

## Gazes from Nature: Reading William Golding's 'Miss Pulkinhorn'

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This short story by William Golding first appeared in *Encounter* in August 1960, and was adapted for radio by the author. It was four years before the publication of *The Spire*. "Miss Pulkinhorn" is 'one of Golding's outstanding uncollected works', according to Golding's obituary in *The Times* on 21 June 1993.<sup>1</sup> However, there are very few critical studies that examine this story in detail. One of the articles worth reading on this topic is Josiane Paccaud-Huguet's 'Playing with Codes: Rites of Perversion and Perverse Masterplot in "Miss Pulkinhorn"'.

The story is extremely enigmatic, but there are few characters and the plot is simple. Sir Edward, the narrator, who has been an organist at a dignified cathedral for many years and has obtained his knighthood, is gradually involved in a mysterious affair as he watches with interest both Miss Pulkinhorn, who works for the cathedral, and a tramp, who comes regularly into the chapel of the Sacrament. The tramp comes punctually at half past six in the evening, and worships the Sacrament with a gesture of Abraham depicted in the painted glass. His every action is observed by Sir Edward through a mirror, or what he calls his 'driving mirror', from the organ-loft.<sup>2</sup> This is his daily life for a generation. He supervises the tramp from the place without himself being seen. As if through the same mirror, he surreptitiously observes Miss Pulkinhorn's every conduct, believing that he is never caught watching her.

She is described in this story as a woman who shows a plain dislike

toward the symbolic world of the cathedral; the highly colourful painted glass, the holy services, the choir, the sublime architecture, and the Sacrament. No wonder she hates the tramp who worships the Sacrament in an exhibitionistic manner under the light of the candle. She is interested in the void in the midst of the very light that illuminates the world of splendid symbols. The tramp is suddenly faced with the void as a result of her tactics.

The void within the symbolic world is reminiscent of *The Spire*, in which Dean Jocelin, who stakes his life to build a spire, the quintessence of all the holy symbols in the cathedral, is obliged to admit that there is a pit under the foundation on which the spire is to be built, and that the spire may, therefore, collapse at any moment. Eventually, Jocelin is made acutely aware of the emptiness of his symbolic world. The episode of 'Miss Pulkinhorn', in which the tramp is almost naked under his overcoat, underlies the ending of *The Spire*, in which Jocelin calls Gilbert the sculptor to his deathbed and tells him that his sculpture will dispense with any shroud.<sup>3</sup> However, 'Miss Pulkinhorn' contains too many complicated elements to be read simply as groundwork for *The Spire*. It includes some of the main themes that the author develops in his major works.

In the following discussion, I focus on the light, one of the few depictions of nature in this short story, and point out that while the symbolic world is illuminated by the light, Miss Pulkinhorn's existence leaves a non-symbolic void amidst the light, and that the gazes from the light of Nature try to disrupt Sir Edward's symbolic world.

There is no symbolic world for the tramp except for the Sacrament, the culmination of holy symbols in the cathedral. Since he is virtually naked under his overcoat, what covers up the void within his symbolic world is, first of all, the overcoat, then his gesture of praying like Abraham, and finally the Sacrament. The Sacrament is to him as the spire is to Jocelin. Moreover, both characters have the painted glass of Abraham in common. Like Jocelin, the tramp superimposes Abraham's life on his own, and is utterly infatuated with himself. When the sunlight reaches the Abraham window, it assumes a burst of various secondary colours, and Abraham '[smiles] up with face and hands lifted' ('Miss Pulkinhorn', p. 102), whereas the window is nothing but a black hole unless the sun shines.

Miss Pulkinhorn, having found the Sacrament temporarily brought out by the precentor who is going to visit Canon Blake on his death-bed, sneaks into the chapel, unlocks the cupboard, and lights the candle, expecting that the tramp will pray as usual when the light is burning. Presumably she intended to have shown him that there lurks a void even in the midst of the light that illuminates the symbolic world of the chapel. However, it is beyond her expectation that old Rikeby the verger, without ever noticing the tramp's figure kneeling there to pray, puts out the light, judging that the precentor simply forgot to put it out when he brought out the Sacrament. It has come to such a pass that the tramp experiences not only the void amidst the light but also the dark, gigantic void occupying his visual field. The void within the light instantly extends to every nook and cranny of his symbolic world, and completely dissolves it.

