

## Tropics:

### Figure and Narrative in William Golding's Sea Trilogy

"For my Conversation, it is like the Sun's"<sup>1</sup>

That Golding's excellent sea trilogy (*Rites of Passage* [1980], *Close Quarters* [1987], and *Fire Down Below* [1989]) is also about language will not surprise anyone who is familiar with it. The narrator Talbot himself, when he gives a one-sentence summary of his narrative, calls it an "account of Edmund Talbot's journey to the ends of the earth and his attempt to learn Tarpaulin."<sup>2</sup> That is, whatever "meaning" we finally choose to impose on the narrative of the voyage, it will have to reckon with what the narrator's remark suggests: his experiences, ordeals, and insights (obviously the source of any possible "meaning" of the story) cannot be separated from his linguistic enterprise.

The trilogy's deep interest in language is reflected in a number of ways: the text is concerned with various verbal or non-verbal systems of representation (theatre, painting, poetry, nautical language), with the ability of language to represent the world, with moments of extreme linguistic strain when the narrator is faced with phenomena that defy verbal rendering, with language as the means and litmus of social existence. Golding's text, however, is not just yet another clever and self-conscious postmodern critique of referentiality; what the trilogy explores is our inevitable implication rather

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (London: Dent, 1959) p. 81

<sup>2</sup> William Golding, *Fire Down Below* (London: Faber, 1990) p. 310. The volumes of the trilogy will hereafter be referred to parenthetically as *ROP* (*Rites of Passage*, London: Faber, 1982), *CQ* (*Close Quarters*, London: Faber, 1988), and *FDB* (*Fire Down Below*).

than imprisonment in language: the text turns with an anthropological interest towards the issue of what it means to exist in/by/through language, to the ways we are using and are being used by language. I have written elsewhere<sup>3</sup> about some crucial aspects of all this in more detail, primarily about the consequences of the use of Tarpaulin words in the text, about the blurred boundaries between language and metalanguage, and about the workings of the slippages between and within metalinguistic terms (“translation,” “metaphor,” “passage,” “transport” etc. are all caught up in a metaphorical chain where their figurative use is a “translation” – that is, a metaphor – of metalinguistic meanings into the non-verbal realm). In what follows I shall explore some of the implications of this “linguistic” universe concerning the trilogy’s imagery, figurativity and narrative logic.

### GONE HOME

For Talbot, who rather fancies himself as a wit, the absolute control of the verbal medium is an essential constituent of his cosmic sense of superiority; language is “so habitual as to be unnoticeable” (*FDB* 89), or rather, the fact that he notices it, playing and punning with it as he pleases, is a mark of his supremacy. Talbot’s extreme verbal self-consciousness is not a sign of doubt or estrangement, but a symptom of excessive self-confidence, an excess or overflow of a mastery confident that there is nothing it cannot do with/to language, a sign of an awareness of the stellar distance separating him from all the other inhabitants of the ship. It is only natural that his primary aim in the course of the voyage is to learn Tarpaulin, “to become wholly master of the sea affair” (*ROP* 6). Talbot is aware that his unassailable authority might suffer unless he becomes *master* (another word for captain) of the ship, a world basically unknown to him. He is also aware that his becoming master of the sea affair can only be attained by the acquisition of the language of the seamen (Tarpaulin). In a sense, he is the enlightened coloniser who knows that proficiency in the language of the natives will clinch his supremacy once and for all.

He duly begins to use his naval dictionary and “conquer” the ship as a verbal universe, believing that the learning of Tarpaulin will simply mean an extension of his vocabulary into a so far unexplored area, and displays his growing proficiency in passages of a veritable intoxication with the technicalities of Tarpaulin. Yet, instead of

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<sup>3</sup> “‘You will forgive the figure’: Language, Metaphor and Translation in William Golding’s *Rites of Passage*,” *British and American Studies* (Timisoara) 2 (1998) pp. 94-102.

bringing him the desired mastery, learning the language presents him with a linguistic experience of a very different kind. It is obvious from the very first moment that Talbot's boarding the ship entails a change (a "sea change") in his experience of language. Something "happens" to language aboard the nameless ship; the change is a moment of wrenching, a fissure. Language somehow becomes perceptible, *getting in the way*, revealed as an "object" between ourselves and the world, ourselves and the others. Talbot's puns are not understood, his foreign words, Greek quotations and mythological allusions are so many insults, his fanciful figures are the dead-ends of communication rather than its embellishments (see, for instance, *ROP* 22, 36, 142; *FDB* 88); words reveal an unexpected and, what is even more important, uncontrollable capacity for ambiguity and polysemy (that is how he unwittingly insults Miss Granham - *ROP* 48-9); frequently he finds himself unable to understand the seamen's language, and not because it is full of abstruse technicalities, but because of the undefinable, yet all-pervasive *alienness* of the language (the best example is probably the carpenter's enigmatic anecdote, *ROP* 79-80 and, in general, Talbot's vaguely humiliating linguistic adventures or tribulations in the underworld of the ship); more and more conversations tend to become "metalinguistic," turning on the shades of meaning of a certain word or expression, addressing issues of verbal representation or communication (*CQ* 170-81), or in various other ways (for instance, Talbot is offered riddles by Summers [*ROP* 135] and Tommy Taylor [*CQ* 278]); certain phrases lose their "meaning" and become like physical objects, exchanged among the inhabitants of the ship like currency ("rendering like an old boot," "we are odd like that"<sup>4</sup>). Language is wrenched from its

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<sup>4</sup> Kevin McCarron, in *The Coincidence of Opposites: William Golding's Later Fiction* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, p. 77), claims that the second phrase plays an important role in the narrative; it is a phrase that comes from Talbot, and the fact that it gains currency among the seamen suggests that Talbot, coming to the end of his initiation ritual, is finally integrated into the world of the ship. The neat interpretation of the trilogy as a three-stage initiation is, I think, contradicted by the text; Talbot is not, cannot be integrated into the world of the ship, not only on account of his personal peccadilloes, but also because the universe of the ship is a world of radical non-integration. Incidentally, the phrase ("I'm odd like that") is not Talbot's: it is one of the idiosyncrasies of the Dickensian purser Mr Jones, used by him in two of his conversations with Talbot (*CQ* 166, *CQ* 260), who then quotes it ironically at Mr Jones to teach the purser a lesson (*CQ* 275); the phrase is adopted by the crew as a "catch phrase" (277), but there is no evidence that Talbot is the source of this "metalinguistic" usage. In fact, inasmuch as Mr Jones is seen as the *source* of the ship's linguistic traffic and commerce, the point is probably exactly that the phrase has no identifiable origin, it is always already circulating (always already a quote). Mr Jones, the *purser* is the invisible origin or still centre of *circulation* in the world of the ship, and the phrase that originates with him is inevitably a verbal unit, a circulating coin whose value (meaning) is totally effaced: its value is its participation in the circulation of

position of transparent medium and controllable “playground” and has to be reckoned with as an unpredictable presence or agent. At sea, language seems to come into its own as an object, vessel, medium of passages (translations) between us and the world, an object (like the ship) whose function is to transport, translate, carry over from one place to another. To live in the ship is to live in translation, in passage, in the passage or translation that language is.

The paradigmatic figure among the seamen who seems to embody the essential experience of being at sea is the halfwitted “ancient midshipman” (CQ 157), Davies, a shadowy figure who no longer speaks at all. His only contribution to conversation is the circular, interminable song he sometimes chants: “It was the beginning and the end of his song. It was the endless end, over and over again” (CQ 160). This is a song that does not mean anything, language finally reduced to the level of noise, of sound. It also illustrates Davies’s narrative situation, as is explained by Mr Askew the gunner: “He’s the real bottom of the barrel, isn’t he? I suppose he might have rose to be a lieutenant if he’d had luck or a shove up the bum from an admiral. But it don’t matter to him now, does it? Not what he was or might have become. He’s had it all and gone home, sir. He don’t hear us, isn’t here” (CQ 160). Davies’s position is beyond the possibility of all narrative outcomes; he is constantly at sea, constantly in movement, yet the movement is totally devoid of any narrative potential. Askew’s central phrase (“gone home”), as he explains to Talbot, is a metaphor:

He’s gone home, like I said. The likes of me, well we’re as hard as the ship’s bitts never having known what it is to have parents and all that gear. But Martin [Davies], you see, he could remember his parents so he has in a manner of speaking a home to go home to, I don’t really mean go home but when he’s like this it’s the same really.

(CQ 161)

Davies is the embodiment of the essential homelessness that the voyage is; homelessness is a condition that is invariably a deprivation, experienced only by those who have had something that can be called a home; Askew has always inhabited, made his home in this homelessness that being at sea turns out to be, but Talbot, like Davies,

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signs. If Mr Jones, the *usurer* who is feared by all is considered to be the centre of the linguistic universe of the trilogy, his language, the language *originating* with him, is language as total (one could say unalloyed) *usure*. For a discussion of the metaphorical relationships between linguistic and monetary circulation, usage and usure, see Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982) p. 209-18.

experiences it as a deprivation, a radically new condition of existence. His moment of homelessness (or the moment when the voyage is revealed as homelessness) comes after Wheeler's suicide, the act that renders his (and Colley's) hutch temporarily inhabitable: "It now came to me that I was homeless! What still puzzles me is that I felt this strange 'homelessness' more than anything else and had some difficulty in restraining my tears" (*CQ* 264). We have seen that this homelessness is defined in the novel as a largely linguistic predicament, a state of wrenching and alienation, a condition in which language, instead of making the world safely habitable, becomes "unhomely," "uncanny." J. Hillis Miller finds an inevitable general analogy between being at sea and linguistic homelessness:

The state of homeless drifting [in a novel's topography] would correspond to an uprooted condition of language. In such a condition, the reference of each word is only another word, the meaning of that word yet another word, and so on. Language moves from word to word in a perpetual drifting, never being pinned down to anything outside language.<sup>5</sup>

Miller's analogy is appropriate inasmuch as the narrative indirectness (or lack of direction) reflects a linguistic indirection (but, at least in Golding's novel, without the oppressive sense of linguistic claustrophobia); it would seem that, narratively, homelessness means the impossibility of *arrival*. When the narrative loses the sense of heading towards an arrival, the chain of meaning working on the microlevels of the text is also likely to suffer from the same indirection. Also, in Golding's novel, there is another, pervasive sense of verbal indirection: the metaphor of translation presides over the text (the addressee of the first part of the journal, the linguistic authority reigning over the world, is Talbot's godfather, the famous translator); words and sentences are misunderstood, messages misdirected, the entire "structure of address"<sup>6</sup> is affected and deflected. Colley's text, for instance, is originally a letter addressed to his sister, but he dies before he could decide whether to send it or not (he himself has doubts about the propriety of doing so); the manuscript is snatched from the dead man's hutch by Talbot who reads it (becoming the text's first unintended addressee). He makes the Marlovean decision of not offending the sensibility of a woman with the

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<sup>5</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Topographies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) p. 11

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996) p. 158. Connor's excellent reading of *Rites of Passage* is centred around instances of the "unreliable semantic passage of meaning" (p. 156) and the constant threat of "deflected destination" (p. 157).

contents of the text and pastes it into his own journal that is also a letter. Colley's letter, thus, ends up as part of a missive to someone he had never met. Besides, the godfather is dead by the time the journal could reach him, so Talbot finds himself in the interesting position of facilitating the passage of a text from one dead person to another. The letter's "home" is not its destination, *arrival*, but its deflection, its moment or process of passage, that is, Talbot's text itself.

