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Analysing the Paradoxes of Confessional Narrative: An Interpretation of William Golding's *The Paper Men*

Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyse William Golding's novel *The Paper Men* as an example of a modern confessional narrative. It is argued that the narrator of the novel, Wilfred Barclay, is characterised by his ironical stance both with respect to himself, other people, and – what is more important – to his own narrative. This ironical distance makes him a self-conscious narrator who is aware of both the powers and limitations of his confession. By referring to different modes of self-expression, most importantly the legal and the psychoanalytic, Barclay seeks to redefine confessional discourse to suit his own purposes. In his journal, he addresses issues which have always been crucial for authors of both ecclesiastical and secular confessions: free will, sin, damnation and redemption. The present article is a close examination of the above-mentioned issues. It is argued that that the relationship between the two major protagonists of the novel — Wilfred Barclay and Rick L. Tucker — can be treated as a commentary on Golding's attitude towards literary critics. The conclusion of the article considers *The Paper Men* against the background of Golding's views on literature and the creative process.

Keywords: William Golding, *The Paper Men*, confessional discourse, irony

The writer and the biographer

At the end of his essay "Belief and Creativity" William Golding makes the following comment on his mission as a writer: "I claim the privilege of the story-teller; which is to be mystifying, inconsistent, impenetrable and anything else he pleases provided he fulfils the prime clause in his unwritten contract and keeps the attention of his audience" (Golding 1982: 202). Two years after writing the essay, Golding published *The Paper Men*, a novel whose narrator possesses all the qualities of the storyteller mentioned by Golding – and more. John Carey (2009: 413–414) views the novel as Golding's response to the critical interest in his works, which became even more intense after he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1983. Golding was flattered by the attention of his various critics and would-be biographers, but at the same time he resented their various misinterpretations of his works, and, in some cases, the tendency

to pry into his private life. According to Golding's biographer John Carey, "it was out of this tangle that *The Paper Men* grew, and the fact that it was a tangle, exposing a contradiction in himself, made it a hard novel to write" (Carey 2009: 414). Golding's response to this state of contradiction, resulting from his ambiguous attitude to his critics, was to incorporate it into his novel. The result was the creation of Wilfred Barclay, the narrator of *The Paper Men*.

In her article "Golding's Pity," Barbara Everett argues that the protagonists of Golding's novels often invoke both pity and shame in the readers; as she observes, Golding creates fictional worlds peopled by "characters that are the essential creations of pity" (Everett 1986: 120). She mentions Piggy (*Lord of the Flies*), Lok (*The Inheritors*), Jocelin (*The Spire*), Sammy (*Free Fall*), but the comment is also relevant in the context of *The Paper Men*. Indeed, Barclay is one of the most grotesque and pitiful characters created by Golding. A renowned writer, he is also a dissolute alcoholic who treats other people instrumentally and does not hesitate to draw all kinds of benefits from his fame. *The Paper Men* concentrates on Barclay's relationship with Professor Rick L. Tucker, whose main ambition is to further his academic career by becoming Barclay's official biographer. As the plot unfolds, it becomes clear that Barclay's attempt to escape Tucker is impossible not only due to Tucker's determination, but also because of Barclay's increasingly erratic behaviour due to his rampant alcoholism. The novel concludes with a scene in which Barclay is about to set fire to his private papers in an attempt to destroy unwanted evidence of his shameful life. His intention is to give Tucker the ambiguous confessional narrative comprising *The Paper Men*, riddled with gaps, discontinuities and untruths, and, in this way, demonstrate the futility of Tucker's biographical project. The narrative is supposed to be a manifestation of his power over his would-be biographer. The fact that Barclay is shot dead by Tucker before the completion of this task – the novel finishes half-sentence, as Barclay reports seeing Tucker taking hold of his gun – shows Barclay's ultimate failure to control the meaning of his confession. Indeed, it seems that his worst dream is realized in that all his private papers, in which he exposes himself as both a depraved and ridiculous figure, fall into the hands of his detested would-be biographer.

