly—the fact that evil resides in the hearts of all men, and climbs the mountain to discover the truth about the beast, the truth that the others enact in killing Simon.9

In spite of all my references so far to the meaning of events and characters in Lord of the Flies, I have aimed at illuminating the power of the story as a narrative and at indicating the lifelikeness of the children. I turn at last to a single scene which evidences both these qualities, but which will show us as well how Golding's style creates a magnificently substantial world in which the symbolic values emerge almost of
themselves—which will illustrate, in short, the essential method of the novel. It is the scene of Simon’s first encounter with the pig’s head that Jack and his group have left as an offering to the beast. The passage moves toward a climax of its own in its symbolic statement, so realistically rendered, that Simon will himself become a sacrificial victim. And the passage moves toward the first appearance of the phrase “Lord of the Flies,” which identifies the Devil with society’s reification of its own fears through its sacrificing to them. What is remarkable, however, is the sustained naturalism of the scene, despite its symbolic implications. The Lord of the Flies remains a literal pig’s head on a stick (it does not speak aloud until the second encounter, a fact perhaps suggesting that it becomes more defined as a force, a person, to Simon only after he has recognized that he himself must be sacrificed); and Simon remains a child, one subject to fits and badly frightened of the object in front of him.

Simon stayed where he was, a small brown image, concealed by the leaves. Even if he shut his eyes the sow’s head still remained like an after-image. The half-shut eyes were dim with the infinite cynicism of adult life. They assured Simon that everything was a bad business.

“I know that.”

Simon discovered that he had spoken aloud. He opened his eyes quickly and there was the head grinning amusedly in the strange daylight, ignoring the flies, the spilled guts, even ignoring the indignity of being spiked on a stick.

He looked away, licking his dry lips.

A gift for the beast. Might not the beast come for it? The head, he thought, appeared to agree with him. Run away, said the head silently, go back to the others. It was a
The visual richness of this writing and the precise diction are self-evident. But it is worth noting, first, how carefully Golding handles the scene so that we may read it as the plausible experience of a terrified boy. Thus Simon keeps striving to shut out the sight of the head, and in the next to last paragraph, for all the insight he reveals elsewhere in the story, he momentarily imagines the beast as actual in the
same way that the other children do when he wonders whether it may not "come" to take its "gift." All the things that the head utters so "silently" represent, of course, the thoughts of Simon: earlier in the novel he has expressed the idea that evil is in man, though in the present context the sound of his own voice unsettles him when he declares, "I know that"; and what the head says of a "joke," a "headache," and "something you ate" are Simon's rational attempts to excuse himself from going up the mountain. Even the phrases about "the head grinning amusedly" and "ignoring the flies," though we later come to view them as something more, seem at first reading the kind of odd perception normal enough to a boy under stress. And the interior dialogue is followed immediately by our return to a physically actualized Simon, "feeling the weight of his wet hair," and to the circumstantial description of the world around him.

But we should also notice how delicately Golding roots the symbolic values in physical details, thus preparing us from the start of the passage for the explosion of symbolic meaning at its close. If the phrase "small brown image" provides a faintly religious air for Simon, the subsequent "after-image" underplays the suggestion by recalling our minds to some extent to optics. The "daylight" is "strange" primarily because of the relentless sun and the pressure Simon feels, but the setting is appropriate for the metamorphosis of the pig's head into the Devil. The fact that the head grins and ignores the flies, though a vision proper to a frightened child, is also a covert statement about the head as the "Lord of the Flies." Simon may look up for God's help, but what he looks at is simply "the sky." If the "butterflies" are to suggest souls that avoid the Devil, they have nevertheless been literal presences in the clearing before this point in the novel. The only statement that may ring slightly false in the passage (and I
am not sure that it does) is "what was real seemed illusive and without definition." This must come from the omniscient narrator, for Simon's eyes are closed, and it sounds a little like a hint to the reader to be on the alert for what is morally "real," that is, for the symbolic equations that emerge clearly by the end of the passage. But even this statement, abstractly though Golding phrases it, accords well enough in its literal sense with the "strange daylight" mentioned earlier, and he actualizes the claim in the next sentence, where the "pile of guts" (the "real") is transformed into "a black blob of flies that buzzed like a saw." The climax of the scene, though fraught with symbolic significance, is brilliantly rendered in almost purely naturalistic terms. The flies move from the pig to Simon, this fact of itself identifying Simon as the next sacrifice (the tickling and playing of the flies harmonize wonderfully with the "fun" that the Lord of the Flies later preaches). Only after this identification has been made is the head referred to as "the Lord of the Flies," though the surrounding details insist that we keep viewing it as a pig's head on a stick. And when Simon finally looks at the head, what he sees are simply the details that he has seen before, though we are made to understand all this as Simon's acknowledgment that an evil principle has been enthroned in man and that he himself—such is the force of the climactic placing of "blood"—must die. The passage as a whole, then, is superbly poised between realism and symbolism, and this is the mode of the entire novel, whose statement about man is anchored in the substantial world of the island and children.

