Conclusion
If the foregoing chapters have helped to clarify the arguments of William Golding’s novels, they will have served a useful purpose, I feel; and even if I have misinterpreted certain events or read the essential meanings of the later novels wrongly, my errors themselves may help others to arrive at the truth. But I hope at least that the chapters have demonstrated the narrative power of Golding’s books, the fundamental requirement, after all, that any story must fulfill. Thematically obscure as the novels may be, this power makes itself felt—even when the reader does not immediately grasp the full significance of every detail—in those carefully graduated series of incidents which might be said to constitute the signature of all Golding’s narratives up to *The Pyramid*. These incidents are what generate the initial impact of his fiction on every reader, and, such is Golding’s strength as a storyteller, I think they retain their primary efficacy as narrative happenings despite the weight of meaning that they come to bear—although some critics have contended that Golding too obviously controls his narrative to fit the significance of the fable which he imagines. While the endings of the earlier books may indeed fracture, distressingly for some readers, the illusion of actuality nourished by the stories that have gone before, this fact is itself a testimony to the force of Golding’s narratives. But, as I have already suggested, the objection to these endings on the ground of realism seems to me critically naïve; in any case, they function compellingly in their different ways to bring the issues of the novels home to the reader.

A deficiency with which Golding may more legitimately be charged, in my opinion, is his relative weakness as a creator of characters, a weakness one becomes more conscious of when placing Golding’s works against those by the major English novelists of the past. Although such central
characters as Ralph and Piggy, Lok and Fa, Pincher Martin, Sammy Mountjoy, and Dean Jocelin reveal complex lives of their own, many of the lesser figures appear thin in comparison, their behavior determined too exclusively by their significance in relation to the leading characters or by the theme of the story in question. And until the appearance of *The Pyramid*, I would have maintained that Golding had failed to create a densely detailed and thoroughly convincing representation of a woman. Winningly human as Fa is, she can hardly qualify as such a figure, for we simply do not see enough of her; Mary Lovell, Beatrice Ifor, and Goody Pangall are all subdued as persons by operating as foils to the leading characters; perhaps Golding wished the Taffy of *Free Fall* to be such a full-blooded individual, but we really have only Sammy Mountjoy's word for her vitality. Both Evie and Bounce Dawlish in *The Pyramid*, however, seem to me more fully imagined and complexly motivated than Golding's female characters in the earlier books—though he has yet to sustain a portrait in depth of a woman through an entire novel.

To mention Golding in the same breath with the major novelists of English literature will no doubt appear presumptuous to many, an instance of my being carried away by enthusiasm for a contemporary. Yet his books, taken as a whole, seem to me to ally Golding rather with the more traditional novelists of the past than with the writers of the present. Although in *Free Fall* Sammy Mountjoy is an artist and an extremely self-conscious narrator, the story neither treats, through Sammy, the problem of the artist as a special kind of person nor becomes a novel whose subject in any significant way is the writing of a novel—both of them particularly prominent motifs in twentieth-century literature. As for the concept of the anti-novel, it strikes me as the very
reverse of what Golding seeks to achieve through his carefully articulated plots and his orientation of all materials to express his theme. If in his novels Golding does not attempt to reproduce—for the purpose of faithfully mirroring the condition of ordinary existence—the sheer flow of experience as the external world impinges on the consciousness of an observer, neither does he develop through his stories an image of a neutral universe with which it is folly for the individual to interact, the sort of universe which Robbe-Grillet has contended that a novelist should aspire to record. While in the matter of technique Golding is both adventurous and highly resourceful—as in adjusting the point of view of *The Inheritors* to Lok's extraordinary sense perceptions, in interweaving different levels of awareness to reveal gradually the situation of Pincher Martin, in unifying the apparently dislocated fragments that make up Sammy Mountjoy's story, or in shifting his own style to a degree from book to book—still one could scarcely classify Golding's techniques themselves as radically experimental. Probably the most salient technical innovation in his earlier books is the change in focus at their conclusions, but the change testifies to the concern that Golding shares with more traditional novelists to convey his theme to the reader as forcefully as possible.

And when I think back to the established English novelists, I cannot help sensing important similarities between Golding's fiction and Thomas Hardy's. To be sure, Golding lacks Hardy's imaginative power in the creation of character. But both writers are acute observers of the natural world, rendering the settings of their novels so substantially that the physical world may become a living thing. Both are extremely gifted storytellers, with Golding's narratives often the more sparingly presented and the more meticulously controlled, but Hardy's developing a similar momentum as they
advance through a series of memorable scenes to an inescapable conclusion. Both novelists are possessed by their themes, relentlessly exploring the condition of man as they see it, however differently they evaluate that condition. And both of them leave one with an impression of singular honesty, for they hold fast to their essential visions of man and refuse to compromise with beliefs and attitudes more conventional at the time of their writing. Whether Golding's novels will endure as Hardy's have, only the future can tell, but the achievement of his fiction so far, as well as the nature of his themes and his seriousness in pursuing them, encourage one to judge his work by standards no lower than those set by the traditional English novel.

