

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1983

William Golding

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William Golding - Nobel Lecture

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Those of you who have some knowledge of your present speaker as revealed by the loftier-minded section of the British Press will be resigning yourselves to a half hour of unrelieved gloom. Indeed, your first view of me, white bearded and ancient, may have turned that gloom into profound dark; dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon, irrecoverably dark, total eclipse. But the case is not as hard as that. I am among the older of the Nobel Laureates and therefore might well be excused a touch of - let me whisper the word - frivolity. Pray do not misunderstand me. I have no dancing girls, alas. I shall not sing to you or juggle or clown - or shall I juggle? I wonder! How can a man who has been defined as a pessimist indulge in anything as frivolous as juggling?

You see it is hard enough at any age to address so learned a gathering as this. The very thought induces a certain solemnity. Then again, what about the dignity of age? There is, they say, no fool like an old fool.

Well, there is no fool like a middle-aged fool either. Twenty-five years ago I accepted the label 'pessimist' thoughtlessly without realising that it was going to be tied to my tail, as it were, in something the way that, to take an example from another art, Rachmaninoff's famous Prelude in C sharp minor was tied to him. No audience would allow him off the concert platform until he played it. Similarly critics have dug into my books until they could come up with something that looked hopeless. I can't think why. I don't feel hopeless myself. Indeed I tried to reverse the process by explaining myself. Under some critical interrogation I named myself a universal pessimist but a cosmic optimist. I should have thought that anyone with an ear for language would understand that I was allowing more connotation than denotation to the word 'cosmic' though in derivation universal and cosmic mean the same thing. I meant, of course, that when I consider a universe which **the scientist constructs by a set of rules which stipulate that this construct must be repeatable and identical, then I am a pessimist and bow down before the great god Entropy** I am optimistic when I consider the spiritual dimension which the scientist's discipline forces him to ignore. So worldwide is the fame of the Nobel Prize that people have taken to quoting from my works and I do not see why I should not join in this fashionable pastime. Twenty years ago I tried to put the difference between the two kinds of experience in the mind of one of my characters, and made a mess of it. He was in prison.

"All day long the trains run on rails. Eclipses are predictable. Penicillin cures pneumonia and the atom splits to order. All day long year in year out the daylight explanation drives back the mystery and reveals a reality usable, understandable and detached. The scalpel and the microscope fail. The oscilloscope moves closer to behaviour.

"But then, all day long action is weighed in the balance and found not opportune nor fortunate nor ill-advised but good or evil. For this mode which we call the spirit breathes through the universe and does not touch it: touches only the dark

things held prisoner, incommunicado, touches, judges, sentences and passes on. Both worlds are real. There is no bridge."

What amuses me is the thought that of course there is a bridge and that if anything it has been thrust out from the side which least expected it, and thrust out since those words were written. For we know now, that the universe had a beginning. (Indeed, as an aside I might say we always did know. I offer you a simple proof and forbid you to examine it. If there was no beginning then infinite time has already passed and we could never have got to the moment where we are.) We also know or it is at least scientifically respectable to postulate that at the centre of a black hole the laws of nature no longer apply. Since most scientists are just a bit religious and most religious are seldom wholly unscientific we find humanity in a comical position. His scientific intellect believes in the possibility of miracles inside a black hole while his religious intellect believes in them outside it. Both, in fact, now believe in miracles, credimus quia absurdum est. Glory be to God in the highest. You will get no reductive pessimism from me.

A greater danger facing you is that an ancient schoolmaster may be carried away and forget he is not addressing a class of pupils. A man in his seventies may be tempted to think he has seen it all and knows it all. He may think that mere length of years is a guarantee of wisdom and a permit for the issuing of admonition and advice. Poor young Shakespeare and Beethoven, he thinks, dead in their youth at a mere fifty-two or three! What could young fellows such as that know about anything? But at midnight perhaps, when the clock strikes and another year has passed he may occasionally brood on the disadvantages of age rather than the advantages. He may regard more thoughtfully a sentence which has been called the poetry of the fact, a sentence that one of those young fellows stumbled across accidentally, as it were, since he was never old enough to have worked the thing out through living. "Men," he wrote, "must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither." Such a consideration may modify the essential jollity of an old man's nature. Is the old man right to be happy? Is there not something unbecoming in his cheerful view of his own end? The words of another English poet seem to rebuke him.

King David and King Solomon
Led merry, merry lives,
With many, many lady friends
And many, many wives;
But when old age crept over them,
With many, many qualms,
King Solomon wrote the Proverbs
And King David wrote the Psalms.

Powerful stuff that, there's no doubt about it. But there are two views of the matter; and since I have quoted to you some of my prose which are generally regarded as poetic I will not quote to you some of my Goon or McGonagall poetry which may well be regarded as prosaic.