Wilfred Barclay as a modern confessional narrator

In his tendency to reveal private, often shameful, details about himself, Barclay can be characterized as a confessional narrator. In his study *The Modern Confessional Novel*, Peter Axthelm describes the confessional narrator (or "confessional hero," as he names him) as "afflicted and unbalanced, disillusioned and groping for meaning" (Axthelm 1967: 9). According to Axthelm, such a narrator is characterised by suffering which originates not in "the chaos of the world but in the chaos within the self" (Axthelm 1967: 9). It is important to add that Barclay is also a thoroughly unreliable storyteller, baffling his readers with various gaps and contradictions in his narrative. His motivations are confused and contradictory: he is wholly devoted to the task of analysing the self, yet he resents the fact that other people might learn about his thoughts and actions; he appears to be a cynic who does not believe in confession as a search for the truth about himself, yet he continues writing his confession until his sudden death; he describes himself as profoundly non-religious, yet one of the central revelations of his narrative involves Christian iconography. Readers of his narrative may well have the impression that Barclay is playing a game with them by revealing intimate information about himself while at the same time withholding from them

certain episodes from his life. Although he blames his memory, as well as his problems with alcohol, for the numerous gaps and temporal lapses in his narrative, there is always the sense that he may be using these as an excuse to mask his unwillingness to reveal some of his thoughts and actions. His evasion and desire to manipulate the reader – a tendency which is clearly visible in his relationship with his would-be biographer, Rick L. Tucker – makes his confessional narrative characteristic of modern confessional writing, which, according to Jo Gill, is distinguished by “evasion,” “displacement,” “obfuscation,” “non-disclosure” and “self-invention” (Gill 2006: 7).

The relationship between Barclay and Tucker is best considered in the context of control and power, which, in turn, are closely connected with Michel Foucault’s notion of confession. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault famously described confession as one of the most important modes of self-expression for Western man. For Foucault, confession, far from being man’s natural impulse, is a powerful means of regulating and controlling the thoughts and actions of an individual. As Foucault observes, confession is “a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship” (Foucault [1976] 1990: 61) in which the addressee of this discourse – the confessor – “prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile” (Foucault [1976] 1990: 61–62).” In this conception, it is the confessor who exercises control over the confessing subject. Writing about the evolution of pedagogy and medicine in the 19th century, Foucault pointed out that confessional practices, which contributed to the evolution of those disciplines, placed the listener in the role of “the forgiving master, the judge who condemned or acquitted; he was the master of truth” (Foucault [1976] 1990: 67). The nature of power that the listener has over the confessional speaker is not only spiritual, but also judicial: the listener resembles a judge who has the power to acquit the defendant of his crimes.

Barclay can certainly be called – following Foucault – “a confessing animal” (Foucault [1976] 1990: 59) in that the compulsion to confess is deeply embedded in his motivations and clearly visible in his narrative. At the same time, Barclay is acutely aware of the power dynamic governing confessional discourse; in other words, he knows well that the recipients of his narrative – his readers, of course, but also his would-be biographer – have power over him, which they can exercise by making moral judgments of his actions. Indeed, as will become clear in the discussion that follows, Barclay’s greatest fear is that of being judged.

Barclay can be described as a modern confessional narrator also because his attitude is characterized by a consistently ironical stance towards himself, other people, and, no less importantly, towards what he says and how he says it. His irony is indicative of his self-consciousness, understood as “profound knowingness about the conventions and expectations of the form with which they play” (Gill 2006: 8). For Barclay, all attempts to reach out to others, even the most desperate ones, are doomed to failure: “Useless to cry. We have no common language. Oh yes, there is language all right, as for example regulations for transporting flammable materials by air or how to make your own Russian salad. But our words have been clipped like gold coins, adulterated and struck with a worn stamp” (Golding 1984: 18–9). Failure of meaningful communication leads to a deep sense of loneliness, and, in Barclay’s mind, reduces his confession to a game played with his readers.

