

WILLIAM GOLDING'S *Pincher Martin*

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*Pincher Martin* is Golding's third novel. After the phenomenal success of *Lord of the Flies*, the second and third novels won critical acclaim but were rather less popular than the first. With *The Inheritors*, which preceded it, *Pincher Martin* established a small but solid body of *tours de force* with Golding as a major voice in the contemporary English novel. I should say at the outset that I wholly agree with the general critical opinion that *Free Fall* and the *The Spire*, which followed, were below Golding's standard, but with his recent *Rites of Passage* and perhaps some parts of the previous novel, *Darkness Visible*, the old man has shown himself once again at the height of his powers and fully deserving of the honor of the 1983 Nobel Prize.

The first three novels describe radically different scenes but are alike in that they might be called fables that deal in one way or another with the nature of existence and evil. Part of the fabulous quality comes from the extreme limiting of the physical environment. In *Lord of the Flies*, the limitation is one of age and place. The characters are schoolboys and their environment is a tropical island. In *Pincher Martin*, the eponymous hero is stranded on a rock in the middle of the ocean, and in *The Inheritors*, the characters roam freely over the land but are restricted by being prehistorical men in an evolutionary stage of underdeveloped reason. This limitation of setting is reintroduced with effect in *Rites of Passage*, which takes place aboard an old sailing ship on its way to the Antipodes. It seems

that Golding's powers are much better focused when total access to a wider world is not allowed to confuse the central issues.

The descriptions in Golding's novels are always part of the structure and never just window-dressing in themselves. The hostility of the island for the schoolboys and the lonely rock of Pincher Martin are the essence of their predicaments, what turn them inward toward themselves to confront the unpretty sight of human nature in the raw. The descriptions in these two novels are, that is to say, representative of the action, which is appropriate in stories that lean to a certain extent on anthropological lore, though, as the critics Kinkead-Weeks & Gregor point out, this lore is always subject to the uses of Golding's imagination. That is, the descriptions are able to both support a symbolic structure and to put the reader right on or in the tropical island or barren rock or primeval forest with a sensuously effective array of sights, sounds, and smells. This second property is one measure of Golding's artistry, while the first not only makes him significant in contemporary literature but undoubtedly endears him to symbol-hunters of the academic industry.

What calls forth the full range of the resources Golding has at his command is what K-W & G (as I shall refer hereafter to the authors of *William Golding: A Study*, an important critical work on his first five or so novels) call "physicality" as a mode of perception. In *Pincher Martin* this physicality is supremely present, from the powerful opening of the sailor churning and choking in the sea to the storm he rages in like a mad Lear before the novel's action is abruptly switched off. The madness of this latter scene is "convincing on a naturalistic level before it is anything else." I should say the same thing of every scene in the

novel that sticks in the mind: his struggle to climb the rock, his careful preservation of the fresh water supply and scrounging of the nauseating but necessary food. These scenes, like the boys' exploratory climb to the mountaintop and Ralph's chase scene in *Lord of the Flies*, or the rites of the New Men round the fire and Lok and Fa drunk in *The Inheritors*, are superbly narrated and can be enjoyed at the basic novel-reader's level that Forster described as being interested in what-happens-next.

There are skewed allusions to *Robinson Crusoe*, a book Golding might expect us to be thinking of when are reading about a man stranded in the middle of nowhere. The poverty of Pincher's resources, both material and spiritual, in contrast to Robinson's storekeeper calm and efficiency, help to point up Pincher's more desperate situation. Pincher's experience is closer to the bone, at least to a modern reader, because his cleverness, unlike Robinson's, does not make his predicament more bearable. I have always found it hard to believe that Robinson remained on his island for over twenty years without being overly concerned with lack of company and, in fact, as Ian Watt tells us in *The Rise of the Novel*, the Scottish sailor whose fate the character was based on underwent his ordeal with considerably less aplomb. Pincher doesn't take long for his collapse, but this might be explained by the fact that he was holding back the end from the very beginning, so that in this novel "realism becomes increasingly ironic" (K-W & G). Then too, Robinson had God on his side while Pincher remains an unrepentant sinner. Luis Buñuel's film version of *Robinson Crusoe* is closer to *Pincher Martin* than Defoe's classic novel. In the film, Robinson's self-assurance, like Pincher's, borders on the desperate and he eventually becomes both ludicrous and pathetic in his loneliness.

There is no wrecked ship offering Pincher presents of tools, food, and jugs of rum – even his candy bar is no more than a speck in a wrapper. Where Robinson's greatest fear is being devoured by wild beasts (unjustified as it turns out), Pincher is in bad physical shape from his shipwreck and he has to try hard to keep his mind together. He is a resourceful chap, as much so as Robinson, and after all his work lugging the seaweed up the rock to make an identifying rescue mark, he barely has enough to start. We feel as we read that this is closer to the truth of what it's like to be a castaway. Indeed, Pincher is more of a Prometheus than a Crusoe (K-W & G), as his mythical week being tortured on the rock seems eternal and, despite the curses for prayers, more cosmic.

