

9 – William Golding, Gaia, and the Crisis Ecology of Lord of the Flies

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Abstract: A case study in the aesthetic genealogy of the now widely debated Gaia hypothesis, this article charts out a critical position for the environmental humanities within such a paradigm. Beginning with a historical assessment of William Golding's major role in the development of a Gaian aesthetics, I then turn to his 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies* to explore its articulation between literature, ecology, and politics. Revealing the critical potential of Simon's character, I develop a new way of approaching Golding's canonical work by emphasizing its evental and experimental nature. Although Simon's character has been approached as the tragic victim of an irredeemable human nature, I use a Deleuzian approach that grants him an immanent position and offers perspectives for the contemporary critical moment, at a time when critique is attacked on every front.

“They do not understand me. I am not the mouth for these ears.
Too long apparently I lived in the mountains, too much I listened to
brooks and trees: now I speak to them as to goatherds.
... And now they look at me and laugh, and in laughing they hate me
too. There is ice in their laughter.”

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

“Writing has no other goal: ... To release what can be saved from life, that
which can save itself by means of power and stubbornness, to extract
from the event that which is not exhausted by the happening, to release
from becoming that which will not permit itself to be fixed in a term. A
strange ecology, tracing a line of writing, music or painting.”

— Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues*

I. “A Change in Sensibility”

In the 1970s, scientists James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis formulated the Gaia hypothesis, a provocative, cybernetic articulation of biology, geology, and atmospheric chemistry through which the Earth is assumed to be a self-regulating system that sustains conditions favorable for life. As such, Gaia designates “The biosphere and all of those parts of the Earth with which it actively interacts” (Lovelock & Margulis, 3). In their wake, various inflexions of the Gaia paradigm² have emerged and informed recent work in the social sciences as well as cultural and literary studies, where scholars and critics have relied on Gaia theory to develop new, dynamic ways of understanding the living world, and offer original attempts at rethinking politics and aesthetics by turning to its material processes.

However, “as science, Gaia never really made it,” Michael Ruse writes (“Holy Fool?”). Geologist Robert Diffendal suggests that the ill-fated trajectory of the first iterations of the Gaia hypothesis comes partly from the naming of the proposition, which is loaded with dense mythological background:

Designating this theory ‘Gaia’ got Lovelock into trouble with some of his detractors, who found it a bit too unscientific. Testing of the theory is still ongoing by many researchers who think it sound, but under such less controversial terms as ‘Earth System Science’ or ‘Geophysiology.’ (139)

Despite a recent paper by Déborah Bucchi delving into the riches of onomastics by comparing the scientific Gaia, its use in the environmental humanities, and the Greek Goddess of the same name in the works of Aeschylus and Hesiod, a major protagonist in this story has suffered disregard, namely William Golding, one of Britain’s major 20th-century writers.³ Indeed, Lovelock and Golding both lived in Bowerchalke, a village in southern England, and the two friends would discuss their respective ongoing projects and musings during evening strolls around the village or at the pub (Carey, 290). And Lovelock remembers:

In 1968 or 1969, during a walk, I tried out my hypothesis on him [Golding]; he was receptive because, unlike most literary figures, he had taken physics while at Oxford as an undergraduate and fully understood the science of my argument. He grew enthusiastic and said, "If you are intending to come out with a large idea like that, I suggest that you give it a proper name: I propose 'Gaia.'" ... Ge, of course, is the prefix of the sciences of geology, geophysics, and geochemistry. To Golding, Gaia, the goddess who brought order out of chaos, was the appropriate title for a hypothesis about an Earth system that regulated its climate and chemistry so as to sustain habitability. (Lovelock, *Vanishing*, 196-7)

Although his naming suggestion may have damaged the scientific reception of the hypothesis, Golding was an early advocate of the revolutionary proposition pushed forward by Lovelock and Margulis. Frédéric Regard timidly identifies in a footnote what he sees as a potentially "Green" discourse in Golding, before referring to two book-reviews written by the author for British newspapers (106). In "Gaia Lives, OK?" (*The Guardian*, September 1976), Golding positions himself as one of the early supporters of the paradigmatic change offered by Lovelock and Margulis. A review of Georg Gerster's book *Grand Design: The Earth from Above*, "Gaia Lives, OK?" charts out the implications of considering the human point of view as limited. Situating the recent proliferation of aerial views in the history of perception, Golding observes that

To know intellectually that the Mediterranean lies to the south of England and on the other side of France is not the same thing as seeing the dark line of water beyond Marseilles in a photograph taken over Hampshire. But the possible change in sensibility was to be overwhelmed by the last and greatest expansion of the human 'point of view.' (85)

Such aesthetic revolution goes beyond the identification of "patterns" displayed in pictures of the earth, the "aerial views of the marks made on the earth by man's repetitious activities." Indeed, the "Blue Marble" picture or aerial views of Europe help us to have a different sense of the materiality of the earth, and the traces of human activity are merely

