

## Golding's *Free Fall* as Confession and Parable

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**A**LTHOUGH critics have acknowledged that the narrator of *Free Fall*, Samuel Mountjoy, must not be identified with Golding, they have failed to distinguish clearly between Mountjoy's purpose in writing his narrative and Golding's in writing his novel. Gaining an accurate picture of the work as a whole depends heavily on the distinction's being made. Yet it has not been made, because critics have taken the wrong approach to Mountjoy's assumption that it is possible freely to relinquish one's freedom of will. It is only when we recognise that this assumption is not shared by Golding that novel and narrative appear in the proper perspective: the narrative as Mountjoy's confession cum self-justification, and the novel as Golding's parable of the abuse of freedom.

"When did I lose my freedom?" (p. 5):<sup>1</sup> this is the question Mountjoy devotes himself to answering in his narrative. It is a strange question, and stranger still for the fact that Mountjoy equates freedom of choice with freedom from guilt. "Free-will," he writes, "cannot be debated but only experienced, like a colour or the taste of potatoes. I remember one such experience. I was very small and I was sitting on the stone surround of [a] pool and fountain in the centre of [a] park. . . . *There was no guilt* but only the plash and splatter of the fountain at the centre" (p. 5, my italics). Reading this makes us suspect that the adult Mountjoy is guilty of some shady or immoral act which he would prefer not to disclose.

Yet he dedicates his narrative to discovering the truth about his past, and writes about himself with a disarming

candour. He has no inhibitions about telling us that he was born a bastard in one of London's slum districts, and he freely acknowledges a character flaw that has been his from childhood: his impressionability, or susceptibility to suggestion. Mountjoy recalls, for example, that at school he allowed a young friend, Philip Arnold, to persuade him to waylay younger boys and steal their colourful "fagcards." He recognises in retrospect that he was Philip's dupe: when the fagcard scheme is discovered, he alone is sent before the headmaster, while Philip, author of the plan and recipient of the larger number of cards, escapes punishment altogether. Mountjoy excuses his own part in the plan by explaining that unlike the other boys, he had no father to give him fagcards, and emphasizes that Philip — "my Machiavelli" (p. 49) — was the real villain. This seems a fair explanation: Sammy's lack of a father, and of firm guidance from his drunken, promiscuous mother does seem to contribute to his tendency to be influenced by people with stronger characters than his own.

Two such people are Nick Shales and Rowena Pringle, teachers whom Mountjoy describes in retrospect as "parents not in the flesh" (p. 250). Initially, Sammy enjoys Miss Pringle's religion classes, for she tells Bible stories vividly. One day, however — with a notable want of Christian sympathy — she corrects his accent in front of the other children. Humiliated, Sammy finds he is much happier in classes conducted by Nick Shales, the science teacher, a genial man from a slum background like himself. Nick and Miss Pringle indirectly influence Mountjoy's attitude to both politics and sex.

Looking back, Sammy recognises that it was his adolescent liking for Nick, a socialist, and antipathy to Miss Pringle, that prompted him to join the Communist Party: "to tell the truth, if it had not been for Nick and his socialism I should never have bothered with politics at all . . . If it had not been for Miss Pringle's nephew who [then] was high up in the blackshirts I might . . . well have been

a blackshirt myself" (p. 95). To illustrate this admission, Mountjoy recalls attending a Party meeting one evening, accompanied by Philip Arnold. Philip is not a Party member, and afterwards in a pub, asks Sammy what prompted him to join. Mountjoy mutters angrily about "fascist bastards" (p. 98) and "bloody blackshirts" (p. 99); but it is clear that he is only repeating things he has heard. Philip, characteristically, wants to know what is to be gained from adherence to Communism. He is cynical and self-centred, certain of what he wants; Sammy on the other hand is uncertain — is aware only that his life is "lopsided and illogical" (p. 100).