The degree to which Golding engages us in that world—partly through its substantiality, partly through the momentum of his narrative, but especially through his management
of point of view—seems to me to differentiate *Lord of the Flies* radically from such a novel as Richard Hughes's *A High Wind in Jamaica*, with which Golding's story has frequently been compared. Certainly both books present unorthodox views of children (though even an admirer of Hughes may feel at moments a certain coyness in his account which is utterly alien to the tone of *Lord of the Flies*). But Hughes systematically uses his position as omniscient narrator to keep us at a distance from his fictional world, writing bits of travelogue and essays on children, presenting potentially distressing incidents in a manner—sometimes mock-heroic—that cultivates our disengagement, sustaining everywhere an adult perspective that keeps us emotionally detached. Thus his story affects us finally as an extreme version of a fable: as rather a statement about children than the rendering of a world that compels our assent to its actuality. In *Lord of the Flies*, the sorts of explicit commentary that I have now and then quoted may make us periodically aware of an omniscient narrator, yet they scarcely qualify our absorption in the events of the novel.

And it is our very absorption in the run of the story, I suspect, that explains why many readers are unsettled by the ending of *Lord of the Flies*—in which the naval officer suddenly appears on the island to take charge of the children—or indeed by the endings of Golding's next three novels. For at the close of each he does of course dislocate us by altering in one fashion or another the perspective through which we have viewed the characters during most of the books, sometimes by introducing new characters. The main objection to such endings would seem to be that the unexpected shift threatens or fractures the illusion of reality generated by the foregoing narrative, and, since that illusion is so powerful in most of Golding's writing, the shift may feel especially dis-
concerting. But Dr. Johnson, for one, taught us long ago in his "Preface to Shakespeare" that the reality represented in literature is an illusion, and thus that it is naïve of us to imagine a work plausible only when it confines itself to one fixed set of circumstances: concerning the unity of place, for instance, Johnson remarks, "an action must be in some place; but the different actions that complete a story may be in places very remote from each other; and where is the absurdity of allowing that space to represent first Athens, and then Sicily, which was always known to be neither Sicily nor Athens, but a modern theatre?"  

While some readers may continue to regard Golding's conclusions as narrative misfortunes, it should at least be clear that his endings work in various ways to expand and bring home the meanings of the stories. In Lord of the Flies, to mention only the case at hand, the adult world adumbrated at the close is carrying on a war of its own, does not differ fundamentally from the children's world to which we have already been exposed, and so reinforces the claim about man dramatized throughout the book in the behavior of the children.

The implications of that claim are perhaps debatable, some readers interpreting the novel as determinedly pessimistic and others finding in it some rays of hope. Certainly the civilization created by Golding disintegrates in the course of the story. And if we take the children separately as representing certain qualities within any individual, the book becomes hardly less somber. For Piggy shows us that rationality alone will not sustain us; Ralph, that good intentions, a capacity for leadership, and a commitment to social order will not suffice to prevent a reversion to savagery under pressure; and Jack, that the fears, cruelty, and lust for power which inhabit every one of us can gain dominance all too easily. But Simon seeks to confront his fears and comes to
accept the evil that inheres in him as well as in the other children, though he pays with his life for what he discovers. By thus struggling against and yet recognizing his limitations as a person, Simon engages in that perennial human task which is the source of man's defeats as of his triumphs—whether one regards man from the Christian perspective suggested by certain details in the novel or from a preeminently secular perspective.


2. An early essay about the novelist's method, and one of the most influential, was John Peter's "The Fables of William Golding," reprinted in A Source Book, pp. 21-34. Peter distinguishes between fictions, in which the writer seeks "to present a more or less faithful reflection of the complexities . . . of life as it is actually experienced," and "fables," which give "the impression that their purpose was anterior" and which, "starting from a skeletal abstract, must flesh out that abstract with the appearances of 'real life' in order to render it interesting" (p. 22). Samuel Hynes—in his pamphlet William Golding (New York and London, 1964)—feels that neither "myths" nor "fables" is an accurate term for Golding's novels and offers "moral models" instead (pp. 4, 6), referring at one point specifically to Lord of the Flies as "a symbolic form but not an allegory" (p. 14). C. B. Cox, in his essay on that novel, finds that "Golding has mastered the art of writing a twentieth century allegory," and the critic goes on to differentiate between Golding's mode and other kinds of allegory (A Source Book, p. 88). V. S. Pritchett uses "romance in the austere sense of the term" to describe Golding's first novels, which "take the leap from the probable [the domain of the realist] to the possible," while he insists that Golding has an "overwhelming sense of the detail of the physical world" and that "the pressure of feeling drives allegory out of the foreground of his stories" (A Source Book, pp. 35-36). Perhaps Margaret Walters has made the most detailed argument for regarding the novels as fables in "Two Fabulists: Golding and Camus" (A Source
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Book, pp. 95–107). After noting some similarities between the romance as defined by Richard Chase and the fable—“a formal clarity and coherence; a sharp patterning of experience in the light of some intuition of order; . . . situation and character . . . reduced to a kind of abstract representativeness” (p. 95)—she distinguishes between allegory, where “the cross-reference between literal narrative and a body of abstractions is usually specific, sustained at length, and rather arbitrary,” and a fable, which presents a “dramatic situation . . . as an analogy of the world at large” (p. 97). And she lists some of the dangers which beset the writing of fables: “. . . the failure to translate abstractions into dramatic terms, which leads to explicit commentary or didacticism; the tendency to distort experience by schematizing it too rigidly; the claiming of a universal relevance that the particular situation fails to suggest” (p. 97).