“trivial alterations to her [earth’s] skin,” compared to the massive, geological impact of “the coral insects” that “have had more effect than we have” (85). The aesthetic quandary for Golding lies in the fact that the magnitude of life’s action in terraforming is deemed approachable only intellectually. Yet, as he argues, “our growing knowledge both of the microscopic and the macroscopic nature of the earth is not just a satisfaction to a handful of scientists. In both directions it is bringing about a change in sensibility” (86). Thanks to the perceptual enhancement that aerial views have provided, aesthetics appears as the most potent domain for apprehending the earth and fleshing out the reality of the milieu in which we find ourselves. Golding is familiar with “the Gaian view of the atmosphere” that Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan define as “a radical departure from the former scientific concept that life on Earth is *surrounded by* and *adapts to* an essentially static environment” (“Gaia and Philosophy,” 60; italics mine). Instead, according to them “life *interacts with* and eventually *becomes* its own environment.” Golding’s alert, “those who think of the world as a lifeless lump would do well to watch out” (“Gaia Lives,” 86), eventually appears as a call not only for a change of sensibility but also, as I will show, for an apprenticeship in signs, an *evental* aesthetics.⁴ Theological in tone, this threat is also an aesthetic challenge to move beyond what Bruno Latour calls an “image of the Globe” (Latour, 111–145) and pay attention to the material processes at work in the Earth system.

Although Golding described human action as “trivial alterations” to the Earth’s surface, his tone changed dramatically fifteen years later, in January 1990, when he published in *The Sunday Times* a piece titled “The Earth’s Revenge.” In this review of John Gribbin’s *Hothouse Earth: The Greenhouse Effect and Gaia*, Golding resorts to prophetic intonations made tangible by the title, an unequivocal condemnation of mankind. Beginning his review with the notion of “climatic disaster,” Golding shares his awareness of the reality of climate change, its irreversibility⁵ as well as its global scale. As he identifies the specifically human agency at work behind the destruction of a “balance of forces,” Golding describes the “process” as having “already begun.”

Most importantly, Golding reformulates what is at stake: “The picture, therefore, is not of humanity inconvenienced by nature, but of humanity struggling with her for bare survival—and not in the distant future but

beginning *now*." Golding displays a minute understanding of the intricacies of planetary ecology, thus developing an understanding of the Earth as a dynamic milieu. Indeed, he references "Professor James Lovelock whose view of nature some 15 or 20 years ago was to see our planet as a single system, a creature having some of the attributes of a living organism." As he tries to identify the conditions for survival and the preservation of the ecological milieu, Golding turns to ancient culture and mythology: "The Greeks prized an emotion they called *sebas*, a word which could mean as little as respect for a worthy person and as much as a reverential awe before the gods. They felt this *sebas* for Gaia." From this spiritual vantage point, Golding develops:

Most emphatically we post-industrial-revolution men have seldom felt a proper *sebas* for Gaia. We experience far more its opposite, *hubris*. We suppose that we own Gaia when the truth is that she owns us and we cannot expect her to continue to afford us 'the means of life' when we live on her like a disease which is no more than a continual and brutal disruption of her self-regulating systems.

In this Greek conceptual framework of *sebas* vs. *hubris*, Golding argues that beyond reducing fuel consumption and geoengineering humanity into the future, the key might be to cultivate *sebas*—"we need to feel 'sebas' for the whole earth," he writes. An irrebuttable *dénouement* follows suit:

There are signs that this revolution in feeling may be at hand. Otherwise, the only motive power which will drive our actions will be self-interest, starting in concern, heightened by way of worry to dread: and if the seas really do become a monster, and Gaia an outraged and avenging stepmother, the end will be panic and terror.

As a writer, Golding refines his articulation of aesthetics in the climate catastrophe that he anticipates. However, his aesthetics remains sheathed in the spiritual, rather than the historical: despite his dismissal of fossil fuel development models, his view remains Occidental and somewhat unaware of political contradictions. In his view, to take political action against climate change and ecological destruction can

only occur through an aesthetic and spiritual apprenticeship that makes tangible the human and non-human processes of the Earth system.⁶

II. The Island As Intensive System

In his 1983 Nobel prize lecture, Golding opens a space for what he sees as the future of literature:

Words may, through the devotion, the skill, the passion, and the luck of writers prove to be the most powerful thing in the world. ... Then there is hope that we may learn to be temperate, provident, taking no more from nature's treasury than is our due. It may be by books, stories, poetry, lectures we who have the ear of mankind can move man a little nearer the perilous safety of a warless and provident world. It cannot be done by the mechanical constructs of overt propaganda. I cannot do it myself, cannot now create stories which would help to make man aware of what he is doing; but there are others who can, many others. There always have been.

