

William Golding's Vision of Violence

William Golding's novel *The Inheritors*, 1955, is a story about a primitive practice whose popularity has never died out, although it alters its shape with every generation. That practice is the maintenance of culture at the expense of a victim or victims, and it is the same practice Golding portrayed in his shocking *Lord of the Flies*, two years earlier.

The Inheritors is admittedly a piece of fiction, something made, something not recorded. What can we learn from the fiction of a contemporary Englishman who eschewed many elements of modern thought? We can, perhaps, learn two things: one intended message and one inadvertent message. First, we can learn—or be reminded—that, rightly or wrongly, human peace is rooted in human violence. This is the intentional or obvious theme of the novel. Golding, educated in Greek tragedy, aimed his sights against H. G. Wells' optimism, replacing that optimism with a portrait of humans who regress as much as they progress in their development.

This theme of the novel—that *homo sapiens* outlast Neanderthals through a superior knowledge of violence—is accompanied by a second theme that occurs only marginally in the novel. This lesson, that even peaceful creatures may have violent origins, is achieved by the novel's very fidelity to artistic detail. If peace operates to conceal violence as well as to displace violence, then it is no wonder that Golding's portrayal of peaceful creatures contains echoes and shadows of cultural violence. This second message suggests that adequate representations of a truly peaceful society are so difficult to obtain that they may comprise an empty category, as they certainly do in Golding's canon.

Thus in the minutes that remain, I will briefly present two readings of *The Inheritors*, supplying the first & obvious reading by way of plot summary. But before I proceed, a definition of cultural violence—the kind of violence that concerns this paper. It is violence that occurs at home, within one's own people or between two groups who have ample food and are therefore not violent merely to survive biologically. If we say that while many animals kill, only humans murder, we are identifying cultural violence. But often times, a society does not describe the act as *murder*. Words like *sacrifice* and *necessity* replace murder. In its muted forms, cultural violence may not involve homicide. It may seize upon animals or symbols. In every case, the violence has more than utilitarian significance. It helps define and structure a society.

In the novel, a family of hominids—three couples and two children—is migrating from the seacoast to the slowly thawing mountains. The patriarch is Mal, the matriarch, "the old woman," whose superiority is designated by the fact that she carries the coals from which the fire is made. A middle-aged couple, Ha and Nil, have a baby, whom Nil nurses, and a toddler named Liku. A slightly younger couple, Lok and Fa, help take care of the toddler as though it were theirs—if such distinctions of ownership apply in this society.

The hominids arrive at their summer territory. This terrace on a cliff, located just across the river from an island and just adjacent to a tremendous waterfall, is protected from all known dangers. In their search for food, Lok and Fa obtain the body of a deer that a "cat" has killed and sapped of its blood. Ha and Nil also find firewood. But by the evening, Mal, the patriarch, is dying and Ha is discovered to be missing. Lok, who is the least intelligent of the group, even of the men, seeks for Ha and picks up the scent of some "new people" he has spotted across the river on an island. Just then, his own people are attacked. He witnesses the old woman and Nil being swept downstream toward a waterfall. He finds Fa only to discover that both the baby and Liku have been taken by the new people.

In their efforts to retrieve the children, Lok and Fa pursue the new people, inadvertently scaring them. As a response, the new people cross over from the island to the territory inhabited by Fa and Lok. Apparently the new people plan on taking their boats up the cliff, through the terrace, in order to bypass the large waterfall. Before ascending the cliff, the new people perform a religious ceremony, apparently to cleanse the pathway. Lok and Fa, hidden in a tree, watch the medicine man, Tuami, draw a totem on the ground. They watch another man dance around in an antelope's hide. Soon after, Lok witnesses the white man's first sacrificial rite: a man is chosen by lot, he extends his hand on a log, and Tuami chops off a finger. Blood is offered to the totem on the ground, and soon the tribe breaks forth into dionysian revels.

While in this tree, Lok and Fa wait out the evening in order to steal the children once the new people are asleep. During that time, Liku appears with a new girl named "Tanakil," who befriends Liku, although Liku is kept on a leather leash, in preparation of being sacrificed. At night, Lok and Fa attempt to obtain the children, they fail, and the next day they find the sacrificial grounds deserted.

Therefore, they follow the new people in their attempt to move the boats up past the waterfall. They notice that the new people are filled with fear as they pass the terrace formerly inhabited by Lok, Fa, Mal, and the others. Lok and Fa have no idea that they have already been mythologized as demons who are tormenting the new people. So great is the fear that the new people prepare one more sacrifice, this time of Tanakil, whom they tether to the terrace, painting another picture of their idol next to her on the cliff at the same spot where Mal was buried.

