

# WILLIAM GOLDING AND JEHOVAH

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In so far as the function of reviewing is to draw the attention of the reader to good work, the reviewers have treated Mr. Golding well. However, it must be a matter for concern that they have not understood him.<sup>1)</sup> When Mr. Wyndham in *The London Magazine* writes of *Pincher Martin* as “the classic predicament of man pitched against the elements” I imagine that the bulk of reviewers will agree with him: had someone chosen to write “the classic predicament of the soul pitched against God even in death” this would probably have been greeted as foolishly provocative, perverse, or as axe-grinding by a Catholic on a propaganda foray. That the second statement is the one which takes the whole novel into account and is thus the correct interpretation, indicates that this novel, (and the others) really demands an interpretative study on the simple ground that it (and they) has been continually misunderstood. A more valid critical aim, besides that of merely tidying up, is that a study of the theme of these novels will reveal the cause of a certain dissatisfaction that they arouse. Here, as in all criticism, one starts from an immediate response to a particular work, and I find that, despite my absorption into the atmosphere of the novels as soon as I have felt it, despite the continual shocks of recognition, the accuracy of the language, the novelty and deep seriousness of the subject matter, despite all Mr. Golding’s considerable virtues as a novelist, the novels are often hard going, and I finish them

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1) Certainly I haven’t read all the reviews so I may be doing someone an injustice: but the remark holds good for the generality of such.

with an embarrassed feeling of discontent. Then, to discover that, what I must consider the most perfect of his novels, *Pincher Martin*, provides the most difficult reading, confirms that enquiry is necessary. When the appetite is jaded before God's plenty one has to consider what exactly one is being asked to eat.

William Golding is a christian novelist: one has to start with that otherwise the novels will not make sense. (This isn't only a fact I have dredged up from the books themselves: Mr. Golding has said as much). One theme must present itself to a christian novelist as the primary one: the free human choice of good or evil, the choice for or against the divine purpose. This is Mr. Golding's theme: indeed the title of his most recent novel (*Free Fall*) suggests that this time he was determined to be understood (he wasn't) since there is the theme put as bluntly and openly as it can be: free *fall*, since, being a tragic novelist, his characters choose evil, and anyway human existence as we know it is the result of the wrong choice. (I had better make it clear now that this is the Christian view, not my own).

As a christian his method would also tend to suggest itself. The importance of this world resides not in itself but in what it points to: it is the place for transcendence. And Christianity relies upon dualisms (Earth: Heaven; Body: Soul) and the subjugation of one to the main function of indicating the other: thus the earth speaks of God or is silent about him, which is its glory (as in Blake) or its poignant, nightmare quality (as in Kafka): the body reflects the soul, what happens to it matters in so far as it points to the soul's journey, and also is a negation of it. The method that suggests itself is an allegorical one; events are used for their simple correspondence with other events, objects for their single correspondence with other objects. This is the method of *Pilgrim's Progress* but I would hardly suggest that Mr. Golding's method is as simple as that: yet the difference lies in that Mr. Golding is realistic and sophis-

ticated in method, thus withholding his significations in a way that Bunyan does not, and not that he is using a symbolist method. Symbolism suggests a cluster of significations: the event or object that suggests can stand by itself in meaning, with the significations added to that meaning which becomes thus infinite. Allegory works with the correspondence: the event or object points to another definable and definite event or object, and the two act upon each other. But there is not the infinite realm of significations that one finds in symbolism, and the allegorical event or object cannot stand by itself as can the symbolist. Of course the two methods, when actually used, are never as pure as this: but the distinction is a real one all the same. An interpretation of these novels demands a grasp of the particular significations his events have: this does not mean a replacement of one by the other; the method is one of interaction, and if I seem to be concerned with simple replacement it is because the situation with regard to his work demands that at the moment.