In this part of his speech, Golding charts out a literary path towards political change as an alternative to "overt propaganda." Unlike Amitav Ghosh, who writes that the "most intransigent way that climate change resists literary fiction lies ultimately in its resistance to language itself" (84), Golding believes language and literature are the appropriate vectors for such an aesthetic apprenticeship. Although he claims that he "cannot do it" himself, his most canonical novel *Lord of the Flies* is one of the most vibrant anticipations of Gaia as a dynamic, ecological paradigm. Thus, the irony in his statement is not to be overlooked. Neither is Golding's public advocacy of environmental thought merely yet another occasion to boast the merits of cross-pollination between the sciences and the humanities; rather, it is an invitation to rethink the topicality of Golding's 1954 book through the prism of ecological crisis and critical thought.

Now a classic of the British novel, *Lord of the Flies* is the story of a group of young boys who crash-land on a desert island.⁷ A postlapsarian rewriting of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Golding's novel sets up the space of the desert island as the virgin land on which British boys

will have their masculine, colonial, feral drives result in destructive failure. Some have argued that *Lord of the Flies* belongs to the past, that its contents and style are merely the reflection of an era haunted by the Holocaust and the atom bomb—an interpretation that either immobilizes Golding's novel as a symptom of the disenchantment of his generation or reduces the novel to the status of a Christian fable, or an allegory of evil as Hélène Cixous claims in her 1966 article. Yet, if there was a decline in popularity for *Lord of the Flies*, as James Baker suggests a couple of years later, this should not be the case anymore, for *Lord of the Flies* “forces us to recognize the likelihood of ... the wanton abuse and destruction of environmental resources” (447). Although the novel is not about climate change *per se*, direct textual references to the atom bomb⁸ and the colonial destruction of milieus participate in the aesthetics of anthropogenic, global scale ecological disaster.

In *Lord of the Flies*, Golding anticipates the discrepancy between the Robinsonade where the island is merely the background for human action, and the dynamic ecosystem the Gaia hypothesis eventually reveals. Golding dismisses what Amitav Ghosh calls “a habit of mind that proceeded by creating discontinuities” (56), which is typical of the Modern tradition in Western literature. A constant mapping and encoding of space, the trait is exemplified by the boys on the island who establish such discontinuities. The “platform” (Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, 88) is transformed into the democratic space where assemblies are called, a political agora that contrasts with the “top of the mountain” (38) and its features of primitive acropolis, while the “Castle Rock” (118) becomes the fortress of Jack and his “tribe” (140). The urge to create discontinuities also appears in the early chapters of the novel, when the boys are eager to “draw a map” (27) of the island and claim it as theirs—“This belongs to us ... All ours!” (29) one of the boys shouts. This iteration of the colonial sensibility of the past century overlaps with a Modern ecological model and participates in “a way of thinking that deliberately excludes things and forces (‘externalities’) that lie beyond the horizon of the matter at hand: it is a perspective that renders the interconnectedness of Gaia unthinkable” (Ghosh, 56). At the end of Golding's novel, however, the scorching up of the island discards such attempts at establishing the land as the external background for human action. As it dramatizes the boys' failure to “become emplaced” (Ghosh, 59), *Lord of the Flies* first plays with and ultimately turns away from

what Ghosh claims to be distinctive features of the modern novel.

But Golding provides more than cartographic evidence, since it is the insular nature of the setting—similar to “our mother, Gaia Mater, set like a jewel in space” (“Nobel”)—that allows him to develop an original ecological aesthetics at a time of crisis. The island comes to life as a proto-Gaian system as Golding gives a body to the island as organism—it has a “scar” (*Lord of the Flies*, 7), a “lip” (28), a “brow” (96), a “backbone” (146), and a “neck” (174). Beyond mere personification, Golding grants actual agency to the islandic system: chapter 9 opens with “a steady current of heated air” while “revolving masses of gas piled up the static until the air was ready to explode” (145). The self-organizing property of the island’s intensive meteorological system has echoes in the numerous storms that all bring about crises in the novel, and all point to the way Golding understood the Gaia hypothesis as a cybernetic milieu structured along principles of energy dissipation. Such dynamism is made visible beyond shorter, more human temporal scales. Indeed, the narrative also often takes place at the level of the island’s geology: “The subsoil beneath the palm trees was a raised beach, and generations of palms had worked loose in this the stones that had lain on the sands of another shore” (62). The deep time of palm trees, life shaping the geology of the island is evidence of a story that exceeds the all-too-human categories of understanding of a group of British boys. The island becomes a dynamic ecosystem, albeit spread across various temporalities. In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh sees an almost unbridgeable gap between the narrative means of the novel genre and the amplitude of temporalities mobilized by anthropogenic climate change.⁹ Despite the fact that Golding’s novel does address climate change directly, it experiments with the dynamic relationship at work within the milieu we humans and non-humans find ourselves together. Paying attention to both the deep time of palm trees as well as human time, in which the swift scorching up of the same palm trees takes place, Golding explores the tensions at work between the various temporalities of the island’s ecosystem.