While a clansman, masquerading as a stag, dances around the sacrifice, the other hunters and women are preparing to launch their boats once again, now that they are above the fall. However, the river is blocked by a log that Fa and Lok had earlier placed between their bank and the island in order to try to regain the children while the new people were still inhabiting it. The hunters are both trying to break this logjam (since other logs have collected at this temporary bridge) and trying to chase Fa and Lok away from the sacrifice, Tanakil.

Interrupting the ritual and attacking the new people, Lok and Fa cannot reach the baby (who is being nursed by a white woman), nor can they see Liku. Lok "seized

Tanakil by her thin arms and talked to her urgently. 'Where is Liku! Tell me, where is Liku?' At the sound of Liku's name, Tanakil began to struggle and scream as though she had fallen into deep water" (210).

The truth is that Tanakil watched Liku being sacrificed to their god for protection from the alleged danger posed by Fa and Lok, two victims who are simply trying to retrieve the remnant of their destroyed clan but are interpreted as a manifestation of the evil. This "evil," of course, was promulgated by the new people, when they stole the children and killed the adults. Fa and Lok, then, are genuine scapegoats, functioning as a focal point and representation of evil in order to deflect the guilt from the new people themselves.

The novel from the point of view of the hominids ends at this climactic scene. Fa is wounded and is swept away by a large pine tree which floats down the river, pushing the logjam free, toppling over the edge of the waterfall. Lok is left, his mate drowning while the hunters sail away upstream with the baby. He is alone on his terrace, except for the picture of the idol, which is also red. By morning, he is dead, and the idol glares over him toward the river.

The new people move their boat to the top of a mountain, finding themselves exhausted, and Tuami meditates on the past crisis, precipitated first by the killing of Ha, the old woman, and Nil, sustained by the stealing of Liku and the baby, and punctuated by the sacrifice of Liku and the attempted sacrifice of Tanakil. And then Tuami thinks of what has happened since he and this small group of people left their larger tribe to start a new community: "In this upland country, safe from pursuit by the tribe but shut off from men by the devil-haunted mountains, what sacrifice would they be forced to perform to a world of confusion? They were as different from the group of bold hunters and magicians who had sailed up the river towards the fall as a soaked feather is from a dry one" (231).

They were soaked in sacred violence. "Restlessly he turned the ivory in his hands [ivory he was sharpening in order to kill the old man, their chief]. What was the use of sharpening it against a man? Who would sharpen a point against the darkness of the world?" (231). The question contains its answer, and the novel ends upon it: "He peered forward past the sail to see what lay at the other end of the lake, but it was so long, and there was such a flashing from the water that he could not see if the line of darkness had an ending" (233).

That is the first reading: cultural violence is a specifically human trait. The greed and desire of humans results in rivalry and bloodshed. The guilt is transferred onto the victims, demonizing them. And the human society goes on its way, mystified by its own behavior, memorializing the past, not as history, but as a mythology of the "other," who, although a victim, is considered the cause of the crisis.

Now, as I move to the more subtle message of the novel, my goal is to show how the novel inadvertently raises questions about the origins of violence and the origins of

culture. The hominids of this novel are radically peaceful creatures, and they are beautifully portrayed as such. I know of no other representation that so credibly shows the phenomenal world from the viewpoint of a creature who is just beginning to establish concepts of identity and causality. But I want to show that these creatures are not themselves completely free from cultural violence.

Some of the clues to a murderously violent past among the hominids are found in their speech. Now on one hand, Golding was forced to endow these creatures with a more sophisticated speech than they would have had, just as Shakespeare was forced to put English on the lips of all his Italian characters. But some of the speech belies a range of emotions—guilt, fear, and dread—that precedes their contact with *homo sapiens*, yet refer, however obliquely, to an experience that entailed both human volition (hence guilt) and violence (hence fear and terror).

The most telling moment is when Lok's perceptions of hunting enter the story. He reveals a unique fear of blood. It is coupled with a fear of being killed by a wild animal, but it goes beyond that fear. It is a fear grounded in a moral system. Killing for food suggests to him another kind of killing, a kind of killing that is colored by superstition and guilt. When he first pictures the possibility of finding a deer to eat, he says, "Now I have a picture in my head. Lok is coming back to the fall. He runs along the side of the mountain. He carries a deer. A cat has killed the deer and sucked its blood, so there is no blame" (37). The curious phrase is, "there is no blame." Since when do carnivores display signs of remorse for following their appetite? The mention of blame suggests other killings in the past, gratuitous ones, killings which were not utilitarian and whose agents were not cats but members of the same species. While Lok did not personally engage in cultural violence, his society has endowed him with a language that constructs reality in those terms.

Furthermore, Lok's wording is ambiguous. When he concludes, "so there is no blame," it remains unclear whether that follows from the fact that "a cat has killed the deer" or from the fact that a cat "sucked its blood." In the first instance, the responsibility for killing is on another creature, exonerating Lok. In the second instance, the blood—the most vivid sign of sacrificial violence—is gone, taking away with it the associations of deaths where blood was spilled to resolve communal conflict.