To speak of Golding's achievement in the body of his work is a good deal easier than to generalize effectively about his development to this point in time as a novelist, for *The Pyramid*—so unpredictable, I think, in the light of its predecessors—appears to break decisively in technique and theme with what has gone before. Whereas four of the first five novels are grounded in a sequence of events that accumulate an enormous narrative charge (and even *Free Fall* depends on such a sequence in the central episode of Sammy Mountjoy in the concentration camp), *The Pyramid* feels much more loosely structured, with only the three sexual encounters between Oliver and Evie in the first part of the story affecting one as a sequence that advances narratively with something like the thrust of those in the earlier books. In the earlier novels, as well, the subjective experience of main characters so various as the youthful Ralph or Dean Jocelin is richly imagined by Golding, and densely represented, too, in the case of Lok's sensuous apprehension of the world, or the existence which Pincher Martin has willed for himself, or the combination of remembered events with commentary
through which Sammy Mountjoy re-creates his past; yet *The Pyramid* offers no such vital center in Oliver, whose inner life remains comparatively empty even while he tells us his story. Similarly, Golding’s style itself in *The Pyramid* seems relaxed and colorless in comparison with the controlled symbolism in *Lord of the Flies*, the marvellous evocation of the world as sensed by a primitive in *The Inheritors*, the interlocking of the apparently substantial and the subjective in *Pincher Martin*, the rendition of a religious dimension in *Free Fall*, or the spare, taut verbal mode of *The Spire*. But, as I have already implied in discussing *The Pyramid*, all of its technical differences may be viewed as consequences of an attempt to represent a presumably rather ordinary person so deeply conditioned by society that he is hardly aware of the ways in which it smothers him—which may be to suggest, once more, that Golding typically creates his fictional structures in the service of meaning.

More striking than *The Pyramid’s* structural innovations, however, is its shift in theme from the previous novels. For they comprise a sustained investigation into the nature of man from a Christian perspective. If *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors* treat social groups, Golding has nevertheless maintained that the “moral” of the first book—the same might be said of the second—“is that the shape of a society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual” 1; and the religious overtones in each story, however muted, function to define “ethical” behavior for us. The next three novels isolate individuals involved in one fashion or another with religious experience, proceeding from *Pincher Martin*, who attempts to deny everything not fathered by his ego, through Sammy Mountjoy, who is capable of visions informed by divinity, to Dean Jocelin, who learns to acknowledge his guilty self and seeks to abandon it. Yet in all these
books, as I have argued, Golding persists in representing even those who experience the divine as fundamentally limited by their humanity, and it is difficult to imagine—for me, at any rate—how the particular theme might be pursued in new ways beyond *The Spire*. In *The Pyramid*, where a religious perspective no longer operates significantly, Golding appears for the first time to conceive of society itself as man's decisive antagonist rather than the individual's fallen nature. But whether the novel indicates that Golding has now begun to view society as an entity absolutely hostile to, necessarily limiting the development of, the individual is hard to say because *The Pyramid* does not supply us with sufficient data on Oliver to make clear how responsible he may be as a person for what happens to him. Although how Golding may come to elaborate in the future on the relationship between the self and society is beyond guessing, there is a potentially allied subject—touched on in several of his stories so far—which one might wish that he will find occasion to explore: a mutually satisfying relationship between man and woman. His nearest approach to date is the portrayal of the primitives Lok and Fa in *The Inheritors*; but in the case of fully rational beings, we have only Sammy's assertions about the joy he shares with Taffy and Oliver's presumably happy marriage with a woman whom we never really see. Aside from these instances, lust replaces love as Golding's figures remain trapped within their selves.

Whatever the techniques and materials to which Golding may turn in the future, however, the difficulty of the novels which he has published since *Lord of the Flies*—even of *The Pyramid* in its own way—makes it unlikely that those now available will ever speak so immediately to the public as did his first book. Surely the religious orientation in many of his stories works to some degree against his popular success at
present, with some readers put off by the orientation itself and others by his unwillingness to provide a comfortably doctrinal solution to the problems of his characters. Yet one may hope that Golding's candor in representing the extraordinary capacities and unavoidable limitations of man will win for his fiction a growing body of readers as time goes on. For his novels are relevant to us on the same grounds that the living novels of the past are relevant: as passionate and intelligent assessments of man's enduring condition. In short, the work published to date reveals Golding as more than a talented contemporary: as a man with important things to say, endowed with deeply original and compelling ways of saying them. And on the evidence of the radical shift in mode manifest in *The Pyramid*, he continues refusing to stand pat as a novelist, a fact which invites one to look forward with the keenest interest to the fictions he has yet to create.

1. Quoted in E. L. Epstein's "Notes" to *Lord of the Flies*, p. 250.