Sophocles the eminent Athenian
Gave as his final opinion
That death of love in the breast
Was like escape from a wild beast.
What better word could you get?
He was eighty when he said that.
But Ninon de L'Enclos
When asked the same question said, no
She was uncommonly matey
At eighty.

Evidently age need not wither us nor custom stale our infinite variety. Let us be, for a while, not serious but considerate. I myself face another danger. I do not speak in a small tribal language as it might be one of the six hundred languages of Nigeria. Of course the value of any language is incalculable. Your Laureate of 1979, the Greek poet Elytis, made quite clear that the relative value of works of literature is not to be decided by counting heads. It is, I think, the greatest tribute one can pay your committees that they have consistently sought for value in a work without heeding how many

people can or cannot read it. The young John Keats spoke of Greek poets who "died content on pleasant sword, leaving great verse unto a little clan". Indeed and indeed, small can be beautiful. To quote yet another poet - prose writer though I am you will have begun to realise where my heart is - Ben Jonson said:

"It is not growing like a tree
In bulk, doth make man better be,
Or standing long an oak, three hundred year,
To fall a log at last, dry, bald and sere:
A lily of a day,
Is fairer far in May,
Although it fall and die that night;
It was the plant and flower of light.
In small proportions we just beauties see,
And in short measures, life may perfect be."

My own language, English, I believe to have a store of poets, of writers that need not fear comparison with those of any other language, ancient or modern. But today that language may suffer from too wide a use rather than too narrow a one - may be an oak rather than a lily. It spreads right round the world as the medium of advertisement, navigation, science, negotiation, conference. A hundred political parties have it daily in their mouths. Perhaps a language subjected to such strains as that may become, here and there, just a little thin. In English a man may think he is addressing a small, distinguished audience, or his family or his friends, perhaps; he is brooding aloud or talking in his sleep. Later he finds that without meaning to he has been addressing a large segment of the world. That is a daunting thought. It is true that this year, surrounded and outnumbered as I am by American laureates, I take a quiet pleasure in the consideration that though variants of my mother tongue may be spoken by a greater number of people than are to be found in an island off the West coast of Europe nevertheless they are speaking dialects of what is still centrally English. Personally I cannot tell whether those many dialects are being rendered mutually incomprehensible by distance faster than they are being unified by television and satellites; but at the moment the English writer faces immediate comprehension or partial comprehension by a good part of a billion people. His critics are limited in number only by the number of the people who can read his work. Nor can he escape from knowing the worst. No matter how obscure the publication that has disembowelled him, some kind correspondent - let us call him "X" - will send the article along together with an indignant assurance that he, "X", does not agree with a word of it. I think apprehensively of the mark I present, once A Moving Target but now, surely a fixed one, before the serried ranks of those who can shoot at me if they choose. Even my most famous and distinguished fellow laureate and fellow countryman, **Winston Churchill**, did not escape. A critic remarked with acid wit of his getting the award, "Was it for his poetry or his prose?" Indeed it was considerations such as these which have given me, I suppose, more difficulty in conceiving, let alone writing this lecture than any piece of comparable length since those distant days when I wrote set essays on set subjects at school. The only difference I can find is that today I write at a larger desk and the marks I shall get for my performance will be more widely reported.

Now when, you may say, is the man going to say something about the subject which is alleged to be his own? He should be talking about the novel! Well, I will for a while, but only for a while, and as it were, tangentially. The truth is that though each of the subjects for which the prizes are awarded has its own and unique importance, none can exist wholly to itself. Even the novel, if it climbs into an ivory tower, will find no audience except those with ivory towers of their own. I used to think that the outlook for the novel was poor. Let me quote myself again. I speak of boys growing up - not exceptional boy, but average boy.

"Boys do not evaluate a book. They divide books into categories. There are sexy books, war books, westerns, travel books, science fiction. A boy will accept anything from a section he knows rather than risk another sort. He has to have the label on the bottle to know it is the mixture as before. You must put his detective story in a green paperback or he may suffer the hardship of reading a book in which nobody is murdered at all; - I am thinking of the plodders, the amiable majority of us, not particularly intelligent or gifted; well-disposed, but left high and dry among a mass of undigested facts with their scraps of saleable technology. What chance has literature of competing with the defined categories of entertainment which are laid on for them at every hour of the day? I do not see how literature is to be for them anything but simple, repetitive and a stop-gap for when there are no westerns on the telly. They will have a far less brutish life than their Nineteenth-Century ancestors, no doubt. They will believe less and fear less. But just as bad money drives out good, so inferior culture drives out superior. With any capacity to make value judgements vitiated or undeveloped, what mass future is there, then, for poetry, for belles-lettres, for real fearlessness in the theatre, for the novel which tries to look at life anew - in a word, for intransigence?"