Mr. Golding chooses exceptional situations: schoolboys on a desert island, neanderthal men, a castaway on Rockall. The central situation of *Free Fall* is similarly exceptional, a man locked in a dark cupboard by the gestapo, yet, as I hope to demonstrate later, this work falls to pieces as a work of art on account of various polemical pressures, present in all his work, but excessively so in this. The meaning of the exceptional situation is clear: the normal civilized world ticks over so sweetly in so far as it stays normal, or at least so deadeningly, that the great truth is ignored, and there is hardly a sense of the need for a great truth there. Mr. Golding is interested in the moment of awareness, the time of solitude, privation, when "real" human nature asserts itself, when the human condition becomes plain, and when the necessity of a truth becomes so painful that it cannot be ignored. This, of course, is not all that special: the novel relies upon meaningful action, and the crisis moment is the obvious time to choose. But there is more to these exceptional locales:

they provide a little world, and a new world where meanings are questioned: it is thus easier for the allegorical significations to assert themselves.

The world is involved in atomic war: some schoolboys are castaway on a desert island. We are told that civilisation is in ruins, and, despite the *deus ex machina* of a ship's officer at the end, as far as the story is concerned it is. The schoolboys are exiles; the opening pages make great play of the casting off of clothes, of the removal of civilisation's meanings. (It is to be noted here that Mr. Golding uses simple, traditional symbols, ones with obvious meanings: in the same way he makes a great deal of use of light-dark contrasts; and this is one reason for placing the action within natural surroundings, so that each object has an allegorical correspondence which is a part of the traditional vocabulary: the forest, the sea, the mountain, the rock, the waterfall; night, day, storm, lightning, fire.) The boys try to discover their immediate aim on the island: it is to keep alight the signal fire that means contact with the other world, although various suggestions of having a good time, of hunting, of, in fact, accepting existence on the island as a be-all and end-all, are made, and eventually succumbed to. With the boys reduced to natural man, the novelist looks for the moment of the Fall. In part it is the evil in human nature, "the darkness of man's heart" as he emphasises on the last page, and which is a constant image in all his novels, the desire to kill, the will to power. It is also the fear of 'the Beast', a snake-like creature, who is another part of the heart's darkness. But this evil also exists outside: there is war in heaven and a visitor, a dead airman, parachutes on to the island, and by accident settles on top of the mountain, sitting there like a god and given a semblance of life by the wind. This is the Beast: he is Death, a concrete symbol of the darkness, the Lord of the Flies. "Lord of the Fly" is one of Satan's titles: snakes, a visitor to the island who brings death and the fall from innocence . . . perhaps one can ignore this, and see the novel as a gripping yarn with a rather fanciful twist in the plot.

I don't doubt that Mr. Golding sees the Fall as a mythic rather than a historical event, and that, for him, the Fall is being continually enacted in each human life (*Free Fall* suggests this); and he is concerned with individual responsibility, since Christian service is perfect freedom. Thus the Beast, and Satan, acquire their meaning from the heart's darkness: it is his schoolboy savages, his representatives of superstition, who give the Beast its meaning, so that they may see evil as an external imposition that is to be propitiated, in order to evade their own responsibility, since the evil is their making. The fact that the Beast is in some part external represents a dogmatic paradox that exists in Christian teaching about the Fall. However, Simon, a representative of poetic or mystic illumination (he is significantly subject to epileptic fits—the mark of the divine idiot—and has conversations with the devil) discovers that the authority of the Beast is an illusion, and as a bearer of the good news suffers a ritual death as a sacrifice to the Beast. After his death he is magically transfigured by moonlight (in a passage of great beauty) and borne out to sea. The 'good' schoolboys feel guilt at his death, which they uneasily try to evade by assuring each other of their lack of responsibility to the point of telling each other that they weren't even present when it took place. Isn't it obvious what one is meant to make of that? as also of the character of Piggy, representing Science or Reason, whose spectacles bring fire, which can save or destroy, who is himself destroyed and with him the conch that represents order, and whose power is appropriated by the forces of evil? Or of Ralph, the normal man, trying to retain civilised values, but gradually doubting their meaning, and becoming aware of the hopelessness of his condition?

If so bare a summary of a few aspects of the work does not convince that this novel is an allegory of the Fall, yet what is one to make of such quotations as the following? Ralph considers the filthiness of himself and his clothes: "He reflected with a little fall of the heart that these were

the conditions he took as normal now and that he did not mind." Or this: "On the other side of the island, swathed at midday with mirage, defended by the shield of the quiet lagoon, one might dream of rescue: but here, faced by the brute obtuseness of the ocean, the miles of division, one was clamped down, one was helpless, one was condemned, one was—." If one wants to consider this novel as just about moral degradation possible to the human spirit, without continual religious significance, then these passages, and many similar, become nothing but fine writing, an invalid tarring up of the story; and the conversation between Simon and the Lord of the Flies becomes fancifully stupid; and the title of the novel a mere piece of commercial eye catching. Yet none of this is so.