In *Lord of the Flies*, a double refutation is at work, destabilizing the traditional view of space (the failure to become emplaced), as well as temporal homogeneity (with the heterogeneous imbrication of various orders of temporality). As a result, Golding offers a more complex

apprehension of the milieu as a dynamic ecosystem. The novel does not need to be concerned with the data-based, sprawling representation of climate change to make a critical intervention in that alley: the feeling of *sebas* that Golding uncovers in his later articles is already at work in *Lord of the Flies* with the intrusion of Gaian ecology as a character in the story. Indeed, the boys see darkness on the island and grant it animal features—"full of claws," but most importantly "full of the awful unknown and menace" (99). As the boys seek to ward off such anxiety, Golding himself invites the reader to feel the terror and awe that a dynamic ecosystem inspires. However, Golding's attention to material processes allows us to move beyond the transcendental decoding we too easily impose on the text. As his novel deconstructs the aesthetic norms of modernity, Golding not only offers an aesthetics relevant for our age, but he also formulates a demand for a critical regime that takes into account the eventual properties of intensive systems. It is this shift in critical endeavor that I would like to explore now.

III. The Failure of Idealist Critique

In his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx argues that Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* erases the historical and social relations of production in favor of a fiction naturalizing a state of affairs that is reversible (Bachofen, 88). The Robinsonade narrativizes the foundational move in ideology: in *Capital*, Marx jokes that "the relations between Robinson and these objects that form his self-created wealth are ... so simple and transparent that even Mr Sedley Taylor [an economic popularizer of the time] could understand them" (170). In *Lord of the Flies*, such simplicity is at work with Piggy's character, who is invested in ideology so much that he too easily dismisses the contradictions at work on the island—"We know what goes on and if there's something wrong, there's someone to put it right" (Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, 84), he says, turning away from material reality in favor of "rational" critique and a technicist view that considers the island from the outside. As he becomes the embodiment of stubborn, ideological rationalism, Piggy projects an image of the world as a lump waiting to be tamed through rational planning, and his remark that "life's scientific" (88) displays a blind belief that ideas and logic precede reality; that everything should make sense and is meant to be acted upon by human intentionality. Piggy's glasses are the symbol of knowledge and mastery

by providing fire to the boys. Yet, his “specs” (40) also manifest his blindness to material, social and environmental processes. Piggy’s embodiment of ideological rationalism attempts to negate the material processes at work on the island: his plan to organize power over the insular territory and establish an ideal democratic constitution ends in chaos, as he fails to see, confront, and compose with the forces at work in the social and environmental ecology of the island.

Ultimately Piggy’s failure is that of the Robinsonade, it enacts the fantasy of an *outside*, which reveals itself as nothing more than a simulacrum steeped in ideology. Such a blind spot becomes more tangible when, directly after Simon’s murder, the rationalist and wishful thinker Piggy is unable to process what just took place. The dilemma eventually takes the form of the unspeakable: “It wasn’t—what you said,” Piggy says to Ralph, “gesticulating, searching for a formula” (156). The “unspoken knowledge” (158) of Simon’s murder is the space where the “fading knowledge of the world” (162) opens a breach in the ideological, utopian program. Piggy’s modernity is of no use when confronted to the reality of material contradiction. So is Jack’s promise to solve antagonism through killing rituals; it merely wreaks destruction and chaos. As a result, Golding presents Piggy and Ralph’s social-democratic ideals and Jack’s own proto-fascism as antagonistic only superficially: rather, they support each other dialectically, a dialectics from which Simon allows to diverge.¹⁰

While Piggy is unable to picture the existence of the beast in which the boys believe, thus blocking the possibility to deconstruct it, Simon offers a major critical move: to go and see the beast—“what else is there to do?” (128, 145), he whispers twice in the novel—the utterance of a *proairetic* code (Barthes, 19), that of action, decision-making and moving on. The central figure of a highly *polyphonic* novel, Simon belongs to the space of experience. His name—from the Hebrew שמע (hearing), matches his own behavior on the island: towards the end of chapter 3, as he wanders through the clearing of the island for the first time, he undergoes an intensive, sensory experience narrated through internal focalization: “Holding his breath he cocked a critical ear at the sounds of the island ... the sounds of the bright fantastic birds, the bee-sounds, even the crying of the gulls” (Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, 57). Simon’s “critical ear” parallels the way Golding defines artists, those “who have

the ear of mankind” and “can move man a little nearer the perilous safety of a warless and provident world” (“Nobel”). The primacy of experience becomes a defining feature of Simon’s critical position. As Reilly suggests, “Simon’s centrality to the text is related to ... the sheer inadequacy of what passes among us for education.” Indeed,