I wrote that some twenty years ago I believe and the process as far as the novel is concerned has developed but not improved. The categories are more and more defined. Competition from other media is fiercer still. Well, after all the novel has no build - it claims on immortality.

"Story" of course is a different matter. We like to hear of succession of events and as an inspection of our press will demonstrate have only a marginal interest in whether the succession of events is minutely true or not. Like the late Mr. Sam Goldwyn who wanted a story which began with an earthquake and worked up to a climax, we like a good lead in but have most pleasure in a succession of events with a satisfactory end-point. Most simply and directly - when children holler and yell because of some infant tragedy or tedium, at once when we take them on our knee and begin shouting if necessary - "once upon a time" they fall silent and attentive. Story will always be with us. But story in a physical book, in a sentence what the West means by "a novel" - what of that? Certainly, if the form fails let it go. We have enough complications in life, in art, in literature without preserving dead forms fossilised, without cluttering ourselves with Byzantine sterilities. Yes, in that case, let the novel go. But what goes with it? Surely something of profound importance to the human spirit! A novel ensures that we can look before and after, take action at whatever pace we choose, read again and again, skip and go back. The story in a book is humble and serviceable, available, friendly, is not switched on and off but taken up and put down, lasts a lifetime.

Put simply the novel stands between us and the hardening concept of statistical man. There is no other medium in which we can live for so long and so intimately with a character. That is the service a novel renders. It performs no less an act than the rescue and the preservation of the individuality and dignity of the single being, be it man, woman or child. No other art, I claim, can so thread in and out of a single mind and body, so live another life. It does ensure that at the very least a human being shall be seen to be more than just one billionth of one billion.

I spoke of the ivory tower and the unique importance of each of our studies. Now I must add, having said my bit about the novel - that those studies converge, literature with the rest. Put bluntly, we face two problems - either we blow ourselves off the face of the earth or we degrade the fertility of the earth bit by bit until we have ruined it. Does it take a writer of fiction to bring you the cold comfort of pointing out that the problems are mutually exclusive? The one problem, the instant catastrophe, is not to be dealt with here. It would be irresponsible of me to turn this platform into a stage for acting out some antiatomic harangue and equally irresponsible at this juncture in history for me to ignore our perils. You know them as well as I do. As so often, when the unspeakable is to be spoken, the unthinkable thought, it is Shakespeare we must turn to; and I can only quote Hamlet with the skull:

"Not one now, to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come; make her laugh at that."

I am being rather unfair to the lady, perhaps, for there will be skulls of all shapes and sizes and sexes. I speak tangentially. No other quotation gives the dirt of it all, another kind of poetry of the fact. I must say something of this danger and I have said it for I could do no less. Now as far as this matter is concerned, I have done.

The other danger is more difficult to combat. To quote another laureate, our race may end not with a bang but a

whimper. It must be nearer seventy years ago than sixty that I first discovered and engaged myself to a magic place. This was on the west coast of our country. It was on the seashore among rocks. I early became acquainted with the wonderful interplay of earth and moon and sun, enjoying them at the same time as I was assured that scientifically you could not have action influenced at a distance. There was a particular phase of the moon at which the tide sank more than usually far down and revealed to me a small recess which I remember as a cavern. There was plenty of life of one sort or another round all the rocks and in the pools among them. But this pool, farthest down and revealed, it seemed, by an influence from the sky only once or twice during the times when I had the holiday privilege of living near it - this last recess before the even more mysterious deep sea had strange inhabitants which I had found nowhere else. I can now remember and even feel but alas not describe the peculiar engagement, excitement and, no, not sympathy or empathy, but passionate recognition of a living thing in all its secrecy and strangeness. It was or rather they were real as I was. It was as if the centre of our universe was there for my eyes to reach at like hands, to seize on by sight. Only a hand's breadth away in the last few inches of still water they flowered, grey, green and purple, palpably alive, a discovery, a meeting, more than an interest or pleasure. They were life, we together were delight itself; until the first ripples of returning water blurred and hid them. When the summer holidays were over and I went back again about as far from the sea as you can get in England I carried with me like a private treasure the memory of that cave - no, in some strange way I took the cave with me and its creatures that flowered so strangely. In nights of sleeplessness and fear of the supernatural I would work out the phase of the moon, returning in thought to the slither and clamber among the weeds of the rocks. There were times when, though I was far away, I found myself before the cavern watching the moon-dazzle as the water sank and was comforted somehow by the magical beauty of our common world.

I have been back, since. The recess - for now it seems no more than that - is still there, and at low water springs if you can bend down far enough you can still look inside. Nothing lives there any more. It is all very clean now, ironically so, clean sand, clean water, clean rock. Where the living creatures once clung they have worn two holes like the orbits of eyes, so that you might well sentimentalize yourself into the fancy that you are looking at a skull. No life.