This linguistic homelessness involves another sense of "indirection" or rather indirectness: the sea is the place where the passage from signifier to signified is not a direct line. Naming is not direct, literal, but improper, indirect, figurative. We shall see the reasons for this in the figurative logic of the trilogy, but the text offers a narrative metaphor as well: when Summers instructs Talbot about the "advised course for a ship between one point and another" (*CQ* 173), he tells him that ships normally do not "take the direct route" (174). Nor do words and names: the linguistic world of the trilogy is a world of figures (metaphors, translations, carry-overs), a world where the border between the literal and the figurative is dissolved in a general sense of indirectness and indirection. The sea is a place where, for instance, and this is another symptom of the general "mobility" of language, dead metaphors are unexpectedly resuscitated – as Talbot realises in a memorable metalinguistic passage that once again connects the movement of the ship and the movement of meaning. Early in *Close Quarters*, the ship is lamed by an accident: it is "taken aback" by a sudden change in the direction of the wind. Talbot, familiar only with the figurative (that is, for him, literal) meaning of the phrase, is fascinated by the linguistic implications of the occurrence:

What a language is ours, how diverse, how direct in indirection, how completely, and, as it were, unconsciously metaphorical! I was reminded of my years of turning English verse into Latin or Greek and the necessity of finding some plain statement which would convey the sense of what the English poet had wrapped in the brilliant obscuration of figures!

(*CQ* 25)

The passage is organised around three dichotomies: that of dead and alive, direct and indirect, illumination and occlusion (the latter two oppositions rhetorically subverted in oxymorons). Talbot realises that an expression which he has been using automatically as literal, direct, is in fact a metaphorical (catachretical) borrowing from, of all things, Tarpaulin. Talbot discovers a dead metaphor in his own language by coming across the same phrase as a literal expression (the earlier form of "taken aback," thus, is not a live metaphor but a literal expression). Discovering a "dead

metaphor," or identifying an innocuous phrase as a dead (already powerless) metaphor thus paradoxically but automatically entails the resuscitating of the phrase, or rather the returning of it to the moment of/before its "death"; the phrase can now be seen as dead, something that is not possible in the case of non-metaphorical, direct, proper linguistic units. It is the metaphor of death that introduces the possibility of a, perhaps past, life for a piece of language, and, consequently, of the personification of language: the diagnosis of (metaphorical) death is the, as it were, posthumous bestowal of (metaphorical) life. It is via a metaphor ("dead") that the possibility of personifying (certain bits of) language is born (identifying a metaphor as dead implies that it had once been alive, that is, it has gone through the process of dying which is the prerogative of living things), and this creates the possibility for the extension of the death-life figurativity which dominates the passage: metaphor (carrying-over), because of its implication in the figurative logic of death and life, puts Talbot in mind of translation (carrying-over), from a live to a dead language. Dead languages are defined as languages of directness ("plain statements"), languages devoid of the possibility, not of metaphoricity, but of this experience of resuscitation. "Now here was metaphor come across at its origin" (25). What he is talking about, then, is not just the rebirth but the birth (origin) of metaphors – and this is what is really denied to dead languages. Dead languages lack their "seas" and "Tarpaulins," places, or times, as it were, before the forking of the literal and the figurative, the proper and the metaphorical. The sea (Tarpaulin) is not really the place where dead metaphors are still alive, but the place where words still contain the potentiality of being transformed into metaphors. Tarpaulin, then, is not an earlier state of language, a lost semantic and referential utopia of unequivocalness,<sup>7</sup> but a place where language reveals a "secret life" largely

<sup>7</sup> McCarron suggests that Tarpaulin is, even if not a "language of unequivocal relationships," with no scope for ambiguity and duplicity, "considerably less amenable to ambiguity than any other form of discourse within the novels" (p. 83). It is obvious, however, that Tarpaulin is itself rich in dead metaphors and catachreses ("shoe," "heel," "petticoats" etc.), and that the seamen's language is full of figurative expressions (e.g. Tommy Taylor [ROP 39], Mr Askew [ROP 79], Mr Gibbs [ROP 81]). Tarpaulin cannot feature as a referential utopia that is "stripped of all symbolic ambiguity because it has to serve a specific practical end" (Jacques Berthoud, "Introduction" to *The Nigger of 'Narcissus'*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. xxiv), as a "technical language" that is "an instrument wrought into perfection by ages of experience." (Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea* and *A Personal Record*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 13. Calling language an "instrument" could be the first step in a Heideggerian reading of the process whereby language becomes an annoyingly noticeable, alien, uncanny "thing" during the voyage.) Tarpaulin is, rather, an ultimately subversive marine *supplement* of mainland English, a "foreign language" that, however, is revealed to always have been inside "plain" English, as its constantly resurfacing condition.

independent of its users. This discovery is an essential part of Talbot's linguistic "homelessness," which is, after all, not entirely oppressive and claustrophobic, but has much in it of the necessary "achieved" homelessness of an existentialist self-discovery.

In *Rites of Passage*, Talbot attempts to overcome his sense of homelessness by inserting between himself and the alien world of the ship *Falconer's* marine dictionary – not realising that thereby the sense of homelessness is not diminished but increased, that the essential sense of homelessness is the contagious presence of the logic of dictionaries: words have to be explained by other words that in turn require an explanation, and so on until all the words are caught up in the chain that blurs the distinction between language and metalanguage. Doctor Johnson was very much aware of the lexicographer's plight: "And such is the fate of hapless lexicography, that not only darkness, but light, impedes and distresses it."<sup>8</sup>

I saw that one enquiry only gave occasion to another, that book referred to book, that to search was not always to find, and to find was not always to be informed; and thus to pursue perfection, was, like the first inhabitants of Arcadia, to chase the sun, which, when they had reached the hill where he seemed to rest, was still beheld at the same distance from.<sup>9</sup>

Doctor Johnson's parable of the lexicographer is curiously like Hillis Miller's story of man in search of meaning in a drifting world, let alone narratives of the transcendental signified and the endlessly floating or slipping signifier. Besides all this, its central metaphor ("chasing the sun") offers a picturesque parable of the figurative structure that dominates Golding's trilogy: the cluster of figures involving the luminaries of the narrated world. One could say that the world of a narrative is "established" when the stable centre, the light-giving still point of the world is "named," when the source of the light that will illuminate the world is positioned. It is this scene that I shall read now – a scene that is, incidentally, marked by the silent presence of the ancient midshipman, the figure of homelessness.

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Johnson, "Preface to the English Dictionary," *Prose and Poetry*, ed. Mona Wilson (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1950) p. 310.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Johnson, p.317

*SHOOTING THE SUN*

When, early in the first volume, Edmund Talbot is taken on a tour of the ship that is his abode during the voyage to the antipodes, he jestingly asks his guide, midshipman Willis, to give an account of his knowledge. Fired by what seems to be naïve pride, Willis enumerates all his nautical skills, adding that he also knows how “to shoot the sun” (*ROP* 35). As is his habit, Talbot begins to twist and turn the sentences of his rather simple interlocutor, not forgetting to involve and revitalise Willis’ unconsciously used metaphorical phrase: “But what is the composition of the powder that enables you to shoot the sun and should you not be careful lest you damage the source of light and put the day out?” (35). What Talbot does here is a simple literalisation of a figurative expression; he knows what the expression means, thus this rhetorical flourish – as is so often the case in the first volume – is a way of asserting his (verbal) authority by involving a nautical technical term in his self-conscious punning. When Willis tells him that shooting the sun, that is, taking an observation (establishing the position of the ship with a sextant) is an activity that is repeated by several officers on each occasion, Talbot elaborates his conceit: “I see. You do not merely shoot the sun. You subject him to a British Broadside! I shall watch with interest and perhaps take a hand in shooting the sun too as we roll round him” (36).<sup>10</sup> The end of the above sentence triggers off the second stage of involving the sun in a play of metaphors: “You could not do that, sir – answers Willis. – We wait here for the sun to climb up the sky and we measure the angle when it is greatest and take the time too” (36). In his reply, Talbot invokes the authority of Galileo, Copernicus, and Kepler, claiming that the sun’s trajectory is only an apparent movement, but the young midshipman sticks to his version: “Sir, I do not know how the sun may behave among those gentleman ashore but I know that he climbs up the sky in the Royal Navy” (37).

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<sup>10</sup> One of the participants of the ritual is midshipman Davies, who, however, cannot read his sextant – he is unable to shoot the sun. After the ceremony, Talbot sees him descend into the underworld of the ship, “going away with a slow and broken motion for all the world like a stage apparition returning to the tomb” (*ROP* 39). The metaphorical link that connects Davies to the sun and to death at the same time is strengthened in a later remark: “in bright sunlight [Davies] looks more decayed than ever” (*ROP* 104). This metaphorical linkage is one of those instances of semantic residue or excess (Wheeler’s case will be discussed in some detail later) that constitute an irreducible block for any systematic interpretation of the trilogy.

The episode is a typical example of Talbot's verbal behaviour (he also baffles Willis by quoting some ancient Greek and by one of those fanciful metaphors that invariably prove to be stumbling blocks in his conversations with the seamen - 34, 36): his self-conscious punning and figuring is one of the ways of asserting his absolute superiority over his interlocutors by demonstrating his erudition and wit. On the other hand, something more is at stake in this conversation; the scene with Willis is important in establishing the world ("world") of the trilogy. Why is the sun introduced in this way? What *is* the sun in this episode – and in the narrated world? These questions are all the more important since *Rites of Passage* is, as it were, presided over by the sun: Colley's final humiliation that leads to his eventual death takes place "under our vertical sun" (ROP 105), Colley's journal is full of references to the awfulness and majesty of the sun, and Talbot's closing remark definitively locates the narrated world under the aegis of the two luminaries: "With lack of sleep and too much understanding I grow a little crazy, I think, like all men at sea who live too close to each other and too close thereby to all that is monstrous under the sun and moon" (ROP 278).

The first noteworthy thing in this context is that the sun is introduced into the world of the novel as the "sun," that is, as a word rather than its referent: "sun" is a central word, not only because it names the central object of what was then the universe, but also because it may be viewed as a kind of referential utopia, as a master-word, the exemplary stable place in language, a place that is devoid of ambiguity and unequivocalness, "whose referent has the originality of always being original, at least in the representation we give of it. There is only one sun in this system. The proper name, here, is the nonmetaphorical prime mover of metaphor, the father of all figures. Everything turns around it, everything turns toward it."<sup>11</sup> It is interesting, therefore, to see (although seeing is perhaps not the right word here) what happens to the "sun" in a novelistic world that is so emphatically "under" it, exposed to its (or "his") rays. First of all, this piece of perfect literalness and univocity that the "sun" is begins by being entangled in a metaphor – what is more, a metaphor that threatens this stable source of light, Logos and meaning with extinction. The sun makes its first appearance only to be shot – and this is a striking metaphor; although Willis claims that even landlubbers know what the expression means, he means landlubbers of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century: if the metaphor appeared to be dead for Talbot, it is, I think, very much alive for us. The sun is not really part of the metaphor (the metaphorical word is "to shoot" which means "to take aim at something with an instrument"), but it is entangled in it: if it (he) can be metaphorically shot, than it (he) becomes part of a metaphorical chain involving

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<sup>11</sup> Derrida, p. 243.

objects and creatures that can be shot (a bottle, a bird – like the albatross –, or a human being). The sun thus finds itself in an analogical relation with a number of other items; that is, it cannot evade the fate of all such terms, that of being caught up in a metaphorical relation, where “everything begins to function no longer as a sun, but as a star.” The name of the sun “is no longer the proper name of a unique thing which metaphor would *overtake*,”<sup>12</sup> but an at least partly “improper” (figurative) name already caught up in the play of metaphor.

