Title: The Janus quality of memory: losing definition and forming identity in William Golding's "Pincher Martin"

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The Janus Quality of Memory: Losing Definition and Forming Identity in William Golding’s Pincher Martin

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The Heracleitian famous analogy of life to a river which says that “upon those who step into the same rivers different and ever different waters flow down” stirs anxiety on close examination.¹ If things are in constant flux, what really exists? The question becomes a nagging one as soon as we realize that although we are involved in the process of passing, we know nothing about its beginning or its termination. Despite the irrevocable transience of things man makes attempts at defining his human condition, though it may entail falsifying it.

Gabriel Marcel evokes the comparison of our life to a lottery where the sequence of lots constitutes our existence.² Some of them have already been drawn. Since many of the numbers are known we may qualify them either as fortunate or unfortunate ones. But a great deal of them are still there to be chosen and we are unable to predict how long the game will last. At the commencement of the

¹ Viewing fire as the essential material unifying all things, Heracleitus wrote that the world order is an “ever-living fire kindling in measures and being extinguished in measures”. According to him the manifestations of fire included the ether. Some parts of this air change into ocean. An orderly balance is maintained in the world. This persistence of unity despite change is illustrated by his analogy of life to a river. Plato interpreted this doctrin in his own way, namely that all things are in constant flux, regardless of how they appear to the senses (cf. W. Tatarkiewicz, Historia filozofii, tom I).

lottery each of us obtained a ticket with a death sentence written on it. However, the space for the date, place and manner of the execution was not filled in. Yet, Marcel invalidates the parallelism arguing that if we analyse the lots closer we will discern that it is impossible to treat them as unconnected elements. Both the winning as well as the losing ones exert influence upon one another. Therefore we cannot once and for all decide about the quality of a drawn lot because the value of it may change when new ones are cast. The only thing which remains undisputable is the fact of our death. This truth conditions man’s awareness of being a homo viator.

Henri Bergson claimed that there is no awareness without memory, no continuity of a state without adding to the present image a remembrance from the past.\(^3\) It constitutes, for Bergson, the phenomenon of duration. Memory prolongs the past and introduces it into the present so that the present includes continually increasing and changing load of the past.\(^4\)

Bearing in mind what has been just stated, is it achievable to discuss the concept of identity without arresting its flow and hence falsifying it? If memory is a prerequisite for building identity, if memory guarantees the awareness of ‘selfness’ and if, at the same time, it is constantly fluctuating, how can we designate the notion of identity? In spite of these ambiguities we tend to search for the experience of ‘selfness’ in memory. Recalling the past events, I know that it was me who acted and thought. The awareness of man’s ‘selfness’ may exist only if he can refer to his own past.\(^5\)

Human beings yearn for stability rather than changeableness, permanence rather than transience, thus they perforce categorize, define, draw boundaries. However, as far as man’s ‘selfness’ is concerned, applying those methods of classifying becomes impossible. Our past fluctuates on end since each moment of our life adds something to it, moulding it anew. Others provide unknown details of things which have almost sunk into oblivion, modifying thereby our comprehension of the past. That is why man’s experience of the self can often be questioned if he considers his ‘selfness’ as a static value. Identity may also be challenged and as a consequence undergoes a radical change in Grenzsituationen such as for example death which is the case probed by William Golding in Pincher Martin.

The only character of the novel remains unnamed by the narrator though the protagonist’s given name and surname are revealed in his own recollections. The persistent referring to Christopher Martin as “the globe”, “the center (of darkness)” or just “the man” reinforces the absurdity of his struggles to protect his identity. After Martin’s ship was torpedoed he finds himself ejected into the Atlantic; the only connection between past and present being the identity disc. It ensures him that he still is what he used to be:


\(^4\) Ibid., p. 41.

He read the inscription again and again [...] “Christopher Hadley Martin. Martin, Chris. I am what I always was”.  