Was it a natural process? Was it fuel oil? Was it sewage or chemicals more deadly that killed my childhood's bit of magic and mystery? I cannot tell and it does not matter. What matters is that this is only one tiny example among millions of how we are impoverishing the only planet we have to live on.

Well now, what has literature to say to that? We have computers and satellites, we have ingenuities of craft that can land a complex machine on a distant planet and get reports back. And so on. You know it all as well and better than I. Literature has words only, surely a tool as primitive as the flint axe or even the soft copper chisel with which man first carved his own likeness in stone. That tool makes a poor showing one would think among the products of the silicon chip. But remember Churchill. For despite the cynical critic, he got the Nobel Prize neither for poetry nor prose. He got it for about a single page of simple sentences which are neither poetry nor prose but for what, I repeat, has been called finely the poetry of the fact. He got it for those passionate utterances which were the very stuff of human courage and defiance. Those of us who lived through those times know that Churchill's poetry of the fact changed history.

Perhaps then the soft copper chisel is not so poor a tool after all. Words may, through the devotion, the skill, the passion, and the luck of writers prove to be the most powerful thing in the world. They may move men to speak to each other because some of those words somewhere express not just what the writer is thinking but what a huge segment of the world is thinking. They may allow man to speak to man, the man in the street to speak to his fellow until a ripple becomes a tide running through every nation - of commonsense, of simple healthy caution, a tide that rulers and negotiators cannot ignore so that nation does truly speak unto nation. Then there is hope that we may learn to be temperate, provident, taking no more from nature's treasury than is our due. It may be by books, stories, poetry, lectures we who have the ear of mankind can move man a little nearer the perilous safety of a warless and provident world. It cannot be done by the mechanical constructs of overt propaganda. I cannot do it myself, cannot now create stories which would help to make man aware of what he is doing; but there are others who can, many others. There always have been. We need more humanity, more care, more love. There are those who expect a political system to produce that; and others who expect the love to produce the system. My own faith is that the truth of the future lies between the two and we shall behave humanly and a bit humanely, stumbling along, haphazardly generous and gallant, foolishly and meanly wise until the rape of our planet is seen to be the preposterous folly that it is.

For we are a marvel of creation. I think in particular of one of the most extraordinary women, dead now these five

hundred years, Juliana of Norwich. She was caught up in the spirit and shown a thing that might lie in the palm of her hand and in the bigness of a nut. She was told it was the world. She was told of the strange and wonderful and awful things that would happen there. At the last, a voice told her that all things should be well and all manner of things should be well and all things should be very well.

Now we, if not in the spirit, have been caught up to see our earth, our mother, Gaia Mater, set like a jewel in space. We have no excuse now for supposing her riches inexhaustible nor the area we have to live on limitless because unbounded. We are the children of that great blue white jewel. Through our mother we are part of the solar system and part through that of the whole universe. In the blazing poetry of the fact we are children of the stars.

I had better come down, I think. Churchill, Juliana of Norwich, let alone Ben Jonson and Shakespeare - Lord, what company we keep! Reputations grow and dwindle and the brightest of laurels fade. That very practical man, Julius Caesar - whom I always think of for a reason you may guess at, as Field Marshal Lord Caesar - Julius Caesar is said to have worn a laurel wreath to conceal his baldness. While it may be proper to praise the idea of a laureate the man himself may very well remember what his laurels will hide and that not only baldness. In a sentence he must remember not to take himself with unbecoming seriousness. Fortunately some spirit or other - I do not presume to put a name to it - ensured that I should remember my smallness in the scheme of things. The very day after I learned that I was the laureate for literature for 1983 I drove into a country town and parked my car where I should not. I only left the car for a few minutes but when I came back there was a ticket taped to the window. A traffic warden, a lady of a minatory aspect, stood by the car. She pointed to a notice on the wall. "Can't you read?" she said. Sheepishly I got into my car and drove very slowly round the corner. There on the pavement I saw two county policemen.

I stopped opposite them and took my parking ticket out of its plastic envelope. They crossed to me. I asked if, as I had pressing business, I could go straight to the Town Hall and pay my fine on the spot. "No, sir," said the senior policeman, "I'm afraid you can't do that." He smiled the fond smile that such policemen reserve for those people who are clearly harmless if a bit silly. He indicated a rectangle on the ticket that had the words 'name and address of sender' printed above it. "You should write your name and address in that place," he said. "You make out a cheque for ten pounds, making it payable to the Clerk to the Justices at *this* address written here. Then you write the same address on the outside of the envelope, stick a sixteen penny stamp in the top right hand corner of the envelope, then post it. And may we congratulate you on winning the Nobel Prize for Literature."

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