

# *Tricks of the Light:* *William Golding's "Darkness Visible"*

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**O**N AWARDING THE NOBEL PRIZE for Literature to William Golding, the Swedish Academy praised his novels for "illuminating the human condition in the world today." But the vast amount of time, energy, and erudition expended in trying to interpret his work suggests that its meaning is in fact none too clear. To read a Golding novel is to be made aware that something important is being said, but what that is is shrouded in ambiguity. The "gimmick" endings of the earlier novels forced the reader to reread and reconsider what he had already read, and the later writings have adopted complex forms within which events play themselves out. In *The Spire* Jocelin's final realization that the explanations for the erection of the spire are as complex as the branching and forking form of the appletree is a realization of the impossibility of explanation. So how "illuminating" is a Golding novel? Does it impart a clear statement about man and his universe, or does it remain darkly ambiguous? If it does remain ambiguous, what is the function of this ambiguity?

In order to explore these points, Golding's 1979 novel *Darkness Visible* will be discussed. This is a contemporary novel about England in the 1970's and deals with characters and events we are likely to read about in the newspapers. There are no Neanderthal men, shipwrecked sailors, or medieval deans here to obscure our understanding of the action. Everything, therefore, should be as clear as possible. It is also a novel whose structure is important and obvious. *Darkness Visible* is divided into three separate parts, each part being occupied by the point of view of a different character. We are thus left in no doubt whatsoever about the perspective we are reading from. Because the con-

struction of Golding's later novels has been little studied, this presents a good opportunity to approach the question of the clarity and meaning of his vision by way of a focus on the structure — the mechanics — of one of his novels.

Except for Frank Tuohy, no reviewer of *Darkness Visible* noted the complexity of the novel's structure. Of course, this may have been because the three-part structure is so obvious it was felt that comment upon it was superfluous. Perhaps it was thought that the structure played no significant role in the novel other than allowing the narrative to occupy three different perspectives: Matty, Sophy, and Sim Goodchild. Even Mr. Tuohy was guarded in his belief that

further study is certain to illuminate the menacing system of correspondences and meanings which underpins the whole book, and to reveal the novel's metaphysical and eschatological implications.<sup>1</sup>

To date, this further study which will illuminate the "system of correspondences and meanings" underpinning the novel has never been carried out. Hopefully, some illumination will be provided here — even if it is only an illumination of the ambiguity of the novel.

An analysis of *Darkness Visible* from a structural point of view reveals an apparently simple shape containing events which are inexplicable and worrying. It is possible that any study of this novel will raise more questions than it answers, and it should also be borne in mind that the purpose of the structure might be to mystify rather than clarify. Arnold Johnston believes that

Golding's concern in *Darkness Visible* is to explore the circumstances and motivations that bring about the convergence of these diverse characters in an event that seems increasingly symbolic of contemporary experience.<sup>2</sup>

This convergence is, however, more obscure than Johnston suggests. The first two parts of the novel — "Matty" and "Sophy" — run parallel in a significant way which provides clues to the meanings inherent in the novel's structure.

Even more than *Free Fall*, *The Pyramid*, and *Rites of Passage*, *Darkness Visible* employs a chronology that is almost pedantic in

its exactitude. This clock-like precision is an integral part of the structure and is worth considering. The major events, their dates, and the characters' ages can be calculated thus:

<i>MATTY</i>		<i>AGE</i>
1940-44	Matty emerges from fire (pp. 9-20) <sup>8</sup>	approx 6-10
1948	Foundlings, Henderson's death, Pedigree's arrest (pp. 21-37)	approx 14-15
1949-50	Frankley's, Matty's question: "Who am I?", leaves England (pp. 38-50)	approx 16-17
1950-51 until 1965	Australia, Matty's questions: "What am I?" "What am I for?", crucifixion, baptism (pp. 51-77)	approx 18 until 32
May 1957	Twins Sophy and Toni born	
1965	Sophy walks with father (pp. 106-07)	
17 May 1965	Matty home from Australia, sees spirits, starts journal (p. 86)	approx 32
	Pedigree released from prison (pp. 75-85)	
17 May 1966	Spirits return to Matty (p. 87) From October 1966 at Wandicott school	approx 33
2 May 1967	Matty sees twins "within a week of their tenth birthday" (p. 101)	approx 34
 <i>SOPHY</i>		
2 May 1967	Twins "within a week of their tenth birthday" enter Good-child's bookshop	9
May 1967	Sophy discovers "Of course" and the Sophy-creature in her head (pp. 108-13) Tidal wave (p. 116)	10