Miss Pulkinhorn decides that the tramp will not come that night because he does not make his half past six visit, so she is going to put out the light that she has lit, when she finds Sir Edward watching her. The

tramp finally shows up long past his usual time. If the light were out, he would go away, as he usually does. The unlit chapel means that the Sacrament has been taken out. She is unable to put out the light due to Sir Edward's watchful eyes. If she were caught extinguishing the light, she would redouble her dubious act. Sir Edward has already detected that she unlocked the cupboard and lit the candle when the Sacrament was not there. However, he still does not realise how she unlocked it. Like a shrewd detective, Sir Edward picks up one clue after another to her mysterious conduct by scrupulously observing any slight change she shows after the event.

The mystery gradually discloses itself as Sir Edward puts together what little circumstantial evidence he finds in her manner. As Paccaud-Huguet aptly points out, one of the clues lies in the sound 'click'.<sup>4</sup> Miss Pulkinhorn comes out of the shadows and walks towards the light, and then she gazes back at Sir Edward's eyes observing her every action. She stops, turns, and walks silently out of the chapel. He finds that her stick does not make the usual sound 'click' as she holds it away from the pavement.

The next time Sir Edward hits on a clue to this sound, he hurries up the north aisle to Evensong and catches his heel on the step. His heel *clicks*. In that instant, he hears Miss Pulkinhorn give a little shriek inside the chapel and a chair falls over. She has been kneeling before the lighted candle, just as the tramp, who has been dead for some months, used to do. Probably, the Sacrament has been taken out and the light is out. She sneaks into the chapel, unlocks the cupboard, and lights the candle, just as she did some months ago, waiting for the tramp to come on time. This time, however, it is not the tramp but Miss Pulkinhorn herself who kneels before the void that has been filled with the Sacrament. Sir Edward

realises that she is oversensitive to 'click', whether it comes from her stick or from his heel, and comes to the conclusion that it is this sound that she makes when she prises the cupboard open.

Sir Edward approaches the final stage of disclosing her mystery: how she managed to unlock the cupboard. He does not fail to notice that her topaz brooch shivers and jumps, and never stops its movement when she comes out of the chapel with her usual dignity. She lost her head when she heard his heel sound 'click', and forgot to re-fasten her brooch, with which she had opened the cupboard.

Miss Pulkinhorn tries to experience for herself what the tramp has gone through because she feels a guilty conscience toward the fact that her simple motive to teach him a lesson has had much more serious effects than she had expected. She simply tries to show him that non-symbolic part of the light which interests her. However, the moment he notices it, it suddenly enlarges its darkness and his symbolic world utterly vanishes, which leads to his madness, hospitalisation, and death. The fear of his experience could be compared with that of sudden blindness. After he is taken to hospital, Sir Edward and Rikeby unwittingly close the gate and lock Miss Pulkinhorn in the cathedral without knowing that she is still there. She has much the same experience as the tramp did when she is confined within the vast darkness of the cathedral all night. This experience also contributes to her guilty conscience.

However, it is actually Sir Edward's watchful eyes that cause her plan for the tramp to deviate widely from its original course, which brings about not only the tramp's unexpected death but also her own death out of deep remorse. Ever since the revelation of Miss Pulkinhorn's trick, Sir Edward's tenacious observation of her gradual inner collapse takes on a sort of obscenity. The process very much resembles that of Jocelin's

dumb accusation against his beloved Goody's illicit liaison with Roger after his voyeuristic detection of their love affair. She is gradually driven into a tight corner and eventually dies from miscarriage. Miss Pulkinhorn, if not a pious believer, works for the cathedral and has some honorary position as a volunteer. Although Sir Edward introduces her as 'an oddity' at the beginning of this story ('Miss Pulkinhorn', p. 99), she is the last person to be accused due to her diligence and dignity. Just as Jocelin regards Goody as a sinner and drives her to death, so Sir Edward endangers Miss Pulkinhorn's life by putting her under his surveillance as if she were a criminal.

Sir Edward has held the respect of the diocese since he got his knighthood. He is, as it were, invested with splendid symbols. However, his voyeuristic eyes turned toward Miss Pulkinhorn's action always have the risk of being gazed at by her eyes filled with symbol-dissolving force. His symbolic world of a knighted organist and would-be authority on the painted glass, the Abraham window in particular, will threaten to crumble if she discloses his voyeurism. He obscenely watches the whole process of her breakdown. Her stick and her head begin to shake. Finally he avoids seeing her as if she were some kind of abject being. Unexpectedly, however, his voyeurism is already known to her. It is her turn to gaze back at his inquisitive eyes.