Philip plays an indirect part in Sammy's formulation of a private code of morality in adolescence. Philip's self-assurance and frank self-centredness have an appeal for him. So do Nick's lessons on science, which imply the existence of a world quite different from the one described in Miss Pringle's Bible classes. Reacting against Miss Pringle, Mountjoy readily accepts that "[there] is no spirit, no absolute" (p. 226), and with this as his starting point, persuades himself that "right and wrong are [therefore] a parliamentary decision like no betting slips or drinks after half-past ten" (p. 226). "But," he asks himself, "why should Samuel Mountjoy . . . go with a majority decision? Why should not Sammy's good be what Sammy decides?" (p. 226). Here Philip's influence is unmistakable. As an adult Mountjoy recognises that his deductions from Nick's teaching were "logical" (p. 226) but misguided. He is aware of having fallen into error through contact with two personalities stronger than his own.

Another person to make an impression on Mountjoy is Halde, the Nazi who interrogates him in a prison camp during the war. Describing the interrogation, Sammy recalls Halde's astute observation that he, Mountjoy, is a "pliable" individual (p. 143), easily influenced, and uncommitted to anything other than his own good. "You do not," he remembers Halde saying, "believe in anything enough

to suffer for it or be glad. . . . Intellectual ideas . . . sit on you loosely" (p. 144). This comment makes an impact on Mountjoy not only because it is true, but because it comes from a well-educated German — Halde reveals that he was an academic in civilian life — willing to treat him as an equal. Sammy's self-consciousness about his working-class background, and lack of intellectual independence, surface when he says in retrospect: "Dr. Halde spoke better English than I did. . . . His enunciation had the purity that goes with a clear and logical mind. My enunciation was slurred and hurried, voice of a man who had . . . never thought, never been certain of anything" (p. 135).

Sammy's chief fear is that Halde will find him "uncivilized" (p. 137), a creature of "gross sensuality" (p. 183). This fear derives from the singular nature of his adolescent moral code. Some time after deciding that "Sammy's good" is to be what "Sammy decides" (p. 226), he asks Nick "a hesitant question" (p. 231) about sex. Nick replies, "I don't believe in anything but what I can touch and see and weigh and measure. But if the Devil had invented man he couldn't have played him a dirtier, wickeder, a more shameful trick than when he gave him sex!" (p. 231). In Sammy's "too susceptible mind" (p. 231), sex becomes "brilliant and evil" (p. 231), a wicked refuge in a world devoid of spirit, devoid of absolute. On the last day of school, his headmaster advises, "If you want something enough, you can always get it provided you are willing to make the appropriate sacrifice" (p. 235). Shortly afterwards, he decides to sacrifice "everything" (p. 236) for the sake of sexual relations with a girl he knows at school, Beatrice Ifor.

He succeeds in seducing Beatrice by threatening to "go mad" (p. 114) if she refuses to sleep with him. But their lovemaking is unsatisfactory. Beatrice is inhibited by the chapel's teaching that pre-marital sex is wrong, and Sammy by feelings of inferiority — for Beatrice is of a slightly higher social class. That she attended chapel as a young girl is significant: "In [Beatrice'] little village," he tells

us, "all the boozers were Church of England and all the boys in broad cloth, chapel. Church of England was top and bottom; chapel was middle, was the class grimly keeping its feet out of the mud" (p. 101). Unhappy with Beatrice, Mountjoy deserts her one night without explanation for a working-class girl named Taffy.

He remains unaware of the consequences of this cowardly act until after the war. Then, learning that Beatrice is in hospital, he pays her a visit. He finds her incurably mad, doomed to a life of "continual and exaggerated worry" (p. 247). Whether he "tipped her over" — caused her to go mad — is unclear. The doctor tells him "You probably tipped her over. But perhaps she would have tipped over anyway. Perhaps she would have tipped over a year earlier if you hadn't been there to give her something to think about. You may have given her an extra year of sanity and — whatever you did give her. You may have taken a lifetime of happiness away from her" (pp. 248-49). Rightly or wrongly, Mountjoy feels responsible for what happened to Beatrice: guilt over his behaviour to her is the guilt he refers to early in the narrative.

