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The Ethical Void or the Parody of Western Modernity in Golding's Lord of the Flies

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Abstract: *This paper examines the issue of ethics in Lord of the Flies (1954) by the English Postmodern writer, William Golding (1911-1993). The study is grounded on some ethical principles drawn from the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). It concludes that ethics is absent in the environment where Golding's characters evolve. This absence of ethical references mainly results from western modernity that called into question all former references that provided moral ideals. As such, Lord of Flies enacts, with much irony, the ethical void in which western modernity introduced humanity.*
Key words*: Modernity, Western, William Golding, Lord of the Flies, Ethical void.*
Résumé : *Cet article examine la question de l'éthique dans Lord of the Flies, un roman de l'écrivain anglais postmoderne, Sir William Gerard Golding. Quelques principes éthiques tirés de la philosophie morale de Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804) constituent le fondement théorique de cette étude. Celle-ci conclut que l'environnement où évoluent les personnages de Golding est dépourvu d'éthique. Cette absence de repères éthiques ou axiologiques est essentiellement la conséquence de la modernité occidentale qui a balayé le socle moral des valeurs anciennes. Lord of the Flies traduit ainsi, avec une pointe d'ironie, le vide éthique ou le chaos dans lequel la pensée moderne a tragiquement introduit l'humanité.*
Mots clés: *Modernité, Occident, Lord of the Flies, Golding, Vide éthique.*

1. Introduction

Also called moral philosophy, ethics is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with the question of right and wrong. Its ultimate aim is to guide human conduct. Besides, *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* defines it as "a system of accepted beliefs which control behaviour". The idea of a good or a bad conduct is understood differently depending on contexts, societies and thinkers. In consequence, there are various types of

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ethics with a multitude of approaches that are sometimes contradictory[1]. The Kantian ethics constitutes the theoretical foundation of this work.

The German idealist philosopher, Immanuel Kant, is one of the most outstanding intellectual figures of western modernity. He is remembered for his influential moral philosophy that he expounds in three different works: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). On the whole, Kant conceives ethics from an exclusively rational point of view. He founds his ethical theory on the basic conviction that man is a rational and autonomous being. As such, the rules of ethics must be based on reason, not on any subjective considerations such as emotions, desires or personal interests. The code of conduct must not either be imposed on man by any form of authority. This rational and moral duty is, for Kant, the fundamental principle of morality that he refers to as the "categorical imperative". Actions that fall within the categorical imperative are morally good. They are motivated by what Kant calls "good will" (good intention). Actions that violate this supreme moral principle are immoral and irrational.

Kant schematizes this categorical imperative, which constitutes the crux of his moral philosophy, through three famous formulations. "Act only according to that maxim where you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (Kant, E., 1993, p.30). This first formulation means that any man's action must be a "moral law" insofar as it is rational, objective, and motivated by "good will". This moral law must also be a universal law since it is valid for everybody, at any time. In the second formulation Kant specifies that man, as a rational being, is worthy of respect and must be treated with dignity. Human beings "must be treated never as a mere means but as the supreme limiting condition in the use of all means, i.e., as an end at the same time" (Kant, E., 1969, pp. 437-438). The third and last formulation is the combination of the first two. It states that "all maxims which stem from autonomous legislation ought to harmonize with a possible realm of ends as with a realm of nature" (Kant, E., 1969, p.436).

Despite its paramount importance, Kant's moral philosophy did not stand the test of time and reality. Its validity was denied, among others, by the extreme acts of violence committed in the 20th century by man, that rational being of whom Kant spoke highly. Beyond Kant's ethical thought, the 20th century witnessed the dissolution of almost all certainties established by western modernity. This ushered in a new era commonly known as the postmodern age. Writers and thinkers reacted differently to the general disillusionment and deep cultural crisis. But most of them, particularly those who are dubbed "postmodern", cast an ironic look at the pretensions of modernity.

Lord of the Flies (1954) by William Golding, an English postmodern novelist, playwright, essayist, and poet, is one of these numerous literary works that ironically portray the too ambitious project of modernity. Written in the aftermath of World War II in Which Golding took part as an officer in the British Royal Navy, the novel raises a

[1] For example, the Aristotelian ethics is different from the Kantian ethics. Besides, there are three commonly mentioned categories of ethics, the normative ethics, the descriptive ethics and the meta-ethics, and various ethical theories including deontology, utilitarianism, the theory of justice, the ethics of right, the ethics of cares, the ethics of virtues, etc. Ethics can also be considered from a historical viewpoint. In this regard, we can distinguish classical ethics, medieval ethics, modern ethics, and postmodern ethics.

variety of upsetting issues. One of them, and probably the most important, is human nature. Actually, the "awful things that happened" in the war led Golding to have a keen awareness of the extremely inhumane nature of the human being. This truth about man is what he particularly exemplifies in this novel in an ironic way.