One night when Sir Edward comes down from the organ loft, expecting to see no one downstairs, because the choir and the congregation have gone, she was sitting on a chair, waiting for him: 'She lifted her chin and fastened her eyes on my face and we stood so far—well, it seemed a long time even in a cathedral' ('Miss Pulkinhorn', p. 107). She declares to him very slowly and distinctly: 'Sir Edward. My conscience is perfectly clear' (*ibid.*, p. 107). These words have a deep connotation. Miss

Pulkinhorn, whose life is numbered, concludes that it is not her but Sir Edward, the voyeur, who is to blame. 'My conscience is perfectly clear' is meant to imply 'Your conscience is not clear'. A week later she dies, and his remorse never leaves him: 'Now I look back after these years I can feel nothing but remorse and shame for my lack of wit [...]' (*ibid.*, p. 102). What he fears is his remembrance of her symbol-dissolving gaze when he meets her for the last time. Not that he has been free from the possibility of meeting the gaze before. There is no guarantee that Miss Pulkinhorn does not gaze back at him from his 'driving mirror' if it happens to catch her figure, although he assumes that he takes up the vantage point from which he can survey others without being seen. He seems to feel the gaze even in the natural light, one of the few depictions of nature in this story.

Sir Edward already knows that it is necessary for him not to look straight at the light in order to retain his symbolic world. When he and Rikeby carry the tramp to the verger's cottage to call an ambulance, he looks up at a great red moon, but it gives almost no light due to the fog. When he remembers that Miss Pulkinhorn is locked in the cathedral, he jumps out of bed and looks at the cathedral, 'huge and squat, with the moonlight glistening icily on the windows' (*ibid.*, p. 105). He does not see the bright moonlight directly but the softened rays. In either case, he unconsciously averts his eyes from the direct beam lest his symbolic world should be threatened by the gaze. While he makes tea and sits smoking after a sleepless night, wondering whether her confinement is not some kind of justice, the moonlight fades and so does his fear of the gaze. He now sees that the roofs of the cathedral are red. In this case, too, he sees the tempered light, not the intense sunlight. It should be noted that the Abraham window assumes 'secondary colours'. So long as Sir Edward

does not see the light directly, his symbolic world is secure. It becomes unstable only when his eyes meet with Miss Pulkinhorn's gaze at the foot of the stairs.

It is Jacques Lacan who formed the theory of gaze inherent in the light. In his early twenties when he was on a small boat, he saw a sardine can floating on the surface of the waves. When he saw the can glittering in the sunlight, it seemed somehow to gaze back at him.<sup>5</sup> According to Lacan, 'the point of gaze operates, not because it can be traversed, but on the contrary because it is opaque' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 96). It 'always participates in the ambiguity of the jewel' (*ibid.*, p. 96). Since the space of light is impenetrable and cannot be seen as it is, it makes us feel as if it were the point of gaze. 'If you wish to see a star of the fifth or six size', Lacan argues, 'do not look straight at it [...]' (*ibid.*, p. 102). In order to see it, we fix our eye to one side instead of looking straight (*ibid.*, p. 102). Sir Edward averts his eyes from the direct rays, and fixes them on the darker side, since the impenetrability of the space of light, like that of the point of gaze, leaves a void within his visual field, thus destabilising his symbolic world.

Needless to say, it is not only the light that makes us feel the gaze. Lacan argues that the gaze is ubiquitous in the spectacle of the world (*ibid.*, p. 75). He takes the *ocelli*, which are seen in the mimicry of the insect, as a typical example of the gaze in Nature (*ibid.*, p. 74). Another example that he shows is the stain. It is in the case of the subject's narcissistic grasp of what has been lost, that is, the function of the gaze in the specular image that he or she searches the universe, be it the light, the *ocelli*, or the stain, for the gaze (*ibid.*, p. 74). In the narcissistic state, the universe is 'all-seeing' (*ibid.*, p. 75). We are 'beings who are looked at,



in the spectacle of the world' (ibid., p. 75). It is this gaze that makes the subject unable to see through it and leaves a void in his or her visual field.

Thus, the gaze he feels in the light is not confined to Miss Pulkinhorn's. Sir Edward's habit of looking into the mirror suggests that he tries to regain the lost object, which was originally his mother's gaze when he was at the mirror stage in his childhood. At the mirror stage, in which the infant begins to recognise its self-image in the mirror, it lives the dual relation with 'every other, all *the others* of the primary narcissistic identification', as well as with the mother.<sup>6</sup> His mother's gaze, therefore, also appears in the form of some others' gaze, be it human or nonhuman, when he is narcissistically captured by the mirror image.