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I remember hearing some years back a radio discussion of *Pincher Martin*, where all concerned expressed bemusement at the ending of the novel. The dead body of Martin had been washed up, and it is said in the final sentence of the novel: "He didn't even have time to kick off his seaboots." This patently contradicts the opening of the novel in which Martin is described as kicking off his seaboots (it is his first action as he starts to control his new situation of being castaway in the ocean), and later as regretting this. The various critics were prepared to register bewilderment and leave it at that: obviously there was some kind of twist at the end of the story, that's all. I can almost admire the critical *sang-froid* shown here: for myself a final sentence which challenges one's whole reading of a novel calls for some kind of thought. That is fairly obviously the idea behind the sentence, so it is only right to respond as the author would wish.

The conversation preceding this sentence gives us the answer. Martin's decaying body has been kept in a decaying lean-to. Mr. Campbell, referring to this says:

"Broken, defiled. Returning to the earth, the rafters rotted, the roof

fallen in—a wreck. Would you believe that anything ever lived there?”

He is using the lean-to as an image of something else: what that is is immediately made clear.

“You know nothing of my—shall I say—official beliefs, Mr. Davidson: but living for all these days next to that poor derelict—Mr. Davidson. Would you say there was any—surviving? Or is that all? Like the lean-to?”

Mr. Davidson, like the reviewers, doesn't catch on: but surely it is clear what is being discussed? What survives after death, after the wreck of the body? What happens to the soul? Martin died before he got his sea boots off: so Mr. Golding's novel has been telling us. I am sorry to press this obvious point so hard, because it is so obvious. Yet no one else seems to have mentioned it, presumably because reading habits among reviewers are so bad that the words are not read closely and the brain is going at half-pressure where thought does not intrude. This is a sad thing to say, but what other reason can there be?

Flashbacks are used in this novel: during one of them the island of Rockall is described as “a near miss”; that is “fuck all”, that is “nothing.” The rock is a construct of Martin's, a negation of the limitless sea in which he is floundering. From this the whole novel springs into shape: the opening pages where Martin is desperately trying to re-connect himself with the world he has lost, his efforts to regain his personality, his concern with giving familiar names to the new territory, his construction of a stone man, those passages in which his body seems to be escaping him and he wills himself back into it. It resolves Martin's questions about the rock, why is it familiar? is he dreaming? When he feels his beard he says: “Strange that bristles go on growing when the rest of you is—”, and he is afraid to say the word, which is “dead.” His whole effort is to refuse the knowledge of what has happened to him, in the same way that he had refused this knowledge, that he would die, when he was alive.

Also the cryptic remarks of his friend Nathanael take on meaning: he tells Martin that he has an extraordinary capacity for "The technique of dying": he foretells his death and his own involvement in it: and there is this remark (in a scene that is recalled at least twice); "Take us as we are now and heaven would be sheer negation. Without form and void. You see? A sort of black lightning, destroying everything that we call life—." It will explain why Martin feels that he is living in his body like a stranger, why he craves for signs of his own identity: it will also make clear that the conversation he has before his final dissolution is between him and God. If you don't want to believe me consider this: "You gave me the power to choose and all my life you led me carefully to this suffering because my choice was my own." How can he be addressing himself? Who else can it be but God?

What happens in purgatory is also a reflection of what happens on earth. The futility of Martin's efforts to avoid his real condition is an image of the futility of purely humanist answers to existence. For example: "But time had infinite resource and what had at first been a purpose became grey and endless and without hope. He began to look for hope in his mind but the warmth had gone or if he found anything it was an intellectual and bloodless ghost." Or this description of Hell: "That's what they can never tell you, never give you any idea. Not the danger, or the hardship but the niggling little idiocies, the damnable repetitions, the days dripping away in a scrammy-handed flurry of small mistakes. . . ."