1969-72	Sophy learns of entropy and ESP (p. 131)	12-15
1972 before October	Sexual initiation and brief prostitution (pp. 135-39)	15
1974	Runways Travel Agency, Roland, orgasm (pp. 141-50)	17
1978-17 June	Sophy with Gerry, plans kidnap from Wandicott school (pp. 151-90)	21

### ONE IS ONE

June 1978		Matty 45 Sophy 21
1-10 June	Matty meets with Pedigree, Bell, and Goodchild in park (pp. 212-13)	
12 June	Seance (pp. 228-34)	
13 June	Sophy loses engagement ring at Wandicott, Toni returns (pp. 182-90)	
16 June	Matty learns from the spirits what he is for (pp. 238-39)	
17 June	Kidnap attempt, Matty's death, date arranged for second seance (pp. 247-48) Sophy's imaginative killing of child (pp. 251-52)	
Autumn 1978	Inquiry into kidnap (pp. 255-61) Pedigree's death, Matty's atonement and spiritual face healed (pp. 261-65)	

This chronological scheme covers the entire novel. But already a close reading reveals several ambiguities. On 2 May 1967 there is a discrepancy which seems to be a mistake on the part of the author since it plays no relevant part in the novel. When Matty sees the twins "within a week of their tenth birthday" (p. 105) it means their birthday must fall between 3-9 May because they are going into the shop to look for books for their forthcoming

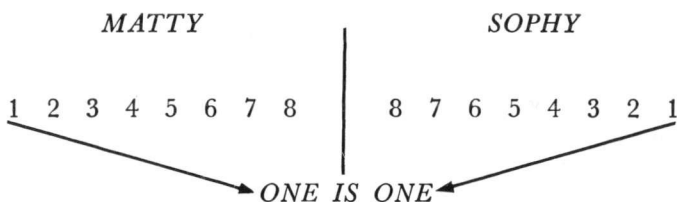
birthday. But on page 127 the narrator gives a precise date — 7 June 1968 — as “approximately a fortnight after” their eleventh birthday. This means the birthday must fall between 20-25 May. It is unlike Golding to make chronological slips — especially in a book as closely worked out as *Darkness Visible* — but there seems to be no other explanation.

Another ambiguity is probably a technical necessity. Sophy is seventeen when she meets Roland and moves into his mother’s house. The day she stabs him and experiences orgasm is two days before she moves in with Gerry. This is apparently in 1978, but Sophy is seventeen in 1974. Thus the paragraph on page 142 beginning “Sophy understood why she had got the room . . .” covers four years. If not, she moves in with Gerry when she is seventeen (p. 151) and spends four years with him before meeting Fido and conceiving the kidnap plan (p. 158). There is absolutely no evidence for the latter since the period between page 151 and 158 is dealt with in terms of days. It could be the author felt that for Sophy to concoct and carry out the kidnap plan when she is only seventeen would be to stretch the reader’s suspension of disbelief to breaking point. Fido does not seem to be the type of man who would become engaged to a teen-age girl and display the fact at Wandicott — an establishment whose conservatism he is perceptively aware of (p. 177). For Sophy to be twenty-one adds to the verisimilitude of the chronology and thus Golding had to “lose” four years. Also, while she is at Runways Travel Matty is in Australia. The events we see him experiencing certainly do not take up fifteen years, yet in the chronology of the novel they cover approximately this expanse. Golding may have had to extend Matty’s stay in Australia because he had to add several years in “Sophy” and still hold the time-structure of the book together.

A further worrying ambiguity arises over the dating of the seances — worrying because the seances tie in with Matty’s death and the climax of the novel. The first seance according to Matty’s journal (p. 235) takes place on 12 June 1978. On page 241 we are told that the next seance is planned for “a week after this first meeting,” that is, on Matty’s weekly half-holiday. The date of this projected seance is therefore 19 June. But Matty

breaks off his journal to attend this second seance on 17 June, only five days later and the day of his death. Golding appears to have made a slip in his chronological scheme—an important slip because *Matty's* death and the kidnap is the point at which “*Matty*” and “*Sophy*” come into convergence. In other words, it is the point of the whole structure of the novel. Possibly Golding is trying to create puzzlement amongst his readers by these ambiguities which are emphasized by the meticulous chronology of the entire work. But it is unlikely that the casual reader would take note of them; but then, perhaps Golding is not writing for “the casual reader.”

