The Castaways—The Mariner

Two William Golding Novels

by Neville Braybooke

In the William Golding canon, his first novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954) remains his most famous, and his third *Pincher Martin* (1956), his most controversial. Both are concerned with castaways and their fight for survival.

When *Lord of the Flies* opens, nuclear war has broken out in Europe and a school from the English Home Counties has been evacuated by air to an unknown destination. On the way there, they are attacked, the crew killed, but the 'passenger tube' released so that it can crash-land on the jungle below. At the moment of impact, a fierce storm is raging and only a number of boys manage to scramble out of the 'tube' before the wind sweeps it out to sea. Those who do, scatter in the forest undergrowth. They are castaways —though it is some time before it dawns on them that they are marooned and consequently 'island castaways'.

The island itself is never named. But the description of its coral reef, beaches and fruit trees that bear all the year round, suggests that it might be one of those lying south of Sumatra or Java. The ways in which the boys adapt to their new tropical background is the book's main theme, and 'interpretations' of it depend largely upon a reader's own particular preoccupations. Freudians, for instance, have already noticed how the boys' behaviour fits the theory that if parental, state, or Church authority is taken away, children will evolve their own gods, totems, and taboos. Others have found the story a parable of man stripped of the sanctions of custom and civilization. A few cynics have seen in it yet another example of how self-defeating are all efforts to build a just community. Or those with political minds have regarded it as a tract about the differences between democracy and anarchy. Lastly, those with Christian convictions have related it to the Garden of Eden and the Fall.

All these 'interpretations' contain their grain of truth, reflecting various meanings to be discovered in the book. None, however, should be accepted exclusively.

Ralph is the central character through whose eyes most of the action is seen. He is twelve and, when he and his friend Piggy blow the conch to summon an assembly of the others, the first reaction amongst the rest of the children is delight at there being no grown-ups to boss them around. Immediately they associate themselves with the young heroes portrayed by R. M. Ballantyne, Henty, and Robert Louis Stevenson. 'We've got to have rules and obey them. After all, we're not savages: We're English. . . . ' This is Jack Merridew speaking who, ironically enough, proves to be

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the most savage of the lot. Yet when he first appears on the scene marching the altos and trebles in columns-of-two, he is distinguished from the rest by the golden badge on his cap. It is the sign that he is their choir leader—and Golding has commented subsequently: 'I chose deliberately the most highly organized, civilized, disciplined group of children it's possible to find anywhere—the cathedral school choir. It's only because of that civilized height that the fall is a tragedy.'

And what a fall it is! Within a hundred pages nearly all the children have turned into savages—naked; painted; gorging on pig-flesh. Yet right to the end schoolboy whoops of 'aah-ah' and 'ooh-oh' accompany all their acts, even when it comes to trying to smoke out Ralph or stick him like a pig. Or, there is Ralph's own wishful thinking in the last chapter, as he lies hiding from the others: 'If only one could have pax. . . . ' It is a masterly stroke of characterization on the part of the author.

Indeed, how different in tone is Golding's treatment of pig-sticking from that of R. W. Ballantyne in *The Coral Island!* In Ballantyne's book of 1857, his three English boys hunt not for sport but in order to eat; in *Lord of the Flies*, the school choir hunt solely for sport and the pleasure of killing. At one remove, Golding is concerned to show just how false Ballantyne's conception of White castaways was. So it is when Jack Merridew is told by a 'littlun' of a Beast that stalks the island by night, he lets the rumour spread, believing that hunting will provide a means by which to appease the supposed Beast by ceremony and sacrifice.

If Jack is the chief antagonist of Ralph, then Simon remains the most mysterious character in the book. He it is who discovers that the Beast reported seen is no more than a dead airman whose parachute strings have tangled in the rocks and scrub of the island's mountains. Yet when he tries to explain both this and that the Beast whom they all fear lies within themselves, the rest will not listen and club him to death. He is a sufferer from epilepsy, and in a key scene, when the fit is about to take him, the Lord of the Flies (whose other name is Beelzebub) visits him. Epileptics often have heightened powers of perception, and in this novel the voice of warning comes from Simon. He alone understands that evil cannot be exteriorized or vanquished by putting either a human or a pig's head on a stick.