Martin is the man with no source of reference outside himself, that is, with divine reality: thus he is the individualist, his position represents the consequence of solipsism. His main image is one of eating, eating up the world, getting it inside him, getting power over it, reducing the world to an existence solely in terms of himself. This image of him is brilliantly reinforced by another, this time of maggots inside a chinese box, who eat one another up until one big fat maggot is left. Martin's whole life is this.

“And of course eating with the mouth was only the gross expression of what was a universal process. You could eat with your cock or with your fists, or with your voice. You could eat with hobnailed boots or buying and selling or marrying and begetting or cuckolding—”

(The savage moral fervour of this needs to be noted, particularly as it is hard to connect its tone with Martin's own consciousness which is where it is supposed to be—it is something I shall refer to later.)

The trouble with eating is that there has to be an end of it: the tin box is dug up and the big juicy maggot, when he is just ripe for it, is taken out. When Martin decides that he will kill Nathanael by a violent swerve of the ship, he is also ripe for death, and the torpedo strikes. The trouble behind eating, behind individualism, behind human philosophies that do not refer to a further reality, is the inescapable fact that it ends, that there is death. So enormous is Martin's refusal of this terrible truth that even in death he cannot accept it. As a child Martin had been haunted with death, and one of his last memories is a childhood one, descending into the cellar of his home which is by a graveyard and knowing that the ends of coffins were pressing against the cellar wall. Thus the fact was always there (realised in childhood since Mr. Golding seems to have a Wordsworthian concept of that time). One can see how the images enforce each other; coffins, maggots in tin boxes, Martin eating and dying: the novel is an exegesis of dying.

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*The Inheritors* is concerned with the moment of the Fall in historical terms: the change from Neanderthal Men to “true men.”<sup>2)</sup> The Neanderthal men are innocent: they do not kill, they are religious, they are a simple communistic society without discord, their sex is a natural impulse

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2) Neanderthal men were not “true men”: they were in a quite different line of descent. I don't know whether the contemporary view has changed, but this is Wells' opinion, and Mr. Golding has indicated that, for at least the purpose of this novel, it is his.

without guilt or possessiveness, they are humorous, they accept death, they do not tell lies (they make a great point of only speaking when they have a "picture": that is they never speak to conceal things from each other). They are ruthlessly destroyed by the "true men" who needlessly fear them, since fear and anguish is the existence of the true men. The neanderthals say of them: "They are frightened of the air where there is nothing." They bring fear and suffering to the world: not that it was not there already, but before it was related solely to natural events and things. The true men are controlled by corrupt passions: they get drunk, and their love making is combat. Their society is hierarchical and discordant. Tuami, one of their leaders, reflects on their condition as they leave the waterfall with the terrible cry of grief of the one remaining neanderthaler sounding across the water:

"He had hoped for light as for a return to sanity and the manhood that seemed to have left them; but here was dawn—past dawn—and they were what they had been in the gap, haunted, bedevilled, full of strange irrational grief like himself, or emptied, collapsed, and helplessly asleep. It seemed as though the portage of the boats . . . from that forest to the top of the fall had taken them on to a new level not only of land but of experience and emotion. The world with the boat moving so slowly at the centre was dark amid the light, was untidy, hopeless, dirty."

It is the complete image of fallen man, and there is little question that we are meant to link this image with our own times.

In *Free Fall* Mr. Golding finds these neanderthal types in real life; either as children ("Those were days of terrible and irresponsible innocence") or in characters such as the hero's mother, whose sexual encounters "had no implication. They were like most sex in history, a natural thing without benefit of psychology, romance or religion." What disturbs me here is the sentimentalism of such a statement, and its falsity: the old drunken dirty-mouthed whore who represents earthy values,

“affirms” something or other which is very necessary and very vague, and is beyond or below good and evil, is one of the dreariest clichés of religio-literature. It says something for Mr. Golding’s talent that this character does come alive to some extent.

Black and white statement (and that is the realm we are in) is acceptable in allegorical literature: the boys on the island with their plain symbolic functions do not represent a falsehood, or clash with the realism of their presentation, since childhood is closer to black and white than adulthood. Yet since the method is one of realistic presentation, once this realism is moved into the normal human world (as in most of *Free Fall*) the didactic nature of his world view becomes oppressive; so much so that much of the novel is caught up in argument that is not suitable to the novel form. One can sympathise with him in this: he has probably been puzzled by the lack of understanding of his work, and decided that he has to make himself more clear; yet, in this effort (which was unnecessary, since the novels are not confused) he moves from art statement to polemical or propaganda statement. By this I mean that instead of letting his meaning or message be *enacted*, he puts out the ideas and simply *reinforces* them by the action.