Through the lens of ethical tenets drawn from Kant's moral philosophy, this study probes into the barbaric attitude of the children in *Lord of the flies*. It examines how this violence is bred by the absence of ethical references. The survey also makes the point that this ethical void is intrinsically connected to the western ideology of modernity. Behind the dark atmosphere of the novel, it is the absurd and unethical ambitions of modernity that are brought to the surface. Finally, the work strives to demonstrate how *Lord of the Flies* is both an expression of the ethical void of our time and a caricature of western modernity.

2. A crash into the ethical void and the reasons for an impossible rescue

Lord of the Flies is about English schoolboys between the ages of 6 and 12 evacuated by plane in a context of a nuclear war. Probably attacked, their aircraft crashes on an uninhabited island. Without any adult supervision, the surviving boys attempt to organize themselves in their new environment, while waiting for the arrival of possible rescuers. They organize their society around the elected leader Ralph and his closest supporters Piggy and Simon. However, it gradually crumbles and descends into savagery, as the boys grow extremely violent under the influence of Jack Merridew, a cynical and bloodthirsty boy who has never accepted the leadership of Ralph.

The direct cause of the marooned children society is the plane crash. This tragic event occurs in a larger and much more tragic context, the nuclear war in England. In addition to reminding us of the violent backdrop against which the novel is written, this painful reality (the war and the crash) announces the dark atmosphere that will prevail throughout the narration. More importantly, it is indicative of the disillusionment resulting from the failure of western modernity to keep its promises of a better world. The tragedies of the 20th century, specifically the two world wars, the Nazi Holocaust, the widespread tyrannical regimes with their massive killings, and the threat of a worldwide nuclear war, displayed a horrible face of man. They revealed mankind's inability to safeguard the basic human values. These violent events also invalidated the discourse of modernity. The major tenets such as rationality, perfectibility, progress, among other things, make no more sense. In this regard, the plane crash in *Lord of the Flies* can be read as the crash of modernity and all the values it conveyed.

The idea of God, which used to be the chief ethical foundation of western societies in the Middle Ages, is discarded by the rationalist discourse of modernity. The latter that provided the new base of ethics has proved unreliable and revealed all its limits. Mankind has then entered a period of ethical and moral deadlock that Han Jonas (1990) expresses as follows: "the new land of collective practice we have got into with the latest technology is still a virgin land in terms of ethical theory" (p.13, author's translation)[2]. The deserted setting of Golding's novel is symptomatic of a new world devoid of ethics and morality.

[2] La terre nouvelle de la pratique collective, dans laquelle nous sommes entrés avec la technologie de pointe, est encore une terre vierge de théorie éthique.

This is why we find on the island no institutions and no adults. In a context where "no traditional ethics […] teaches us the norms of good and evil" (Jonas, H., 1990, p.13) how can man organize his society? How can he establish codes of conduct in order to regulate his society? This is the puzzle that Golding's kids are confronted with. Yet, as the oldest boys all assume, they are obliged to "create rules", to found a social structure in order to survive. It is paradoxically in their very try at laying down rules that the ethical void that they want to compensate for is much apparent. To put it differently, the rules adopted by the boys to create a sense of ethics and preserve their community bear the mark of the ethical void they are trapped in, as will be demonstrated later.

Faced with the ethical void, the only points of reference in the light of which the boys intend to set codes of conduct and preserve their society are the boys themselves. This is implied by Jack's reaction after he learns that there is no adult on the island: "Then we'll have to look after ourselves" (Golding, 22). "To look after themselves", means to take charge of their own destiny, to define their own society without resorting to any modal that pre-exist it. Kant insists on the autonomy of the rational agent to freely determine its own guiding principles irrespective of any external force or authority. Golding's boys are rightly in a situation where they must decide by themselves. They are their own moral legislators. However, in a context where all certainties have collapsed and everything relative, such a freedom is both meaningless and perilous. Action can no longer be judged morally because values are emptied of all universality, objectivity and rationality. There are no more common beliefs that determine what is good and bad action. Something is right or wrong according to the person that freely appreciates it. "Man is the measure of everything"[3]. Since the boys do not share the same values or concerns, and interpret things differently, it becomes clear that they cannot socially be brought together. No rule can either bound or bind them; hence the impossibility of any salvation.

There is a real chance that the moral order they endeavour to set be prematurely disrupted. This is besides what accounts for Piggy's growing fear: "we ought to be more careful", he confesses, "I'm scared" (Golding, 49). Piggy is, alongside Ralph, much concerned about rules, order and civilization. Like Simon, a naturally good and intelligent boy who suffers from a kind of hallucination that sets him apart from the rest of the group, Piggy also shows a protective attitude towards the younger boys of the group called the "littluns". It is precisely on his advice that Ralph has managed to gather all survivors on the island by blowing into the conch found at random. Right at the opening of the novel, he is busy trying to identify the anonymous boys he encounters. He asks and takes down their names, while making sure the names be not forgotten and a meeting called. "I expect we'll want to know all their names and make a list we ought to have a meeting …. We got to find the others. We got to do something" (Golding, 15), he suggests. Perhaps more than any other one, Piggy embodies ethics and morality. Though Ralph and Simon are both dedicated to the building of an ethically sound society, Piggy shows more determination in this perspective. He makes relevant proposals and keeps expressing actual worries concerning the possible violation of the established rules.