Barclay’s critique of language is evident in his tendency to doubt the relevance of confession as a mode of self-examination. In his view, neither confession nor any other kind of writing, autobiographical or fictional, can bring him closer to himself: “I dreamed myself watching the great glacier on the other side of the valley; and . . . I saw that it was my own consciousness that hung there. I understood what

wearisome business it was, this dancing awareness, this glitter of the mind from which I constructed my implausible but amusing stories” (Golding 1984: 69). Like the confessional narrator of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*, Barclay views consciousness as a burden,¹ imposing on the writer a task that is both tiresome and, to some extent, impossible (according to the unusual imagery used by Barclay, the task of analysing the self is like navigating an alpine glacier). While there is little desperation or resignation in this conviction, neither is there any shadow of hope that writing will bring him closer to the truth about himself; indeed, the notion of autobiographical truth is so alien to Barclay that he never seriously considers it.

It should be added that *The Paper Men* is far from being a simple negation of the confessional paradigm; on the contrary, one of its most interesting features is that it provides an ironic critique of confessional discourse without rejecting the notions which are constitutive of this form of self-expression. The kind of irony adopted by Barclay is reminiscent of Ernst Behler’s understanding of this phenomenon: “The ironic manner of expression can be described as attempting to transcend the restrictions of normal discourse and straightforward speech by making the ineffable articulate, at least indirectly, through a great number of verbal strategies, and accomplishing what lies beyond the reach of direct communication” (Behler 1990: 111). Irony enables Barclay to combine that which, outside the bounds of irony, can never be reconciled: his overwhelming need to dissect his thought and emotions with profound scepticism towards confession as a means of formulating and communicating the truth about himself – a scepticism that has, at its roots, Barclay’s rejection of the category of a stable and final subjective truth and his fear of being judged by others.

The paradoxical logic of Barclay’s confession

As in *Free Fall* (1959) and *The Double Tongue* (1995), two other confessional novels by Golding, freedom is the focal point of *The Paper Men*, around which all the other themes are organized. Barclay sees freedom as a burden which is imposed upon him. On being abandoned by his wife, he comments on his newly acquired bachelorhood: “Freedom at fifty-three! What nonsense. What *bloody* nonsense! Freedom was what faced me. My advice is, don’t try it. If you see it coming, run” (Golding 1984: 18–19). The underlying belief here is that a close relationship with others, such as that found in marriage, is a state of bondage, which, nonetheless, is better for him at this point of his life than being on his own. Freedom is associated with a lack of commitment and the state of drifting from one place to another without any goal in mind. Freedom is, in other words, a state of rootlessness.

Despite the advice that Barclay gives to his readers, he embraces freedom, understood not only in relation to other people, but also to philosophy and religion. This is evident when he describes his relationship with his Italian lover, who eventually converts to Catholicism when she meets Father Pio. Barclay, on the other hand, refuses to recognise the authenticity of Father Pio’s stigmata. Describing the confrontation with the Italian woman, he puts himself in opposition to her and all believers: “My driving force was a passionate need for there *not* to be a miracle” (Golding 1984: 20). Barclay’s stance – at least

¹ Addressing his readers, the underground man writes: “I swear to you, gentlemen, that to be too conscious is an illness, a genuine full-blown illness” (Dostoevsky [1864] 2008: 10).

at the beginning of his narrative – is a deliberately cultivated mode of disbelief, which enables him to stay uncommitted to any ideas or principles which do not have a rational explanation.