The introduction of the sun, then, establishes the world of the novel as an emphatically verbal, linguistic universe where even the central object of this world is a word, and then, by involving this word in a metaphor before it could appear as a proper name, institutes this universe as a world of unstable, metaphorical chains and slippings. The second metaphor that involves the sun (“the sun climbs”) goes one step further: it is not just that the metaphor (error) is not recognised as such by Willis, but also that its semantic aspect recalls Aristotle’s arguments (and Talbot remains a staunch Aristotelian up to the middle of the second volume, and probably throughout) about the “impropriety” of the name of the sun.

He who has stated that it is a property of the sun to be “the brightest star that moves above the earth” has employed in the property something of a kind which is comprehensible only by sensation, namely “moving above the earth”; and so the property of the sun would not have been correctly assigned, for it will not be manifest, when the sun sets, whether it is still moving above the earth, because sensation then fails us.<sup>13</sup>

“Literal naming – claims J. Hillis Miller – is possible only of things which are open to the senses, phenomenologically perceptible, especially available to eyesight”<sup>14</sup>; and the sun cannot fulfil this criterion for two reasons: first, we cannot see its celestial movement in its entirety, therefore part of the name we give it will be based on conjecture and not on perception; and second, because we cannot, strictly speaking, look at the sun. Even though it provides the possibility of seeing, by looking at it one would see nothing or be blinded.<sup>15</sup> “The sun is not one of those things we encounter, see, and know ‘under the sun.’ The ‘sun’ can therefore only be named in figure, veiled or misted in metaphor, covered by a word or words which serve as a protection against

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, p. 243.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) p. 420

<sup>14</sup> Miller, *Tropes, Parables, Performatives* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990) p. 217

<sup>15</sup> See Miller, *Tropes, Parables, Performatives* p. 217.

the danger of blinding ... Any name for the 'sun' is a kind of blank space in the syntax."<sup>16</sup> The first metaphor, thus, implies that the 'sun,' instead of standing supremely apart from the essential figurativity of language, is inevitably caught up in its metaphorical processes, whereas the second goes much further and identifies the 'sun' as the paradigmatic case of a name that is always already metaphorical: if the sun is the basis of the world in the sense that it makes possible vision, knowledge and truth, this basis is already the exemplary case of figurativity, verbal "impropriety." The 'sun', then, is a strange word, pulled apart by the fact that it is exemplary in two opposing senses:

The trajectory of the sun, its rising and setting, its alternate visibility and invisibility, has been since before Aristotle a paradigm, perhaps the most basic paradigm, both for truth, *aletheia* in its veiling and unveiling, and for metaphor in its covert dependence on catachresis, the figurative naming of that which has no literal name.<sup>17</sup>

Golding's trilogy is, among other things, a novel about tropes – about the tropological, figurative nature of the way we make sense of the world. It is the sun that makes this world visible, and the sun itself is made invisible by the text; the sun, *this sun*, defines the visibility of the metaphors in the narrated world, in two senses: if all metaphors (and tropes) are heliotropes (as Derrida and Miller think they are),<sup>18</sup> this means two things: the founding metaphor of the world is the sun-metaphor (metaphor of the sun), "the turning movement of the sun,"<sup>19</sup> which is a meta-trope, likening the passage of meaning implied in a metaphorical transfer to the turning of the sun, and every metaphor (passage, translation) of the novelistic world is somehow illuminated, inseminated by the sun, and turns toward the sun (heliotropes) like the "climbing plants" (*ROP*, p. 159) in Captain Anderson's private paradise. The sun, this tutelary and originary source of light in the novel, disseminates its light in a world which, in order to be visible, has to be metaphorical. "Shooting the sun" means, in the context of the trilogy, "making the sun invisible," "returning the sun to its original invisibility," acknowledging the originary invisibility (and therefore figurativity) of the source of light and truth: "each time there is sun, metaphor has begun."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Miller, *Tropes, Parables, Performatives*, p. 217.

<sup>17</sup> Miller, *The Linguistic Moment*, p. 141.

<sup>18</sup> See Derrida, p. 251 and Miller, *The Linguistic Moment*, p. 142.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, p. 251.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida, p. 251.

The episode that features the two heliotropic metaphors goes on to describe the actual ceremony of "shooting the sun" when it has "climbed" to its greatest height. As can be expected, Talbot is granted a memorable insight, enlightenment, illumination in the light of the invisible sun: watching the solemn proceedings and the awestruck spectators (the "common" emigrants who live in the fore part of the ship, who, unlike clever Talbot, do not understand what is going on), he sees "such concepts as 'duty,' 'privilege,' 'authority' in a new light. They moved out of books, out of the schoolroom and university into the broader scenes of daily life" (ROP 38). His insight (revelation) is twofold, and doubly figurative, as it should indeed be in the light of this sun. On the one hand, he sees the common sailors and passengers as characters in a personification allegory, but in an oblique way: the abstract categories ("duty," "privilege" and "authority") belong to him not to them; they are *his* duty, and it is insights like this one that grant him the "privilege" and "authority" over them. On the other hand, and this is a different figurative reading of the same scene, this is the first event that is called "rite" (37) by him – the ritual of shooting, instead of, say, propitiating, the sun. The rite is performed by the officers and watched by the simple folks as if they were attending "a religious service" (38). "You might be inclined to think as I did that the glittering instruments were their Mumbo Jumbo. Indeed, Mr Davies's ignorance and Mr Taylor's defective instrument were feet of clay; but I felt they might have a justifiable faith in some of the older officers!" (38). This scene of solar revelation is paradigmatic for another reason. It could be argued that Talbot is trying to occupy or usurp here what he considers to be the position of the sun: he is watching the ceremony as well as the spectators, himself wrapped in the sublime outside-ness of his immobility. He is the source of light (e.g. knowledge about the source of light) and reveals the truth of the world narrated by him, always standing apart, trying to keep a distance that is solar in its absoluteness. This is how he behaves in connection with Colley's ordeal, careful not to be caught up in the dangerous, infectious metaphorical slippings of that story. His first encounter with Colley is a little parable of his later (verbal) attitude: poor seasick Colley stumbles into Talbot and "befouls" his oilskins, but "a heave, shudder and convenient spout of mixed rain and sea *cleaned him off me*" (ROP 16; italics mine).

The fact that he is inextricably involved in, to some extent even responsible for what happens to the clergyman is indicated, among other things, by the rhetorical developments in *Close Quarters* where Talbot is caught up in the metaphorical slippages of the world, *becoming* Colley in many ways (this is an example of how the moral issues raised by the novel are inextricably involved in the verbal and metalinguistic processes).

Perhaps it is not too fanciful to suggest that Talbot the narrator starts out as king Sol, the sun that is a proper name for a motionless source of light — that is, Talbot ignores the narrative, linguistic, social and moral consequences of the Copernican turn he himself invokes; besides, by entangling the ‘sun’ in a metaphorical play before it could become a proper name, Talbot actually undermines his own narrative position, because he continues to use language as if it were under the tutelage of sun as the exemplary proper name; if he is a sun (that is, perhaps, why he is so eager to participate in shooting his rival), he is the ‘sun’ that he himself involves in the slippery world “below,” even if he remains blissfully unaware of this. We could probably suggest that Talbot ends as a lunar storyteller, aware that telling a story is not the revelation of truth but the transmutation of the world. All this, of course, cannot be “true” properly speaking, partly because of the way truth (the light of truth) is conceived of in the narrated world, and partly because this conception implies an altogether too neat narrative of development.

The sun plays a central role in Robert Colley’s narrative as well, and its (his) configuration illustrates the differences between their (Talbot’s and Colley’s, that is) tropes and use of language generally. Colley’s first mention of the sun – in the course of his jubilant description of the “oceanic paradise” – is also a figure: “The sunlight is warm and like a natural benediction” (*ROP* 187). The metaphor implied here identifies the sun as the one who grants the benediction of light, the source and giver of light, and this idea is elaborated in a later passage: “the sun lays such a lively hand on us! We must beware of him lest he strike us down! I am conscious even as I sit here at my *desk* of a warmness about my cheeks that has been occasioned by his rays!” (189). This is an elaborate figure, too, but very different from Talbot’s: the personified sun appears as an agent (representative both in a political and a semiotic sense) of divine power (love and wrath), an actor in the spiritual ordeal into which Colley has imaginatively transformed the voyage. The semiotic relationship that Colley is concerned with is not the one between the sun and ‘sun,’ but that between the sun “itself” and whatever it “stands for.” The sun is no longer a metaphor but a symbol (in the Romantic sense of the term),<sup>21</sup> partaking of what it represents. Even when he refers to the sun allegorically

<sup>21</sup> Their respective uses of the ‘sun’ could be seen as part of a more general opposition: much has been made of the differences between Talbot’s and Colley’s diction by a number of critics who have identified Talbot as an Augustan and Colley as a Romantic (see J. H. Stape, “‘Fiction in the Wild, Modern Manner’: Metanarrative Gesture in William Golding’s *To the End of the Earth* Trilogy,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 38.2, Summer 1992, p. 213; Connor p. 154; Marita Nadal, “William Golding’s *Rites of Passage*: A World in Transition,” in Susana Onega, ed., *Telling Stories: Narrativizing History, Uhistorizing Literature* (Amsterdam –

("king Sol had exerted his full sway" - 225), the celestial orb remains a symbolic representative (part) of the disseminated divine presence. Colley's world is a signifying universe, where everything is a potential figure of God's grandeur or mercy; everything has a spiritual significance, which, however, being by definition unnameable, can only be reached through figurative language. This is not a self-conscious use of figures, but one that is charged with and enforced by an existential and epistemological stake. For Talbot, figures are not catachretic: they do not illuminate new, otherwise unreachable aspects of existence, but simply provide different, fanciful and ingenious ways of saying or naming things that actually have a proper name; for Colley, figures are an extension of language into regions that would otherwise remain unaddressable. There is one more difference: Colley simply cannot afford to relegate (degrade, "sink") the sun to a figurative level in the way Talbot does. One does not even have to look at the sun to suffer: it is enough to face the sun, and to *give it a face* (the meaning of *prosopopeia*) to be *defaced* by it, as Colley realises when he examines his "sun-scorched skin" (*ROP* 225) in the mirror.

The sacrificial ritual, in the course of which Colley is degraded by being once again *defaced* (his face is smeared with ordure and urine - 237) takes place under the aegis of the sun and the moon.

Our huge ship was motionless and her sails still hung down. On her right hand the red sun was setting and on her left the full moon was rising, the one directly across from the other. The two vast luminaries seemed to stare at each other and each to modify the other's light. ... Here plainly to be seen were the very scales of GOD.

(*ROP* 233)

Colley's symbolic sacrificial death (the defacing ritual) is preceded by this apocalyptic moment of stillness and cosmic equilibrium, but the actual event takes place when the scales have already tilted, "the double light faded and we were wrought of ivory and ebony by the moon" (*ROP* 233). This striking and beautiful figure might suggest a change in the configuration of the narrated world, the moment when the sun begins to surrender its supremacy to the secondary luminary; there is indeed such a change, but in *Rites of Passage*, the sun reasserts its supremacy in the episode of Colley's

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Atlanta, Rodopi, 1995], pp. 89-96. It should be noted that Nadal borrows most of her insights from Philip Redpath, *William Golding: A Structural Reading of His Fiction* [London: Vision Press - Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1986].)

total self-degradation (as we have seen, the closing sentence places the narrated world under the double authority of the sun and the moon).