[3] This is the famous maxim of the Pre-socratik Greek philosopher, Protagoras. The relativist dimension of this assertion was theorized by his compatriot Empiricus.

Piggy's worries are grounded on the fact that without any clear ethical references, man is unable to set up a lasting society. Like Hobbes, he does not believe in the natural goodness of man, in his ability to choose the right path without being forced to. Rather, he considers that only a set of strong shared social values is able to maintain life in community. This is besides the conviction of Golding when he states that "without a system of values, without an adherence to some, one might almost call it, codified morality, right and wrong, you are like a creature in space, tumbling, eternally tumbling, no up, no now…" ("Golding, W., & Baker, T., 1982, p.133). Thus, both Piggy and Golding hold an anti-Kantian view of ethics.

We can only give credit to Piggy's concerns since the schoolboys have not completed their socialization process in England that might have allowed them to 'adhere to a codified morality', distinguish right from wrong and to possibly build an ethically strong society. Except Piggy and Ralph, and to a certain extent Simon whose kindness seems more innate than cultural, the boys are free from any social grip. The social umbilical cord that links them to England is unexpectedly severed as the result of the plane crash. This partly explains their failure to instinctively copy the social pattern of their mother country.

On the other hand, the impossibility for the boys to build a proper civilization cannot only be attributed to the abrupt interruption of their socialization process in England. Being the seeds of the larger society that has begot them, the boys unsurprisingly develop the same reflex that has led to the breakdown of the mother country. They perpetuate the world vision of the adult world that has no ethics at its basis. Consequently, the evil in the boys is more social than natural; it is begotten by society. This is the final conclusion of Levitt about *Lord of the Flies*. He declares:

> Frequent rereading of the book and some adjunct knowledge and logic impel me to think otherwise. The fact is that *Lord of the Flies*, fascinating though it is, admirably programmed though it may be, make so such case, on the contrary, clearly confirms the premise that it is Western society, Western culture, Western values, Western traditions wherein the evil lurks, not primordially in the hearts of men (…). We all know the book; we all know, therefore, that the boys come to the island *already acculturated*. And what do they bring? They bring a tradition of carnivorous, blood-lust human violence, tribalism, ingenuity in warfare (it is a truism that the technological progress of the Western world has consistently been the direct consequence of a struggle for supremacy in weaponry), anti-intellectualism, and the vivid memory they were trying to escape (….)

He adds:

> Without civilization temptation, they would have survived in such a paradise – at last, to invoke Darwin, the fittest would have survived disease and the elements with a little luck…Free of traditions, uniforms, memories, language, perhaps never to develop a language beyond the most rudimentary, would have those children and nature have manifested Golding's beast." (…). "They (children) have just acted out, unencumbered by English

> etiquette, episodes they will relive a decade or so hence in the sophistication of modern warfare. But it is not their "nature" they have failed to escape; on the contrary, innocence of their nature never had a chance – it was not even in the chase (Leon Levit, 522-523).

For Levitt then, the origin of the evil that is given full expression through the boys in *Lord of the Flies* is to be found in no human nature, but in western civilization itself. It is that deeply corrupt civilization that has rubbed off on the behavior of the adventurous kids. This unethical western culture is nevertheless underpinned by a world vision known as modernity, the root cause of the social and metaphysical unease that pervades Golding's novel.

3. The modernist project: the road to the crash

The Rousseauist idea according to which man is naturally good and that it is society that corrupts him is illustrated in *Lord of the Flies* by a certain number of facts. One of them is the often-mentioned natural goodness of Simon. Simon shows no sign of wickedness. On the contrary, he is protective towards both the smaller boys and the environment, though he is an atypical being who lives on the fringes of the boys' society. Another example is offered by Jack. He is first presented as a rather innocent boy, unable to bear the sight of blood (Golding, 34), before "getting transformed into a killer who doesn't hesitate to kill other children" (Chavan, P., 2013, p.1521). Jack's extreme violence results from a combination of present factors, but is essentially a legacy of the violent society he originates from. His violence is learned from a society that makes of the quest of power its chief ideal; an ideal incarnated by the ideology of modernity.

The assumed purpose of modernity, born at the dawn of the Renaissance in the late 15th century and that reached its peak in the "Enlightenment" era in the 18thcentury, was to lift human race from ignorance, injustice, poverty and suffering to project it towards more promising horizons. To achieve this ideal of progress and emancipation, modernity exclusively relied on the methodical and rigorous application of reason, in accordance with Cartesian injunctions. By reducing life to the pursuit of the ideal of development and by making of rationality the only legitimating discourse, modernity discredited and then destroyed the values derived from Christianity, the dominating ideology of the Middle Ages that it succeeded. Moreover, it put an end to the moral orientation inherent in Christianity, while paradoxically it did not propose any viable alternative, apart from certain philosophical precepts, the most famous of which were probably those derived from Kant's moral philosophy.