Events converge in the last section of the novel, but the structuring of the first two parts and their interrelationship is important. “*Matty*” ends where “*Sophy*” begins and the relationship between these two parts is that of a mirror-image. This can be represented as:



A key to the numbers reveals the shape of these two parts:

- 1 Fire of Blitz: fire at Wandicott school
- 2 Death of Henderson: *Sophy's* imaginative killing of child
- 3 *Matty's* uncertainty about self — “Who am I?”: *Sophy's* certainty in decision to kidnap child
- 4 *Matty* rejects “daughters of men”: *Sophy* finds sexual partner in Gerry
- 5 *Matty* goes to Australia: *Sophy* works at Runways Travel
- 6 *Matty's* baptism: *Sophy* and Toni struck by tidal wave
- 7 Spirits tell *Matty* what he must do: *Sophy* discovers inescapable law of “Of course”
- 8 *Matty* sees twins going into shop: twins go into shop

“Matty” moves forward from 1 to 8, “Sophy” moves from 8 to 1. This relationship warrants attention.

“Matty” is a fulfilment of the prophecy of John the Baptist:

I indeed baptise you with water unto repentance: but He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: He shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.  
(Matt. 3.11)

Fire and water play an important role in the novel. Matty is “born” from the fires of the Blitz and willingly dies in fire. He undergoes a third immolation in which his spiritual face is healed:

the man . . . was consumed, melted, vanished like a guy in a bonfire; the face was no longer two-tone but gold as the fire.  
(p. 265)

Water is a symbol of Matty’s repentance for his “sin” against Pedigree as he performs his own mystical baptism in a lake or creek in Australia (p. 75). Matty regards the elements of fire and water in a spiritual and creative light.

For Sophy they are destructive and in keeping with the entropic universe portrayed in the second section of the novel. Fire is an element with which to perpetrate “outrage.” Water is destructive: Sophy kills a dabchick on a stream and learns through this act the law of “Of course” (p. 108) in which her will can mesh in with the universe so that it assists her in achieving her ends. The tidal wave (p. 116) reveals to her the presence of an invisible force acting through a material medium, and it is in the barge on the canal that she imagines killing the kidnapped boy — “the last outrage” (p. 251). Whereas Matty submits himself to the spiritual and creative, Sophy submits herself to entropy and the void.

In a perceptive review Craig Raine pointed out that

*Free Fall* ended with Sammy Mountjoy’s realisation that there were two worlds — the scientific, rational world of his physics master, and the other world of the spirit of good and evil. . . . *Free Fall* concluded that “both worlds are real. There is no bridge.” *Darkness Visible* is an attempt to sketch that bridge.<sup>4</sup>

But it is precisely the existence of this bridge that gives rise to the interpretative problems of the novel. The difficulties lie in the reflection of the spiritual within the material, of the divergence between the material "Sophy" and the spiritual "Matty" and their convergence in the mirror-image structure of the novel. There is throughout a tension between the simplicity of this structure, with its overwhelming clarity and precise chronology, and the inexplicable events which, taken together, constitute the structure of *Darkness Visible*.

The bridge between the spiritual and the material is, however, very ambiguous. If we could be certain about Matty's relationship to the spiritual dimension the novel would pose considerably fewer problems. Matty submits himself totally to the will of God. The title of the novel's initial letters are DV, an abbreviation from the Latin "*Deo volente*" or "God willing." But Matty has a penchant for misunderstanding and misinterpreting. He overhears the verger, startled by a choirboy, demand "'Who are you?'" (p. 49) and comically interprets this as a spiritual voice demanding to know who he is. He regards Harry Bummer's attack as a crucifixion (pp. 64-65) although the narrator calls it a "crucifarge" (p. 68), which reveals Matty's tendency to see everything in a spiritual light. These mistakes would be merely a comically misplaced religiosity if the other parts of the book's structure did not converge so deliberately with "Matty" and if Matty's spiritualism did not have so decisive an effect on the novel's main action.

We know that Matty has read Revelation (p. 87) and believes the spirits direct him to guard a new saviour, a child with the IQ of Jesus of Nazareth (p. 101) who shall "bring the spiritual language into the world and nation shall speak it unto nation" (p. 239). Because "Matty" and "Sophy" converge in such a very exact way it seems that the spiritual enters and in part dictates events in the material world. But we can never be happy with this interpretation because the spirits are not without their banalities. They appear in the trite red and blue of cherubim and seraphim, and are improbably dressed in clothes that are more or less expensive according to heavenly rank. They do not simply order Matty to go to Greenfield, there is the whole un-



believable paraphernalia of buying and learning to ride a second-hand bicycle and Matty's rueful "It is easier to drive a car than to learn to ride a bike . . . but today my knees and elbows seem better and the bruising has gone down" (p. 95). The spirits inform him that his momentous vigil of the apocalyptic 6/6/66 "did much good . . . as far afield as Cambourne and Launceston" (p. 101). The God they serve is not above triviality: "There was a slight accident at the bottom of Fish Hill. A boy . . . fell off his bike and sustained a fracture of the left leg. His will be done" (pp. 89-90). The meticulous dating of the journal adds an air of verisimilitude to this chronicle of unlikelihoods.