### LUMINARIES

The sun and the moon create the conditions of visibility, which in turn establish the figurative setup of the ship's world, the figurative, tropological (helio- or lunotropic) processes whereby meaning is sought, created and generally speaking illuminated. Truth (the kind of truth that can be revealed under this particular sun) is revealed under, in the light of, the sun and the moon, and the trilogy seems to have a particular rhythm whereby one or the other of these sources of light (that is, metaphorical authority) presides over this or that stretch of the voyage. I would call *Rites of Passage* a decidedly solar text with just one episode, the crucial one of the sacrifice dominated by the moon; in the rest of the trilogy, however, visibility as such becomes problematic. The sun is largely absent from *Close Quarters*, apart from two brief metaphorical appearances as the 'sun': there is the little "private sun" (*CQ* 114) shining on Talbot and Miss Chumley, and the 'sun' appearing in Lieutenant Benét's fanciful simile: the future, he says, belongs to poetry and poetry properly belongs to women, who, when they finally understand this, "will rise in splendour like the sun!" (*CQ* 206). In the absence of the sun, the second volume is dominated by the difficulties of visibility, especially by mist (and by signal flares [49-50] and lanterns, artificial substitutes for the 'natural' sources of light),<sup>22</sup> Talbot feels strange "in our universe which the mist reduced to no more than a portion of our ship" (*CQ* 29); the two ships are "wrapped now in a humid mist

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<sup>22</sup> The source of light that, in a sense, defines or illuminates the world of the two becalmed ships is the metaphorical lightning that strikes Talbot and his world when Miss Chumley appears on the scene. "The lightning that struck the top of the mizzenmast ran down, and melted the conductor into white hot drops. The mast split and flinders shot every way into the mist. The deckhead burst open and the electrical fluid destroyed me. It surrounded the girl who stood before me with a white line of light" (*CQ* 87). The light here is like the sun, in that it reveals the world (the "white line of light" provides a condition of absolute visibility as regards Marion) and destroys whoever is exposed to it (by surrounding the girl it makes her another sun, impossible to look at without the risk of being blinded and destroyed). The "white hot drops" evoke the story of Danae, further confusing the "direction" of the lightning: it enters Talbot, feminising him, and is also directed at Marion, who, however, being a rival luminary, is not destroyed but made more powerful, more visible by this absorbed light. The light of the lightning is also like the moon in that it is a substance that transmutes whatever is immersed in it, in that it is a light that is fire and liquid at the same time.

that seemed to invade my intellect as much as it drifted across our decks" (*CQ* 74; see also 122). Like the sun, the moon makes two, equally metaphorical, appearances. It is first mentioned by Benét, this thoroughly lunar figure, in a fanciful simile, when he likens the hogging and sagging of the ship's wood to the waxing and waning of the moon ("I have sometimes had the fancy that the moon is a ship with all her timbers a-creak, hogging, sagging, rolling, pitching" - *CQ* 181), and reappears in Talbot's poetic effort as he tries to emulate the inspired poetic madness of *Romeo and Juliet* ("Brighter than moonlight, wandering maid" - *CQ* 215). The moon is also present in a diffused, general way, as madness, the *lunacy* that gradually overcomes all the inhabitants of the ship (Talbot is delirious for most of the novel, and when he recovers, Mr Smiles suggests that everybody else is mad [191]; the ship is pervaded by a communal hysteria, an "idiotic decline into phantasy" [220] and a "hysterical, mad hilarity" [271]): and a ship of fools or lunatics is naturally presided over by the moon.

By the time of *Fire Down Below*, the moon seems to have established its (her) sway over the ship: apart from a brief glimpse of the setting sun (*FDB* 122-3), visibility is provided by its reflected light: Talbot's nightly vigils with Summers, for instance, take place on the "moon-drenched" desk (*FDB* 60, see also 52, 128, 157, 229). One would be tempted to say that the reign of the moon reflects (it cannot but reflect) a change in the verbal universe of the trilogy, and in a way this is probably a justifiable surmise. The masculine sun, no matter how deceptive, is still a gravitational centre that makes all other words and tropes heliotropes — and this is true even if the centre undermines the very world that it illuminates. The sun, when looked at, blinds and damages (as it defaces Colley); when, however, it is the invisible source of the light by which the world is examined, it reveals the objects of the world. The moon is not a central celestial body: if it figuratively dominates a world, that particular world is an unstable, wandering half-world that is always on the move.<sup>23</sup> Moonlight does not physically damage: it is a light that does not imply the concept of fire (in the concluding volume, the fire is not up there, but "down below"). A world illuminated by the moon is not a world that is revealed; moonlight does not tear away the mist that hinders visibility, it is itself a light that is also a mist, a veil, an almost tangible substance. "Before me the pool of the waist was full of light to be waded through. I went out, and as I turned to go up the ladders the waxing moon blazed in my face" (*FDB* 83); "this moonlight — one could bathe in it — swim in it" (*FDB* 88; see also 94). Moonlight does not reveal but transform: in the context of the linguistic universe of the trilogy, it does not administer

<sup>23</sup> It is also, like moonlit Patusan in *Lord Jim*, a reflected, second-hand, even ghostly world, its revelations born in and illuminated by a borrowed light.

or assist the metaphorical work of language, but *performs* it – as is obvious from Colley’s sentence quoted above: “the double light faded and we were *wrought* of ivory and ebony by the moon” (ROP 233; my italics). If sunlight reveals a face, moonlight does what we do: it *gives another face* (Deverel and Cumbershum are wearing another face, that is, masks, during the ritual; during the night watch, Summers “wore a *mask of moonlight* as I suppose I did” – FDB 90 [my italics]), transforms faces: “You know, however long I live I shall remember the middle watch” – Talbot says to Summers in a sentimental mood –. “I shall think of it as a kind of – island – out of this world – made of moonlight – a time for confidences when men can say to a – transmuted face what they would never bring out in the daytime” (FDB 94). The moon is the metaphor-maker, the translator, and her supremacy seems to be so strong that, since the position of the ship cannot be taken now with reference to the sun (the chronometers are not working properly), Benét’s method that is somehow connected to “lunar distance” (FDB 24) is being considered. The ascendancy of the moon (one should, but could not say that the sun is totally eclipsed by it) is confirmed when its power of transformation has affected even the originary source of light: “a faint haze reduced the sun to a white roundel much like the full moon” (FDB 106).

In *Fire Down Below*, visibility as such seems to be affected and injured. It is not just that moonlight transforms instead of revealing, but also that the source of light itself seems to disappear; there is no point (stable or moving) that has the privilege of illuminating the others, of providing the light by which everything else is then made visible. One such, apparently sourceless light is the indescribable, “unearthly storm light” (FDB 138, 175) which seems to rise from the darkness of the storm, subverting the very opposition between light and its opposite in terms of the possibilities of visibility: “I had a shadow. But this was not the absence or diminution of light, it was the absence of mist, of rain, of spray” (FDB 133), that is, the obstacles of visibility seem to usurp the role of light and cast a shadow by their absence. Another typical passage describes Talbot’s dream in which he finds himself in “a place lit by a savage light” (FDB 62) of which the only thing that can be said with any certainty is that it is not still (“it leapt and sank, again and again” – FDB 62). The luminary confusion is indicated by the fact that Talbot mistakes the gleam (ominous internal light) of the iceberg for daylight; the typical “luminary” of this part of the narrative (perhaps of the entire narrative) is the ice: “the ice glimmered little more than the sails in some strange light which, now the moon had set, seemed to have no source which was identifiable” (FDB 231).

The sun, however, does not totally disappear from *Fire Down Below*; it, or something like it makes a spectacular metaphysical comeback when the Platonic conception of the world is propagated by Mr Prettiman, in a scene that is crucial in that it also represents or embodies a possible conclusion for Talbot's life narrative.

The introduction of the Platonic theme is preceded by a conversation about the art of "celestial navigation" (*FDB* 88), a theme that is introduced by the ceremony of shooting the sun and is much on Talbot's mind throughout the trilogy, especially in the closing volume where Summers's and Benét's clashing methods divide the ship's inhabitants into factions. In the present context, celestial navigation is important as yet another kind of referential system involving the sun and the moon. In an earlier scene, Talbot remarks the strangeness of our turning the sky into a set of signs: "How awesome to think that we actually use all that up there – make use of the stars and refer to the sun as habitually as to a signpost!" (*FDB* 90). What disturbs the otherwise unreligious and frivolous Talbot is a sense of profanisation of the celestial bodies by degrading them to the level of empty signs that refer to nothing beyond themselves: the sun, when "used" in taking observations, ceases to mean anything; in fact, by becoming a sign or a cipher it effaces itself: in a truly semiotic fashion, it becomes a signifier that does not signify anything apart from its position in the chain or constellation of signifiers. Its entry into the ceremony of observation is not a trace of the sacred, a secularised ritual of the adoration of the sun, but an erasure of the sun. For Summers, the daily rituals have not effaced or abolished the transcendental representativeness of the sun ("No man can contemplate it without being put in mind of his Maker" – 90); for him, as for Colley, the sun is a symbolic (or indexical) sign that refers to its creator. He even quotes the Psalms, and the conversation about the celestial sources of light once again leads inevitably to issues of language and truth: upon hearing the line from the psalms, Talbot calls it a piece of poetry and goes on to ask: "Yet why should putting something into poetry make it truer than if it was in figures?" (90). He juxtaposes poetry (poetic figures) with mathematical figures, ambiguous language with the paradigmatic realm of proper names, absolute unequivocalness, and, since by "talking about" the sublime poetry partakes of its mysteriousness and sublimity, decides that truth (the power to reveal) properly belongs to "improper," that is, figurative language (he assures Miss Chumley already in *Close Quarters* that he has changed sides and is now "an advocate of impropriety" – *CQ* 103).

The conversation with Mr Prettiman that eventually leads to the Platonic theme is concerned with the same juxtaposition; from the discussion of the techniques of celestial navigation, Prettiman and Talbot shift to an exchange of Shakespearean

lines (“This majestic roof, fretted with golden fire –” [*Hamlet*]; “the floor of heaven is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold” [*The Merchant of Venice*]) “so as to” – as Mrs Prettiman remarks – “get the universe on a proper literary footing” (FDB 218). The words are interestingly chosen: the two lines, traditional metaphors of the nocturnal sky, avoid naming directly not only the sky itself but also the sources of light; that is, they are improper namings of the sources of light that reveal the objects of the world. Yet, this literary (figurative, improper) footing is called “proper” by Mrs Prettiman: metaphors are more proper than proper names or mathematical figures in the sense that the universe, as Talbot claims, “is more truly revealed by poetry than prose!” (218). Once again, the discussion of the luminaries and of the languages we have of naming them ends up addressing the issue of truth as revelation. The proper (true) names of the sources of light are metaphors: the world that is illuminated by their light is a world illuminated, revealed by figures; metaphors create and name the celestial bodies in the light of which it is possible to distinguish between proper and improper, literal and figurative.

It is at this point (when the circle is once again short-circuited, when the nature of truth as revelation is defined by reference to the luminaries as metaphors) that Prettiman brings up his Platonic conception of the world:

Oh, look, boy, look! Can the whole be less than good? If it cannot – why, then good is what it must be! Can you not see the gesture, the evidence, the plain statement there, the music – as they used to say, the cry, the absolute! To live in conformity with that, each man to take it to him and open himself to it – I tell you, Edmund, there is not a poor depraved criminal in the land toward which we are moving who could not, by lifting his head, gaze straight into the fire of that love, that χαρις of which we spoke!”