Golding presents us with only two alternatives for Simon: to dismiss him as a holy imbecile, incomprehensible and irrelevant; or to concede that there are modes of knowing different from and perhaps superior to those based on rational insight and mathematical reasoning. (9)

Yet, such modes of knowing do not operate a shift towards otherworldly cognition, be it religious or more broadly transcendental. On the contrary, Simon’s character develops on a *plane of immanence*; his learning is not the excavation of a fundamental system of thought. Simon’s mode of learning has nothing to do with the assimilation of preexisting contents or pieces of information (which would introduce a form of idealism that his character resists). Instead of the Platonic conception of education famously exposed in *Meno*, where the contents of knowledge preexist the cognitive act of recollection, Simon learns through *intensities*.

In a section of *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze reveals the idea of education at work in *In Search of Lost Time*, which Ronald Bogue summarizes as follows:

Only through a chance encounter with an unsettling sign can thought be jolted from its routine patterns, and only through such an encounter will the object of thought cease to be arbitrarily selected and attain the necessity of something that itself chooses thought, that constrains thought and sets it in motion. (329)

Indeed, new, virtual possibilities become available to Simon as he perceives the saturation of “riotous colors,” the green of the candle buds, their whites and their “scent [that] spilled out into the air and took possession of the island” (Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, 57). He encounters such “riotous” and “spilling” signs not as *preexisting* units of a system,

but as *asignifying ruptures*¹¹ creating new, unexpected paths that break away from the routine patterns of the boys' expedition. As "the susurration of the blood" (57) becomes more audible than the sea, Simon also establishes himself as a *point of view*. Eventually, Simon's situatedness embraces an evental aesthetics of immanence: instead of abstracting himself from the world and establishing a transcendental subjective position, Simon is enmeshed within a cloud of material forces (human and non-human) which he encounters as signs, themselves *concreting* with his own point of view.

Yet, Simon's critical ear is not only a mode of sensual availability that reveals an immanent position; it also implies political responsibility in the context of catastrophe. When he eventually discovers the dead body of the pilot, animated like a puppet by the lines of his parachute as the wind blows, he understands that it is this rotting body that the boys mistook for the beast they are afraid of. Having understood the dangerous illusion, "he took the lines in his hands; he freed them from the rocks and the figure from the wind's indignity" (146-147). As he untangles (quite literally) the symbols against which society contingently constructs itself, Simon's critical position becomes political. When during an assembly the boys discuss the possibility of there being a beast, Simon leaves open such a possibility, and replies "maybe it's only us" (89). Is he suggesting that the beast is only a projection of the boys' imagination? Or that the beast is none other than themselves? In both cases, Simon displays once again a form of situated consciousness that Piggy, embodying the all-too-evident certainty of ideology, violently dismisses by abruptly cutting in: "Nuts!" (89). Piggy's ideological blindness prevents him from deconstructing the illusion that his feral fellows are subject to, because it blocks the possibility of there being anything exceeding what he knows already. On the contrary, Simon's availability and his open apprenticeship in signs constitutes him as a potent resisting force against ideology, a political position unto itself.

Neither theological nor spiritual at heart, Simon's *material* critique does *not* unveil any bleak truth of the human condition; there is more at work in his position than mere potential for enchantment and wonder. *Lord of the Flies*, far from merely upturning the theme of the Robinsonade, constitutes an immanent reckoning with material processes. It is a profound endeavor to chart out the possibility of emergence of critique,

beyond the idealism that is so typical of the utopian genre of the Robinsonade and its transcendental, ideological foundations. Against the artificial immediacy of such relations, Golding's material depiction of a micro-society stranded on a desert island allows him to take up the critical gesture and reveal the socius as a dynamic field of forces and events that is open to transformation.

IV. Flight Without Escapism: Simon's Critical Drifts

In a 1968 article, Henri A. Talon expresses his frustration with his perception of Golding as a moralist who does not offer anything, rendering him an *ironic* moralist. As a response, Baker convincingly suggests that Golding's

steadfast opposition to the outworn public myths of the modern age is not simply negative or nihilistic. ... All of his fiction shows us *the possibility of a new mentality struggling to be born against the terrific odds imposed by the patterns of our social heritage and the limitations of our species.* (460; italics mine)

Rather than carrying a supposedly "Goldingian" truth of the human condition, *Lord of the Flies* draws lines of becoming and transformation that move beyond metaphorical readings¹² and ideological takes on human perfectibility.¹³ Instead of interpretation (Skilton) and the quest for "truth" (Sullivan), I am interested in the *experiment* Golding conducts. Indeed, both Lovelock and Golding shared a taste for "'what-if?' situations" (Carey, 291) and the appeal of making the text an active locus of experimentation is what allows Golding's work to unfold well beyond the European cultural production of the time and its typical post-war anxiety: far-reaching, ecological questions that Golding foresaw in the middle of the past century are only entering the stage now.