Now this failing is one that will tend to attach itself to a religious novelist. (Not that it is unavoidable: Dostoevsky and Kafka demonstrate that). For a christian, truth has been said: it is not to be made or newly discovered: it is to be re-discovered, recalled, revealed. One can see this clearly enough in the treatment of freedom<sup>3)</sup> in these novels, for it is Mr. Golding’s main theme.

Christianity resolves the difficulty of freedom by paradox: service is freedom. The difficulty finds its classic example in the Fall: *Paradise Lost* is intriguing because of Milton’s huge efforts to overcome the paradox of

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3) M. Sartre’s brilliant essay on Mauriac is a final statement on the difficulties a Christian novelist can encounter over this subject.

free choice and God's foreknowledge. It is clear that Mr. Golding has spent much time over this same problem, particularly since, as a novelist, it is necessary that his characters do not appear to be slaves: the characters in a novel must seem free; even if their freedom is shown as poisoned or corrupted it must still be there.

Fatalism is the end of the novel: it cannot exist with that as a part of its scheme. It is all very well to look back over a novel and see the inevitability of what has happened: but this inevitability must only come *after* the event. This is not to say that events can't be to some degree predictable: people have characters and they tend to choose after a pattern: but it always is choice: there is no "must" about it. Once a novelist gives in to the idea of Fate (of everything pre-ordained by God—or by society or history or the subconscious of course) then he has forsaken his task. Who wants to hear a story that is already over and done with? And once they are ordained they do not require the novelist's strenuous attention. Instead of the characters expressing their truth it is laid down for them. They are not interesting in themselves, but for what they point to.

Now the black and whiteness of Mr. Golding's novels becomes intelligible: it is the spirit of absolutism. Martin is an absolute bastard: Nathanael is a saint: as allegory, as two sides of the penny, I could accept this, but the novel lays claim to realism. (There is a contradiction, in fact, at the heart of Mr. Golding's method). In *Free Fall* this absolutism becomes oppressive. There are the innocents: the children, the girl Beatrice. There are the evil characters: the friend who looks at everything solely for what he can get out of it; there are the two Marxists whose sole concern is free sexual intercourse. The polemicism of this is quite gross: surely no human action can be as simple as this? I don't know what the C. P. was like in the thirties, but I find it hard to believe that it, or anything, could be just that. This sort of slanting might be just

permissible in satire, but not in the sort of novel Mr. Golding is writing. The polemics show themselves most blatantly in the method: the two sex-obsessed Marxists are described in physically repulsive terms; one with absurdly short legs, the other with absurdly long legs. Here is a real case of fixing the evidence, of, as Lawrence would put it, pressing down one side of the balance with your hand.

The sexual theme as related to the Fall is strong in these novels: the only novel where it is not present is *Lord of the Flies*, which, I imagine, is his fear of upsetting his readers, since it is externalised enough in the torturing and the killing. There is no happy sex (except among the innocents): the heroines in the two latest novels are both aggressively chaste, and this seems to be a part of their goodness. The hero of *Free Fall* seems to make a happy marriage, but we are told almost nothing about it, which is fixing the evidence again. This novel associates quite clearly the loss of freedom with the upsurge of desire: Sammy Mountjoy decides he wants to possess Beatrice, that he wants this more than anything else in the world, and he is no longer free.

Yet he never was: no one is in these novels. Freedom is not irresponsibility as is often implied here: only slaves are irresponsible, and who is less free than a child? Mr. Golding makes his attitude towards freedom very clear in this novel. In speaking about the churches his hero<sup>4)</sup> says: "I am one of you, a haunted man—haunted by what or whom? And this is my cry; that I have walked among you in intellectual freedom and you never tried to seduce me from it, since a century has seduced you to it and you believe in fair play, in not presuming, in being after all not

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4) The objection that this is a character speaking and not the novelist himself seems to me invalid here. The novel points towards statements like this: they are polemical statements, not dramatic ones. I realise there is a suggestion of arguing in a circle here (i.e., the novel is polemical therefore this is polemical therefore the novel is polemical etc.) but I calculate on having established this point already, so that this remark should make sense.

a saint. You have conceded freedom to those who cannot use freedom and left the dust and the dirt clustered over the jewel. I speak your hidden language which is not the language of other men. I am your brother in both senses and since freedom was my curse. . . .”

