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William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*: The Failure of the Law

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If in Plato and Aristotle we find the distinction between the person who is naturally just (physis) and the person who is just out of conventions, Aristotle adds that the laws governing the states are the product of men. So here we see that man is not naturally noble and that the state cannot engrain its laws inside the individual.¹

Introduction

Lord of the Flies starts with a strong sense of order. The civilization the children come from is strongly rooted in order, organisation and law. The immediate clash we witness at the very opening of the novel is that between civilised society and primitive nature: apparently nature is out there, a sort of undivided cosmos, mysterious and threatening, while civilization is well structured, culturally developed and integrated. The children, well brought up, at first demonstrate an ability to collaborate and stay together for the aim of survival. The element of civilized organisation is very much stressed at the beginning: the conch that is used to call children to meetings, the idea of a democratic society based on sharing and communal decisions, the idea of hierarchy (the search for grown ups to tell them what to do, the orderly marching of the group headed by Merridew, the obedience to orders "Choir! Stand still!"), the use of names to give form to things. The necessity to have some form of law to order this newly born society is deeply felt. Therefore at the beginning the superior culture of the children seems to correspond to the superior civilization they come from.

However some jarring elements set in from the very start: the blackness of the choir children's attire contrasts with the bright and sunny colours of the island, the shrill and loud noise of the conch blown by Ralph makes birds cry and small animals scutter; the whole island reacts to the violation of this unknown sound. We are instilled the doubt from the very beginning: is this really a superior civilization that has stepped on the island? This doubt widens out when we realize that, notwithstanding the frequent exhortation to give themselves rules ("We ought to have more rules [...] We've got to have rules and obey them. After all we're not savages. We're English", p. 46-47), the law doesn't keep. In other words the superior civilization the children come from is only a disguise. Being a dying sort of civilization (according to Spengler's conception of the waning of Western civilization) not supported by real culture (which is spiritual refinement), the law is not deeply rooted within the children: it appears to be a mere strategy to keep society together and once society/civilization collapses, also the law fails. Useless is Piggy's appeal "I got the conch" so he has a right to speak, but Jack shouts "You shut up".

This paper will start with a brief diachronical assessment of the term "culture"; then will demonstrate how culture and law (which is an intrinsic part of the cultural background) in this novel fail: the individual will be left alone with his murderous instincts.

What Is Culture?

The complexity of the concept of 'culture' is remarkable. It became a noun of 'inner' process, specialized to its presumed agencies in 'intellectual' life and 'the arts'. It became also a noun of general process, specialized to its presumed configurations in 'whole ways of life'. It played a crucial role in definitions of 'the arts' and 'the humanities', from the first sense. It played an equally crucial role in definitions of the 'human sciences' and the 'social sciences',

¹ Luciano Perelli, *Il pensiero politico di Cicerone*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1990. My translation.

in the second sense. Each tendency is ready to deny any proper use of the concept to the other, in spite of many attempts at reconciliation.²

Culture can be seen, among its other senses, to describe the relationships between global and atomistic conceptions that have been called paradigms.³

The term culture has two fundamental meanings. The first and most ancient meaning indicates man's formation, his spiritual refinement. Francis Bacon considered culture as the "Georgics of the soul" [...] The second meaning indicates the product of this formation, that is the whole way of life and of thinking of a society, that is summed up in the term 'civilization'.⁴

During the last years of the XVIII century and the first half of the XIX a series of words appear in language which were destined to mark epochal changes in the diachronical development of their meaning. The term "culture" is certainly one of these.⁵

If in the classical world culture stemmed from the idea of "colere", cultivate, that is spiritual refinement, and was connected to the ethical-moral sphere, in the course of time it comes to represent a series of human activities: from ontological certitude to progressive abstraction and problematization.