In this regime of reading, the critical shift *Lord of the Flies* operates precisely as an exploration of the conditions of emergence of a "new mentality," to use Baker's expression. It is along such lines, instead of seeing Golding as an ironic moralist, that I read his novel as *an active, non-representative*,¹⁴ and anti-ideological experiment highly relevant for

our age of climate catastrophe. Indeed, Simon's materialism offers a way out of the self-sustaining, disastrous dialectic of ideology, the failure of which is dramatically embodied by Piggy. Many have read Simon as a tragic figure, the incarnation of Judeo-Christian, soteriological paradigms, bearing the weight of human guilt on his shoulders. Readings of *Lord of the Flies* use his death to give a sense of closure to the novel by transforming it into an easily-assimilable moral apologue, as is the case with Baker, who writes: "In *Lord of the Flies* we have perceived a re-enactment of the fall of man ... and an awful fulfillment of the gloomy prophecies of *Revelation*; but these are only descriptive metaphors and not definitive analogues or parallels" (454). Yet, in this meticulous dismantling of ideology, "the intention is to undermine our naïve faith in the moral progress we like to read into modern social theory," he continues. Eventually, he concludes that "we are not asked to abandon hope. We are only urged to recognize that "human nature" is dynamic and capable of extraordinary transformations which may result in social good or ill," depicting Golding as a "relativist." Indeed, symbolical readings of the novel have reterritorialized Simon's ethics in an age-old ideological debate around good and evil in human nature.

In Jacques Lacan's analysis of sexual maturation as the creation of a territory and partitioning of space, "territorialization" describes the emplacement of the subject and commands the investment of desire into given *loci* in the stable structure of the socius. Deleuze and Guattari are interested in the opposite processes that seek to liberate the body from such territory. They turn instead toward the *milieu* (an idea they poach from Jakob von Uexküll and his notion of *Umwelt*), which coextensively develops with what lives within it (such a move echoes Margulis and Sagan's Gaian metaphysics). The milieu being a dynamic system, and not a territory, it allows for deterritorialization as the undoing of the fixed image of the subject, favoring virtual flows over actual territorialization. Simply put: "to deterritorialize is to free up the fixed relations that contain a body while exposing it to new organisations" (Parr, 69). Deleuze and Guattari's interest in *pure* deterritorialization stems from the difficulty that deterritorialization never lasts and the potential creative assemblages it contains are blocked in reterritorialization. Simon precisely dwells in the virtual opening of deterritorialization, the knot of the event.

To pay tribute to what he embodies, one must instead turn towards the ways in which he *materially* embodies an immanent critical position. Instead of offering yet another interpretation of Simon as a Christlike martyr figure whose belief in moral values makes him stand out from the rest of the group, I read *Lord of the Flies* affirmatively by focusing on the *active* critical work that Simon's character operates.

To unglue the novel from territorializing readings, I suggest a shift towards a Deleuzian mode that echoes the work done with Félix Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. For Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka has too often been read as a pessimistic, resigned writer of inexorably absurd worlds. In response, they open Kafka's literary machine to display the *transformative potential* it bears. Just as "*The Trial* is the dismantling of all transcendental justifications" (51), they write, Kafka's other works all aim at deterritorializing critique: against a critical position that is fixed on the outside, Kafka's work operates from a position of immanence. Simon embodies the critical move quite literally during the subtle, delicate, yet perceptibly decisive event that occurs when he and the other boys wander during the land-surveying expedition: "Simon turned away from them and went where the just perceptible path led him" (Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, 56). The tension at work between the adverb "just" and the adjective "perceptible" echoes the nuance of the "flicker of incredulity" when Simon was considering the impossibility of a beast on the island; both locutions express an oscillatory, *atopic* opening in Simon's critical sensibility, the immanent "care of the event" (Conley, 344). A method "much more intense than any critique," (Deleuze & Guattari, *Kafka*, 48) deterritorialization as practiced by Simon is a deviation from the dialectics of power in which Ralph, Piggy, and Jack are engaged, as well as the mark of his experimental characterization. The evental quality of Kafka's stories allows characters to engage in processes of immanent *becoming*, resisting the monolithic categories of idealist critique. Simon is able to go through such a process, but when he comes down from the mountain to share the news of his discovery with the other boys, in Zarathustrian fashion, they are unable to hear him and instead unleash their deadly urges:

It was crying out against the abominable noise something about a body

on the hill. The beast struggled forward, broke the ring and fell over the steep edge of the rock to the sand by the water. At once the crowd surged after it, poured down the rock, leapt on to the beast, screamed, struck, bit, tore. There were no words, and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws. (Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, 152-153)