This kind of gaze does more harm than good in that it makes him regress to the mirror stage when his symbolic world was unstable due to the lack of a third term. The closed dual relation with some others makes it impossible for the subject to understand symbolic relations. Only when a third term intervenes between them and keeps them at a certain distance does the subject enter the symbolic world. Thus some others' gaze tends to disrupt the subject's symbolic order and even its visual field. 'When the subject looks at an object', Dylan Evans argues, 'the object is always already gazing back at the subject, but from a point at which the subject cannot see it'.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Sartre unites the gaze with the act of looking, Lacan argues that 'we see, in the dialectic of the eye and the gaze, that there is no coincidence' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 102). He goes on to say: '*You never look at me from the place from which I see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see*' (ibid., p. 103). Thus, there is no complete symbolisation of the object.

The closed dual relationship between the subject and the object,

without any intervening third term that introduces the subject to the symbolic world, would lead to the suffocating impasse. Throughout Golding's fiction, we notice the following schema: when the subject inflicts an organised attack upon the other, in a rationalistic and/or patriarchal manner, in order to resolve the impasse, the first other for the subject—the maternal and her gaze—revives and threatens the subject's symbolic world.

In *Lord of the Flies*, Simon feels a symbol-dissolving force latent in the counter-gaze of the mother pig, whose head is spiked on a stick as a sacrificial offering to an imaginary beast, after she has been killed in an incestuous fashion by the hunters who had tenaciously pursued her: 'At last Simon gave up and looked back; saw the white teeth and dim eyes, the blood—and his gaze was held by that ancient, inescapable recognition'.<sup>8</sup> It is the fascinating effect of the sow's gaze, or the function of the evil eye that transfixes Simon. From ancient times, the eye is maleficent. 'In the Bible and even in the New Testament', Lacan argues, 'there is no good eye, but there are evil eyes all over the place' (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 119). The 'ancient, inescapable recognition' is presumably that of the power of the evil eyes. The evil eye of the gaze freezes movement and terminates life (*ibid.*, pp. 117–18). Immediately after seeing the sow's gaze, Simon falls into a fit of epilepsy, and becomes unconscious and motionless. The patriarchal system of the hunters, who have killed the sow, together with Piggy's rationalistic way of thinking, has their symbolic system undermined as the story comes to an end.

Oa, the earth goddess in *The Inheritors*, plays the role of dissolving the new people's symbolic system imposed on the Neanderthal people. The old woman, who is Oa's incarnation and qualified as the mother of

Nature, is brutally murdered by the new people, who rationalistically utilise Nature or destroy it.

In *Pincher Martin*, Christopher Martin, the hard-boiled rationalist, tries to murder Nathaniel, his friend and colleague, as soon as the latter has been engaged to Mary Lovell, for whom Martin has an insatiable lust. It is Martin himself who is thrown overboard and dies, but the flashback shows that his symbolic world collapses one after another under Mary's gaze when he tries to outrage her. Her gaze, lit by summer lightning, breaks and blights the growing point of his life. He may well liken himself to Actaeon who, having witnessed Diana's bathing, is transformed into a deer by her gaze and killed by his hounds.<sup>9</sup> Here, again, the gaze implies the evil eye. In *Free Fall*, Sammy, like Martin, rationalistically approaches Beatrice and one-sidedly outrages her, only to have his symbolic order threatened by the womb-like darkness of the cupboard in which he is temporarily confined by Dr Halde, the Nazi psychologist.

*The Spire* represents the symbol-dissolving force that is latent in the void just under the foundation on which is built the magnificent symbolic system of the cathedral. Dean Jocelin imagines himself inflicting on Goody, his beloved follower, just what Roger the master builder did on her in their illicit liaison, but Jocelin's mere imagination leads to the collapse of his symbolic order, while Dia Mater, believed to inhabit the pit under the foundation, keeps intimidating him with her symbol-dissolving reaction against the symbolic world of the cathedral. This mishap is caused by the patriarchal system of the chapter allied with Jocelin's rationalistic calculation, from which he takes advantage of the liaison between Roger and Goody for the purpose of binding Roger to the unreasonable construction of the spire.

