



THE CITIZEN'S VOICE: TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLITICS AND LITERATURE

by Michael Keren

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No Fire; No Smoke; No Rescue

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is a complex novel.¹ It is a story of British children who find themselves on an island after a plane crash. This story can be analyzed as a religious allegory of the killing of the messiah; as a didactical tale on the theft of fire; as a fable demonstrating the three Freudian forces: id, ego, and superego; as a moral statement about the imperfection of the human race or, as Virginia Tiger reminds us, simply as an English adventure story. Tiger is right in objecting to an analysis of the novel based on any one of these dimensions.² Even a political analysis of *Lord of the Flies* cannot ignore the symbolic and theological dimensions of this tale. And yet, the novel is highly political; it provides important insights into the political world.³ In particular, *Lord of the Flies* can be read as an espousal of civil society and a call to uphold one of its main features, i.e., reason.

This is a tale about children stranded on an island after a plane crash, children who want to enjoy life and be rescued (with the first wish sometimes prevailing over the second). These are English children who know something

about democracy and its rules; they are familiar with the procedures by which leaders are chosen, and when they find out they are alone on the island, they try to establish a functioning community. This is a book about the possibility of actually doing that. Golding can be placed within a glorious tradition in the history of political thought which asks whether individuals who find themselves together on the globe at any given time can live in peace. The question of the chance to survive as a peaceful society stems from the loss of belief in heavenly redemption. It is part of the search for a communal order that would allow the human race to cope collectively with the dangers it faces.

British social contract theorists such as Hobbes and Locke believed in the capacity of humans to form a civilized community. Although they departed from different assumptions about human nature, they believed humans were capable of managing their affairs in a relatively decent manner and able to apply reason in ways that would assure their physical and spiritual survival. Golding, who published *Lord of the Flies* in 1954, may be seen to be updating the question of the social contract, applying it to a world that has experienced World War II. The question is what chance does the human race have to live by a social contract in light of the murderous instinct revealed as so dominant during that war.

The only chance the children on the island have to survive is if they can maintain a fire whose smoke would be seen by a passing ship or plane. In light of the many mystical elements in the novel, the fire may symbolize an aspiration for redemption that would come from the outside, but even from this perspective, redemption depends on the human ability to construct political structures and processes. The chance of survival depends on the ability to maintain a degree of cooperation between members of the community, and Golding expresses great pessimism in this regard.

Golding's idea about the state of the world after World War II is summarized in a sentence toward the end of the novel in which Ralph, the chosen leader, describes the situation: "No fire; no smoke; no rescue."⁴ Ralph realizes this when, after a long effort at applying reason, he finds himself isolated in an empty shelter, shivering in the evening sun. This situation can be attributed to the evil nature of the human race but even more so to social conditions. Ralph is not an evil character, nor are many of the other children on the island. Despite some obvious criminal types, such as Roger, we are

basically surrounded in this novel with ordinary English schoolchildren, which makes their ability to maintain a fire in order to be rescued all the more interesting and perplexing.

Our first encounter with Ralph is when he jerks up his stockings with an automatic gesture “that made the jungle seem for a moment like the Home Countries.”⁵ Throughout the book we are reminded that Ralph, like his home country, is part of a long tradition of coping with civility. If there is any hope in the book it depends on him. At the beginning, he stands naked on the sand among the skull-like coconuts looking at the dazzling beach and water. At this point he resembles the biblical Adam who, while still in the Garden of Eden, had a chance.

Ralph has a chance for three reasons. First, because he is not evil by nature; there was mildness about his eyes and mouth, writes Golding, “that proclaimed no devil.”⁶ Second, because his dad is a commander in the navy and Ralph knows that once he gets leave, he will come to his rescue. Ralph has the confidence gained by many years of British rule over the entire globe: “My father’s in the Navy. He said there aren’t any unknown islands left. He says the Queen has a big room full of maps and all the islands in the world are drawn there. So the Queen’s got a picture of this island,”⁷ he reassures the other children. And third, because he uses reason.