What does freedom mean for Mr. Golding? It is the freedom to make the wrong choice. This is the freedom of his characters and it is a joke. In *Free Fall* he juggles the word so that it turns back to front, meaning that freedom can be the right choice, if you give it up, if your freedom becomes *perfect service!* (Freedom is thus slavery, and slavery is freedom: the reader might reflect where he has heard that before and read through the last quotation again.) This is why the characters become so wooden, why they become absolute in their dimensions, and artificial. In *Free Fall* (and, as I have said, the polemicism which destroys this work is implicit in the rest) the reader is presented with contrasts—the free who serve and the free who don’t and are thus slaves. With this there comes an attempt at a negation of humanist values: the ungenerous, closed-within-herself Beatrice is one of the saved: Mr. Golding wonderfully exposes her and then reverses the judgement. One finds a similar process in the Christianity-Science debate that goes on between the teachers: the good by humanist terms is on the wrong side, the vile sadistic teacher is on the right side. Someone will argue that Mr. Golding is giving humanism a chance, or is revealing the complexity of these matters: yet it is not this but a matter of reducing these values to nothing when put in the light of the divine truth. I find it ironical that he (or his hero) should complain of the lack of a “vital morality”, “the relationship of individual man to individual man”, when Beatrice the generous ends up in the ultimate refuge of the self-enclosed, madness. This development in the story is obviously polemical (whether people do go mad the way Beatrice does is not the point; in the novel it doesn’t carry conviction, so it has a polemical function—as the placing of the mad scene right at the end

would indicate anyway), so it must be accepted at its face value, which means that, compared to the "truth", human values do not matter.

When the polemical nature of his work grows clear, much of the bitterness towards existence which these novels embody is understandable. Mr. Golding's God is strictly authoritarian, and authoritarianism objects to the richness in life because it is a continual challenge to its power. It is difficult to see Christ in this world: this God is Jehovah who has "a compassion that is timeless and without mercy." And the fact that Sammy Mountjoy receives his illumination at the hands of the gestapo can be seen as full of a meaning at which I prefer to look no further. "It is only such conditions as these, electric furnace conditions, in which the molten, blinding truth may be uttered from one human face to another." I doubt if Jehovah's black lightning will leave us much of the human face that would be recognisable.

Certainly I am overstating the case here: Mr. Golding is nothing like a crude as this suggests, and I imagine he would be shocked by what is being implied: but there are ideas resident in his work which are dangerous to the novel, and to much more than the novel. And the novels are not as simple as this suggests, but the aim of criticism is to send readers back to the work with their eyes a little more open, not to make so final a statement that the work itself can be ignored (unless the work is so bad it *ought* to be ignored.) It is true that his characters are fuller, more opaque, than this suggests, but still they are not full enough, they are being used to illustrate an idea of life, rather than be life themselves. The cause of this is a polemical attitude towards the novel: in the first novel it is under control; in the latest it has got loose.

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In conclusion it is necessary to add that much of the non-success of the novels can be reduced to a technical level. There is something wrong with the pace of these novels: a successful novel switches pace to give

the events a structure which clarifies and emphasises the final meaning. Often, in Mr. Golding's novels, one starts to lose the thread because of a monotony of pace: this may be a reason why significance in them is not readily grasped by many readers. One can find oneself reading through an important episode and not grasping it. It might be the case that he is writing at the wrong length, that he should be more expansive. Of course this is only a guess, and a novel of two hundred thousand words will not find a publisher, so that even were it true there is not much that he could do about it.

And "non-success" is the wrong word. Of the novelists who have appeared during the past ten years it would be difficult to find another who writes so seriously, or so well. If I have given the impression that he falls into the clumsiness of the idiot "committed" writer, then that idea had better be discarded. I have wanted to arrive at the centre of what I feel is a real failure: in doing so some of the truth of these novels must get lost. But they are there: they are more important than anything that can be said about them.