The problem the spirits present to the reader is akin to that presented by the ghosts of Quint and Miss Jessel in *The Turn of the Screw*. If the ghosts do not exist, how can the governess describe Quint and Jessel so well? If the spirits in *Darkness Visible* do not exist how does everything they prophesy to Matty occur with such unerring accuracy? But because they only appear in Matty's journal we have no other evidence than his account that they exist — and he is prone to misinterpretation. To add to the complexity, in saving the child Matty is in fact pursuing another end altogether — personal salvation for his "sin" against Pedigree. But even the actuality of this "sin" which Matty is convinced he has committed is doubtful. Because of the death of Henderson, Pedigree is arrested and blames Matty. But what is Matty's role in Henderson's death? The narrator purports to give us "the real story of that night; how Henderson had begged to be let in and been denied and gone reeling to the leads to slip and fall" (p. 37). We are not told how Matty's gymshoe found its way underneath the body. The Old Testament Psalm — "Over Edom have I cast out my shoe" — is never actually mentioned by Matty under interrogation. The headmaster discovers it later, and the fact that it is misquoted in the novel — the actual words are "*will* cast out my shoe" — creates further confusion in this significant but obscure incident. The word "*will*" implies an indefinite future event; the word "*have*" (p. 37) implies an event that has taken place and therefore requires a performer. This would perhaps place the blame for the death

more squarely on Matty's shoulders. Or it might be a case of the headmaster misinterpreting and taking us with him. But Matty writes in his journal that he followed and waited for Henderson on the night of his death (p. 98), and if he did push Henderson off the roof it would justify his feeling of having committed a sin. We can never be sure because the novel gives us at least two explanations of the event.

Since the convergence of "Matty" and "Sophy" occurs in the final section of the structure of *Darkness Visible* — "One is One" — it is in this section that we might expect things to become clearer. But Sim Goodchild's sceptical comment about whether the football passed through or between Matty's legs is an apt summary of the mechanics of the novel's structure:

"I'm not going to have a trick of the light or a minimal coincidence stuffed down my throat as a violation of the natural order, or a miracle if you prefer." (p. 209)

Perhaps Golding is playing a "trick of the light" on us in this novel. If the spirits do not exist except in Matty's apocalyptic imagination, the convergence of "Matty" and "Sophy" is a minimal coincidence — of Matty's being in the right place at the right time. If they do exist and instruct Matty, *Darkness Visible* depicts a "violation of the natural order." At the end of the novel an inquiry takes place into the events surrounding the kidnap attempt. Matty's journal is unearthed and it is felt that "it may throw some light" (p. 261) onto the shadows obscuring events. This is ironically untrue and the reader, who is in an interpretative position similar to the inquirers', will smile ruefully at the belief. Having read the journal we know that it will have the same effect on the fact-seeking inquirers as it does on us — puzzlement.

But in this final section Golding has provided us with two interpreters — Goodchild and Bell. Interpretations of the novel come thick and fast in this section. "One is One" is an attempt to fuse the divergent actions brought into convergence in the novel's structure into the framework of a single encompassing interpretation. Goodchild

tried to imagine some deep, significant spiritual drama, some contrivance, some plot that would include them both and be designed solely for the purpose of rescuing Pedigree from his hell. (p. 247)

They may indeed be playing a part in saving Pedigree, who is at the end released from his fear that he will kill a child. But Sim is too disillusioned to believe in a cosmic plan outside his self and "had to admit that the whole affair was about Sim the ageing bookseller or no one" (p. 247). Matty interprets events as leading to one goal: "Freedom" (p. 265), atonement for his "sin." Pedigree wonders of Matty "is he all connected with everything else or does he kind of drift through?" (p. 264). The novel leaves this question open. The spirits explain events to Matty as leading up to the birth of a new saviour. For Sophy her actions are solely aimed at committing outrage and stealing money. She regards outrage as contributing to the inevitable and natural process of the running down of the universe. The tension between clarity and obscurity, precise events with mysterious meanings, forms the heart of *Darkness Visible*. It is a tension the reader encounters as he moves through the structure of the novel. The mirror-image relationship between "Matty" and "Sophy" suggests that they must be seen in terms of each other. But this relationship remains ambiguous. The final section offers so many possible interpretations that a single satisfactory interpretation becomes impossible.