This is not to imply a *roman à clef* with Simon representing Wisdom, or Jack Evil. That would be simplifying things too much, and would be an offence against an author who has resolutely argued that one of the main failings of modern man is his refusal to accept the complexities of his nature. Of course, a book bearing one of Beelzebub's titles will undoubtedly have a great deal to say about the prospering of the wicked and the corruption of the innocent; yet even so, *Lord of the Flies* should not be regarded as a

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theological commentary on the Devil. Its story is too many-sided to allow such a narrow classification, whilst its title hints at more than one meaning.

How often, for example, parents will say of their children: 'He wouldn't hurt a fly.' And yet those very children who love and cherish rabbits or white mice can be the very boys who will tear the wings off flies, because in a phrase from the novel, good and ill can exist side by side 'in the darkness of man's heart'. It is a paradox that explains more clearly than anything else the savagery which slowly comes to control the choir school on the island. But, even in the hunt for Ralph, the better nature of two twin brothers suddenly takes hold of them when one of them throws him a hunk of meat before making him 'shove off'. For a passing moment all three are Boy Scouts again. Finally, once the book is closed and a reader knows that the naval officer who has been rowed ashore will take all the children off, including Ralph, there remains the tantalizing question raised, in the last sentence, by the presence of 'the trim cruiser in the distance'. It is an escalating question without an answer, too. For, in a nuclear war, who will save man from man's inhumanity? Who will rescue the grown-ups?

In *Pincher Martin*, in contrast, there is only one castaway. The time is the Second World War, and his destroyer H.M.S. *Wildebeeste* has been torpedoed in mid-Atlantic. But the novel is a story with a twist, because in the final chapter it is revealed that the lieutenant has been dead since the fifth paragraph. So the story is really a study of a man who will not accept the fact of his own death and whose

> ravenous ego invents a rock for him to endure on . . . He is not fighting for bodily survival but for his continuing identity in the face of what will smash and sweep it away—the black lightning, the compassion of God.

This gloss was provided by the author in a note which he contributed to the *Radio Times* when the book was adapted for broadcasting. It is a confirmation that the novel deals not with actions, but with the development of consciousness, and, like a poem, demands to be read several times.

For in the end Martin's rock is shown to be his memory of an aching tooth; it has a rough edge of cliff, marked with trenches, that slopes down to a part of his gum which he refers to as the Red Lion. This naming of the parts of his mouth is one of the tricks by which he tries to continue his identity. But his imagination lets him down. The gulls circling above his rock become 'flying reptiles', and the lobsters in its crevices appear red before being boiled. Signs such as these are hints that the book is not about reality in a conventional sense; nor is it a story of survival like *Lord of the Flies*.

In fact when *Pincher Martin* was published in America it was

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called *The Two Deaths of Christopher Martin*—a title that emphasizes Martin's physical death in Chapter One—'his distant body stilled itself and relaxed'—and his ego's death two hundred pages later when it has shrunk to merely a pair of inflamed claws trying desperately to grab on to an imaginary rock. There is too a fitting poetic justice about the image, since before the war Martin was an actor who on one occasion was offered the part of Greed in a Morality Play—a part, as the producer informs him, that has to be played as a man 'born with his mouth and his flies open and both hands out to grab'. It is an inspired piece of typecasting.

Survivors from drowning have often described how pictures from their past lives have flashed by as they sank beneath the waves. And what may have seemed to them a playback of fifty or more years, may, in effect, have taken place in two or three seconds or less. In the concluding chapter of *Pincher Martin*, when Captain Davidson is asked if Martin can have suffered, he replies, having examined the corpse, that Martin 'didn't even have the time to kick off his sea-boots'. In other words, his physical death was instantaneous with his hitting the water. But does such a death signify the complete end? Does the soul leave the body instantly—or is this to beg the question since Martin believed in nothing except the importance of his own life? Or, was there a split second before his first and second deaths when, though Martin battled to prevent God from taking possession of his ego (others might call it his soul), there came a moment when the victory had to be conceded to 'the black lightning'? The answer to these problems would seem to be given at the close of Chapter Thirteen:

> The lightning crept in. The centre was unaware of anything but the claws and the threat. It focused its awareness on the crumbled serrations and the blazing red. The lightning came forward. Some of the lines pointed to the centre, waiting for the moment when they would pierce it. Others lay against the claws, playing over them, prying for a weakness, wearing them away in a compassion that was timeless and without mercy.

