

## The Sea is Roaring in My Blood: The Poetry of William Golding

by Jacqueline Vigilanti

As William Golding said in an interview about his work as an author: 'The novelist is a displaced person, torn between two ways of expression [...] you might say I write prose because I can't write poetry.'<sup>1</sup> The collection of 29 poems published by Macmillan and Co. in 1934 by W. G. Golding when he was twenty-three may not have been the author's most interesting or even personal favourite work, but the poems reveal the writer Golding was to become. Golding is not trying to make any profound statement; he is merely articulating his ideas and feelings about life through the medium of prosody, and his imagination is reflected in the choice of subject. This essay is not going to pick apart the poems in order to determine if they are 'good'; its aim is simply to appreciate a mind that is in the process of development. No writer is born with a mature ability, and Golding is no exception. One of the values of juvenilia lies in its revelations.

The imagery of the poems is typically Golding: the sea, passing of time, wisdom, faith, doubt, and the loss of childhood. Golding's imagination and creativity stand out in each one of the poems. Despite being disliked by Golding himself later in life, they are interesting as the early work of a budding originality. Most of the poems are lyrical and written in rhyming couplets or quatrains. They remain quite short, and include three distinct sonnets. All contain classical, mythical and Christian imagery. There is an

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<sup>1</sup> Dick, Bernard F. *'The Novelist is a Displaced Person': An Interview with William Golding*. College English. 26:2, Mar. 1965. 480.



Didactic by the flapping fire,  
Puts back the ticking clock of heaven  
And keeps the world at half-past seven.

Already we see Golding's imagination coming out in the subject: human passions and struggles viewed with a satiric eye. Golding is not making any direct statement about the motives or ethics of the action, but remains apparently ambivalent about the encounter. The reaction of the squire towards the *demos* or 'people' allows him to retain the attention of his reader within the drama.

In another poem, *Mr. Pope*, the irony disguises a serious theme:

Mr. Pope walked in the park-  
Trim rows of flowers  
Embroider'd the well-ordered dark  
Where marched the marshalled hours.

The trees stood silent, two by two  
Pagodas lifted up their heads  
From neatly weeded laurel-groves  
And well-spaced flower-beds.

Then down a quiet gravel path-  
For Mr. Pope eschewed the sod-  
The gentleman pursued his way  
To raise his hat to Mr. God.

"Dear sir," he said, "I must confess  
This is a chastely ordered land,  
But one thing mars its loveliness,  
The stars are rather out of hand"-

"If they would dance a minuet  
Instead of roaming wild and free  
Or stand in rows all trim and neat  
How exquisite the sky would be!"

Here Golding is reflecting on eighteenth-century rationalism. But he is using irony to present questions about religious and anti-religious ideologies. He does this by titling both the rationalist poet Alexander Pope and God 'Mr.', thus equalising their authority. 'Mr. Pope' clearly sees the world as perfectly ordered (black or white, right or wrong). There is no room for mystery or uniqueness; he can not even bring himself to turn off the pathway. Golding's ironic term 'dissolved' holds the 'disordered' stars up against this world-view to show that God has not made a world to fit eighteenth-century ideas of perfection, order or understanding. Golding already has the intellectual eye that we see in later works; his understanding of deeper truths is portrayed through the tone and imagery of this poem to make a statement about rationalism without forcing his opinion on the reader. In this way, the poem separates itself from the author and enters into conversation with other works of English literature.

A common image in Golding's works is the sea (which he often associated with his childhood visits to Cornwall). The poems he writes about the sea contain elements of this loss of childhood, and the pull it still exerts on him years later. His sea poems are probably the most personal of the collection as they deal with loss of innocence, the inevitability of death, and the indistinct ideas of mystery and power.

In *Mazed with Breakers* there is an overt sorrow for the past, that is, the speaker laments his (or her) separation from the once loved sea. Despite this separation, the pull of the sea on the speaker steadfastly remains:

Could I go out by the open door  
And walk to the setting sun

By dark night or star-light  
Till seven days were done,

Could I track down this evening  
To heather and the sea  
And hear dark waters moaning-  
Ah Christ! If that could be!

Surely heather were soft and sweet,  
Surely peace would creep  
Out of the looming sea with dusk,  
And the waves would let me sleep.

The sea is roaring in my blood,  
Crooning a wild tune.  
I can no more say "nay" to her  
Than the tide to the master-moon.

'Could I track down this evening...if that could be!' conveys the writer's nostalgia. There is a sense of urgency at the loss of a beloved object. But the sea is more than an object. It possesses a life of its own. The power that the sea holds over the speaker is formidable. Not only does it have power to draw the speaker's heart to it, but the sea has actually become a part of the speaker. He says: 'The sea is roaring in my blood'; the sea is 'crooning a wild tune'; the 'dark waters are moaning.' Golding compares the loss he feels to this wild, moaning sea. The emotional flow is echoed as the speaker is pulled towards the water as 'the tide to the master-moon.'

In *Song of the Flowers at the Land's End*, Golding speaks of childhood as a form of wisdom. It is equated with the ancient existence of the sea, and the mystery of life that holds all children captivated:

Darkness sits beneath the sea,  
The sun is worn, the earth is cold,  
And we are wild with mystery,

So young we be, and oh! So old.

