

The Plotting of *Pincher Martin* by William Golding

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The artistic value of *Pincher Martin* consists in the creation of various plots in the temporariness of living consciousness possessed by a drowned sailor named Christopher Hadley Martin. This novel is characterized by the fact that the decisive reality is consistently foreclosed out of the protagonist's mind. Into the space devoid of reality, various fantasies and illusions penetrate one after another. They construct the narrative plot as they approach the two foreclosed facts, which I regard as "death" and "castration". The infinitely complicated signifying chain toward the true signified weaves the arabesque of plot in Martin's momentary vision. The plotmaking impulse of *Pincher Martin* is based on the power of refusing to allow the temporariness between life and death to be meaningless. I think Martin's momentary vision depicted in this novel clearly shows the fundamental principle of the narrative plot.

I

It seems to me that *Pincher Martin* by William Golding expresses most fully the true character of narrative plots. I find it the most characteristic of this novel that the protagonist himself becomes an artist who creates the narrative plots one after another. The narrative impulse is defined by Peter Brooks as the dynamism caused by life instinct and death instinct which Freud expounds in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.¹ According to Peter Brooks, the arabesque of plots is produced where life instinct, while approaching toward death, never short-circuits but detours in all directions.² In the light of his theory, I think the value of *Pincher Martin* lies in the momentary vision of Christopher Martin, the protagonist who produces various plots successively in the temporariness of his life. His vision is highly suggestive of the feature of the narrative plot particularly in the following respects :

- 1) It always seeks for some archetypes.
- 2) The lapse of time is not linear but cyclical, with repetition and juxtaposition.
- 3) The decisive facts are foreclosed at the beginning. They are replaced by various symbols and fantasies which try to reach the occulted facts, but always fail. Christopher Martin cannot distinguish between facts and symbols.

The third factor has a common feature with the case history titled *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*³ by Sigmund Freud.

In this paper, I'd like to analyse the vision of the protagonist and estimate its worth as a narrative, especially in terms of psychological foreclosing (*forclusion*) which causes the protagonist to create various plots in his vision from which the decisive facts of "death" and "castration" are completely foreclosed.

II

At first glance, the plot of *Pincher Martin* is simple. Christopher Hadley Martin, an officer in the Royal Navy, is shipwrecked in mid-Atlantic as his ship is torpedoed. Like Robinson Crusoe, he is marooned on a tiny island and struggles to survive, waiting for rescue. But the final few pages of this novel tell us that his struggle on an island is nothing but his fantasy after his physical death. He is already drowned as early as in the third paragraph of the first chapter, where the author says, "The throat at such a distance from the snarling man vomited water and drew it in again. The hard lumps of water no longer hurt. There was a kind of truce, observation of the body. There was no face but there was a snarl."⁴ The rest of this novel is all Martin's fantasy except the coda of a few pages. His fantasy is full of myths and archetypes. Modern writers use myths and archetypes in order to remedy their unsatisfactory plots. When we can't grasp our vague and inconsistent individual experience, we sometimes fill the gap with phylogenetic one which sometimes works as parody.⁵ Martin relates himself with Lear and Hamlet, or uses Scandinavian, Greek, and Roman myths. These "traditional" forms cross his mind one after another. Golding, like some modernists, uses these traditional plots quite self-consciously to produce irony, whereas the protagonist is obliged to depend on the traditional symbols which he cannot distinguish from reality. His consciousness tries hard to exclude the reality which is replaced by various fantasies. Since reality is excluded, symbols of his own making never reaches the signified. Eventually, he cannot make out the relationship between symbol and reality. For him, reality is the very symbol that he produces. His consciousness is sometimes invaded by reality, the message of which "he cannot or will not grasp."⁶ One of the decisive facts is that he is already dead. Whenever he comes near realising his death, he escapes it, and excludes from his utterances any word relevant to his death:⁷

"Strange that bristles go on growing even when the rest of you is —" (p. 125)

"The process is so slow it has no relevance to —" (p. 78)

The following passage shows clearly that the rock on the island is a symbol created by the memory of his "decayed tooth" :