The paradox which Barclay fails to recognise despite his self-consciousness is that his freedom is only an illusion. In fact, all his actions are dictated by two obsessions which lie wholly outside of his control: the first one is his compulsion to confess, the other one is his fear of judgment. This uneasy combination of desire and fear can be found in other confessional novels, for example in Camus's *The Fall*, whose confessional narrator, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, is torn between his strong need to share his intimate thoughts with his listener and the fear of being judged. That confession can be followed by judgment is a fact of which Barclay is constantly reminded by the presence of his persistent and sycophantic admirer, Rick L. Tucker. Tucker's request that Barclay appoint him to the role of his official biographer is met by the writer with disbelief, but also increasing apprehension. The metaphor that Barclay uses to describe Tucker's biographical project is a legal one: he presents himself as the defendant, while the biographical material (his novels, diaries, notes *etc.*) are "the evidence for the prosecution" (Golding 1984: 47). One of the charges which Barclay levels at himself in his imagined court case is the fact of his vocation as a writer: he pleads his generosity as a possible "counterbalance to the prisoner's habit of scrawling lies on paper into a shape that the weak-minded have taken as guide" (Golding 1984: 47). Being a self-conscious narrator, he builds the metaphor by means of an ironical intertextual reference: he refers to Plato – "the principal witness for the prosecution" (Golding 1984: 47) – and specifically his assertion that all poets are liars and so should be expelled from the ideal republic. The metaphor of judgment is interesting not only because of the way Barclay shapes it in his narrative, but also because of its metatextual implications. The quoted passage can be read as Barclay's ironic reflection – and Golding's self-reflexive commentary – on the readers who view his works as autobiographical insights into his character, or, by reverse, take their understanding of the writer as a perspective from which his works can be analysed.

The ironic reference to the imagined court case illustrates the disconcerting, self-cancelling logic of Barclay's confession. On the one hand, he is driven by the fear that his writing may be used against him (the autobiographical reading mentioned above), but on the other there is the sense that his confession is a necessity which simply cannot be eliminated. It is possible to view Barclay's narrative as a conflict between two dissimilar concepts of confession: one psychoanalytic and one legal. Although Barclay does not mention psychoanalysis explicitly, the psychoanalytic view of confession can be gleaned from certain comments which he makes in passing. To give an example, on page one of his confession he refers to himself as "the indefatigable analyst of my character" (Golding 1984: 7), thus introducing the analyst-analyst terminology used in psychoanalysis and implying that his is the solitary task of confessing and analysing his confession. In his psychoanalytic metaphor, confession is an act of revealing his shameful thoughts, which is not accompanied by a sense of relief, or reintegration into the community. In other words, he fails to discuss the true aims of confession – reconciliation and forgiveness – which Jung viewed as paramount both for sacramental and psychoanalytic practice (Todd 1985: 41). It is as if Barclay treated confession as a ritual which he must continue because it has become his lifelong habit.

Far from bringing about a sense of relief, confession increases Barclay's insecurity, which results in the first place from his conviction that his past actions, as well his thoughts and motivations, are visible to others. Indeed, his fear of being transparent to others borders on paranoia: "It seemed to me that everyone in the world but I could see, had some sort of access, and only I was trapped in myself, ignorant, bounded by my own skin with none of the antennae *They* seemed to have in order to reach out and touch my secret

self" (Golding 1984: 114). The act of confessing does not give Barclay the sense of a privileged insight into his thoughts and motivations; on the contrary, he is convinced that his true and suppressed identity – his "secret self" (Golding 1984: 114) – is inaccessible to him, and at the same time visible to others. Although he does not specify who he means by the word "They", it is highly possible that he is referring to Tucker and all other literary critics who treat his novels as a commentary on his life. His dread of these critics is increased when he learns about Tucker's powerful sponsor, an American millionaire called Halliday, who, it seems, has the ambition of collecting all possible information about famous writers. Halliday's mythic presence permeates the novel; he is a semi-divine malevolent spirit at work in the universe.

Barclay's ambiguous attitude to Tucker's biographical project is rooted in his contradictory view of his life. At times, his narrative conveys a deeply disparaging attitude to his life, which, in Barclay's belief, has two distinguishing characteristics – one of them immorality, the other farce: "In one way I could describe my whole life as a movement from one moment of farce to another, farce on one plane or another, nature's comic, her clown with a red nose, ginger hair and trousers always falling down at precisely the wrong moment. Yes, right from the cradle" (Golding 1984: 49). Seeing himself as a figure of ridicule, Barclay is convinced that a detailed (auto)biographical account of his life will only bring him shame. At the same time, he cannot help but be flattered by the attention of his would-be biographer. Indeed, Tucker's biographical project appeals to him, as it elevates him above other people. As he writes, "I feared to be the object of a biography. At the same time I was – no matter how had I tried not to be – I was flattered by the possibility" (Golding 1984: 99). The comment is an expression of the vicarious pride and satisfaction that Barclay takes from the fact that his life as a distinguished writer is of great interest to others. There is the underlying conviction that his memories, however shameful they may be, are a precious confessional currency. For Barclay, the act of writing his confession is a means by which he asserts his uniqueness and difference from others. This leads us to yet another contradiction inherent in his confession: while he views his memory as a burden, he does not want to be relieved of it, as it constitutes his mark of distinction. It can be concluded that while Barclay's fear of judgment seems strong and genuine, his compulsion to confess is made stronger by the underlying egoistic belief that it is his numerous vices, contradictions and inconsistencies which elevate him as a singular confessing subject, worthy of his readers' attention.