The keyword that first thoroughly analysed the concept of culture can be considered Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1932) where Arnold purports the idea of a common culture, the idea of sharing and transmitting the best that has been said and thought in the world. However this very famous and seminal work was anticipated by Burke's *Reflections of the Revolution in France* (1790),⁶ by Coleridge's *On the Constitution of the Church and the State* (1837),⁷ by Carlyle's *Signs of the Time* (1961).⁸ If Arnold expresses a totalizing and globalizing notion of culture, at the end of the XIX century E. B. Tylor's anthropological perspective in *Primitive Cultures* (1871) splits up this universal model and reaches an atomistic conception of culture which he connects to ways of life. Much later Clifford Geertz in his concept of "thick description"⁹ brings Tylor's views to their climax, glorifying the margins, the differences and the loss of a universal perspective, which explodes Arnold's idea of communality.

With T. S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), C. J. Powys's *The Meaning of Culture* (1930) and C. Bell's *Civilization* (1928) Arnold's socialist view is transformed into the idea of the élite, of a special group which should control culture and transmit it to the happy few. After these thinkers, with the Frankfurt School and with M.

2 R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, New York and London, 1977, p. 17.

3 R. Schleifer, R. Con Davis, N. Mergler, *Culture and Cognition, The Boundaries of Literary and Scientific Inquiry*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1992, p.26.

4 N. Abbagnano, *Dizionario di filosofia*, Tea, I dizionari Utet, 1993. Term "Cultura". .My translation.
5 R. Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, Penguin, Harmondsworth and London, (1958) 1963; R. Williams, *Keywords*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, (1958) 1976.

6 In this work Burke does not openly mention the word "culture" but his idea of the English Constitution, his emphasis on the "historical and local community", the idea of the state as an active agent in human perfection foreruns Arnold's concept of the organic community and of national culture.

7 Here Coleridge speaks of cultivation and civilization, anticipating the split between the two terms "culture" and "civilization" which was to take place at the end of the XIX century: "a nation can never be a too cultivated, but may easily become an over-civilized race".

8 In this work Carlyle laments the fact that man has become mechanical and that his age is characterized by physical, practical, economical concerns and not spiritual ones.

9 C. Geertz, *Interpretations of Culture*, New York, Basic Books, 1973.

Horkheimer's and T. W. Adorno's *Lessons in Sociology* (1966) the split between culture and civilization, which had been anticipated by Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), finally takes place. Culture comes to cover a semantic field totally opposed to the one of civilization: the former still represents spiritual refinement, but it is at variance with civilization, which epitomizes material, practical progress devoid of spiritual growth. Even more than so: O. Spengler in his *The Decline of the West* (1918-22) asserts that the maximum development of civilization implies the maximum regression of culture. This concept is also shared by F. R. Leavis who in his *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1943) laments the progress of civilization that marks the separation of man from nature. The progressive separation of the two terms is studied also by R. Williams's many works that pave the way for the Cultural Studies anti-foundationalist theories, where the debate on the question of culture reaches its climax. Just to mention one of the latest important works on the topic, I wish to quote G. Hartman's *The Fateful Question of Culture* (1997), where he speaks of the explosion of the term under the pressure of the mass media: nowadays everything is "the culture of..." something else, thus bringing the term to such levels of inflation that any original meaning is lost.

Lord of The Flies: A Debate Between Culture and Civilization

Lord of the Flies, published in 1954 and characterised by Golding's bitter war experiences, represents a milestone in the narrative production of the XX century and perfectly epitomizes how far civilization has come from culture and how the law partakes of this general pessimistic panorama.

The law is an intrinsic element in the survival of civilization, so much so that in *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, the risk of not respecting Shylock's contract would mean the collapse of Venice as a society and a civilization. The law sustains the whole fabric of society; therefore the first action the children wrecked on the desert island try to do is give themselves rules: through the creation and application of rules they can re-create a sort of new society reminiscent of the civilization they spurted from. The conch symbolises the new code: its fragility, transparency and delicacy suggests the liminal situation the children find themselves obliged to accept, but it also stresses the idea that civilization is grounded in the law, could not exist as such if it didn't have any laws. The law therefore appears at the beginning as a guarantee for social progress: good laws make good citizens. The children are aware that there are strong jarring elements in their nature which can be kept at bay by the law.