His tongue felt along the barrier or his teeth — round to the side when the big ones were and the gap ... His tongue was remembering. It pried into the gap between the teeth and re-created the old, aching shape. It touched the rough edge of the cliff, traced the slope down, trench after aching trench, down towards the smooth surface where the Red Lion was, just above the gum—understood what was so hauntingly familiar and painful about an isolated and decaying rock in the middle of the sea." (p. 174)

But he tries to conceal this fact of the "decayed tooth" by any means. He makes up an illusion of rocks and controls it. He builds up his heaven and hell on this decaying and creviced molar.⁸ The dynamism of this novel is caused by the indomitableness of a protagonist who firmly rejects his extinction. Mark Kinkead-Weekes and Ian Gregor compare Martin's experience to the "surface tension of the bubble inflated with infinite care and precision."⁹ Martin invents his future "in a moment blown up like a bubble." Here we can feel the dynamism, the energy, and the conflict of this novel.¹⁰ There is no real world except the moment of death, but we must value this temporarity. He takes every measure to stop the

ephemeral bubble from bursting, to stop the short-circuit of life and death. He tries to invent infinite time inside the temporality. Therefore, in this novel, we can notice the cyclical and repetitious time, in which the past, the present, and the future are juxtaposed.¹¹ The memory of the past revives in a present moment as a stream of consciousness. Everywhere spreads the space completely separated from the linear progress of time. Many flashbacks of Martin's past do not always explain the cause of his present circumstances. Each scene of flashbacks works as the past fantasy juxtaposed with the present one rather than has the definite causal relationship with the present. If we imposed any ethical causality on this plot, we might reduce the narrative value by half. Even if the author intends any retributive justice, something beyond his intention plays an important part in Martin's narrative plot,¹² where each fantasy functions as a metonymy with which to fill the blank left behind the foreclosed facts. The present fantasy is replaced by the past fantasy, which is, in its turn, replaced by that of more distant past. But he never reaches the meaning of the facts. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud says that the two antagonistic instincts, i. e., life instinct and death instinct do not short-circuit but make a dynamic interaction through the necessary detour.¹³ The structure of life (origin) and death (end) needs the detour between them. In other words, the progress from the origin to the end is delayed by force. According to Jacques Lacan, that bar of the inverted Saussurian sign (S/s) which separates signifier from signified means the bar of repression, preventing signifier from reaching the true signified. Therefore, signifiers connect with one another to form a "signifying chain" for the purpose of gaining access to the signified.¹⁴ This metonymic function makes an arabesque of plots in the text.¹⁵

III

Now, I will consider another foreclosed fact—that Christopher Martin is castrated. This fact is also ingeniously occulted like that of his death. But close investigation of his signifying chain of fantasy will tell us something about this occulted fact. One of his memory flashbacks indicates that after cuckolding Alfred's wife, he invited Alfred to watch her in his own bed. Here Martin castrates Alfred. But Martin is castrated in his turn when his friend Nathaniel Walterson marries Mary Lovell for whom Martin feels an unappeasable lust. His illusion is filled with hatred and humiliation as if he were cuckolded by Nathaniel. He pictures the copulation in his mind and feels an ever growing desire for Mary. It flames out all the more for her flat refusal.

That was where Nat had taken her—taken her in two senses, grateful for the tip...
Because you fathomed her mystery, you have a right to handle her transmuted cheap tweed;
because you both have made a place where I can't get; because in your fool innocence
you've got what I had to get or go mad. (pp. 100–101.)

... the Mary gloved and hatted for church, she Mary who ate with such maddening refinement, the Mary who carried, poised on her little feet, a treasure of demoniac and musky attractiveness that was all the more terrible because she was almost unconscious of it ... But combined with the furious musk, the little guarded breasts, the surely impregnable virtue, *they (the eyes) were the death sentence of Actaeon They made her a madness, not so much in the loins as in the pride, the need to assert and break, a blight in the growing point of life. They brought back the nights of childhood, the hot, eternal bed with seamed sheets, the*

desperation. The things she did became important though they were trivial, the very onyx she wore became a talisman. A thread from her tweed skirt—though she had bought it off the hook in a shop where identical skirts hung empty and unchanged—that same thread was magicked into power by association … Those nights of imagined copulation, when one thought not of love nor sensation nor comfort nor triumph, but of torture rather, the very rhythm of the body reinforced by hissed ejaculations—take that and that! That for your pursed mouth and that for your pink patches, your closed knees, your impregnable balance on the high, female shoes—and that if it kills you for your magic and your isled virtue! (Italics mine.) (pp. 148–149)