Still, like in *The Trial*, when K. displays a becoming-animal as he is killed and cries “like a dog” (Kafka, 165), Simon’s becoming-animal occurs during his murder. The point of view is that of the boys, as the focalization shows: with the third person singular neuter pronoun “it,” Simon is referred to as “the beast” and displays animal features. Yet, the boys can only loosely refer to Simon’s animality: his becoming contrasts with Piggy’s fixed position in the animal realm throughout the story, since he is narrowly territorialized as a pig and condemned from the outset. The lack of generic precision in “beast” reveals from inside the *diegesis* the boys’ inability to give precise contours to what Simon embodies, thereby showing the latter’s deterritorializing potentiality. Ultimately, Simon’s initial sidestepping, his deviation¹⁵ from the track returns in the movement of his eventual death:

Somewhere over the darkened curve of the world the sun and moon were pulling, and the film of water on the earth planet was held, bulging slightly on one side while the solid core turned. The great wave of the tide moved farther along the island and the water lifted. Softly, surrounded by a fringe of inquisitive bright creatures, itself a silver shape beneath the steadfast constellations, Simon’s dead body moved out toward the open sea. (Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, 154)

In his short piece “Desert Islands,” which was written in the 1950s but published posthumously, Gilles Deleuze identifies two types of islands: *oceanic*, a force from the depths, such as volcanic islands; or *continental*, separated from a continent through erosion, disarticulation (9). In both cases, the island materializes a derivation, either vertical or horizontal. The materialization of an immanent *thrust*, a conflict between sea and land, the island is an event that pushes towards deterritorialization. The ideological failure of the Robinsonade is to believe in a pure origin, outside of ideology; yet “in its very failure, Robinson gives us some indication: he first needed a reserve of capital” (13). Deleuze then

demonstrates that an island is always a “second origin” (13), a serial deviation. Islands are taken in a process of continual deviation, sites of resistance to territorializing attempts, leaving open a virtual field of differentiation. Such an opening, affirmative movement is at work in Simon’s death. While Piggy’s *inert* body is engulfed by the sea—“then the sea breathed again in a long, slow sigh, the water boiled white and pink over the rock; and when it went, sucking back again, the body of Piggy was gone” (Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, 181)—the trajectory of Simon’s dead body is an instance of *becoming-island*, the agent of a deterritorializing moving out. Far from being an *arrêt de mort* or death warrant, his killing is an immanent envoi “toward the open sea.”

As such, Golding uses Simon to open the critical situation, to feed the event, to untangle its knot and better identify a line of flight, unleashing transformative potential. As Deleuze and Guattari write:

Rather, it was the world and its representation that he [Kafka] *made take flight* and that he made follow these lines. It was a question of seeing and speaking like a beetle ... Even more, in the novels, the dismantling of the assemblages makes the social representation take flight in a much more effective way than a critique would have done and brings about a deterritorialization of the world that is itself political. (46-7)

Likewise, and at one remove from ideological matters that would territorialize or close the event of Simon’s death as a sign of failure, Golding provides us with a character whose death is meaningful not ideologically but *effectively*; the beauty of Simon is his material “care of the event” as the other boys look for constant reterritorialization, be it Piggy’s rationalist scheme, or Jack’s proto-fascist fantasy. While they remain invested in the drive towards territorialization—materialized by the British officer who fetches the boys in an escapist move of salvation, Simon offers an alternative movement of drifting away, his ultimate death not as an act of closure, but as the ultimate affirmation of a “becoming” that pierces the horizon along a line of flight; *fuite* both as flight and leak—flight without escapism.

Conclusion

Using the novel's own potential as a material and experimental critique, my reading of *Lord of the Flies* not only raises the question of society's blindness to critique and the violence it unleashes against the figure of the critic who engages in deconstructive practices, it also questions the very idea of critical thinking in the current climatic, social, and political context. Simon speaks "almost in [Ralph's] ear" (Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, 111), and yet he fails to be the consulting agency of politics. Does the failure to be heard mean that critique is condemned to roam? Should the critic mourn Simon's death?

Although Golding was a "disillusioned modernist" (Baker, 457), he was not of the "despairing" (460) kind. Through aesthetics, he believed monumental change could take place. As he writes in one of his Gaia essays, "Surely, eyes more capable than ours of receiving the range of universal radiation may well see her, this creature of argent and azure, to have robes of green and gold streamed a million miles from her by the solar wind as she dances round Helios in the joy of light" ("Gaia Lives" 86). Of course, such Nietzschean, sun-worshipping flight of lyricism easily reads as merely theological or spiritual, but Simon's critical work as immanent deterritorialization, and his "care of the event" manifests such an affirmation of life, even in death.