With brilliant irony Golding has Bell say at the end, "I think . . . I shall write a book about the whole affair . . . and I shall find the truth" (p. 258). Bell's book would be *Darkness Visible*, a book raising more questions than it answers. This seems to be a subtle warning from the author, who refuses to say anything whatsoever about the book, against imposing reductive meanings on events that are complex, worrying, and inexplicable.

In this *Darkness Visible* bears a close resemblance to Browning's *The Ring and the Book*. Because of the multiple conflicting interpretations which make up the poem, it is impossible to decide whether Guido was justified in killing Pompilia. In the opening book Browning tells us that

... there's nothing in nor out o' the world  
 Good except truth: yet this, the something else,  
 What's this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?<sup>5</sup>

"The something else," that which is more than truth and therefore "seems untrue," is something beyond the factual interpretation which the court in the poem and the inquiry in the novel seek. How can this "something else" be accounted for? The *Yellow Book* which is the source for the poem is a mass of conflicting evidence. Browning attempts to locate this "something else" in it by turning it into art:

Art, — wherein man nowise speaks to men,  
 Only to mankind, — Art may tell a truth  
 Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought,  
 Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.<sup>6</sup>

Golding tries to make us experience mystery in the universe by making us experience mystery in his work of art. The way of making the reader aware of a dimension beyond the material world in which we live is to turn the whole problematic of the spiritual/material — divergence/convergence into art. Golding makes the mysterious obvious by foregrounding it against the meticulous clarity of the structure of the novel. Juxtaposed to this clarity is an area of experience which is inexplicable, beyond reductive interpretations. This makes it impossible for us to deny with certainty the existence of a spiritual dimension intersecting ours. But given *Matty's* talent for misinterpretation it is just as hard to confirm it with total conviction. The puzzling converging structure of the novel creates the possibility of a supernatural influence in our lives. Whereas we might have felt certain about our perception of reality, Golding forces us to shift the perspective from which we view the universe by opening up this seam of doubt. "Sophy" is our normal perspective, the recognizable world of the late nineteen-seventies. But now we also have to view it from the perspective of "Matty." The convergence of these two sections in the third thus becomes a representation of our restructured vision. *Darkness Visible* is a map or blueprint of our perception of the universe in terms of both the spiritual and the material in intersection with each other.

This does not alter the shape of the universe, it alters the shape of our perception. The mirror-image converging structure of the novel reshapes our perception by seeing "Matty" reflected in "Sophy," the spiritual in the material. But the spiritual remains mysterious. *Darkness Visible* offers the reader his own personal eschatology, a way of seeing that accounts for the inexplicable by accepting an inexplicable dimension intersecting our scientifically reducible dimension. Even Matty, confronted by the spiritual, has to admit "I cannot say what I mean" (p. 235). For Goodchild, who is sceptical, events remain a mystery: "No one will ever know what happened. There's too much of it, . . . a sprawling series of events that break apart under their own weight" (p. 258). For him "One is one and all alone and ever more shall be so" (p. 225). Partitions remain, the material and the spiritual are separate. For the reader who has been forced to see in the novel the fusion of the spiritual and the material, one and one equals one: a unified vision explaining mystery by accepting its existence.

In the end, it all hangs on man's perception of the shape of the universe and thus ultimately on man himself and his relationship to the universe:

Man, like a glass ball with a spark a-top,  
 Out of the magic fire that lurks inside,  
 Shows one tint at a time to take the eye:  
 Which, let a finger touch the silent sleep,  
 Shifted a hair's-breadth shoots you dark for bright,  
 Suffuses bright with dark, and baffles so  
 Your sentence absolute for shine or shade.<sup>7</sup>

This recalls the glass ball into which Matty stares and is transfixed for the first time by the presence of a dimension beyond the material world: "He was aware . . . of a sense of rightness and truth. . . . He was shown the seamy side where the connections are. The whole cloth of what had seemed separate now appeared as the warp and woof from which events and people get their being" (p. 48). It is this connection between the warp and woof of the material and spiritual universe of which the structure of *Darkness Visible* tries to make us aware.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Frank Tuohy, "Baptism by Fire," rev. of *Darkness Visible*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 October 1979, p. 41.
- <sup>2</sup> Arnold Johnston, *Of Earth and Darkness: The Novels of William Golding* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980), p. 100.
- <sup>3</sup> All page references to *Darkness Visible* are from the 1980 Faber paperback edition and are given parenthetically in the text.
- <sup>4</sup> Craig Raine, "Between the Stars," rev. of *Darkness Visible*, *New Statesman*, 12 October 1979, p. 552.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Richard D. Altick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), I, 698-700.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Ring and the Book* XII. 854-57.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Ring and the Book* I. 1367-73.