The italicized part of the second passage reminds me of a man's case treated in Freud's work titled *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*. The patient known as the Wolf Man, during the Oedipus phase, failed to be separated from his mother for fear of being castrated by his father. He forecloses the castration from his mind, and fills the blank with a series of illusions. His case is partly true of Christopher Martin, although we cannot trace his illusions back to the early history of his childhood except for a few suggestive instances. The following analysis of Martin's illusions will locate "castration", and further, suggest that his foreclosing of this fact makes the plot even more complicated. Like the Wolf Man, Martin has in his mind the two contradictory attitudes toward castration, i. e. rejection and acceptance. Though he is already castrated, he firmly rejects it. But on the other hand, he is willing to accept it by playing a woman's part. Unconsciously he becomes Mary Lovell and wishes to have Mary's sexual pleasure given by Nathaniel. This is confirmed by the fact that Martin cannot help loving Nathaniel, however hateful he is. Throughout this novel, there are various symbols for both rejection and acceptance of castration. The rejection is symbolized by morbid fear of animals and food, as is also the case with the Wolf Man. He hates sea-gulls (flying reptiles), seals, lobsters, because he thinks he will be eaten by them. He is overcareful in eating shellfishes and sea anemones because he is afraid of being poisoned (eaten). All these creatures are symbols of what castrates him. Above all, he loathes the lobster with claws. The illusion of lobsters appears everywhere, and makes him feel a "terrible loathing" for them. At last this lobster metamorphoses into God. God is "bloody great bully" to him. Though Nathaniel is the origin of his castration, Martin substitutes God for Nathaniel, who knows something about God and wants to teach him the technique of dying into heaven. A series of symbols—from sea-gulls, sea anemones to lobsters, God—is the substitution for Nathaniel. But even Nathaniel might be a substitution for something else. What castrates Christopher Martin might have been the master he met behind the coffin in the midnight cellar when he was a child, or might have been his father who was "like a mountain with the thunder and lightning playing round its head." (p. 144) In any case, what castrates him is substituted one after another. He fights against every kind of bullying, until he himself becomes the Creator armed with a pair of claws. With this armament, he tries to control God and everything in order to own Mary to himself. But here we have to consider his contrary attitude—the acceptance of castration. In fact, two antagonistic trends exist together in his mind. One of them defiantly rejects castration, while the other accepts it. But he accepts it on condition that he plays Mary's part. He wishes to enjoy Mary's sexual pleasure by using his bowels. This is defined by Freud as anal eroticism, which is suggested in the bizarre enema scene :

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He began to work at the bladder with both hands, squeezing and massaging. He felt the cold trickle of the sea water in his bowels. He pumped and squeezed until the bladder was squashily flat. He extracted the tube and crept carefully to the edge of the rock while the orchestra thundered to a pause. And the cadenza was coming—did come. It performed with explosive and triumphant completeness of technique into the sea. It was like the bursting of a dam, the smashing of all hindrance. Spasm after spasm with massive chords and sparkling arpeggios, the cadenza took of his strength till he lay straining and empty on the rock and the orchestra had gone. (p.165)