The first reaction to the new surroundings is an attempt to keep hierarchies: "Aren't there any grown-ups at all?"¹⁰ Having this first attempt at delegating responsibilities failed, the children have recourse to the rules they know: having names (because "nomen hominem", name is identity, social creation),¹¹ meetings (the symptom of democracy), order (the conch establishes the right to speak), voting, electing a chief. Even *in absentia* the rules they have been reared to are still strong: the commandment "don't kill" is what blocks their first killing of the wild pig:

'Why didn't you...?' They knew very well why he hadn't: because of the enormity of the knife descending and cutting into living flesh; because of the unbearable blood". (p. 34)

The establishing of rules appears from the very start a sort of imposition or obligation: "We'll have rules! [...] Lots of rules! Then when anyone breaks 'em..." (p. 36): it becomes a symbolic force in a situation children cannot control. So much so that they think of rules as a

10 W. Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, Faber and Faber, London, 1954, p. 8.

11 Dating back to the Bible and to God's creation of the world through His divine Logos.

dam against annihilation: “We ought to have more rules” (p 46). The law becomes a linking factor among different individuals, a common language that unites the majority. But “if I am to bend to this law and accept it, a certain number of conditions are necessary”,¹² Derrida affirms, and in fact in the novel everybody must understand the conditions of the contract: they must have meetings and names, the conch establishes the turns to speak, they must distribute duties (Jack should be the head of the hunters), some children provide food, some others direct the assemblies, they should keep a fire burning etc.

However it is evident from the very beginning that law must be enforced: the law is always an authorized force that represents a compromise between the language of the single individual (anarchic) and the common language of the crowd, of the group (where each single individual must give up some of his liberty in order to acquire a wider, more general interest). Such enforcement stands out in the many commands that characterise the first meetings of the children: “Shut up! Wait! Listen!” (p. 41); “Choir! Stand still!” (p. 21); “You shut up!” (p. 46). If on one hand the turns to speak are established by the holding of the conch, on the other hand this rule is hard to accept and turns are not respected, so that we often read the complaint “I got the conch”. The subtle relation between force and form, force and signification must be found. The force is connected to a great weakness in the children. The “littluns” are afraid of the beast from darkness and the whole group is afraid they won’t be rescued: therefore rules are necessary to cover up this intrinsic fear. Such fear sets itself midway between a metaphysical sort of fear (an unspecified threat from the darker side of the island) and a physical one (they will die because they won’t be able to survive on the island). This is where the law becomes necessary: it will rationalize such fears, it gives the children the impression they can control the situation. The force and weakness of the law: its force consists in its reasonableness, its weakness lies in its being rooted in unspecified fears.

But the law is useless if it has no power of enforcement; in fact we see that rules are not obeyed: even if they have decided that the conch marks the right to speak, this is not respected.

The small boy held out his hand for the conch and the assembly shouted with laughter; at once he snatched back his hand and started to cry. (p. 39).

The concept that the law represents in the text one of the predominant cultural elements that inform the children as civilized individuals is epitomized by their mentioning books and by the literary comparisons they draw between their present situation and what they have studied in school:

“It’s like in a book”
At once there was a clamour.
“Treasure Island...”
“Swallows and Amazons...”
“Coral Island...”
Ralph waved the conch.
“This is our island.” (p. 38)

This is their upbringing: if Arnold means with culture “the best that has been thought and said in the world”, the novels the children mention indicate the English tradition that gives form to the civilization they come from, to the individuals they are. The same happens with

12 J. Derrida, “Force of Law: the Mystical Foundation of Authority” in D. Cornell, M. Rosenfeld, D. Gray Carlson eds, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, New York and London, Routledge, 1992, p. 5.

the rules they decide to apply: they are part of the democratic tradition, of the social organisation that typified their cultural background.

This responsibility toward memory is a responsibility before the very concept of responsibility that regulates the justice and appropriateness (*justesse*) of our behaviour, of our theoretical, practical, ethico-political decisions. This concept of responsibility is inseparable from a whole network of connected concepts (property, intentionality, will freedom, conscience, consciousness, self-consciousness, subject, self, person, community decision and so forth).¹³

Derrida's idea of responsibility is what sustains Ralph's first decisions: he feels responsible for the children's safety, he feels responsible for the burning of the fire, for the reassuring of the "littluns", for the whole organisation on the island. Therefore his actions involve a "theoretical, practical, ethico-political" behaviour, including some sort of legal jurisdiction. The law therefore is evidently part of the culture the children represent.