As we face historical and historic demands (Butler, 4) in the current ecological catastrophe, *Lord of the Flies* brings the affirmative impetus of deterritorialization into the critical discussion, while at the same time warning us: in the end, the island is but a piece of scorched earth. If Simon gives us an ethics, we still need a politics.

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[1](#) I would like to thank Tom Conley, Sarah Dimick, Alba Elliott, and the anonymous peer-reviewers whose attentive readings and generous feedback were immensely helpful in the preparation of this article. My gratitude also goes to Frédéric Regard for his mentorship. In many ways, his work made my intervention possible.

[2](#) Bruce Clarke identifies two major figures of Gaia: Isabelle Stengers’s “Gaia the Intruder,” and Bruno Latour’s “secular Gaia” (Clarke “Rethinking Gaia”).

[3](#) Golding and some of his works are mentioned several times in Ruse, M., *The Gaia Hypothesis: Science on a Pagan Planet*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013 (although a study of *Lord of the Flies* in relation to Gaia is beyond the scope of Ruse’s project).

[4](#) See “What is an event?” in Deleuze, G., *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Conley, T., Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

[5](#) Interestingly, instead of “crisis,” Golding uses the notion of climatic “disaster.” See Blanchot, M., *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Smock, A., Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

[6](#) Golding’s ecological aesthetics might also have to do with his interest in esoteric, and spiritual movements. In his biography of Golding, John Carey writes that he praised Rudolf Steiner, the founder of the pseudoscientific school of anthroposophy, “for trying to find a bridge between the world of the physical sciences and the world of the spirit”

(Carey 243). Indeed, an example of such direct influence has been identified in Golding's use of the colors that form the basis of Steiner's system (green, pink, white, and black) as the basis for the color symbolism in *Lord of the Flies*. For an analysis of the influence of Steinerian thought on Golding's oeuvre, see Miyahara, K., "William Golding – Rudolf Steiner – Anthroposophy," *Anthroposophy*, vol. 38, 2003, p. 33–60. Miyahara suggests that Golding's interest in Steinerian thought was sympathetic rather than fully committed. For a study of anthroposophy in relation to Gaia, see Ruse, *The Gaia Hypothesis*, p. 122–5.

[7](#) For a recent exploration of islandic art and literature in the face of climate change, see DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2019.

[8](#) In what could be called his *ars poetica*, "Fable," Golding, explains that "Before the Second World War [he] believed in the perfectibility of social man" until he "was unable to." Written in the wake of the atom bomb, *Lord of the Flies* turns it into a leitmotiv: soon after the boys are stranded on the island they heave a rock from the top of the top of the mountain and let it smash into the forest, "like a bomb" (25). In the second chapter, the boys make a fire that quickly leads to dreadful images of atomic blasts: "For yards round the fire the heat was like a blow" (41); "A tree exploded in the fire like a bomb" (47). The internal focalization creates surprise and fear before the realization that it is "just" trees burning. This momentary surprise connotes the deeper trauma of the atomic bomb. Episodes of fire scattered about in the novel develop a genealogy of the notion of progress from the early dreams of mastery over nature to the deadly illusion of technics that end up transforming the island into a waste land. This of course feeds into the pessimistic reading of *Lord of the Flies* as a dark fable about entropy and the destructive drives of humanity. As will become clear later on, I am quite resistant to this conservative reading that brackets off the active, immanent critique that Golding offers in his novel.

[9](#) Gould, S. J., *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the*

Discovery of Geological Time, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 173. Cited in Ghosh.

[10](#) Here, Golding's experiment with proto-Gaian critique and Simon's role allows to resist Lovelock's own drive towards ecofascism. Indeed, Lovelock expresses the need for democracy to be suspended as part a global effort to tackle the anthropogenic climate disaster (Lovelock, *Vanishing* 95; Sagan, "Uchronia" 163). On ecofascism, see Dubiau, Antoine, *Écofascismes*, Caen, Grevis, 2022.

[11](#) Deleuze and Guattari use the example of the rhizome to define an asignifying rupture. Cutting a rhizome allows for two divided branches to grow. An asignifying rupture takes place as an act of amplification promoting differentiation.

[12](#) For Baker, *Lord of the Flies* has faced rejection precisely because it has too often be read as metaphor (459).

[13](#) C. B. Cox insists upon the religious dimension of the novel and depicts Golding as a writer for whom "every detail of human life has a religious significance." Thomas Marcellus Coskren leans towards a more optimistic approach, one that differs from mine insofar as he emphasizes individual responsibility while I seek to "de-moralize" the novel in favor of a materialist critique. I am more inclined to agree with Kenneth Watson, for whom the novel has been too often and too easily assumed to be a religious work.

[14](#) On the "representative" regime of art, see Rancière, Jacques, *Le Partage du sensible*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2000.

[15](#) On another level, a deviation but also a deviancy if we follow accounts of Simon as a queer character, as embodying a *becoming-homosexual*.