The absence of a genuine ethical base in the modernist project inevitably led to the catastrophic ideologies and wars that engendered chaos. *Lord of the Flies* strives to picture this general disintegration by tracing it back to its other origin. It is "a sharp criticism on celebrated enlightenment rationality" (Salini Sathyaseelan, S., 2016, p.99). Because it does not consider much traditional ethical values, modernity or the rationalist discourse proves to be "useless to achieve lasting happiness or even to secure one's health and survival" (Carballido, J., 2015, p.27). The neglect or lack of ethics, which is behind the degeneration of the world of the adults, is quite observable in the boys' attempt to form a micro society. It is as if Golding made them perform the history of the corruption of

civilization by the modernist ideology, and made his reader see why things went wrong in the true world.

After their meeting and the election of the chief, the boys' first major decision is, "to go on an expedition and find out" (Golding, 25) the reality about the island. Ralph, the leader, decides that this thrilling mission is to be carried out by him and Jack, his direct challenger. He hesitantly and symbolically adds the naturally good Simon to the group before rejoicing in these terms: "we're explorers" (Golding, 27). The pride and joy of the boys, particularly of Ralph and Jack, are justified by the feeling of responsibility that the idea of exploring the island fills them with. The consciousness of their possibility to freely take their own decisions, to be the 'masters' of their destiny is much relieving. This can be read as an allusion to the modernist project that basically consisted in making of man "master and owner" of himself and of the world; This implied the rejection of all institutions, all structures that curbed his freedom of thought and action.

The absurd nature of such a project is satirically brought to the surface through the image of the innocent and weak boys. Though conscious that their presence on the island results from an accident, they do as if they were involved "in real exploring" (Golding, 29) of a world "nobody's been […] before" (Golding, 29). They are very excited to know more about their surrounding and assert their power.

It is significant that Piggy, who embodies wisdom, intelligence, ethics and morality, is systematically refused the right to be part of the group of "explorers". "You're no good on a job like this" (Golding, 26), says Ralph to him, as the latter expresses the wish to go with them. Jack reinforces this viewpoint by sharply adding: "we don't want you" (Golding, 26). Piggy is excluded from the boys' project because he still sticks to old social values. He is a sort of conservative. He prefers the preservation of communal life to any other initiative that he considers a risky adventure. As such, he constitutes a major hindrance to the carrying out of the boys' mission.

Piggy stands for traditional ethics reduced to nothing by the emancipating discourse of modernity. This ideology favoured new ethical values like earthly happiness and progress that constituted both its driving force and the praxis of individualism. Indeed, the total liberty of the individual is the necessary condition for the fulfillment of the ideals of modernity. Piggy has the intuition of the anarchy to which such freedom, synonym of individualism and ethical void, can lead their fragile society. The boys need no moralist, no authority, nothing or nobody to hinder their freedom to daringly create their own history. They are determined to follow, not their reason as modernity advocated, but, most ironically, their instincts by trying to own the island at any cost.

The so praised rational nature of man in the modernity discourse is here called into question. In a Freudian perspective, man is less a rational being than a being of irrational desires. The island is a form of literary laboratory where this idea about human being is tested and established. Piggy, "the embodiment of intellect and rationalism" (Ly, X., & Wu, W., 2009, p.120), is therefore unfit for this world. The narration makes it clear: "Piggy was an outsider, not only by accent, which did not matter, but by fat, and ass-mar, and specs, and a certain disinclination of manual labour" (Golding, 70). It is no accident that he finds it difficult to physically and morally adapt himself to the new society. He is described as a fat boy suffering from asthma and shortsightedness and who, unlike the

majority of the kids, is much concerned about issues of social justice. He is the laughing stock of this micro society, of his fellows who constantly humiliate him.

Piggy's disgrace is all the more difficult to accept, for him and for the reader, as he is, with Ralph, the major craftsman of the young society. He plaintively reminds the group of this reality: "I was with him (Ralph) when he found the conch. I was with him before anyone else" (Golding, 26). Piggy is reminiscent of all past values that man made use of to create his society before modernity found them ineffective and discarded them. He also recalls Greek Classical philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Epicurus and the Stoic thinkers that laid the foundation of an ethical thought in a time marked by wars, disorder and anxiety so as to guide people's conduct and help them live in peace with themselves and their environment. It is in a similar context of chaos that Piggy attempts to define lines of conduct to save his society.