His avowed object in writing is to discover the moment at which he ceased to be able to choose freely. What he fails to see is that the notion of losing one's freedom has been suggested to him by Halde. During the interrogation, Halde says: "One must be for or against. I made my choice with much difficulty, but I have made it. *Perhaps it was the last choice I shall ever make*" (p. 140, my italics). Clearly, this is the argument a sensitive, cultured man has had to pose to himself to assuage the anguish of guilt he feels over acting as a Nazi interrogator. Halde comforts himself with the thought that, having lost his freedom, he cannot be blamed for his actions, however atrocious.

Similarly, Mountjoy's search for the moment at which he lost his freedom is in reality an attempt to absolve himself of the guilt he feels for what has happened to Beatrice. Mountjoy is prepared to admit that he used Beatrice selfish-

ly. But his affair with her occurred, he claims, after he had chosen to sacrifice "everything" for her, including his freedom. "[By the time I deserted Beatrice]," he emphasises, "I had lost my power to choose. I had given away my freedom. I cannot be blamed for the helpless and mechanical reaction of my nature" (p. 131). Implicitly, Sammy imagines his sacrifice to have been a metaphoric leap from a position of freedom, of control over his actions, into a state of free fall, in which no matter what he does, his behaviour is ultimately determined by physical laws. The idea that it is possible to lose one's freedom in this way gains weight from the scene in hospital in which Beatrice urinates involuntarily over his trousers and shoes. It would appear that for Beatrice, "tipping over" has meant falling from a position of behavioural control to one in which all her acts are subject to forces beyond the realm of choice. Yet we must remember that Beatrice is mad and Mountjoy sane: the argument that applies to the one character does not necessarily apply to the other.

Whether it is possible for a sane individual to relinquish his freedom is debatable; yet Mountjoy seeks to quash our doubts about his own case with the comment that "[free-will] cannot be debated but only experienced" (p. 5). Here he is trying to avoid criticism from readers whose education is better than his, and who might demand a carefully worked out argument.

Sammy implies that "free fall" must necessarily refer to physics, but Golding uses the phrase to echo a passage in the third book of *Paradise Lost*.<sup>2</sup> In a dialogue with Christ, God emphasises that divine foreknowledge (i.e., theological determinism) had nothing to do with the fall of man:

ingrate, he had of mee  
All he could have; I made him just and right,  
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.

Satan and his rebel angels,

by their own suggestion fell,  
Self-tempted, self-deceived: Man falls deceiv'd  
By th'other first: Man therefore shall find Grace,

The other none: in Mercy and Justice both,  
Through Heav'n and Earth, so shall my glorie excell,  
But Mercy first and last shall brightest shine.<sup>3</sup>

The parallel between Satan and man is all-important. Satan and his rebel angels fall into divine disfavour for aspiring to Godhead, and are cast into Hell. Similarly, Adam and Eve fall from grace for eating the forbidden fruit, and are cast into the wilderness. But because Adam and Eve are tempted by Satan, rather than being self-deceived, God extends mercy to them: through the sacrifice of Christ, access to Paradise — in the afterlife — is restored. What Sammy fails to recognise is that he was "sufficient to have stood." Rather than having lost his freedom, he has abused it in behaving selfishly to Beatrice and in contributing, perhaps, to her mental breakdown. But because Mountjoy has acted not entirely on his own initiative, but instead, under the influence of characters like "Old Nick" (the schoolboys' nickname for him) Shales and cunning Philip Arnold, his sin is seen to be not entirely wilful, and mercy is extended — by Golding. Mountjoy is cast into the wilderness in a figurative sense, in acutely feeling the need to relieve his guilty conscience. Yet Golding grants him experience of two kinds of Paradise — both related to his being an artist.