3. James Gindin’s “‘Gimmick’ and Metaphor in the Novels of William Golding,” reprinted in A Source Book, pp. 132–40, is a relatively early piece on the first four novels and a seriously misleading critique of their endings. Gindin’s thesis is that the conclusions are “clever tricks that shift the focus or the emphasis of the novel as a whole,” that they “contradict or . . . limit the range of reference and meaning that Golding has already established metaphorically” (p. 133). But when confronted with specific endings, Gindin keeps appearing to deny his thesis, as in writing of Lord of the Flies, “Certainly the whole issue, the whole statement about man, is not contradicted by the ending” (p. 134). More important, he strikes me as mistaken in one way or another about the ending of each novel he mentions. In the case of Lord of the Flies, he understands the appearance of the naval officer to mean that “adult sanity really exists” (p. 134), whereas the world of the naval officer in fact mirrors the murderous activities of the children.

4. In William Golding: A Critical Study (New York, 1965), James R. Baker reports that during the ten years prior to the publication of Lord of the Flies, Golding completed “several novels” that were rejected (Preface, p. xv).

5. In “‘Men of a Smaller Growth’: A Psychological Analysis of William Golding’s Lord of the Flies,” reprinted in A Source Book, pp. 121–32, Claire Rosenfield describes the progression of the hunters’ dances in psychological terms: “Each time they reenact the same event . . . their behavior becomes . . . more cruel, less like representation than identification” (p. 126).

6. Several critics have protested against such explicitness, viewing it as the risk built into the writing of fables and finding often that Gold-
ing’s events and characters generate sufficient significance by themselves. See, for instance, John Peter, *A Source Book*, pp. 27–28 and Margaret Walters, *ibid.*, p. 100.

7. The triumph of evil forces on the island reverses the sense of R. M. Ballantyne’s *The Coral Island*, a nineteenth-century book for boys which Golding has named as lying behind his own story. In Ballantyne’s adventure, three English boys—Ralph, Jack, and Peterkin—survive famously on an island, upholding the values of civilization and Christianity in the face of attacks by cannibals and pirates. The relations between the two novels have been explored by Frank Kermode in “Coral Islands,” reprinted in *A Source Book*, pp. 39–42, and by Carl Niemeyer in “The Coral Island Revisited,” reprinted in *A Source Book*, pp. 88–94.

8. In his sustained and lucid account of *Lord of the Flies* in *William Golding*, James Baker develops a provocative comparison between the novel and Euripides’ *The Bacchae*. Yet I wonder whether his reading of the play may not be slightly overinfluencing him when he writes of Golding’s children: “In their innocent pride they attempt to impose a rational order or pattern upon the vital chaos of their own nature” (p. 9); “. . . the assertion that life is ordered. . . . embodies the sin of pride and, inevitably, it evokes the great god which the rational man would like to deny” (p. 12). To my ear, these sentences ascribe to the children a degree of self-conscious effort to behave rationally and a kind of pride that one hardly feels in the story. Piggy, to mention only the most determined rationalist, seems on the whole to be hoping, with increasing desperation, that his words will be heeded rather than to be priding himself on his wisdom. But I would of course agree with Baker that the novel shows rationality to be an insufficient support for man.

9. Many critics have felt Simon implausible as a person, a figure arbitrarily determined by Golding’s fable, partly because of Simon’s mystic insight and partly because of the omniscient commentaries in which Golding himself articulates some of his character’s intuitions (see, for instance, John Peter, *op. cit.*, pp. 27–28 or Margaret Walters, *ibid.*, p. 100). To my mind, Simon radically offends against credibility only when he prophesies that Ralph will return safely to civilization, a prediction that lacks even narrative importance so far as I can see. Other readers have found the two scenes in which Simon confronts the pig’s head on a stick dramatically unconvincing. But in the first of these, as I shall try to show in my text, Golding seems to me eminently successful in keeping Simon a terrified little boy despite the scene’s symbolic overtones. Only in the second, when Simon’s fit is rapidly
coming on, does Golding permit the head to speak openly; so the fact of its addressing the boy may be viewed naturalistically as a symptom of Simon's illness.

Although C. B. Cox thinks Simon "perhaps the one weakness" in *Lord of the Flies* (*A Source Book*, p. 87), he movingly discusses the passage in which the boy's dead body is drawn off to sea to suggest that Simon is transfigured in it: that Golding achieves through "the brilliantly realistic description of the advancing tide" a representation of "all the beauty of the world which promises eternal reward to those who suffer," and thus makes the reader "aware of the Christian meaning underlying the story" (p. 86). The effect which Cox indicates here, of muted symbolic values arising out of a pervasively circumstantial description, is the same sort of effect that I go on to examine in the scene where Simon first views the sow's head impaled on a stick.