In keeping ethics, morality and even common sense, embodied mostly by Piggy, away from their plans, Ralph and Jack inexorably lead the young society to disorder, just as western modernity introduced the world into chaos after calling into questions all its founding structures. The adventurous character of the mission of the "explorers" is expressed in these lines: "The three boys walked **briskly** on the sand…they turned to each other, *laughing, talking, not listening"* (The underlining is mine, Golding, 27). The 'brisk' way the boys walk and their laughter express all the delight aroused by their free undertaking, but chiefly the imagination of the fruits that their mission is going to yield, a laudable purpose that is satirically evocative of the beautiful emancipating promises of modernity. However, the boys talk but don't listen to one another. In other words, none of them pays attention to what the other feels, thinks and says. Each is confined in their own little world. This individualist attitude of the "explorers" is one of the germs of the destruction of their unstable society. In any case, the three teenagers continue their ways with 'pleasure', despite being "hot, dirty and exhausted" (Golding, 29).

After multiple efforts, they seem to overcome the hostility of nature. They reach the top of the mountain. From this summit, they have a panoramic view of the island and know more about it now. Consequently, they can take possession of it and assert their power. Ralph, the chief, can then triumphantly declare: "this is our island" (Golding, 38). Here is the modern man who, having reached the height of scientific knowledge thanks to his common sense and courage, proclaims himself master and possessor of nature. This privileged position gives man a feeling of pride that the "valiant" explorers in Golding's novel experience. They are delighted to have successfully accomplished their mission, as the narration shows: "eyes shining, mouths open, triumphant, they savoured the right domination" They were lifted up. (Golding, 32).

After the euphoria, they note, still through the chief's voice, that the place is uninhabited: "There's no village smoke, and no boats" (Golding, 32). Like the first European explorers and missionaries in Africa, Ralph gives a report on their exploratory mission for the rest of the group: "we're on an island. We've been on the mountain-top and seen water all around. We saw no houses, no smoke, no footprints, no boats, no people. We're on an unusual island with no other people on it" (Golding, 35). Beyond the ethical vacuum, these words echo the nihilist discourse of the modernist European explorer on the African continent with the famous theory of *tabula rasa* according to which Africa would be a total void, a place without civilization, culture or history. This racist idea of

western rationality is an obvious violation of the Kantian ethical principle according to which man, as a rational being, must be treated with dignity. He must be treated as an end and not as a means. This held opinion about Africa was a means for Europe to better achieve its goal of domination. The colonization of Africa by modernist and rationalist Europe was then quite irrational and unethical.

Modernist Europe's false speech results, among other reasons, from its ignorance of Africa. Europeans often mistakenly think that Africa is a country and not a continent, and that one finds there the ugliest and most dangerous things of the world. Ralph's following words are symptomatic of this mistake and prejudice about Africa: "You couldn't have a beastie, a snake-thing, on an island this size, you only get them in big countries, like Africa, or India" (Golding, 39). The same idea is repeated later by Jack: "You don't get animals on small islands. Only pigs. You only get lions and tigers in big countries like Africa and India" (Golding, 90). Ralph's and Jack's words are uttered in order to dispel the fear of the smaller of the group who believe that a terrifying beast in the form of a snake would prowl about on the island.

The reference to Africa and India has another significance. Africa experienced colonial rule, as did India, the largest colony of the much powerful British Empire from 1858 till its independence in 1947. The boys intend to subject the virgin island to the same fate as Africa and the Indian subcontinent whose economic resources were systematically plundered by the European settler. This imperialist economic project is betrayed by Jack's cry of joy after the success of their exploration: "we'll have food" (Golding, 32). Jack does not think about preserving the beautiful island, and even less about the means to return to the motherland. On the contrary, it is a question for him, as did westerners in Africa and in Asia during colonial time, to take unfair advantage of the natural riches of the 'discovered' island that Ralph proudly calls "the "Treasure Island", the "Swallows and Amazons, the "Coral Island" (Golding, 38). Thus, the little ones in the group stuff themselves with the island's fruits to the point of having diarrhea, while Jack and his gang supply the society with meat by hunting wild pigs. This hunt is particularly violent and devastating. It is an opportunity for Jack and his companions to express, unhindered, their natural violence which ends up creating chaos on the gorgeous island.

Jack pursues his interests relentlessly and without scruples. All means are good, including humiliating, stealing, torturing and killing to achieve his goal. Unlike him, Ralph is an idealist. He naively believes in their ability to perpetuate the principles of English civilization and in the idea that they will be saved. Ralph symbolizes in this regard the humanist side of the discourse of modernity, namely the great ideals of progress, human perfectibility, freedom, justice and happiness; while Jack represents its cruel face. He is symbol of the capitalist spirit which is the very essence of the discourse of western modernity, meaning the domination of man by man, the selfish power that engenders anarchy and chaos. It is this unethical and capitalist spirit which, according to Marxists in particular those of the Frankfurt School like Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, is the cause of the extreme ideologies and deadly wars across the world, beyond the horrors of colonization. Jack embodies European worst dictators like Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Petain, to name but a few, in a time when Europe prided itself on being the civilized continent. The extreme violence of these dictators, the traumatic wars of the 20th century and the horrors of Auschwitz swept away all the beautiful ideals of modernity before

turning the world upside down. So we understand why Jack succeeds in dethroning Ralph by having almost all the boys rally to his support, imposing then his anarchist law on the whole island. Jack is therefore, as the narrator specifies, "the most obvious leader" (Golding, 24), namely the one who embodies the soul of capitalism better than anyone, while Ralph is the façade of this discourse, in other words the beautiful speech that hides the malevolent purpose.