The ensemble of beliefs and practices that form a given culture function as a pervasive technology of control, a set of limits within which social behaviour must be contained, a repertoire of models to which individuals must conform.¹⁴

However we discern that a schism has already taken place between culture meant as spiritual refinement, spiritual and natural growth of the individual that is naturally noble, and civilization intended as mere material progress, as practical organisation that is not natural to the individual, but that must be enforced. Children must be obliged to stay within authority through the threat of punishment: the incomplete sentence "Lots of rules! Then when anyone breaks 'em..." quoted above is emblematic of the violence the law must exert in order to keep people within rules. This is what Benjamin means when he says that law has an interest in a monopoly of violence, which violence should protect law itself. Foucault's idea "surveiller et punir" perfectly conveys the necessary threat the law carries within itself and this is why the great criminal is particularly threatening because "it lays bare the violence of the legal system"¹⁵. In *Lord of the Flies* such threat to the rules is epitomised by Jack. Jack is a sadistic individual, that contests the legal authority represented by Ralph, that defies the law of obedience to the chosen chief (Ralph). He symbolises the great criminal that exerts a perverse fascination on the rest of the children, that challenges rules bringing to the forefront the hidden violence of rules themselves, that stifle the anarchic sense of freedom of each single individual.

What is interesting from our standpoint is that the law, that is inherited from the civilization the children come from, that should give order to this primitive society, is deconstructed from its very foundation. The seeds of discord are already there, lurking in the background represented by the dark cloak of the choir boys, by Jack's resistance to rules and by his setting himself as an alternative chief. He undermines the very foundation of authority on the island and demonstrates that the law has already deconstructed itself.

The Failure of the Law

If we accept Derrida's assertion that "the foundation of all states occurs in a situation that we can [...] call revolutionary. It inaugurates a new law, it always does so in violence"¹⁶ we realize that in fact the children are the product of a civilization that is steeped in violence and by violence is being overthrown (the horrors of World War II), but also their organisation in

13 J. Derrida, cit. p. 20.

14 S. Greenblatt, "Culture", in F. Lentricchia and T. McLaughlin, *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp.225-232, p. 225.

15 J. Derrida, cit. p.33.

16 Ibid. p.35.

the new surroundings is undermined by the symbolic act of the killing of the wild pig and by the discovery of the dead body of the aviator swinging from a bough. Moreover Jack, the violent one *par excellence*, asserts a right to violence, because he should provide food: violence appears to have a right to law from the very opening of the novel. Violence legitimates the law.

The law therefore in the text is on one hand transcendent and theological, but on the other immanent and interpretative: *Lord of the Flies* becomes an interpretative model, a hermeneutical act centring on the symbolic order of law. It also becomes an act of accusation against the damages of civilization: if civilization has resulted in such a devastating war, then the law has failed in its fundamental aim of keeping society at peace, in order. There is something rotten in law. Order therefore is not intrinsic in the human being, that is not happy in a natural state, contrary to what Rousseau purports; the individual needs the support of the law, but the text clearly demonstrates that a social contract is the result of the individuals contracting among themselves, it is the institutionalization of conflict.

However if we accept the principle that the law is part of a people's culture, this idea of culture is connected anthropologically to the "whole way of life" of a group of people, and it does not mean spiritual sharing, spiritual refinement, but violence and deracination. Therefore the book epitomizes how far apart the two concepts, culture and civilization, have come. The degradation of the children, that fall back to primitive customs of hunting and slaughter, is marked by a slow abandonment of a law that had in any case already failed in their previous life.