The symbol-dissolving force of the gaze is effectively depicted in

*The Pyramid*. Just as Oliver's gaze from a blind corner at the evidence of his father's voyeuristic observation of Oliver's open lovemaking with Evie perplexes and dethrones the father, so two eyes of faint light, the furious eyes of a bust of Beethoven, and the red eye of the fire frighten the infant Oliver during his curious scrutiny of Miss Dawlish's dark hall. In Stilbourne, the crudely discriminatory community, Oliver and Henry Williams, with their rationalistic self-interest, utilise Evie and Miss Dawlish respectively, and then dispose of them as though they were filthy things. As a result, Stilbourne assumes the ambience of the stillborn, and the Stilbourne Operatic Society (SOS), which is nested inside the greater pyramid of Stilbourne, sends an SOS.

The symbol-dissolving effect of the gaze is also highlighted in *To the Ends of the Earth: A Sea Trilogy*. Every member of the crew and passenger on board is exposed to each other's watchful eyes from every direction, and the most wretched victim of the voyeuristic observation is Rev. Colley, whose behaviour is eccentric for a clergyman. After he has killed himself due to the crew's atrocious bullying, Talbot, the narrator, has his eyes transfixed to the eyebolt in the ship's side near the head of the bed where Colley died.<sup>10</sup> Since the 'eyebolt' has the implication of the bolt from the eyes, Colley's counter-gaze harbours a destructive force against the symbolic system of the crew and passengers who turned their curious eyes towards him before driving him to suicide. The result is that there is a gradual breakdown of the symbolic system of the ship, which had been maintained by the alliance between the patriarchy of Captain Anderson and the scientific rationalism of Lieutenant Benét.

As mentioned above, Golding often deals with the closed, dual relationship between the self and the other, in which the subject's symbolic order is destabilised by the other when the former rejects the latter

as an eccentric, filthy, or abject being from the patriarchal and/or rationalistic point of view. Given Sir Edward's rationalistic strategy of taking advantage of the angle of his 'driving mirror' to monitor other people, as well as his patriarchal tendency to make light of women, 'Miss Pulkinhorn', albeit a very short story, clearly conveys the author's key concept.

It is 'ecologically irrelevant', Kate Soper argues, to interpret humanity as a subject, Nature as an object, and to insist on our 'essential separation from Nature'.<sup>11</sup> This is true of a subject-object relationship between human beings as well as between humanity and Nature. Lacan rejects every dualistic scheme of thought as a style of the imaginary at the mirror stage when the symbolic order is unstable.<sup>12</sup> This leads to the fallacy of environmentalism in which the natural phenomena that have aesthetic and anthropomorphic appeal are saved, while those excluded from our symbolic system and thus un-symbolised, such as weird, uncanny, or odd beings, even though they are indispensable to ecosystems, are hard to protect.<sup>13</sup>

To repress or exclude these beings would affect not only the ecosystems but also our symbolic system, as implied in Golding's fiction. Sir Edward's symbolic system is doomed to collapse the moment he looks on Miss Pulkinhorn as 'an oddity'.

## NOTES

- 1 Josiane Paccaud-Huguet, 'Playing with Codes: Rites of Perversion and Perverse Masterplot in "Miss Pulkinhorn"', in *Fingering Netsukes: Selected Papers from the First International William Golding Conference*, ed. by Frédéric Regard (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 1995), pp. 63-81 (p. 63n).

- 2 William Golding, 'Miss Pulkinhorn', in *The Penguin Book of Modern British Short Stories*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury (Harmondsworth: Viking Penguin, 1987), pp. 99-107 (p. 101). All further citations and references given in the text are to this edition.
- 3 William Golding, *The Spire* (1964; repr. London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 219.
- 4 Paccaud-Huguet, pp. 63-81 (pp. 78-79).
- 5 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (1979; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 95.
- 6 Louis Althusser, 'Freud and Lacan', in *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, vol. 3, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 44-62 (pp. 54-55).
- 7 Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 72.
- 8 William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (1954; repr. London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 145.
- 9 William Golding, *Pincher Martin* (1956; repr. London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 148.
- 10 William Golding, *To the Ends of the Earth: A Sea Trilogy* (1991; repr. London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 518.
- 11 Kate Soper, *What is Nature?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 47-49.
- 12 Jacques Lacan and Wladimir Granoff, 'Fetishism: The Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real', in *Perversions: Psychodynamics and Therapy*, ed. by Sandor Lorand (London: The Ortolan Press, 1965), pp. 265-76 (p. 274). See also Evans, p. 50.
- 13 Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 138.