If Ralph and Jack epitomize the two opposite faces of conquering modernity, Simon, the third explorer, is a rather ambiguous figure. He is of a very natural humanism and intelligence that gives him a premonitory vision of their existential situation. He is very calm and often stays away from the group. These features give him a certain religious dimension and make of him particularly a Christ-figure. It may seem surprising that this person of such kindness be enlisted in Ralph and Jack's exploration project. Simon could have been dismissed like Piggy.

The fact that Ralphs chooses him with much hesitation is quite symbolic. The relationship between Simon and the two 'modernist' explorers evoke that between Christianity and modernity. Indeed, the rational foundation of modernity did not automatically reject the Christian God, but gradually challenged him before "putting him to death", a death attested by Nietzsche at the end of the 19th century. It is the same fate that Simon suffers. He is a mere onlooker in the group of explorers. He is first isolated before being killed at the end of the mission. Simon is then the symbol of marginal Christianity in modernity and of the sad fate that this rationalist ideology reserved for it.

In addition, people have often mentioned the predominant role of Christianity in colonization through essentially the evangelization of African peoples by European missionaries with strongly colonial overtones. Christianity, more particularly the Catholic Church, therefore not only blessed the colonial mission, but took part in it with subtle maneuvers directly affecting the faith of the African and making him more docile to colonizing speeches. From this point of view, Simon's attitude towards Ralph and Jack is meaningful. While they are delighted at their fine exploitation and especially at the idea that the island belongs to them, Simon remains impassive. Better still, he seems to approve of the appropriation project: He "looked at them both, saying nothing but nodding till his black hair flopped backwards and forwards: his face was glowing" (Golding, 32). Simon's guilty silence in the face of the imperialist posture displayed by the two boys may be evidence of the complicity of Christianity in the colonial enterprise. It is only belatedly that he tries to make the boys see the truth by explaining to them that the source of man's fear and evil is man. But, it is unfortunately the moment chosen by the young people to silence him definitively by killing him, even it is out of accident. Partner at the beginning, Simon ends up being seen as an enemy and eliminated; a situation which reminds in many respects that of the Catholic Church. Today, it is subjected to public obloquy by the modern or post-modern West which finds its principles too conservative and therefore totally out of step with the progressive and licentious spirit that it requires, this same West which made of this Church yesterday a strategic ally in the colonial mission.

Like this all-powerful West that dictates the march of history through the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund created in a post-war context, the boys decide to enact the regulatory principles of life on the island, after their "successful" exploration that elevates them to the rank of "masters" of their space. They

believe to be the "elected people", the "best at everything". Jack confesses: "I agree with Ralph, we've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we're not savages. We're English; and the English are the best at everything" (Golding, 47). The disciplinary measures of Ralph and his group reflect the principles dictated by the international decision-making bodies cited above which apply to all peoples of the world. Their limits in terms of fairness are well known. They are unfair because they serve to maintain the domination of the "elected people"[4], the West, over the others who are silenced. Jack's following words addressed to Piggy tell us much about this rampant dictatorship and injustice: "it's time some people knew they've got to keep quiet and leave deciding things to the rest of us" (Golding, 111). Jack only repeats here the well-known thesis of the modern West making of Europe the civilized centre and of the other societies, especially in Asia and Africa, the savage periphery that needs to be taught the basic principles of civilization. That such a remark be put in the mouth of a savage and bloodthirsty boy, who abhors any form of social order, highlights all the fallacy and absurdity of this Eurocentric view. Jonathan Swift, before Golding, underlined this fact with a much more biting irony in his novel *Gulliver's Travels*. It is much disturbing that the anarchist Jack is at the heart of the establishment of the rules on which the survival of the society depends. This does not bode well, as Piggy senses it. The rules are like those who define them. They have no ethical basis.

The ethic free rules of the boys' community are fully expressed by the entity on which these very rules are based. Indeed, the children's society is entirely regulated by a conch shell. Their first meeting is made possible thanks to the conch. Ralph is elected leader of the group partly because he holds it at the moment of the voting. All the boys agree that whoever holds the conch has the right to speak and nobody is allowed to interrupt them. One has just to raise their hand to be given it. Anytime Ralph the leader thinks it is necessary to summon the boys, he simply blows into the "precious" thing.

The conch shell is symbol of freedom of speech, democracy, order and of civilization. What is striking, however, is its great power that contrasts with its insignificant nature. Indeed, the shell is a fragile object. It is an empty thing that can no longer fulfill its original role. It is separated from the body of the animal it protected. As such, it is totally useless and can be easily broken both in the literal and in the symbolic sense.