The literal meaning of this passage is too simple. Martin has been suffering from constipation, and to make matters worse he is poisoned by sea anemones. He clears his body of poison and regains energy to beat the antagonist. His last blasphemous words "I shit on your heaven!" (p. 200) means that his antagonist is none other than God. However, if we interpret these words in the above context, quite another meaning is possible. According to Freud, these words mean "I give a baby to God."¹⁶ Christopher Martin identifies himself with Mary, and accepts Nathaniel's phallus, so that a baby is born. This child is nothing less than Christopher Martin himself. Therefore, he says after his self-administered enema, "There is a certain sense in which life begins anew now, . . ." (p. 166) Just like the Wolf Man who could not overcome the Oedipus phase for fear of being separated from his mother, Martin feels fundamental anxiety about the separation from Mary Lovell. It is this castration complex that makes him take two contradictory attitudes, rejection and acceptance. But in the latter case, he does not really accept castration. He has already excluded the idea from his mind and clings to the anal eroticism, which means psychological regression. According to Freud, sexual organization develops from oral phase (cannibalism) to the normal sexual desire by way of anal eroticism.¹⁷ But in Martin's case, this process is reversed. His sexual desire degenerates into oral phase and anal eroticism. In *Pincher Martin*, as Arnold Johnston observes, "oral-anal imagery is so pervasive and unpleasant as to seem almost obsessive."¹⁸ As for oral imagery, we can notice many symbols of "eating". Above all, the episode of a maggot is representative of these symbols:

" . . . when the Chinese want to prepare a very rare dish they bury a fish in a tin box. Presently all the lil' maggots peep out and start to eat. Presently no fish. Only maggots . . . The little ones eat the tiny ones. The middle-sized ones eat the little ones. The big ones eat the middle-sized ones. Then the big ones eat each other. Then there are two and then one and where there was a fish there is now one huge, successful maggot. Rare dish." (p. 136)

Through the space devoid of "castration," oral-anal imagery comes and goes incessantly. The alienation from the union of Nathaniel and Mary—this painful reality of castration can't be endured by Martin unless he forecloses it from his mind. It is substituted by a series of metonymy, which creates the network of various plots.

IV

As has been discussed above, the reality of "death" and "castration" is repressed and foreclosed from Martin's mind. Therefore he can never reach the true signified. But thanks to this repression and *forclusion*, he can prevent the short-circuit of life and death. Making a detour between life and death, he invents a "signifying chain" to reach the "true signified."

This forward drive in the signifying chain, the metonymy,¹⁹ produces an arabesque of plots in Martin's momentary vision. "Plot is", as Peter Brooks says, "its thread of design and its active shaping force, the product of our refusal to allow temporarity to be meaningless, our stubborn insistence on making meaning in the world and in our lives."²⁰ This power of "refusing to allow temporarity to be meaningless" is Martin's narrative impulse to make a "signifying chain." Bernard S. Oldsey and Stanley Weintraub refer to this extra power of Martin's as follows :

Pincher Martin may have made the wrong moral choices, and may be condemned for ignobility of soul, but his is a soul not easily extinguished. Shrunk at the close to a frenziedly resisting pair of lobster-red claws, Martin retains to the end the last vestiges of his personality. To the end, he repudiates mortality.²¹

Thus, it may safely be said that Martin's momentary vision depicted throughout this novel clearly indicates the fundamental principle of the plot making.

NOTES

- 1 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York : Norton, 1975), pp. 30-33.
- 2 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot : Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 101-107.
- 3 Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XVII*, trans. James Strachey (London : Hogarth Press, 1981), pp. 1-123.
- 4 William Golding, *Pincher Martin* (London : Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 8. All the subsequent page references to this novel are from this edition.
- 5 Brooks, pp. 279-280.
- 6 Virginia Tiger, *William Golding : The Dark Fields of Discovery* (London : Marion Boyars, 1976), p. 104.
- 7 Tiger, pp. 111-112.
- 8 Mark Kinkead-Weekes & Ian Gregor, *William Golding : A Critical Study* (London : Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 147.
- 9 Kinkead-Weekes & Gregor, p. 134.
- 10 Kinkead-Weekes & Gregor, p. 132.
- 11 Tiger, p. 114.
- 12 Bernard S. Oldsey and Stanley Weintraub, *The Art of William Golding* (Bloomington & London : Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 95.
- 13 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 32-33.
- 14 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1966), pp. 501-503.
- 15 Brooks, pp. 55-56.
- 16 Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis", p. 83.
- 17 "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis", p. 108.
- 18 Arnold Johnston, *Of Earth and Darkness : The Novels of William Golding* (Columbia & London : Univ. of Missouri Press, 1980), p. 48.
- 19 Brooks, p. 105.
- 20 Brooks, p. 323.
- 21 Oldsey and Weintraub, p. 95.