An echo haunts the busy hours  
Of all but recollected song  
Sung soft among the ancient flowers  
So long ago, so long, so long.

How often have we in our pain  
Swayed to the "Why?" but moments give  
Faint answer that it must remain  
Most sweet and terrible to live.

Darkness hovers on the sea,  
The sun is set, the earth lies cold,  
And we are wild with mystery,  
So young we be, and ho! So old.

We are given the impression that children are connected to the land or sea in ways that adults are not. This knowledge that children possess is displayed by Golding in the prevalent darkness and cold. The child senses the age of the sea intangibly, and this knowledge makes him or her, in a sense, old as well. Golding uses mystery in talking about the sea because it is mysterious and unknowable, and also beautiful and dangerous. It is a boundary to the land, but yet can be traversed. He connects childhood with this because of the fragility of children and their fascination with nature. Children are always asking 'Why?' when they see something they do not understand. But they are not plagued by 'busy hours'; they have not yet grown away from the 'pain' of life 'most sweet and terrible to live.'

Both these poems imply that life is ever moving, that its wisdom comes not from experience, but from a relationship with nature, and most particularly, the sea. Golding sees something in the sea that is valuable and tied to humanity. These poems portray his already deep-seated fascination with the sea that suffuses his other works.

Classical imagery was used by Golding very early on. It is placed alongside the idea of beauty in order to capture its unfading quality. In *The Winged Horse* and *The Phoenix*, he creates a sense of mystery about beauty and how it is connected to freedom. In *The Winged Horse*, it is Pegasus who becomes the subject set against the speaker's longing to partake in nature's beauty and joy:

Oh Pegasus, see him, Pegasus up in the night-  
Beautiful sight in the solitude as he wheels  
Flashing bright as a jewel in the upper light  
Coltish for joy of the wide sky, kicking his heels!

But here, down here, my solitudes are dim-  
Oh might I rise on his sunny wings for flight  
In fields of crimson above the sea's rich rim,  
Where day still wrestles with the angel of night!

Oh might I as Pegasus dive and wheel,  
Freely shake hands with the laughing stars, and run  
As free of the lively air as a bird may feel  
In ways of thunder, about the blazing sun!

Golding is equating freedom with childhood: that 'coltish joy,' and the youthful 'day wrestling with the angel of night.' Time passes for Pegasus, but he is unaffected by it, unlike the speaker who must grow up and lose his youth and freedom.

In *The Phoenix*, classical imagery is compared similarly to beauty, that is, the delight and wonder of childhood. The phoenix represents new life, rebirth and splendour compared with mundane humanity that has grown old and lost its wonder:

The phoenix rose again and flew  
With crest and plume and pinion  
In splendour from grey ashes flashing  
Like a jewel turned beneath the sun.

In cities and in palaces,  
Or toiling through the hot dumb sand  
Bare-footed in the barren hills,  
Men saw- and would not understand.

But some there were among the fields  
That let the swerving plough jolt on  
And stood and gazed against the light  
Through wide eyes filled with tears as bright,  
Until the burning bird was gone.

Oh Phoenix! Did they hear as I  
The agony, the lonely cry  
Of mateless, mateless, mateless Beauty,  
Echoing in the desert sky?

Here, instead of the speaker being alone in his or her realization of grief at the loss of beauty, the phoenix is witnessed by many. Some 'would not understand,' while others 'stood and gazed against the light.' These latter observers are akin to the speaker in that they too recognize how distant they have become from the world of power and beauty. They have been distracted by the 'cities, palaces and toiling' that dominate their lives.

In an essay, by John Bayley relates one of Golding's thoughts about what good poetry should be:

He [said] that the art he valued most had something repellent in its first impact, because it could seem 'thought out', and taken from some assumption, or conviction, or personal prejudice on the author's part: and then, as the reader took it in, it *dissolved* into something so moving and immediate that all

suggestion of ideas - either the author's own ideas or his received ideas - was swept away.<sup>2</sup>

Golding may have thought his poems too 'tame' or 'safe,' and so may not have had the desired impact on his readers. He hoped his work would create a profound effect; instead, he may have felt that his poetry did not carry the weight of a mature writer.

In all his poems, Golding is refining his craft as a writer. Using techniques such as alliteration, variable meter and variation in rhyming patterns, his poems are a good application of prosody. His changes+ of tone and juxtaposition of imageries show him developing his literary skills. These are in fact early works, and clearly not examples of mature Golding, yet his subjects are like those of the mature author. His love of the sea, childhood, nature, and the classical tradition are all used effectively in his novels. Golding may have have doubted the value of this collection of poems after he had begun writing prose, but it shows that he was already in touch with the fundamentals of the writer's craft. His creativity bounds through every poem, and each one reveals how Golding makes use of his passionate nature and creativity through technique, content and his own sensibilities.

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<sup>2</sup> Bayley, John. "Walter de la Mare and William Golding." The Walter de la Mare Society Website. <http://www.bluetree.co.uk/wdlmsociety/research/johnbayley.htm>.