The contrast between the important normative role of the conch and its trivial nature is pregnant with significance. Among other things, it expresses the pressing need for the boys to find an ethical reference in a universe that offers nothing in this perspective. Through the conch, the boys helplessly attempt to give a social meaning to their accidental presence in a world where there is nothing to lean on to sustain one's humanity. The emptiness of the shell mirrors the ethical void the boys are helplessly caught in. Its fragility heralds the moral chaos the little community is inevitably heading for.

The rules established thanks to the conch rather reveal a desire for domination. The smaller boys are often denied the right to speak, like the so-called underdeveloped countries which are almost not entitled to the chapter concerning decisions taken in the

[4]For more detail about this point, read my online article: Gning, M. (2018). «Modernité, Postmodernité et Impérialisme Occidental».*European Scientific Journal*, 14(5), 386-409.

framework of international bodies: "the small boy held out his hands for the conch and the assembly shouted with laughter; at once he snatched back his hands and started to cry" (Golding, 39). The crowd's laughter eventually intimidates the 6-year-old boy and makes him lose his voice, despite the support of Piggy who defends him in these terms: "Let him have the conch" (Golding, 39). In addition, Piggy is sometimes refused the floor, even though he has the shell. "The conch doesn't count on top of the mountain (…) so you shut up" (Golding, 46), violently retorts Jack when Piggy insists that he should be let to speak since he holds the conch. These examples sufficiently demonstrate that the rules are only a semblance of democracy. In fact, they are empty shells.

Like the rules, the most important decisions that Ralph takes, generally under Jack's dictation, have no ethical basis and prove to be somehow dangerous for the survival of the group. This is particularly the case of his choice of Jack to lead the group of hunters. The motivation behind this choice has nothing rational or objective. It is conditioned by Ralph's desire to please Jack (who has just lost the election) with the hope of keeping him at his side. The result of this decision, which is not motivated by Kant's good will, is morally drastic. Jack uses the hunters to rebel against Ralph and the established order. The ingredients of chaos are brought together to blow up the young society and give concrete form to the ethical vacuum.

4. The kingdom of "savages": the ethical chaos

Modernity freed the individual from all tutelage, from all forms of beliefs, institutional authority or references. It made man again the sole responsible for his destiny. It introduced him back in the era of uncertainty prior to the establishment of values. This is the situation in which the boys in *Lord of the Flies* find themselves. They represent the man of the post-war period of whom the existentialist thinkers say he is cut off from his traditional roots after the collapse of all certainties and who suddenly finds out that he is an empty being facing an empty universe. Instead of making man master and owner of the world, as it haughtily announced, modernity eventually led man to become aware of his existential frailty. He is not master of the world, nor is he master of himself, as poststructuralist thinkers contend, and before them Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. For these thinkers, man's thought and action are determined by structures. He does not condition things, but is conditioned by them. He is not a transparent being; he is a mystery whose complex nature reflects that of the world.

According to Camus, the unbearable opposition between man's desire to elucidate all as a rational being and the unfathomable nature of the world he lives in results in a feeling of the absurd. Man is no longer at ease in the world. He feels the threat everywhere without being able to point it out.

This diffuse menace in *Lord of the Flie*s is reflected in the nightmares that the smaller of the group make at night, but also by the constant fear that inhabits them. Actually, they believe that there is a dangerous beast on the island, which puts them in a state of permanent fear. In their eyes, their "good island" has suddenly become strange and fearful. "The world, that understandable and lawful world, was slipping away" (Golding, 99), Ralph regrets.

Beyond the existential anxiety mentioned above and the widely shared fear of a nuclear war in a time of uncertainty and violence, the dread of the children seems to have

another source. This is at least the conviction of the intellectual and wise Piggy for whom there is no beast on the island and that the source of the fear is probably man. "Unless we get frightened of people" (Golding, 92), he says. Simon is of the same opinion as Piggy. "What I mean is … maybe it's only us" we could be sort of…. The narration specifies that "Simon became inarticulate in his effort to express mankind's essential illness" (Golding, 97). The beast that scares the boys is in everyone. Simon discovers it in his hallucinations: "I'm part of you" (Golding, 158). The beast or the "lord of the flies" is the embodiment of the inner self. This discovery is terrifying and gives reason to Piggy who always insists on the need to be careful, not to leave too much freedom to the individual. Now it's Ralph, the head of the group, who panics: "I'm frightened. Of us. I want to go home. Oh my God I want to go home" (Golding, 173). The joy of discovering the island is quickly replaced by the general feeling of worry and fear due to uncertainty, the absence of axiological references to determine and supervise the behavior of children in order to avoid chaos.