But some who recognized the persuasiveness of the physicality remained unconvinced by the flash-backs of him who (in this case with justice) we can call the protagonist. John Bayley says "consciousness must... be of absorbing interest" in a novel. Now, it is Pincher's physicality as a mode of perception that tells, and *is*, the novel, the consciousness of one man, as well as the sufferings of his Promethean archetype. In purely fictional terms, the flash-backs are valid, but it must be admitted that the novel suffers a drop in voltage when Pincher is running his pictures through his mind rather than just feeling; i.e. when he actively meditates rather than passively hallucinates. He was less interesting to me when I saw him as just a certain kind of bastard who is identified as an "actor" or a "pincher" (thief) of other people's realities – specifically the actor in a morality play who is to play the part of Greed (K-W & G). The novel sinks here in the same way as Defoe's does when Robinson starts saying

prayers, however much both of the novels depend on these things to give point to the action. That Pincher loses his job (and therefore has to go into the navy) is more a result of his tuppung the producer's wife than his failure to "pinch" the part. He is a bit like John Lampton in *Room at the Top*: another bad actor, but more unscrupulous, ironically just the kind of fellow who would do pretty well on a rock in the mid-Atlantic. K-W & G argue that Golding is aiming at a "different kind of reality" from what is going on on the rock, one not naturalistic and particularized but a "world of morality-play," which might explain why these scenes are the least satisfying in the novel. K-W & G go on to defend this disparity by saying that Golding intended these scenes to be cinematic, that Pincher himself always insists on the artificial nature of his "illuminated scenes." There is a further irony here, too, since the "real" scenes on the rock are eventually revealed as artificial - they never happened! Pincher, it turns out, swallowed too much water in the beginning of the first chapter.

The explanation the two critics give, however, for Pincher's willfully continuing his story beyond the second page (the future that never was) is that this story can only be of the kind of man who refuses to die - and presumably why he is this kind of man is what is catalogued in the flash-backs. This explanation seems to me a bit slick, especially since I can't say what's wrong with it, but it seems like a critic's facile explanation rather than the satisfaction of a serious question. At first, I thought that Pincher's being dead was the weak part of the story - why not lop off the last chapter and leave it at that: a harrowing story of a not-nice fellow who rises to tragic heights and then is left to a

natural oblivion (in the film the final shot would be a long fade from the tiny rock in mid-Atlantic). But that would be to rewrite the novel, something one shouldn't attempt unless one dares to write another and undo what Golding had already done in his first two novels - add a final chapter giving an outside point of view to put things into perspective. In this way, we see in *Lord of the Flies* the savage boys as just boys playing at savages, and in *The Inheritors* the People as animal-like Devils. Here we see poor Pincher as just a water-logged corpse who didn't have time to get his seaboots off. In each case, there is a nice irony in that the final perspective is itself limited by the very knowledge the novels have given us by limiting our "modes of perception."

In *Pincher Martin*, however, I felt (got) tricked. I suspected and could put my finger on the passage where Pincher drowned but had to accept him alive to go on with the story. That is to say, in realistic terms, there is a discrepancy. Who "told" it, after all? If the naturalism isn't in vain, there ought to be an explanation, but what follows is only acceptable in metaphysical and not realistic terms. But the physicality of the sailor's perceptions imposes itself on the reader's brain so that dark center Pincher can't allow himself to dwell on comes across as the possibility rather than the fact of death. That is to say, a real hell is more convincing than a metaphysical one, and all the hints are explicit enough on a second reading. But is it fair to expect a reader of a novel to have to read to the end to make sense of the beginning? Poets expect it as a matter of course, so I suppose that is not a valid complaint, or maybe we are meant to read carefully enough to have seen the point from the beginning.

The horror Pincher cannot face is not just dying but accepting non-existence, which is much harder than facing the end of life: he fights against waking into "the positive, unquestionable nothingness." K-W & G have a (perhaps over) brilliant exposition of Pincher's seven days on the rock as a parody of God's creation. The fit in the rainstorm, then, is a logical culmination of a world created by the Imagination in the service of the Will gradually losing its credibility. Pincher's world becomes progressively harder to maintain (this is the increasing irony of the realism) in the teeth of "reality" pressing in with its "black lightning" (Golding's image) of non-existence. The novel, in this reading, is a *tour de force* of Being and Nothingness, like Lok's outside and inside selves in *The Inheritors*, the wild sponge of the mind and sane rock of the body of someone on LSD, the sensitive ego that perceives and the experienced ego that protects. Pincher holds on till he breaks. In the end, this reading is convincing, for Pincher prefers, after all, his suffering and isolation to the "black lightning." If he is Miltonic in his will to defy the reality of death, he is shown to be diminished by his choice, immense only in the "centre" that shits on heaven. This final obscenity of Pincher, as K-W & G point out, can be taken both ways: the novel's "religious view prevails, but the other has real imaginative resonance." In my own case, a dream that brought home the finality, the awful obliteration of death, resonates somewhere in a tension with the expectations of afterlife I was taught to hold. This is a novel that tackles the unmentionable realization everyone who dares think about it (or dream about it when they don't dare) knows lurks beneath the surface of the pathetic rationalizations that organized religious peddle. Golding

has a foil in the saintly Nat, but Pincher has the last words, even if they are babblings to hold off the approach of the black lightning, which "wears away in a compassion that was timeless and without mercy."