Later in the novel, Lok's picture proves to be prophetic. He and Fa discover a doe who has been killed by a cat. But the experience nevertheless inflicts Lok with guilt. As they dismember the doe, Lok thinks, "This is bad. This is very bad" (54). He and Fa are free from all possible guilt and yet a profound condemnation emerges from their contact with death.

The fear and guilt that Lok's lines communicate also arise in the novel precisely where his hoard exhibits the greatest cultural sophistication: the family. The structure of their family elicits great respect from each member. The eldest are treated with deference and awe, while the youngest are humored for their immaturity. At times, this hierarchical order confers on the matriarch and the patriarch a superiority which

borders on transcendence. For example, here is a description of Lok's perception of his mother: "Freed from the burden of the fire she [the old woman] seemed a little less remote, a little more like one of them. He could look her in the eye now and speak to her, perhaps even be answered" (32). We might ask, how did a woman who is clearly nurturing obtain, at the same time, a demeanor that kept her child from looking at her?

Finally, while the religion of the hominids is clearly less violent than that of the *homo sapiens*, it generates a sense of dread and terror—dread in anticipation of the sacred, terror as a response to it. As Lok and Fa search for the missing Ha, they enter a crevice where ice has formed in bulges that they associate with "ice women" and "Oa"—their word for the feminine power of reproduction. It is a place forbidden to men, a kind of earth-mother shrine, and Fa enters to pray for Mal, but Lok also follows. First, Fa offers up a meat sacrifice: "She crouched on the stones and lifted up the parcel of meat" (83). Then she "began to speak in little more than a whisper. At first he could hear individual words, 'Oa' and 'Mal': but walls rejected the words so that they bounded back and were thrown again . . ." (83). Finally a sense of terror at the echoes drives Fa and Lok out of this cavern. "As if the terror of the sanctuary was pursuing them the two people broke into a run" (86).

I realize that the dread could be read as a primitive horror of the unknown, of the act of procreation with its strange fluids and painful groans. That is one point of view. However, it is unlikely that these emotions are a response to natural phenomena in a religious framework that exclusively focuses on life-giving processes. Given the novel's explicit code of violence as a structuring energy of society, I believe the dread and terror suggest that buried beneath the rituals of birth were rituals of death.

Considered in light of the morality of blood guilt that I have already detected in these hominids, the Earth Mother can be seen to hold a power that could proceed from a distant communal killing, one perhaps that involved all men. The outcome could have been so devastating and yet so pacifying for the survivors that they took the peace and transferred the authority and power to the women. Thus in the most "humane" and safe way, their culture protected itself, maintaining a sense of dread and respect but seldom or never repeating the injuries that introduced that realization of the potential for chaos.

If these peaceful animals do hold in their history a violent crisis, *The Inheritors* defines the relationship between culture and violence as a fixed variable: a relationship always exists, but some cultures have learned from it more than have other cultures. In cases, for limited periods of time, the meek after all do inherit the earth, in the present tense. They do not keep it forever, and they inherit with it the vocabulary of cultural violence. But at least they don't enlarge the lexicon.

Abstract: William Golding's Vision of Violence

We all know that in *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding credited humans, even good ones, with the capacity to select and kill a human victim as a way of displacing guilt and dispelling fear. In his next novel, *The Inheritors*, Golding moved back into the dawn of human time, very successfully portraying an original act of violence through which one group of (sub) humans was supplanted by another group, a more civilized group. These representations of violence as a means of disrupting and reorganizing society continue throughout Golding's later novels. This paper investigates the overall function of violence as it appears in four of Golding's novels: *Lord of the Flies*, *The Inheritors*, *The Spire*, and *Darkness Visible*.

The relationship of *Lord of the Flies* to *The Inheritors* calls into question the modern assumption that humans are progressing, in a linear fashion, away from primitive forms of violence. Whereas the reversion to violence in *Flies* is presented as an embarrassingly simple step, the emergence of violence in *The Inheritors* is incredibly gratuitous. In both novels, something like religious ritual accompanies the violence, with the result that the sacred and murder are inseparable. In *The Spire*, the sacred has been aestheticized for centuries, while violence has been relegated to individual transgressions instead of to collective activities. Nevertheless, the chief symbol of the sacred—the ponderous spire—evokes one more act of collective violence which appears both gratuitous and necessary within the confines of the plot. Only in the later novel, *Darkness Visible*, does violence become markedly separated from the sacred, finally showing itself in opposition to the sacred. In this case, when Matty sacrifices his life for the sake of the boy, Matty may think his god inflicts the violence, but the plot reveals that violence is a purely human phenomenon. Any value violence possesses is when it functions as a foil to a love that knows and needs no violence to maintain itself.

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