(FDB 218-8)

At this point, the whole text (and the narrated world) arrives at its very limit, and it is not an accident that this passage, although without naming it, is “about” the central luminary of the world. In Prettiman’s sentences, the text imagines the possibility of transcending itself, of getting outside itself. Supposing that that the centre of the world is the sun and that the centre of language is ‘sun,’ we have seen the kind of centre the sun is and the kind of world that is illuminated by it. The sun is a centre of the world as a metaphor, and thus, instead of providing an example of stable, literal naming in the light of which all the other names of the world could then be judged as to their truthfulness as revelative power, it casts forth truth in this thoroughly linguistic

world as trope, figure. Proper naming is simply not possible in this world — partly because every word of this language is also potentially part of a metalanguage (the names of the luminaries are no exception: 'sun' names — figuratively — figure, and 'moonlight' performs figuration). The possibility of looking at the sun would entail a radical reorganising of the whole universe: it would amount to the possibility of naming the sun, of establishing a proper name around which the whole world could be restructured and solidified; on the other hand, the sun that Prettiman thinks one can gaze into is not the sun as such but the Sun of Plato's parable, a metaphorical Sun that represents "the Form of the Good in whose light the truth is seen; it reveals the world, hitherto invisible, and is also a source of life."<sup>24</sup> If the text wants to transcend the limits of its textuality (the impossibility of proper naming, inevitable figurativity), it is bound to textualise the "world," to turn it into a place of figures.

For Prettiman, the impossibility of looking at the sun is not due to its extreme brightness but to the presence of all those things (human figures, metaphors, names) that obstruct our vision: human constructions are like a mist that veils the sun, and the emptiness of the Antipodes will provide him with a place "with nothing between our eyes and the Absolute, our ears and that music" (*FDB* 218); this is indicated by the fact that when he actually tells the story of looking at the Absolute, he talks about "moving by cool night through the deserts of this new land" (218). The act of facing the Absolute, the inhuman that has not yet been touched by human naming, however, is possible only through becoming "inhuman." The fire of the sky (the Absolute, the Form of the Good) can only be seen by itself, that is, fire. The participants of Prettiman's expedition must be transformed into fire, "a fire down below here — sparks of the Absolute" (218). The world of this narrative conclusion, the world where seeing and naming the sun is possible, is a world where light is as diffused as in the nameless ship in the closing volume; this, however, as Talbot's dream attests, is a positive diffusion, a suffusion rather than a diffusion, where the people, as well as any other point of the world, are sources of light in their own right: the "faces" of the dream-characters are "glowing," and the whole world is saturated by what Talbot remembers as "honey light" (*FDB* 312). This possibility, the narrative equivalent of which is the Prettimans's expedition *out of the world* of the novel, cannot be the conclusion of Talbot's journal, simply because it is a narrative that cannot be told in this world, in this language: it is the intimation of a world not "under" the sun but "in the sun." It is a narrative possibility that is always implied in each word, each metaphor as a possible outside, a beyond, but one that cannot be lived and then told. In this

<sup>24</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 4

structural sense, it is like death — at least as death is figured in the trilogy. It *insists* in Talbot's text as an absence, recurring in the place frequently reserved in narratives for the non-narratable residue or detritus that the text produces (not unlike the "undergrowth of weed" that develops in the course of the journey): in Talbot's dreams. It has to remain on that level, for if it were to become an actual narrative, the entire linguistic universe would disintegrate; "because if it was [more than a dream], then I have to start all over again in a universe quite unlike the one which is my sanity and security" (FDB 312).

This solar narrative outcome, then, is outside the world and the linguistic universe of the trilogy. It is there as the intimation of a limit (or transgressing) in every word of the text, but cannot be taken as a narrative route. In fact, the concluding note of the actual journal (the account of the dream reads like an appendix, a text that could not find its proper place in the narrative) is that of the need to protect oneself from the sun. The objective of the voyage turns out to have been Miss Chumley, who, as opposed to bronzed Edmund Talbot, has successfully preserved her essential whiteness (almost an epic epithet; we have seen that her first appearance is an appearance "as" white light, as a figure defined by a "white line of light" – CQ 87) — as chastity and as (and perhaps the two are after all not very different) evidence of not having been exposed to the rays of the sun. As befits a European lady, she, the polar opposite of the Prettimans, lives in the tropics with "something" between herself and the sun — and by stating this, one has involved even her seemingly innocuous *parasol* into the metaphorical play of the text. When they are finally reunited in India under the tropical (heliotropical) sun, she forgets herself for a moment to such an extent that, leaving behind her protective parasol, "she took no heed of the sun" (FDB 311), becoming thereby, as it were, something new under the sun. The phrase, however, is perhaps more resonant: taking no heed of the sun (in the sense of "ignoring the sun") is what she has been doing so far and there is no doubt she will continue to do so. Just like voyage-bronzed Talbot whose face will probably soon resume its customary colour under a more temperate climate. One could perhaps say that Miss Chumley, instead of being a moon-goddess, is a rival sun, a surrogate sun, not unlike Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock*;<sup>25</sup> if the story of the novel is, like the project of the hapless lexicographer, a

<sup>25</sup> Belinda is immediately announced as a rival sun ("Sol through white curtains shot a tim'rous ray, / And oped those eyes that must eclipse the day" l. 13-14); the opening of Canto II further elaborates the similarity between the sun and "the rival of his beams" (II. 3): "Bright as the sun, her eyes the gazers strike, / And, like the sun, they shine on all alike" (II. 13-14). The connection is confirmed by what seems to be (but is not necessarily) Miss Chumley's poetic effort, a text that becomes legible only by accident, marks on

chasing of the sun, the winning of Marion is the winning of a mock-sun that, unlike the "real" sun, is available, that can be looked at. Talbot, instead of choosing the Prettimans' alternative and continuing to chase the sun (Sun), the light that is by definition unreachable, settles for a substitute mock-sun, someone who "takes no heed of the sun."

The "story" of the trilogy in terms of its figuring of light, visibility and language would thus go as follows: the sun dominates *Rites of Passage*, even if its (his) light is not the light of truth but that which turns everything into a (helio)trope; in *Close Quarters*, mist veils the world most of the time, but the presence of the moon is already felt in the lunacy that creeps over the ship; the moon comes into its own in *Fire Down Below*, transforming the world of the novel into a metaphorical universe where even the (deceptive) centre is missing — this is indicated by the fact that by the end, the source of light becomes unidentifiable, thus a linguistic universe ensues where no point (name, world) is more privileged (proper) than any other. Perhaps the world of the novel has been like this throughout, only now it is revealed for what it inevitably must be. This is what is suggested by the fact that the ship remains nameless — the ship is the nameless name of the world where proper names are impossible.<sup>26</sup> There is a growing sense (knowledge) of instability, a loss of the original source of light and a centre-less dissemination of light: the voyage (passage) takes Talbot from a solar world through a suspended world of mist into a lunar world and beyond, into a world where the oppositions between light and darkness, literal and figurative, name and metaphor, are

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the back of Marion's letter that Talbot can only read with the help of a mirror. The lines, in a reversal of Pope's simile, tell of a young woman: "When gentlemen appeared she straight begun / To turn her face as sunflowers to the sun" (*CQ* 212). Talbot effusively, and exaggeratedly, claims that "Pope himself could have done no better than these gently satiric lines" (*CQ* 212), even though the relationship between the poetic fragment and Marion is not at all clear: she is the source of this piece of language in the book, it is, however, not clear whether she is its copier, author, or/and heroine. If the latter is the case, the Popean lines function like a warning concerning Miss Chumley's usurpation of the position of the sun, exposing her as an absorber and not a source of light.

<sup>26</sup> Some critics (McCarron p. 97, Mark Kinkead-Weekes and Ian Gregor, *William Golding* [London: Faber, 1989], p. 271) claim to have identified the name of the ship which they believe is called *Britannia*. The *Britannia* theory, however, to use an appropriate metaphor, does not hold water, for several reasons. First, we know that the girl who is born in the ship is named after the ship and *Britannia* would be a very unlikely name. Also, one does not really see how *Britannia* could have been transformed into an obscenity by the sailors (see *ROP* 34). And finally, tagging a name onto the ship would go against the logic of the narrated world. The ship has a "monstrous *figurehead*" (*ROP* 34) instead of a proper name, the emblem of the name instead of the name.

progressively eroded. The solar alternative returns in a Platonic version but only as a finally non-narrative and non-narratable alternative, something which cannot come to pass, but continues to insist, in a temporality that has to be figured as present: Talbot does not know where it comes from, but, as the very last sentence of the trilogy (with a curious little echo of the concluding sentence of *Mrs Dalloway*) claims, “there it is” (FDB 313).

This is probably a fair narrative account of what happens in the trilogy, at least as regards the handling or trajectory of the luminaries; something, however, is wrong with it. It is somehow too neat in its attempt to arrange the narrated world into a story, a narrative pattern – and, as we shall see, the trilogy seems to resist such schemes. Also, even this story of growing dissemination, of the gradual loss of the proper, of the erosion of metaphysical oppositions, is (has to be) narrated by me as a narrative of accumulating knowledge (the narrative becomes that of the interpreter’s growing wisdom concerning the narrated world); no matter how my narrative is obsessed with the problematisation in the trilogy of concepts like knowledge, light, truth, revelation, it purports to shed light on the story precisely in the way in which this is not possible within the world of the narrative. The conditions of visibility prevailing in the narrated world do not allow the creation of such stories.

The trilogy is full of things (characters, events, figurative clusters) that seem to defy attempts to arrange its world as, for instance, a continuous, segmentable narrative of growing insight and illumination. Regarding the luminaries, a single detail will suffice to illustrate what I mean. One of the most ambiguous characters in the trilogy is Talbot’s servant, Wheeler, who disappears from the ship after Colley’s death, only to return on board after the *Alcyone* appears. After his unlikely return, Wheeler becomes a ghost, a figure of death, haunting Talbot and his cabin (the hutch where Colley died) until he blows his brains out (defacing Talbot) in it. Before his “first death,” Wheeler is an ordinary ship’s servant, trusty supplier of paregoric, oilskins, and gossip. There is, however, a reserve of ambiguity about him – a reserve that urges us to see something “more” in him without clarifying what this surplus meaning is. This residue or surplus is located in a metaphorical halo or aura that appears consistently whenever he is present – and, as it happens, this metaphorical residue has to do with light and luminaries.

Wheeler, surprisingly, is introduced as “a sunny fellow” (ROP 4); in the metaphorical universe of the trilogy, this is a heavily charged adjective, one that positions Wheeler as possessing some special link with the central source of light. The sentence that follows this identification provides an explanation of the adjective in a

striking image: "He smiled at me then as if the deck, close over our heads, had opened and let in some light" (4). This image, quite unlike Talbot's usual rhetorical flourishes (partly because it reflects some genuine observation of somebody else, and because it is inspired by a crisis of naming), suggests that Wheeler is "sunny" not in the sense of 'cheerful' but inasmuch as he is a 'sun-man,' a person "like" the sun, who is able to emanate light. Two sentences later, Wheeler "dowsed the light of his countenance" (*ROP* 5).<sup>27</sup> Two things need to be noted here. First, that the light, the sun-ness of Wheeler is consistently associated with his *face*, and second, that by being identified as a (rather unlikely) sun-character, a giver of light, Wheeler becomes entangled in the metaphorical chain of luminaries that dominates so much of the trilogy: this entails that he is by definition (or by analogy, which is the same thing under this particular sun) a metaphorical, figurative character, one that cannot be faced, looked at, properly named. It is this intriguing excess of meaning attached to him that makes of him a privileged participant of the narrated world – privileged in the sense that such excess of meaning always opens the door for symbolic interpretation or mythological reading (mythological is very often the *name* we give to the semantic residue or excess gathered by a particular character or place). Wheeler has duly been identified with Mephistopheles (on the basis of his "willingness to obtain for a gentleman anything in the wide, wide world" - *ROP* 265),<sup>28</sup> although identifications like this simply provide the excess of meaning with a proper name; the interpretative "advantage" of the mythological name is that, despite its properness or propriety, it manages to preserve something of the excess and "obscurity" or ambiguity of the character. Wheeler is also a "bringer of light" (even though, not allowed to bring a lamp, he offers candles to Talbot, thereby becoming a source or provenance of light - *ROP* 17), but, then, following this up would once again be no more than inventing a proper name for his ambiguity.