Ralph is a natural leader. None of the boys could have found a good reason for his nomination, we are told; there was a stillness about him as he sat that marked him out. But the natural leader shows no signs of arrogance about his mental skills. On the contrary, he is aware of his weaknesses and understands the need to think:

Listen, everybody. I’ve got to have time to think things out. I can’t decide what to do straight off.⁸

And elsewhere:

Ralph moved impatiently. The trouble was, if you were a chief you had to think, you had to be wise. And then the occasion slipped by so that you had to grab at a decision. This made you think; because thought was a valuable thing, that got results....⁹

And also:

There were many things he could do. He could climb a tree; but that was putting all eggs in one basket. If he were detected, they had nothing more difficult to do than wait. If only one had time to think!¹⁰

The essence of wisdom, said Socrates, is modesty, and Ralph is aware of his limitations vis-à-vis the more profound thinker, Piggy:

Only, decided Ralph as he faced the chief's seat, I can't think. Not like Piggy. Piggy could think. He could go step by step inside that fat head of his, only Piggy was no chief. But Piggy, for all his ludicrous body, had brains. Ralph was a specialist in thought now, and could recognize thought in another.¹¹

The skill cherished here is not supreme wisdom but the urge to seek knowledge and the willingness and ability to recognize it. Golding believes in Socratic wisdom, which associates knowledge with the recognition of its limits. It is this association that distinguishes the possessor of reason and turns reason into an effective social force. Ralph's reason has two dimensions. At times it is presented as an almost metaphysical force possessed by few. In chapter 7, when some of the boys search for the beast, Ralph's reason is seen as an inner voice, existing beyond the power of words:

Now that his physical voice was silent the inner voice of reason, and other voices too, made themselves heard.¹²

Mostly, however, Ralph's reason is presented as a social force combating two alternative forces: the lack of concern with knowledge that characterizes savages like Jack, and the excessive use of intellect embodied in the character of Piggy.

The case of Jack is the more familiar one. When Ralph analyzes the hard conditions on the island, Jack's response is irrational and unreasoned:

Ralph cleared his throat ...

'We're on an island. We've been on the mountain top and seen water all round. We saw no houses, no smoke, no footprints, no boats, no people. We're on an unlimited island with no other people on it.'

Jack broke in.

'All the same you need an army – for hunting. Hunting pigs.'¹³

Jack is a true lunatic with an opaque, mad look reminiscent of fascist leaders in the twentieth century. He is the face of authoritarianism, the antithesis of rational, democratic leadership. Jack's concern with hunting, his shortsightedness and his murderous instincts lead to disaster. Piggy, on the other hand, is far more complex; he seems like a caricature of a twentieth-century intellectual. His language reveals his outsider's status in relation to the group: "Piggy was an outsider, not only by accent, which did not matter, but by fat, and ass-mar, and specs, and a certain disinclination for manual labor."¹⁴ He uses his brain, often in a very creative fashion. He realizes that the plane the boys flew in was shot down in flames, that nobody knows where they are, and that they may stay on the island for a long time. He understands the value of organization and despite his non-charismatic appearance, plays the mandarin's role in taking a count of the boys, asking names and setting rules.

Piggy's disinclination for manual labor does not make him impractical. He comes up with practical solutions, such as the setting of a sundial. His attempts to explain the mathematics of a clock based on the movement of the earth around the sun evoke ridicule but his knowledge is recognized, if only partly:

Piggy was a bore; his fat, his ass-mar and his matter-of-fact ideas were dull, but there was always a little pleasure to be got out of pulling his leg, even if one did it by accident.¹⁵

At times, the contribution of the helpless boy with the creative brains is invaluable, as when Piggy realizes that the failure to light a fire on the mountain top may not be fatal. He proposes to light a fire on rocks and sand, and it is recognized that "only Piggy could have the intellectual daring to

suggest moving the fire from the mountain.”¹⁶ However, Piggy’s practicality is tied to a tendency to ignore reality when things turn bad.