According to Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* and in *The Future of an Illusion*, civilization is something that a small minority has forced upon a recalcitrant majority. He asserts that if on one hand mankind has immensely progressed in the conquest of nature, on the other an analogous progress has not been attained in human coexistence: in fact Golding's novel poses the question whether the goals reached by civilization through progress should be really considered worthwhile. Freud has the impression that any sort of civilization is rooted in the stifling of instincts and in coercion. Freud therefore marks the passage from *Kultur* to *Zivilisation*, which stresses the split that has taken place between the two terms in the XX century. The law in Golding's text partakes of the failure of these high spiritual ideals, and rather than emphasising the superior culture the children come from and that should mark their organised coexistence on the island, it stresses the corruption, the loss of ideals and the failure of all reasonable and orderly structure. What emerges is the wild, unredeemed aspect of the individual that had been forcefully suppressed and that the law cannot keep at bay.

A particularly emblematic scene is the one described when Ralph reaches the other side of the island:

Here, on the other side of the island, the view was utterly different. The filmy enchantments of mirage could not endure the cold ocean water and the horizon was hard, clipped blue. Ralph wandered down to the rocks. Down here, almost on a level with the sea, you could follow with your eye the ceaseless bulging passage of the deep sea waves. They were miles wide, apparently not breakers or the banked ridges of shallow water. They travelled the length of the island with an air of disregarding it and being set on other business: they were less a progress than a momentous rise and fall of the whole ocean. [...] Wave after wave, Ralph followed the rise and fall until something of the remoteness of the sea numbed his brain [...] On the other side of the island, swathed at midday with mirage, defended by the shield of the quiet lagoon, one might dream of rescue; but here, faced by the brute obtuseness of the ocean, the miles of division, one was clamped down, one was helpless, one was condemned, one was... (p. 122)

What we are being described here is a paraphrase of the dichotomic war between the ego and the id, between the conscious and controllable and the unconscious and uncontrollable.

The law falls within this distinction, because the law is a conscious code rooted in reason and order, it is the Apollonian side of rationality and rules, it is the fundamental system that allows civilized society to exist. But what prevails on this side of the island, which epitomizes the other side of man, is the Dionysian, the unruly, the unreconcilable wilderness, all that baffles any possible organisation. And the children's attempt to ground their new situation in rules fails exactly because the civilization they come from has become prey to the Dionysian, to the savage death drive. It is them that bring chaos to the island, which was perfectly harmonious and balanced before their landing. Therefore this novel is a terrible accusation expressed by Golding against the waning of reason and of law: there is no way out, because when at the end Ralph becomes the victim of a savage man hunting but is saved by the Officer, such saving is only apparent: the society he is being brought back to is a world at war where any legal system has been turned topsy turvy.

The novel therefore ends in failure: failure of reason, of all ethical concepts (the main dictum 'don't kill' has been transformed into 'do kill'), of any orderly principle. Language itself has failed (Ralph stutters and cannot form clear sentences) which reminds me of Weisberg's very seminal assertions in *The Failure of the Word* (1984). Even language (which is itself a code based on grammatical and rhetorical rules) is twisted and made to serve unreason:

'The rules –shouted Ralph- you're breaking the rules !'
'Who cares?'
Ralph summoned his wits.
'Because the rules are the only thing we've got!'
But Jack was shouting against him.
'Bollocks to the rules! We're strong –we hunt! ' (p. 100)

Jack uses language to find new rules that may justify the return to savagery and to unreason: we kill because we are hunters. And we are hunters because we are threatened by a beast lurking in the dark. The echoes of the unprecedented and unredeemable violence veiled in apparent reasonableness which typified World War two is evident here. The law is used for illegal reason, so as to justify its violation.

Therefore if Weisberg speaks of failure of the word, we may use the same definition to describe this novel. And in fact the officer's words at the closing suggest exactly such stubbornness, such blindness to illegality that marked the Vichy process:

'I should have thought, 'said the officer as he visualised the search before him, 'I should have thought that a pack of British boys – you're British aren't you?- would have been able to put up a better show than that. (p. 222)

The lack of understanding of the officer depends on the blindness to illegality, to the failure of the law that Western civilization was witnessing in those years. The law therefore is always at risk of misunderstanding and we are can never feel secure within it, Golding seems to be telling us.