Wheeler's 'sun-ness' or luminosity is an element that seems to disturb the vertical structure of the world: one would be inclined to see the key to his mysteriousness in his continuing association with the ship's underworld, yet the figurative cluster generated by Wheeler's semantic excess or residue consistently links him to the sun and the 'sun.' His ambiguity is a 'darkness,' and what seems to be happening is that this hermeneutic darkness is embodied in his "light": his light is the name of the way he occludes rather than illuminates his world. The repeated references

<sup>27</sup> Talbot continues to be intrigued by this light, "that same peculiar light, which is not quite a smile but rather an involuntary expansiveness" (*ROP* 9).

<sup>28</sup> Don Crompton, *The View from the Spire*, p. 150

to his association with light increase rather than dispel the obscurity that surrounds him: Wheeler, who, as a character metaphorically related to the sun, is supposed to shed light on the world around him, himself remains invisible. Talbot finally finds a name for the excess embodied in “his lighted face”: “his *lighted* face – I can find no other description for his expression of understanding all the ways and woes of the world – gave him an air of positive saintliness” (ROP 176), “an expression of holy understanding” (177). His names (“saintly,” “holy”), however, have no consequence, no sense of being properly naming proper names; what they do is endow Wheeler with a certain (sun-like) authority over the narrated world without identifying or clarifying the nature of this authority or knowledge (a knowledge that is surely *more* than the sum total of all the rumours and gossip going around the ship, although the fact that he is someone who passes smoothly between different regions of the ship, like Hermes, and that his authority does seem to be related to this function of being a messenger and interpreter, once again like Hermes, suggests that this authority is at least partly linguistic). The lighted face and the unspecified authority over the world involve Wheeler in the metaphorical chain of luminaries discussed above, and the excess of meaning that makes him so “mysterious” actually serves to transform him into something *less* than a proper character: when he disappears, he is “gone like a dream” (ROP 265). Wheeler is a blank, the appearances of his name in the narrative are what J. Hillis Miller would probably call “surds”<sup>29</sup>: places where the vertical structure of the world is subverted or injured – and places that also disturb the horizontal, narrative patterns of the trilogy. He is a narrative impossibility, a loop in the story line, a character *who can say that he has died*, and a character who, by his implication in the opposing metaphorical chains as well as in several key episodes, seems to contaminate whoever has contact with him. His “saintliness” and the fact that he disappears after Colley’s death links him to the clergyman, and through his suicide in the hutch that used to belong to Colley but is now inhabited by Talbot, he becomes the embodiment of that unidentified and unidentifiable link that exists between Colley and Talbot – more of this later.

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<sup>29</sup> Wheeler is also a subversive element in terms of the relationship between language and metalanguage – in two ways: he is referred to by Talbot as a “walking falconer” (ROP 14) or “living falconer” (ROP 62), that is, as someone with the authority to reveal the objects of the world by naming them, and he is the chief supplier of paregoric which, as Valentine Cunningham has noticed, is also a metalinguistic term, meaning “smooth(ing) talk” (see Valentine Cunningham, *In the Reading Gaol: Postmodernity, Texts, and History* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1994], pp.193–4).

Wheeler's participation in the metaphorical world of luminaries does not "explain" him; nor does it shed any light on the trajectory of the celestial bodies (therefore on the nature of light, seeing and truth) in the trilogy. He is an irreducible element that complicates the neat pattern of solar and lunar narrative (although, if he is the sun in some sense, the destruction of his "shining baldness" and "lighted face" at the end of the second volume is perhaps "appropriate"), a peripheral character who, by his implication in what seems to be the tutelary figurative system presiding over the world of the trilogy, becomes central to whatever interpretative scheme we choose to impose on the narrative.

#### THE ART OF SINKING

One of the most striking features of the (linguistic) universe of the sea trilogy is its handling of tropes. Most of the dominant tropes (that is, names of tropes) of the text partake of the sylleptic quality of its language in that they are both literal and figurative: as literal names, they refer to figurative processes and passages (that is, they are metalinguistic), and as figurative terms (tropes), they refer to the non-verbal(?) realm of the story and the characters. The most typical examples are, of course, "metaphor" and "translation" itself; caught up in the chain of analogy that connects them to each other and to other (originally not metalinguistic or rhetorical) terms such as "passage" and "transport," they transform the diegetic world of the trilogy into a rhetorical universe, without depriving it of "human interest," that is, of the relevance and stake of moral and social issues – since what happens is not just the rhetoricisation of the narrated world but also the mobilisation of rhetorical technical terms in the opposite direction. The result is what we could call the prevalence of *narrative tropes*. One example will suffice here.

Bathos is the rhetorical term that names an (unintentional) anticlimax, a kind of *falling short* of the intended effect at the moment of what should be the point of the highest emotional tension. The term is used "appropriately" in *Close Quarters* when Talbot endeavours to describe the strange world of the two becalmed ships, wrapped in mist in the middle of the ocean, fastened together for a day, and he finds that he simply cannot convey the sense of what that little universe was like: "What bathos! I have tried to say what I mean and cannot" (CQ 75). Another reference to bathos occurs in Talbot's comment on the corporate poetic effort of the seamen with which they entertain the passengers on the night of carnival. "He wound to a peroration which was concerned neither with loyalty nor duty but *food!* Was there ever anything at all like the

*art of sinking?*” (CQ 115). This self-conscious reference to the text in which Pope introduced the concept of bathos is somewhat ambiguous, for it is not entirely clear whether Talbot considers the bathos intentional or the result of the artists’s ineptitude. Nevertheless, in these instances, the term retains its rhetorical (that is, literal) frame of reference. All this, however, occurs when the term has already been introduced in much more ambiguous circumstances. The word is first used when Talbot sums up Colley’s fate:

Now the poor man’s drama is done and he stands there, how many miles down, on his cannonballs, alone, as Mr Coleridge says, all, all alone. It seems a different sort of *bathos* (your lordship, as Colley might say, will note the amusing ‘paranomasia’) to return to the small change of day to day with no drama in it.

(ROP 264)

Even if we disregard the fact that the word “paranomasia” is a quotation from Colley’s text, there is a complicated process of slippage going on here, of which Talbot is only partly in control, simply because a number of other paranomastic terms are being mobilised. The word that is paranomastic here, *bathos*, is a purely rhetorical (metalinguistic) term that refers to a downward movement, a sinking – but exclusively within language. The literal meaning of the word is the name of a figure. Talbot, however, uses it to denote three different processes: the physical sinking of Colley’s corpse (to do this, the rhetorical term has to be used metaphorically, its meaning carried over into a different realm), the moral/spiritual fall of Colley (this usage translates the narrative movement into a rhetorical category, and also implies the metaphorical use of the rhetorical term, for the process described is definitely *not* rhetorical), and the bathetic resumption of ordinary existence after the spiritual drama and excitement of Colley’s story; this use is still based upon the metaphorical use of bathos, since another, later, narrative development is named by a rhetorical trope. It is interesting that the second and third senses of the paranomastic term contradict each other: if the fall of Colley can be seen as bathetic, it was a comic and degrading kind of fall (earlier, when the clergyman is still alive, Talbot calls it a farce and not a tragedy, because, as he says, “the man appears now a sort of Punchinello. His fall is in social terms. Death does not come into it ... [h]e has committed no crime, broken no law” – ROP 104). The third sense of the paranomastic expression, however, implies that the spiritual drama was something elevated and noble, compared to which everyday life is *low*. Since Talbot’s previous sentence does not contain any stylistic or emotional

anticlimax, the rhetorical expression is used in three different senses, none of which is a literal (that is, metalinguistic) sense. The rhetorical term has remained a trope but one that refers to narrative instead of purely verbal movements. What is at stake here ultimately has to do with the troping of death. The paranomasia of *bathos* involves the event of death in the metaphorical chain that connects passage, translation, transport and a group of vertical (downward and upward) movements: sinking, fall, descent, transportation, translation. The contradictory senses of *bathos* imply a contradiction in what precedes the narrative *bathos*: if Colley's death itself is bathetic, it is defined as a downward translation, a sinking. If Colley's death is an event (trope) in relation to which everyday existence is seen as something low, then the death is an upward translation.

Three things need to be noted here. The first is that the involvement of *bathos* in the slippages of *translation*, *metaphor* etc. entails that a number of other, originally non-rhetorical terms (*sinking*, *fall*, *descent*) are also caught up in the chain, therefore they can all be read as paranomastic narrative tropes (the fall of Prettiman [FDB 59, 69]; Talbot's "uncommon knack of falling about" [FDB 69]; Talbot's "killing" of Prettiman that is experienced by him "like falling into the darkness of a measureless pit" [FDB 148]; and, of course, Colley's fall [ROP 104, 278]; Talbot's descents into the nether world of the ship – one in each volume – are all instances of *katabasis*, that is, a descent into the underworld [CQ 156, 164]).

The second implication of this figurative-narrative logic is that the involvement of these terms implies a slippage between horizontal or neutral passages and vertical ones, introducing a narrative ambiguity by rhetorical means. This slippage comes to pass in two senses. In one case, rhetorical terms and rhetoricised words of movement might work as local narrative tropes, thereby performing a crucial function: by translating the horizontal contiguity of action and causality into a possibility of vertical movement, they create narrative levels and thus offer the possibility of a spatial reading – be it in terms of a hierarchy of narrative levels or of "symbolicity," which always implies the vertical organisation of ontological levels, the logic of surfaces and depths. The other sense in which this slippage is significant has to do with the fact that the entire journey is a passage, a translation, a carrying over; therefore any term that is involved in the metaphorical slippages might be considered as a self-reflexive narrative trope that paranomastically "names" the passage from Britain to the antipodes as a rhetorical operation (translation, transportation, fall, descent, etc.): "a voyage from the top of the world to the bottom" (CQ 4).

The third implication is that these narrative tropes (tropes of horizontal and/or vertical movements) seem to cluster around places where the *event of death* has to be named. In some cases, such paranomastic terms of (rhetorical and narrative) movement “name” a local narrative event, the voyage as a whole, and a rhetorical operation, as well as participating in the trilogy’s effort to somehow “deal with” the final passage, the event of death.