This is the one direct statement in the novel which suggests that Martin, whether he likes it or not, will have an after-life. Earlier, on the rock, he has cried out 'I am Prometheus' and tried to play the part of the Greek who defied the Deities. But he is an actor, and his shouts, threats and blasphemies are very much the rantings of an actor. A time has to come when the curtain will descend and the setting against which he is acting will be shown to be no more than cardboard. Martin knows this—and so does his captive audience of readers. But is there anything behind the cardboard, or is it a void? Golding tells everyone (except Martin) that behind it there exists a reality that is 'timeless'—namely, the reality of God. Then in the next and final chapter, set in the Hebrides, where Martin's body has been washed up, he attempts to

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put against this view that God is a certainty, the view that the reality of an after-life is an open question. Thus when Captain Davidson, a corpse-disposal officer, is asked by an islander whether he would say there was any surviving after death, neither a Yes nor a No follows. He merely asserts that in the case of Martin's drowning, there was not any suffering. The book finishes on a note of ambiguity.

Still, there can be no ambiguity about Golding's view expressed at the end of the previous chapter—a view subsequently enforced by his comments in the *Radio Times*. The only puzzle to be cleared up is why Golding should have chosen as his central character 'the nastiest type of individual' he could imagine.

Let there be no mistake: the tenacity with which Martin clings to life, and the ingenuity with which he creates the rock, have a certain heroic quality about them. There is something stirring about a man refusing to be annihilated by his fate. Yet Christopher Hadley Martin is portrayed as he has always been, as a complete rotter. I choose the term advisably. During his life he has employed the power of sex, whether with women, men, or boys, as a means to promote himself. 'I climbed . . . over the bodies of used and defeated people', he boasts.

In the Royal Navy, anyone surnamed Martin can expect to be nicknamed Pincher; but in the case of this Martin it could not be more apt. He will pinch anything from a cash-box to a reputation. Christopher, his first name, derives from Christ-bearer—and the author cannot have missed the irony when selecting it. Christopher's besetting sin is greed, a greed that rules out the possibility of there being any such thing as a selfless love—either human or divine.

When the book first came out many reviewers identified themselves with Pincher Martin. Golding was delighted. Greed in Martin's case may be supreme greed, but the fact that there was this identification suggested to the author that the idea of sin was not so generally forgotten as is customarily supposed. So, in assessing this his most religiously committed novel, the parable of the shepherd and the lost sheep is brought to mind: for there is more joy in Heaven 'over one sinner that repenteth . . . than over ninety and nine just persons, what needeth no repentance'.

At first sight then, Martin's defiance of Heaven is characteristic of a man who does not know what repentance means and who seems to have no redeeming features. Yet to admit this would strike at the heart of Christian belief which accepts that the Crucifixion was an individual act of universal redemption; it would be to deny that 'the nastiest type of individual' *can be* redeemed. The challenge therefore that Golding presents himself, both as a novelist and a believer, is a self-imposed one: it is how to square the concept of man's free will with that of an omnipotent Deity. Further, in so highly complicated a story, his reply is a

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profoundly simple one—namely, that God's ways are always mysterious. In fact, Golding's choice of 'the black lightning' as an image of God proves to be no more than a variation on the medieval poet's image of God as 'the Sun'. In each instance too, the rays of both are charged with everlasting mercy.

St Augustine once wrote of a man falling into a river: 'The mercy of God may be found between the bridge and the stream.' In the case of Pincher Martin, it would seem, the bridge was that of H.M.S. *Wildebeeste* and the stream was the mid-Atlantic.

Realism, Allegory and Symbolism

Some Speculation about the Novel*

by David Lodge

I begin with a number of propositions, which I shall try to develop in detail:

First, that allegory and symbolism are modes of analogy, that both present one thing or concept in terms of another thing or concept, even though the ways in which they do so have been contrasted and seen as vitally different.

Secondly, that the novel is, as a literary form, generally characterized by realism, and that realism as a literary technique would appear to be opposed to analogical modes.

Thirdly, that this opposition is only apparent because all literary discourse (and in a sense all language) is analogical, in so far as it is meaningful: and that this is confirmed by critical practice.

Fourthly, that the development of the novel therefore reveals a continuing compromise in which overtly analogical modes are allowed to permeate the apparently non-analogical mode of realism in the interests of meaning.

Fifthly, that in the modern period the value of realism as a technique begins to be called into question, and consequently the point of the compromise begins to be called into question, with significant repercussions on the form of the novel.

In putting forward these ideas, particularly the last one, I have been much influenced by *The Nature of Narrative* (1966), by Robert

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