Without references, the individual is inclined to do evil, to express himself naturally by giving free rein to his impulses. Ralph is aware of the imminence of the chaos. He knows that their social project will inevitably collapse. The signs are already very noticeable. The signal fire goes out of control, sets fire on the forest and a little boy disappears, certainly burned to death. The boys prefer to play and hunt instead of helping Ralph and Simon build the protective huts. The little boys make nightmares and find it difficult to sleep. The hostility between Ralph and Jack becomes increasingly serious. Roger and Maurice, two sadistic collaborators of Jack, bully the little boys at the beach, Jack and his gang mask their faces with charcoal for hunting. They return from a bloody and joyful hunting to find that the signal fire has gone out and a boat passed without seeing them. Jack slaps Piggy who blames him for letting dye out the signal fire, breaking one of the lenses from his glasses. Simon is accidentally killed by the boys who take him for the beast, whereas he wanted to tell them the truth about the supposed beast. His body is washed out to sea. The death of Simon, the spiritual figure, can be equated with "that of God" with its liberating effects[5]. The children start feeling free to do whatever they want, irrespective of the rules. Like God in the thought of Nietzsche, the rules are pure invention in the eyes of most of the boys and prevent them from being what they are: totally free beings.

As in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the rules are constantly violated, especially by Jack and his camp. Ralph continually reminds Jack of the importance of obeying the rules, all they have to oppose the emptiness of the universe: "the rules shouted Ralph you're breaking the rules… Because the rules are the only thing we've got" (Golding, 100). The rules can also be compared to reason that had supplanted the faith in God and challenged the idea of transcendence. The collapse of faith in reason and in the idea of the emancipation of modernity, following chiefly the catastrophes of ideologies and wars, led humanity to become aware of the nothingness of existence, of the active nihilism that

[5]According to Nietzsche the "death" of God, who besides has never existed, permitted at last man to face truly his world with a clear consciousness of his entire liberty. He considered that the "death of God" at last freed human being who feels the sole responsible for his life.

Nietzsche had predicted, in other words the total rejection of all values and the advent of the absurd.

One must fully experience nothingness as the foundation of the world by destroying everything that exists in order to assert oneself as a fundamentally free individual. Nothing makes more sense. Jack endorses this nihilistic injunction. For him, rules no longer have any reason to be, only the will to power matters: "Bollocks to the rules! we're strong" (Golding, 100), he replies to Ralph who tries to call them to order. He also rejects the power of the conch: "We don't need the conch any more. We know who ought to say things" (Golding, 111). Beyond the authority of the conch and that of Ralph, it is any form of organization or order that Jack refuses. Besides, apart from Ralph, Piggy and the twins Sam and Eric commonly referred to as "Samneric" as if they were one entity, all have joined Jack's camp. Becoming the new chief of the island, Jack retires with his gang in the forest, all disguised as savages.

The beautiful island is transformed into a kingdom of savages by Jack and his tribe more than ever determined to erase all traces of civilization, morality and ethics. It is in this perspective that they attack Ralph and his small group, destroy the few remaining shelters and steal the glasses of Piggy, thus reducing him to blindness. Ralph and Piggy's counterattack to make them see reason and take back the glasses leads to a tragedy. The two twins, "shamanic" are tied like lambs on the altar of sacrifice; Piggy is tragically killed by a heavy rock that Roger drops on him, smashing at the same time the conch he held. Ralph runs away and is hunted like a wild pig. In order to get him out of his hiding place, the group of savages sets fire to the forest. Fortunately, Ralph is saved by a naval officer attracted by the smoke. The island, nonetheless, sinks into total chaos, marking the definitive end of ethics and morality and looking much like the world of adults the barbarous boys come from. This is the disturbing result of conquering western modernity that fostered total freedom of man and made of the quest of power its ultimate purpose.

5. Conclusion

With very few exceptions, the characters depicted in Golding's *Lord of the Flies* are evil producers. In choosing innocent kids as perpetrators of such horrible actions in such a naturally beautiful place that they have literally destroyed, Golding implies that the evil in man is natural rather than learned.

In the light of Kant's moral philosophy, the actions of Golding's boys are generally immoral and irrational. They violate all Kantian ethical principles. However, the boys cannot be held responsible for their unethical attitude. They are trapped in an environment that drastically lacks ethical references.

What at first sight looks like a natural propensity is in fact a social product. Actually, the children in *Lord of the Flies* instinctively copy the values system of the adult world, England, where they come from. Individualism, freedom, competition, thirst for power, leisure, and injustice are in short the various ingredients with which they attempt to form a new society. These unethical principles that have led to the destruction of the boys' society constitute the core of a world vision inherited from the adults' world and known as modernity that the boys seem to be literally performing. The ethical void highlighted in the fictitious world of the children is the literary portrayal of the ethical void prevailing in the true western world. This one is corrupted by the modernist ideology.

The latter rejected religion as the guarantee of moral conduct, refused all form of authority in the sacred principle that 'man is a rational and autonomous being', capable of freely deciding the right thing to do. Besides, a close examination of this modernity, through both the boys' acts and Kant's ethical principles allow to realize, ironically, that there was no true ethics at its basis. It was fundamentally motivated by selfish consideration, the quest for power. Evil can only produce evil. The symbolic way in which Golding exposes this true in *Lord of the Flies* is one of the reasons for the success of his novel.

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