To talk of *sinking* in a ship is never wholly innocent: even a straightforward rhetorical term is charged with a figurative connotation, becomes dangerously paranomastic or sylleptic, where the figurative sense is inevitably narrative. *Close Quarters* is full of such ambiguous references to sinking (194, 196, 237, 259, 261, 278). Some of these uses are explicitly metaphorical, some only by virtue of being involved in the play of slippages and passages, but they all proleptically imply “the final sinking, the end of everything” (FDB 244). The central episode in this respect is a conversation that brings together all the elements mentioned above. It is a conversation overshadowed by the constant threat of sinking, and initiated by the marine artist Brocklebank. Brocklebank’s “great question” concerns what we may call the *art of sinking*: “How does a ship sink when it is not seen or recorded?” (CQ 240). Interestingly, the paranomasia involved in the verb is transferred onto the interrogatory word “how.” For what Brocklebank means is not a problem of representation: “No, sir. It is a question not of paint but of conduct” (241). That is: how does one die? What happens when one takes the final passage? This is, I believe, the final stake of all the play of slippages and passages, of the confusion of literal and figurative, tropological and narrative, linguistic and metalinguistic levels, of the ambiguous, tropological light of the novel’s luminaries. After Colley’s death, the text becomes thoroughly sylleptic: on the one hand, the narrative account of the story (the voyage) that continues, relating the things that take place, but, on the other hand, also a persistent attempt to *come to terms* (rhetorical, figurative or technical terms) with the residue of Colley’s passage: the account of the passage is also, secretly, trying to become the account of the other passage, trying to make it narratable, to make it into an event. “The dead – writes Lyotard – are not dead so long as the living have not recorded their death in narratives. Death is a matter for archives. One is dead when one is narrated and no longer anything but narrated.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event*, p. 112

## FACES

Colley's death is the major event of the trilogy, an event in the sense that is given to the word by Lyotard: something is an event "insofar as it refuses to be absorbed into the order of a classical narrative, brought to book in a narrative account."<sup>31</sup> The event disrupts rather than solidifies narrative coherence; it cannot be integrated, narratively arranged, it is not a node or knot of the narrative surface but an absence, a gap, an endless interruption that is also an irruption (Colley's death *is* in fact an interruption, an interruption of a conversation that is largely concerned with the pictorial representation of death). J. Hillis Miller writes:

Death is never experienced as an event. What can be seen is the change of the other from live body to dead body, corpse, inanimate matter. We call that change death, but what we want to experience and be able to name is the transition from life to death. We want to follow someone from one realm to the other, but be able to come back and tell the story of this journey.<sup>32</sup>

Colley's death is the archetypal event as ongoing disruption and irruption, or, to quote Miller who says the opposite but means the same, the "immemorial non-event" (Miller, *Ariadne* 249). The conversation in the course of which Brocklebank raises the great question of the art of sinking ends with the painter's absurd attempt to interview the resurrected Wheeler about the experience of the passage of dying (*CQ* 242). Wheeler, however, has no story, no words. Death, even the death that he has survived, is "radically resistant to the order of representation."<sup>33</sup>

One could probably argue that the aftermath of Colley's death is the attempt to name, to represent this death as a narratable, integrable event. Colley himself is aware of the therapeutic value of narrativisation: he is able to make a narrative out of the sacrificial ritual that involves his first humiliation (defacement): "I see without any disguise *what happened*. There is much health in that phrase *what happened*. To clear away the, as it were, undergrowth of my own feelings, my terror, my disgust, my indignation, clears a path by which I have come to exercise a proper judgement" (*ROP* 239-40). The first humiliation can still be turned into a story, but after the second humiliation, Colley

<sup>31</sup> Lyotard, qtd. in Bennington, p. 109.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, *Ariadne's Thread* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) p. 249-50

<sup>33</sup> S. Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 26

has run out of words. From this point, the narrative carries with itself his death, trying to name it (“low fever” and “dying of shame” are two of the metaphors); his death becomes the gap, the residue, the excess that disturbs and confuses the narrative line, it is an undergrowth, a “marine growth” (*CQ* 14) like the weed that attaches itself to the ship during the voyage. It is this death that makes the trilogy refuse neat narrative patterns of interpretation: Colley’s death is an event that does not *come to pass*, an event that does not become past, and all the disturbing narrative loops (Wheeler’s survival of his death by drowning) and gaps are in a way the residue of this death. Michel Tournier’s *Robinson* suggests that to survive is to die; in the trilogy, Colley’s death is his survival; every death and every irrational event is a repetition of his death, an irruption of his absence. The narrative of the journey is also a text of *mourning*, of the attempt to integrate, to represent this fissure.

Representations of death are misrepresentations, or rather representations of an absence. The paradox at the heart of the representation of death is best conveyed by the figure of *prosopopeia*, ... a form which implies the failure of presence, a face which withdraws behind the form which presents it.<sup>34</sup>

Prosopopeia, “the ascribing of a name, a face, and a voice to the absent, the inanimate, or the dead,” is called by Hillis Miller “the trope of mourning.”<sup>35</sup> In Golding’s trilogy, prosopopeia is certainly the trope of mourning James Colley. The name of the trope etymologically means the giving of a face, and Talbot has the double task of giving a face (a representable face) to Colley’s death, and to perform something like a work of repentance: the undoing of his own defacement of Colley. In *Rites of Passage*, Talbot uses Colley’s appearance, and especially his face, as a kind of training ground where he can display his rhetorical skills (his art of sinking as defacing) to best advantage. Colley has no face, but a “casual assemblage of features” (*ROP* 42), a “curious assemblage of features” (*ROP* 72); the “disorder of his face” (42) is the occasion for some of Talbot’s most spectacular rhetorical flourishes: “Nature has pitched – no, the verb is too active. Well then, on some corner of Time’s beach, or on the muddy rim of one of her more insignificant rivulets, there have been washed together casually and indifferently a

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<sup>34</sup> Critchley, p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990) p. 4. See also Miller, *Ariadne’s Thread*, p. 251, James Paxson, *The Poetics of Personification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) p. 26-7, 52, and Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 75-6.

number of features that Nature had tossed away as of no use to any of her creations" (ROP 66-7). When not verbally destroying Colley's face, Talbot allegorises him (ROP 106) or simply "reject[s] him as a human being" (ROP 122).

These are all rhetorical strategies of degradation, defacement, dehumanisation – the very opposite of what is involved in prosopopeia. The fundamental rhetorical energies of the trilogy are those of prosopopeia, involved in the impossible project of *giving back* James Colley's face. The survival of Colley, as I have suggested, is his death: by dying, he (or his absence) becomes the subversive, disruptive, unrepresentable element in the narrative, the unnameable origin of all the unnameable elements of the world, the thing to which a face must be given. Personification and prosopopeia, therefore, are in the trilogy always existentially charged; they are places where language *as* the language that addresses death is condensed.

This is what accounts for the double nature of Colley's presence (insistence) in the two final volumes. On the one hand, he survives (or insists) in later parts of the narrative as *language*, more precisely, as a kind of verbal behaviour and style; even more precisely, as the name of a kind of language that would be able to describe what Talbot cannot describe (all these elements are metaphorical repetitions of his death, the origin of unnameability: Colley is the only one who could describe, tell his final passage). Whenever Talbot comes up against something that he feels is beyond his verbal resources, he evokes Colley: "Colley's pen" becomes a shorthand for the presence of that which cannot be described (see *CQ* 69, 133, 156). One could say that the unrepresentable automatically raises Colley's ghost, or that, in order to describe the unrepresentable, Talbot would have to *become* Colley, that is, dead: more precisely, someone who died Colley's death. Successful prosopopeia, that is the ability to give a face to the inhuman, the inanimate, would require Colley's pen, his figurative energies. In fact, it is Colley who realises that the sea voyage is a condition of essential homelessness in the sense of being cast into a region that is radically inhuman: "Here we are, suspended between the land below the waters and the sky like a nut on a branch or a leaf on a pond! I cannot convey to you, my dear sister, my sense of horror, or shall I say, my sense of our being living souls in this place where surely, I thought, no man ought to be!" (ROP 192-3; Talbot is troubled by the *repetition* of this idea in the later volumes, see for instance *FDB* 180, or *FDB* 134, where he calls the raging sea "a place which surely was not for men"). On the other hand, it is also Colley who first personifies, or at least animates the sea in a memorable image which, however, does not make the sea more human or less formidable: the surface of the sea was "as if the water were not only the home and haunt of all sea creatures but the skin of a living

thing, a creature even vaster than Leviathan” (ROP 219). It is interesting to compare Colley’s prosopopeias, inspired by a sense of sublimity, with Talbot’s clever personifications in *Rites of Passage* (e. g. 19-20) which entirely lack the stake the figure has in Colley’s language; Colley’s prosopopeias are attempts to name the unnameable, whereas for the Talbot of the first novel, the unnameable simply does not exist. Colley’s death is the birth of the unnameable in Talbot’s language, and it is no wonder that every occurrence of the unnameable becomes the potential repetition or metaphor of this death, which is itself invisible, unrepresentable.

The radically inhuman force to which most of the prosopopeic energies of the trilogy are devoted is of course the sea (see Summers’s strangely scientific definition and account of the habit of “earlier peoples, savage peoples and poets” to credit the sea with thoughts and feelings [CQ 170] or Talbot’s attempts at the sublime through the prosopopeia of the sea [e. g. FDB 136, 232]). The ultimate test case of the personification of the sea in the trilogy is Byron’s famous invocation at the end of Canto 4 of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Lady Somerset, an admirer of Byron, even quotes the famous line (“Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean—roll!” - CQ 98); the effect, however, is somewhat diminished by the fact that the same invocation is earlier referred to rather condescendingly by a sceptical Talbot who at this point is still Pope’s champion: “The present weather is sharply defining our horizon for us in a dense blue which obeys Lord Byron’s famous injunction and continues to roll on endlessly – such is the power of verse!” (CQ 5) What seems to be a wry and cynical comment is actually a reference to a text that illustrates the paradox of prosopopeia, of ascribing a face to the absolutely alien. Byron’s stanzas define the sea as the realm that is absolutely and irreducibly alien, defying human intrusion, a place where the human disappears without a trace: if it has any “meaning” for the human intruders, it is death:

The wrecks are all thy deed, nor doth remain  
A shadow of man’s ravage, save his own,  
When, for a moment, like a drop of rain,  
He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan,  
Without a grave, unknell’d, uncoffin’d, and unknown.

(CLXXIX)

On the other hand, this force or element that is absolutely alien and inhuman is addressed throughout the text, even though the words say that the thing they are addressing cannot be addressed at all. Also, prosopopeic figures (“Time writes no wrinkle on thy azure brow” - CLXXXII) abound in the text that implicitly calls any

personification of the sea a kind of narcissistic nonsense where the words will only fall back upon the speaker. This paradox is overcome and sublated by another paradoxical move: the invocatory stanzas are preceded by a rhetorical manoeuvre whereby the speaker leaves behind the human sphere and becomes part of that which he is about to address: in order to communicate with the inhuman (to have "interviews" with it - CLXXVIII), he has to shed his humanity, "To mingle with the Universe, and feel / What I can ne'er express, yet can not all conceal" (CLXXVIII). Childe Harold's invocation, then, is alluded to not only because it is part of the playful juxtaposition of the Augustan and the Romantic in the trilogy, but also because it is a clear example of the basic paradox of prosopopeia, identified by James Paxson as its chiasmic structure:<sup>36</sup> the giving of a face to the dead or the inhuman entails that the speaker become deprived of his/her face, defaced, faceless, inhuman or dead (this is, incidentally, the logic behind the rhetoric of Prettiman's utopia of gazing at the sun). In the figurative economy of Golding's trilogy, prosopopeia, the attempt to name the unnameable, is also always the raising of Reverend Colley, a gesture of mourning. Addressing the sea is also addressing (the death of) Colley.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Paxson, p. 52.

<sup>37</sup> As I have tried to suggest several times (in relation to the defacing of Colley during the ritual and his rhetorical defacing in Talbot's journal; Wheeler's "lighted face"; Summers's "transmuted face" during the night watch, etc.), *face* is one of the most highly charged words throughout the trilogy. Already in *Rites of Passage*, Brocklebank (a painter specializing in naval death and portraiture) is worried about the special difficulties that will be presented by a black face in the antipodes (60); Talbot refers to his godfather's advice, according to which he has to learn "to read faces" (*ROP* 61). One of the crucial scenes of *Fire Down Below* can be read as another parable about the paradox of prosopopeia: the spectacle of the iceberg is obviously the encounter with the absolutely alien, the unnameable (its counterpart is a narrative blank or lacuna, involving some sort of unspecified intimacy with Celia Brocklebank - *FDB* 247): the iceberg is the faceless force of nature, totally indifferent to human presence, yet, it has to be given a face if it is to be referred to (the account of the unnarratable episode is full of prosopopeias: 241, 242, 243); what is more, the central moment of the episode (a kind of limit moment) is the ascription of figures and faces to the wall of ice ("I saw a mélange of visions in the ice which swept past me - figures trapped in the ice, my father among them" [*FDB* 244]); the ultimate position of this episode is suggested by the fact that this is the only reference to Talbot's father throughout the entire trilogy: the father - symbolic rather than physical - appears as the *face* of the absolutely, ultimately alien, but the reference is not a recovery or restitution of some paternal, and the accompanying narrative/symbolic authority over alienness and homelessness. The implication is the opposite: through this reference, the so far absent father becomes involved in the logic of faces, and connected to whatever the iceberg is seen to "mean" in the narrative.