This is apparent from the beginning when Piggy fails to refrain from revealing his nickname to Ralph, relying on a promise he doesn’t get, and has no chance of getting, that it won’t be passed on to the others. He is a bore not only because the general population does not know how to relate to his knowledge but because his utilization of it is excessive. His organizational skills resemble those of a clumsy mayor at a town meeting:

‘That’s what I said! I said about our meetings and things and then you said shut up—’ His voice lifted into the whine of virtuous recrimination. They stirred and began to shout him down.¹⁷

Piggy’s proposal to regulate the politics of the group with a conch found on the beach is clever, but his reliance on the conch becomes pathetic; he clings to procedures even when they no longer make a difference. Particularly worrisome is Piggy’s willingness to escape reality when hard moral consequences must be drawn. Ralph is far less intelligent – he treats the day’s decisions as though he were playing chess, writes Golding, but would never be a very good chess player. Yet in contrast to Piggy, he recognizes murder when he faces it and refuses to turn – like Piggy – to escapism. A frightening dialogue takes place after Simon’s murder when Piggy sticks to the possibility of calling an assembly and demonstrates a total lack of morality:

‘Piggy’
‘uh?’
‘That was Simon.’
‘You said that before’
‘Piggy’
‘Uh?’
‘That was murder’
‘You stop it!’ said Piggy, shrilly. ‘What good’re you doing talking like that?’¹⁸

This is where Golding’s critique of twentieth-century intellectuals is very harsh. It is not sufficient to have brains, but one has to use them in a self-

restrained fashion and with moral courage. This is the true mark of reason – common sense that is not devoid of moral judgment and twentieth-century intellectuals have often not shown to possess it. Many of them supported the rise of communist and fascist tyrannies and served in their oppressive bureaucracies,¹⁹ served as their advocates and legitimized them inside their respective countries and abroad.²⁰ Others presented themselves as resistance fighters while resisting nobody, spending their time instead in writing long manuscripts in coffee houses.²¹ Still others refrained from supporting their peers who were persecuted by authoritarian regimes, simply continuing their scholarly or literary activities while the world was burning,²² and many betrayed the people by holding on to authoritarian dogmas even when freedom was at the horizon.²³

Mark Lilla describes the adventures of intellectuals such as the pro-Nazi Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmidt, as well as their counterparts in the communist world, under the title *The Reckless Mind*:

Fascist and Communist regimes were welcomed with open arms by many West European intellectuals throughout the twentieth century, as were countless “national liberation” movements that instantly became traditional tyrannies, bringing misery to unfortunate peoples across the globe. Throughout the century Western liberal democracy was portrayed in diabolical terms as the real home of tyranny – the tyranny of capital, of imperialism, of bourgeois conformity, of “metaphysics,” of “power,” even of “language.” The facts were rarely in dispute; they were apparent to anyone who could read the newspapers and had a sense of moral proportion. No, something deeper was at work in the minds of these European intellectuals, something reckless.²⁴

Piggy may be seen as representing those intellectuals who betrayed humanity during the rise of twentieth-century totalitarianism either by excessive reliance on democratic procedures when bolder action had to be taken, or by failing to show courage when it was most needed. Golding is no purist. He does not put his faith in Simon, the saint, whose promise that the boys will be rescued is based on belief, not on reason. Simon’s belief is no buffer against

the regimented use of brute and wild power by Jack. The world as Golding sees it faces the choice between two options:

There was the brilliant world of hunting, tactics, fierce exhilaration, skill; and there was the world of longing and baffled common sense.²⁵

The community's rescue depends on "the world of longing and baffled common sense" that Ralph walks in – not on Jack's savagery and not on Piggy's intellect. *Lord of the Flies* may thus be read as a novel about the role of reason in the survival of the community. It is not that communal action devoid of reason is no option. Several times in the book the boys engage in activities that strengthen ties and spark the hope that rescue is possible. When a pile of wood is built, for example, the collective effort is described quite enthusiastically:

[O]nce more, amid the breeze, the shouting, the slanting sunlight on the high mountain, was shed that glamour, that strange invisible light of friendship, adventure, and content.²⁶

Golding cherishes collective effort. When the boys light the fire, unkindness melts away and they become "a circle of boys round a camp fire."²⁷ When they explore the island, they forget in the excitement of exploration the beast they are so frightened by "and soon were climbing and shouting."²⁸ But collective action itself provides no rescue. Hunting also involves collective action which, however exciting, cannot lead to rescue. In a picture taken from the inventory of fascist images, Ralph and Piggy are attracted to the warmth of the organic tribe. Although it is clear that Jack's tribe had turned into a pile of savages, holding spears, spits, and firewood, developing a circle movement and chanting, the two boys cannot resist the temptation:

Piggy and Ralph, under the threat of the sky, found themselves eager to take a place in this demented but partly secure society. They were glad to touch the brown backs of the fence that hemmed in the terror and made it governable.²⁹

The appeal of the organic tribe is not ignored but neither is the thick, urgent, blind desire to kill that develops as part of it. Thus, the only alternative is the community of reason. Here, this community is compared not only with the organic tribe but also with the democracy of procedure. As shown in the following quotation, the author cannot assure us that such a democracy has a chance to survive when it comes up against stronger forces that do not play by the rules:

‘Who’ll join my tribe and have fun?’
‘I’m chief,’ said Ralph tremulously. ‘And what about the fire?
And I’ve got the conch –’
‘You haven’t got it with you,’ said Jack, sneering. ‘You left it
behind. See, clever? And the conch doesn’t count on this end of
the island –.’³⁰

At this point, blowing the conch, calling an assembly and following the right procedures is no longer possible as these procedures are effective only as long as there is general agreement about them. Golding is quite skeptical about the effectiveness of democratic procedures even when there is some agreement:

‘Meetings. Don’t we love meetings? [says Ralph] Every day. Twice a day. We talk.’ He got on one elbow. ‘I bet if I blew the conch this minute, they’d come running. Then we’d be, you know, very solemn, and someone would say we ought to build a jet, or a submarine, or a TV set. When the meeting was over they’d work for five minutes, then wander off or go hunting.’³¹

The author desires neither the fascist-like organic community nor sheer democratic procedures, but a community that is capable of reasoned collective action. What is missing on the island is mainly civility, which, in this novel, refers to an assemblage of rational, determined individuals who focus on the central tasks of survival. A civilization cannot survive for long only on hunting; the fire must be maintained, which requires a different kind of cooperation than is used in hunting pigs. But such cooperation cannot be found:

'Look at us! How many are we? And yet we can't keep the fire going to make smoke. Don't you understand? Can't you see we ought to – ought to die before we let the fire out?'³²

Part of the reason for the author's focus on children seems to be his understanding that behind the failure of civilization lies the childish fear of beasts and ghosts which hinders rational action and builds up organic tribes of irrational hunters. Here is what Ralph has to say about fear during the search for a beast:

'We've got to talk about this fear and decide there's nothing in it. I'm frightened myself, sometimes; only that's nonsense! Like bogies. Then, when we've decided, we can start again and be careful about things like the fire' A picture of three boys walking along the bright beach filtered through his mind. 'And be happy.'³³

Here lies the novel's message on civility. Individuals are fearful and therefore turn to evil. Making them into saints is infeasible and undesirable. Nor can the state be trusted as a means of bettering them. Jack's choir is a well-organized regiment of disciplined soldiers, but this does not prevent its transformation into savagery. What we are left with is the need to overcome fear and apply reason in our collective action. Reason is not only a precondition of rescue but may actually lead humanity to a degree of happiness – symbolized by those three boys walking, like biblical shepherds, along a bright beach.