Conversion narrative: a reversion of paradigm

One of the most interesting features of Barclay's confession is its self-conscious parody of the conversion narrative. Most conversion narratives, however different they may be, include a description of the writer's spiritual, religious or psychological crisis, which ultimately leads to a profound and lasting inner transformation. St. Paul's Damascene conversion, as described in Acts 9, while not itself a conversion narrative (it is narrated in the third person), is paradigmatic of this subgenre of confession. It is this event to which Barclay refers when he describes the crisis that he experienced during his visit in Italy. An analysis of this episode in Barclay's life will concentrate on Paul's conversion as a hypotext² of Barclay's ironic confession.

2 I am using the notion of hypotext as defined by Gérard Genette. In his study *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Genette made the following comment about hypertextuality: "Hypertextuality refers to any relationship uniting a text B (which

The episode mentioned takes place during Barclay's visit to the volcanic island of Lipari off the coast of Sicily. During one of his solitary rambles, he visits a church, in which he is awed by the imposing silver statue of Christ with ominous, fiery eyes made of red stone. Barclay's reaction to seeing this figure is a disconcerting combination of high rhetoric and deflating irony: "I knew in one destroying instant that all my adult life I had believed in God and this knowledge was a vision of God. Fright entered the very marrow of my bones. Surrounded, swamped, confounded, all but destroyed, adrift in the universal intolerance, mouth open, screaming, beppised and beshitten, I knew my maker and I fell down" (Golding 1984: 123). Commenting on this episode, Don Crompton writes about Barclay's "infernal epiphany" (Crompton 1985: 177), and there is indeed the sense that he has reached hell, personified by the intimidating figure he confronts in the church. Similarly to Paul's conversion, Barclay's epiphany is brought about by knowledge which he is unable – at least not at this point – to fully accept. The profundity of the subject's spiritual transformation is manifested in their physical condition: Paul's blindness and Barclay's inability to speak. It can be argued that Paul's first reaction to Christ's words – his collapse to the ground – is symbolic in that it restores the relation between God and his creation. Viewed in this way, it is the first manifestation of Paul's humility with respect to God. Barclay's vision of God is radically different from Paul's in that it is not based on God's mercy, but His anger and injustice. The key notion here is that of predestination, which Barclay believes to be the divine logic at work in the world: "I saw I was one of the, or perhaps the only, predestined damned" (Golding 1984: 124). Barclay's transformation is a grim parody of Paul's conversion, and indeed all other conversion narratives, in that it precludes the notion of change and is built on the belief that "what we are is not in our hands" (Golding 1984: 125). This fatalistic approach towards man's fate is yet another negation of freedom to be found in Barclay's narrative.

Barclay does not write openly about his loss of freedom; on the contrary, he boasts of his freedom, understood in the narrowest possible sense, as the ability to carry out his wishes whenever and wherever he wishes. A revealing insight into the nature of these actions can be found at the beginning of his narrative, when, looking back upon his life, he claims: "I lived in the simple conviction, I now see, that I could only remain integrated by immorality" (Golding 1984: 17). This conviction is strengthened by his church epiphany, as a result of which he starts to view immorality not only as an integral part of his identity, but as his destiny and the ultimate goal of his existence. He decides to view his guilt as a universal and unchangeable condition, thus leaving himself only the task of proving the obvious fact of his sinfulness. In an obvious parody of sacramental confession, he addresses himself with the following message: "Commit. That verb is to remain intransitive. Go forth old man and commit. Commit afresh" (Golding 1984: 129). At this point, Barclay does not have any concrete actions in mind; rather, his plan is to devise new ways of manifesting his freedom. Paradoxically, this use of his freedom proves the reverse: as he believes himself to be already damned, he negates the notion of free will. He grants himself the freedom of a marionette in the hands of the merciless god he has created.