Narratively (this is the other aspect of his survival), Colley survives as *repetition*, the force that creates loops in the straight story line of the voyage; in the trilogy, repetition is potentially the repetition of death. The narrative trope for repetition as the possibility of death, for return as absence, is of course a ghost (the French for ghost is 'revenant,' 'the one who returns'); Colley seems to have gone "underground" and continually haunts the ship. Talbot feels him behind the madness that creeps over the ship ("I could not but feel that the ghost of Colley was roaming the ship" - *CQ* 274-5; "perhaps it was the unappeased 'larva' of Colley creeping about the ship like a filthy smell which was the 'motus' of our idiotic decline into phantasy!" - *CQ* 220). Colley (or the death of Colley, or Colley as death) as repetition also haunts the ship by contaminating other characters who thus become Colley. Wheeler returns after his death to haunt Talbot and his (Colley's) hutch as a ghost (*CQ* 53, 68), both alive and dead, a character who can say: "I drowned, sir" (*CQ* 53) and who can be mortally afraid of drowning *again* (*CQ* 233). Talbot also becomes Colley by repeating the clergyman's "fall" in *Close Quarters* (making a public display of himself in a delirious state, occupying Colley's hutch which is a mirror image of his own, even coming to resemble him). By the end of the voyage, or rather, after the end of the voyage, Talbot even refers to himself as a ghost: "I wondered round, therefore, a revisiting ghost" (*FDB* 274). The contaminating power of Colley's death is so great that at one point the ship itself becomes a ghost, in a sentence evocative of Colley's image that I have quoted twice: "The ship was a ghost, a spirit of silver and ivory" (*FDB* 83).

These aspects of Colley's survival or insistence, as well as the figurative cluster related to it, come together in one of the central episodes of the trilogy, the vision of the monstrous face in *Close Quarters*. The ship's progress (the narrative movement) is disturbed in several ways after Colley's death: on the one hand, it is uneven, lopsided, arrhythmical (as a result of the negligence of Lieutenant Deverel when the ship was taken aback), and, on the other, it is too slow, partly because the ship was partially dismasted, and partly because of the undergrowth of weed that began to accumulate at the time of Colley's sacrifice, when the ship was becalmed; in a sense, the weed is the narrative trope of all the undergrowth (repetitions, disturbing episodes, dreams, doldrums, etc.) that impedes fast narrative movement. Lieutenant Benét suggests a rather unorthodox method of getting rid of some of this undergrowth and making narrative progress faster: he suggests that the underside of the ship should be cleaned with the dragrope, a practice that is normally used only in the case of ships that are in berth. In metaphorical terms, this means an attempt to get rid of the story's undergrowth without stopping. The risk of the procedure is that the weed might be

attached to the hulk with such force that (partly because the wood of the ship is rotten), by removing it, parts of the ship might be broken off and the ship might take too much water (the figurative implications are obvious). Something like this happens here: there is a groaning noise from below, a confusion aboard, and something rises out of the sea beside the ship:

I have seen all this and much else which was to come in nightmare, not once but several times, and shall do so again. In nightmare the shape is bigger and rises wholly awesome and dreadful. My dreaming spirit fears as my waking spirit fears that one night the thing will emerge, bringing with it a load of weed that only half conceals a face. I do not know what face and do not care to dally longer with the thought. But then, that morning in the wind, the salt air, the rocking, heaving ship, I saw with waking eyes down by the crazily unstable waterline something like the crown of a head pushing up through the weed. Someone screamed by my shoulder, a horrible, male scream. The thing rose, a waggonload of weed festooned round and over it. It was a head or a fist or the forearm of something vast as Leviathan.

(CQ 257)

The event is a rising: a "shape," a "thing" rises from below. The "thing" has, must have a "meaning," must be addressed, made part of the text, and therefore be given a face. The thing, however, is already a "face." It can be seen as the face of the sea as a destructive depth, a hungry mouth or a stomach, an underworld waiting for its victims (the reference to Leviathan would seem to support this view, since it is an echo of Colley's image of the sea). On the other hand, it can also be the face of the ship, because the bits of the vessel that have probably been broken off are also part of the face. It is a composite face, made of the flotsam of the sea, bits of the ship, and the weed that grows at the line where the two meet.<sup>38</sup> It is an uncanny face, rising as the repetition of something that is familiar: it has been suggested that the face is Colley's ghost.<sup>39</sup> Saying that the face is not Colley's ghost is not, strictly speaking, true. However, Colley's ghost is much more than the face just as the face is not exhausted by being identified as Colley's ghost. It *is* a repetition of Colley's death inasmuch as it is an event that cannot be integrated, inasmuch as every giving of a face is a raising of Colley.

<sup>38</sup> Even the invocatory stanzas of *Childe Harold* are evoked: "Dark-heaving:—boundless, endless, and sublime— / The image of Eternity—the throne / Of the Invisible; even from out thy slime / The monsters of the deep are made" (C1.XXXIII).

<sup>39</sup> McCarron, p. 116.

This justifiable identification, however, betrays the basic narrative and figurative paradox of the episode: the thing is a repetition of Colley, of Colley's death, that is, the repetition of the very thing that awaits naming, narrativising, the allocation of meaning. A repetition of the central defacement of the text, a repetition of the "event" that erupts into the narrative as something totally disruptive, non-narratable, unintegratable. The repetition of the defacement, however, is a face. In an impossible reversal, the faceless appears as a face. An enormous amount of verbal energy is spent throughout the text in the effort to give a face to the faceless, and when finally a face is generated out of the story, it is monstrous, it cannot be looked at – because it is a face as facelessness. The face of the thing is itself a figure (a secondary figure, that is, an allegory) of *prosopopeia*, of the giving of a face to something that is radically faceless (one possible name for it is "a world of blind force and material" - *CQ* 259). It tells in an allegorical story the infinite regress, and therefore the hidden narrative, implied in and generated by the logic of *prosopopeia*: if something faceless, nameless is given a face/name, the essential face- /namelessness is not eliminated but simply displaced onto a face that therefore becomes the face as defacement. The process is potentially endless, and generates a narrative that unsuccessfully endeavours to name that which is deferred by the figure of giving a face. The result of the giving of a face is that the face (name) that is given will partake of the facelessness or defacement that it vainly attempts to accommodate: language, instead of being an accommodation (home), will, in the trope of *prosopopeia*, be itself nameless and faceless, a condition of homelessness.

The event of the face is almost immediately followed by another event, that of the destruction of the face. The two events, which are repetitions of each other, and of Colley's death, are connected by two references to Colley (the connections are created by the narrating Talbot and not Talbot the character). As he is returning to his hutch, Talbot remembers that it used to belong to Colley (261); the experience of the face also puts him in mind of Colley's *bathos*: "That grim baulk of waterlogged timber [the face, that is] was still, I suppose, sinking towards the ooze where Colley stood on his cannon balls when I approached my hutch" (261-2). He sees that Wheeler (Colley's substitute, repetition, death) is standing in the hutch.

His eyes were shut, his expression peaceful. He raised towards his lips a gold or brass goblet. Then his head exploded *after or with or before*, for all I know, a

flash of light. Then everything disappeared as a wave of acrid smoke burst out of the louvre. My left eye was, or had been, struck and filled with a wet substance.

(*CQ* 262; italics mine)

Colley's death was an indescribable, lonely passage, a narrative blank that produced an undergrowth of narrative loops and repetition as haunting, dreams, or encounters with the unnameable. This repetition of his death is not a narrative blank, but a non-event, a confusion of tense and succession ("his head exploded after or with or before"). It is the end of prosopopeia, the explosion of a face, a defacement that is total and irreparable. It is also an event that implicates, infects Talbot ("befouling" him, as Colley did on the occasion of their first encounter) once and for all with death, making of him a repetition of Wheeler and of Colley. It is an event that connects prosopopeia with light and seeing: Talbot's face is smeared with Wheeler's face and brain (as Colley's face was smeared by the seamen); he is blinded by that which cannot be looked at directly, the central absence of light (anti-sun, black hole) of this world, towards which, after all, prosopopeic figures seem to be striving and turning (being necro- rather than heliotropes); his eyes are full of Wheeler's death in a moment of ultimate metonymy, and he, instead of giving a face to the faceless, becomes a figure contaminated, smeared, covered, defaced by death: "There is death in my hands. I kill people without knowing it" (*FDB* 154). He is redeemed only in *Fire Down Below* when his third "murder" turns out to be the "resurrection" of Mr Prettiman. This repetition as prosopopeia, as both the giving of a face and the destruction of a face, as a haunting and an endlessly repeated attempt to name death, is the undergrowth that develops upon (below) the story, an undergrowth that slows down the narrative movement and makes it lopsided, uneven, jerking, that creates narrative loops and lacunae and renders the narrative uninterpretable as a neat *Bildung*, that produces the excess or residue connected to certain places, characters and events, that produces the paradoxes of the figurative logic of the trilogy, that creates a confusion of the figurative and the literal, the referential and the metalinguistic. The removal of this undergrowth, however, is impossible, simply because the undergrowth, which seems to be an unnecessary burden on an otherwise straightforward and fast-moving narrative, turns out to be the very condition of the possibility of narrative; that which seems to be generated by the (standing still of the) story is in fact the source and condition of the story. The origin of Talbot's narrative is the untellable event of Colley's death, an event that can never be told, only repeated, that is, "figured" in the endless process of prosopopeia: it can only

affect the text, insist in it as an undergrowth, an excess, a residue (called by interpretation a “depth”), the removal would bring about the premature end (“sinking”) of the story.

The trilogy is a sea story: the god of this world is Neptune. He presides over the sacrificial ritual that involves the defacement of Colley; this is Neptune as a masked man, as an allegory of the process of prosopopeia: in order to address, to be able to relate to, the inhuman, unpredictable power of the sea, man gives it a face, a name (Neptune); the giving of the face, however, only displaces the facelessness, alienness onto the face/name, involving it in the alienness. Man, in addressing the alien, the faceless, deprives himself of his own face, defacing himself (donning, for instance, the mask of Neptune that is a face as defacement), and, as another faceless entity, partakes of its absolute facelessness. Colley is sacrificed for Neptune’s sake, by people wearing a facelessness as their mask; his death is to a great extent the result of the ceremony performed to gain the benevolence of the sea-god. Colley therefore and thereafter belongs to him and to the sea. And the sea returns, takes revenge for Talbot’s dehumanisation of the parson (with a very bad pun, one could say that the dominant figure of the trilogy is “deparsonification”), that other defacement (blinding) of his son: the relationship is confirmed when, in the moment of his final humiliation, Colley is referred to as “a pigmy Polyphemus” (*ROP* 116). Talbot is also blinded by a sea-death, and he is allowed to *arrive* only after he has *faced* Neptune as the sea, as death, and as Colley. Talbot is thus Ulysses in the sense that his voyage is a constant fight against Poseidon, and also in the sense that his voyage is not something that could ever be over; the end of his sea-voyage is not an *arrival*.