For Mountjoy's narrative tells not only of his seduction and desertion of Beatrice, but also, of his rise to artistic success. As in the one, so in this other part of the story, Beatrice' role is significant. Mountjoy sketches her hurriedly one day in art class; she appears to him to be surrounded in metaphoric "light." He is as excited by the light as Dante is in the *Vita Nuova* at the sight of another Beatrice, and hopes to catch another glimpse of it in the act of drawing her again.

What Sammy wants from Beatrice, though, is something Dante never desired: a fusion of aesthetic and sensual pleasure. His account of one of the sittings makes this clear: "When the drawing was finished I made love to her. . . . Or rather, I repeated what my pencil had done, finished

what my pencil had begun" (p. 120). Some of his drawings of her are successful — one even finds a place in the Tate Gallery — but throughout his adolescence and young manhood, Sammy's artistic vision is blunted by the selfish, sensual element in his outlook on life. In adolescence he does not re-discover the metaphorical light that surrounded Beatrice the first time he drew her.

It is not until the war — not until Halde orders his brief solitary confinement in a darkened cell — that he undergoes the psychological conversion necessary to restore his "sight." His vivid imagination and childhood fear of the dark combine to make what is in reality a short stay in a broom closet a supremely terrifying experience. Knowing there to be no physical escape from the cell, Mountjoy achieves, in a burst of hysteria, a painful mental escape. Referring to an interior aspect of himself, the frightened, screaming, "thing within," he writes:

The thing that cried fled forward . . . , was shot forward screaming as into a furnace, as over unimaginable steps that were all that might be borne, were more, were too searing for the refuge of madness, were destructive of the centre. The thing that screamed left all living behind and came to the entry where death is close as darkness against eyeballs.

And burst that door. (p. 185)

The door is a door of death: after he has been released from the cell, Sammy is aware that the "thing within" has perished. Walking through the grounds of the prison camp, he feels, though, like "a man resurrected" (p. 186): the world appears to him as "a burst casket of jewels" (p. 187). Everything seems to irradiate the metaphorical light that had surrounded Beatrice's face years before. Moreover, he now appreciates that an ordered society depends heavily on the concern and compassion of man for individual man. The death of the "thing within" — clearly an aspect of Mountjoy's selfishness — has brought about the restoration of his artistic vision and a renewed and intensified concern for other people. One says "renewed" bearing in mind that Mountjoy has never been totally evil. Earlier, we have

seen him rush forward spontaneously to the aid of a man hit with a bottle at a Communist party meeting, and we have also seen him refuse Halde information that might have imperiled his fellow prisoners. Beneath the shell of adolescent self-centredness is a fund of humaneness in Mountjoy: it is this that accounts for the intensity of his suffering over what happened to Beatrice.

Mountjoy's description of his restored aesthetic "sight" recalls not only Dante but Blake. "If the doors of perception were cleansed," the latter wrote, "everything would appear to man as it is, infinite and holy."<sup>4</sup> The metaphorical door burst by the "thing within" is thus not only a door of death, but a door of aesthetic perception. Yet Mountjoy's world after the war is not an unalloyed Paradise. Knowing what has happened to Beatrice, he is tormented by guilt: it is this that drives him to write about his purported loss of freedom. Blake also wrote: "Mutual Forgiveness of each Vice,/Such are the Gates of Paradise."<sup>5</sup> But it is impossible for Mountjoy to obtain forgiveness from Beatrice, whom madness has rendered incapable of speech. Nor can he extend forgiveness. Self-righteously, Sammy sets out after visiting Beatrice to forgive Miss Pringle her domineering unpleasantness, and Nick the part he played in his construction of a private moral code. But his self-righteousness is overtaken by compassion when he finds that Miss Pringle is hopelessly self-deceived, believing herself to be partly responsible for Mountjoy's artistic success; and finds, too, that Nick is dying in hospital. Sammy is in the event too sympathetic to the lonely spinsterhood of the one and the sufferings of the other to make the speeches of forgiveness he had planned. To his misguided, but nonetheless humane and therefore sympathetic character, Golding restores paradisaical vision, enabling him to succeed as an artist and attain to a house in the fashionable district of Paradise Hill.