One way of interpreting Barclay's decision to elevate his moral corruption to the status of fate is to view it as an unlikely attempt to justify his immoral actions on the basis of the doctrine of predestination; in other words, since he is already damned, then his actions do not result from his free will, but from a divine plan; thus, they cannot be judged as moral or immoral from the perspective of the one who acts. If this is Barclay's tacit way of disclaiming responsibility for his conduct, then it is a highly unconvincing

I shall call the *hypertext* to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (Genette [1982] 1997: 5).

attempt. Another way of interpreting his fatalistic logic is to view it as an expression of Barclay's last stage of moral corruption. In this sense, the references to the doctrine of predestination show his dramatic loss of hope of any possibility of self-transformation. Barclay's parody of conversion narrative emphasizes his grim conviction that no amount of self-examination will bring about a change in his condition.

The ironic "unfinalizability" of Barclay's confession

Reading *The Paper Men* is a discomfiting and, at times, a painful experience not because it portrays a protagonist who seems beyond redemption, but rather because it shows a person absorbed with his fears and passions, consistently failing to transcend his self-centredness and open himself to others. Indeed, one of the most shameful revelations of Barclay's confessional narrative is his monstrous egoism: ultimately what concerns him is neither his wife nor his daughter, but the task of writing his confession – filtering the chaotic events described in his diary into his own version of an autobiography.

In his overwhelming desire to control the meaning of his confession Barclay is similar to the confessional narrator of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. As Bakhtin observes, Dostoevsky's underground man "seeks at whatever cost to retain for himself the final word about himself" (Bakhtin [1963] 1984: 53). His ultimate goal is to highlight his own ambiguity – his "unfinalizability" (Bakhtin [1963] 1984: 53) – which is a kind of defensive mechanism against what he sees as the threat to his integrity posed by his readers. A similar case can be made with respect to Barclay: he too wants to have the upper hand over his readers by selecting and – if needs be – obscuring the information about himself. It is the final irony of the novel – one over which Barclay has no control – that despite all his attempts to control the meaning of his narrative, he is unable to draw his confession to its conclusion (as was mentioned, he is cut mid-sentence by Tucker's attack on him). Kevin McCarron in his analysis of *The Paper Men* argues that "the last word, literally, goes to the author, but this last word is cut off, truncated, by the interpolation of the critic, and the author's final word is forever incomplete, forever amenable to interpretation" (McCarron 1995: 193). In this sense, the subversiveness of Barclay's confession goes beyond the self-conscious games that he plays with his readers – it is an unfinalizability whose bounds are controlled not even by the author.

Reading *The Paper Men* biographically, one may come to the conclusion that the ending of the novel is a thoroughly bitter one, showing Golding's sense of insecurity as a writer who, despite a brilliant career, was always sensitive – perhaps oversensitive – to various critical evaluations of his works. Indeed, Carey claims that Golding's two greatest fears were the fear of writing and the fear of critics (Carey 2009: 518–19). This claim is substantiated by Golding's allergic reactions to reviews of his works, which are said to have had a profound influence on him. Nevertheless, seeing *The Paper Men* as merely a manifestation of Golding's fears and frustrations is reductive; what manifests itself in Barclay's self-reflexive games with the reader is Golding's belief in the power of imagination to create the kind of literature that resists the interpretations imposed upon it both by the critic and by the writer. In the already mentioned essay "Belief and Creativity," he observes: "The writer watches the greatest mystery of all. It is the moment of

most vital awareness, the moment of most passionate and *unsupported* conviction” (Golding 1982: 197). The comment shows Golding’s considerable emotional and intellectual investment in his work, and it conveys his view of writing as an intense and mysterious process, directed towards the creation of that which transcends the anticipations and interpretations of both writers and critics.

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