By palliating his character's suffering in this way, Golding diminishes the reader's sense that *Free Fall* is a purely

naturalistic account of Mountjoy's psychological development. "Paradise Hill" is an allegorical rather than an actual place name, and is only one of a number of allegorical names like it. "Old Nick" Shales has both a nickname and surname that are significant: it is he who unwittingly suggests to Sammy a satanic code of personal morality with a base as unstable as shale on a scree. The surname of sarcastic, hypocritical Miss Pringle probably derives from the first stanza of a poem by G. K. Chesterton:

Oh, how I love Humanity,  
 With a love so pure and pringlish,  
 And how I hate the horrid French,  
 who never will be English!<sup>6</sup>

*Free Fall* is the story of Samuel, a character who, like the Biblical prophet, is visited by spiritual revelation and is involved (as an artist) in confounding the philistines. But most important of all, it is the story of Mountjoy, the man who mounts his own joy above that of others, and suffers in consequence.

Mountjoy's narrative is a search for the moment of lost freedom, but the allegorical element in *Free Fall* clearly suggests that in Golding's view, Sammy has abused rather than relinquished free choice. Emerging from solitary confinement during the war, Mountjoy recognises that concern for fellow man is important to the maintenance of a civilised society. It is partly because he recognises his own lack of concern for Beatrice that he decides to excuse his behaviour to her by claiming that he freely chose to sacrifice his freedom. His experience in the darkened cell has, paradoxically, enlightened him; yet he remains partly self-deceived in thinking that he chose to lose his freedom.

Of merely incidental importance to his narrative is an aphorism he forges in reference to his love for his mother: "Love selflessly and you cannot come to harm" (p. 33). The remark is irrelevant to his search for lost freedom; but it is the crux of Golding's novel/parable. For Golding's purpose in *Free Fall* is to expound a moral lesson echoing one of Blake's *Songs of Experience* — "The Clod and the

Pebble." In the first stanza of that poem, "a little clod of clay" sings:

'Love seeketh not itself to please,  
Nor for itself hath any care,  
But for another gives its ease,  
And builds a heaven in hell's despair'.<sup>7</sup>

Two lines later Blake tells us that the clod must endure the hell of being "trodden with the cattle's feet"; its consolation is the bliss that attends on knowing that it loves selflessly. The pebble in contrast sings:

'Love seeketh only Self to please,  
To bind another to its delight,  
Joys in another's loss of ease,  
And builds a hell in heaven's despite'.<sup>8</sup>

The pebble's song is of Sammy's dilemma — his experience of the hell of guilt within the heaven of paradisaical vision and life on Paradise Hill. "Love selflessly and you cannot come to harm" is a lesson Sammy has yet to learn fully. But it is the moral of Golding's novel/parable — his exhortation to us all.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>All quotations from *Free Fall* are from the Faber & Faber edition (London, 1959). Page numbers will be cited in text.
- <sup>2</sup>Mark Kinkead-Weekes and Ian Gregor identify this passage in *William Golding: a Critical Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p. 191, without commenting on it.
- <sup>3</sup>*The Poetical Works of John Milton*, ed. Helen Darbishire (London: Oxford U.P., 1967), I, 56.
- <sup>4</sup>"The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," in *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford U.P., 1966), p. 154. All quotations from Blake are from this edition.
- <sup>5</sup>"For the Sexes: the Gates of Paradise," pp. 1-2 of the prologue, p. 761.
- <sup>6</sup>"The World State," in *The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton* (London: Methuen, 1958), ll. 1-4, p. 16.
- <sup>7</sup>"The Clod and the Pebble," ll. 1-4, p. 211.
- <sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, ll. 9-12.