This is only a piece of metal “about the size of a penny”, an object which cannot shed light upon “the mystery of human presence”, to borrow Marcel’s words. Yet, for Martin it seems to represent sufficient evidence for his “selfness”. Strangely enough, the officer who arrives to collect the dead body seeks the disc, too. Having found it, he rewrites the data into his files. That is all what has remained from Martin’s existence. His god-like and unrelenting struggle has been reduced to a paltry engraving on a piece of metal.  

Having been thrown into the ocean Martin desperately tries to endure, to regain power first and foremost over his body and later over the surrounding world. The castaway desires stability, normality of the usual world where he used to be a master. Although, “the machine in the head” did not manage to bring under control the disorganised body, it has been quick to produce a surrogate – a memory of a child’s toy. This is a picture of a jar full of water with a small figure swimming on top of it.  

[I]t was interesting because one could see into a little world there which was quite separate but which one could control. The jar was nearly full of clear water and a tiny glass figure floated upright in it. The top of the jar was covered with a thin membrane. [...] The pleasure of the jar lay in the fact that the little glass figure was so delicately balanced between opposing forces. Lay a finger on the membrane and you would compress the air below it which in turn would press more strongly on the water. [...] By varying the pressure on the membrane you could do anything you liked with the glass figure which was wholly in your power. You could mutter, – sink now! And down it would go, down, down. [...] You could let it struggle towards the surface, give it almost a bit of air, then send it steadily, slowly, remorselessly down and down.  

(PM, p. 9)  

One would rather incline towards a pessimistic interpretation of the image where a god of the Cartesian malin genie-type plays with man. The recollection symbolises Martin’s plight; he is the figurine helplessly floating on the water, without any power or its own will. Albeit he viewed himself as an active man pulling the strings of the marionettes, he was the one to be restricted and steered. He was confined to the earthly temporal predicament as well as driven by seamy desire.  

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6 William Golding, Pincher Martin (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), p. 76; hereafter cited in the text as PM.
Whereas Martin misconstrues the significance of the remembrance of the toy and interprets it as a much needed clue to remind him of using his life belt. The misinterpretation is of enormous importance, though. It accentuates Martin’s total misunderstanding of his identity. He absolutely rejects the possibility of drowning because he regards himself as too precious, almost pivotal for the outside world to be discarded. The man is unable to face the boundary-situation which results in pathetic attempts at saving his vile life.

His terror-stricken endeavours are successful – Martin bumps into a protruding rock. He finds the much desired solidity. After climbing onto the top of the island, the center commences to organise itself. The awareness that he has emerged from the destructive element is propitious for consolidating his being.

All these noises made a language which forced itself into the dark, passionless head and assured it that the head was somewhere, somewhere – and then finally [...] declared to the groping consciousness: wherever you are, you are here!

(PM, p. 24)

Marooned on the island he experiences his ‘selfness’ not as something obvious but, on the contrary, as something one must fight for and guard against possible disintegration which in that case means madness.

The Conradian situation of an ordeal when man in utter isolation has to show his “inner strength” is modified by Golding. A man who is “hollow at the core” gradually understands his true value and commences to form new identity. The evolution is painful and the human faculty of remembering both assists it and inhibits it.

Martin, in spite of his inability to coordinate the movements of his limbs, persuades himself he lives since pictures start forming inside his mind. They are treated as independent objects similarly to pebbles outside his body. Still, they are there to bring back things from the past which he cannot identify, just as he is unable to decipher reality. It consists of unreadable patterns which represent for the “center” no meaning (PM, p. 23).

The final step towards corroborating his existence is forming a thought. The Cartesian act of thinking restores Martin’s positiveness about his enduring. He coerces himself into thinking because if cogitatio est, it follows that there is a subject to have entertained it. “The center” has to grapple with difficulties for a cogent act of reasoning because the mind is flooded with recollections from the past which inhibit thinking. Here memory is the aggressor. Instead of securing the sense of continuity, memory hinders it. It thwarts the subject’s experience of “selfness”.

But inside, where the snores were external, the consciousness was moving and poking about among the pictures and revelations, among the shape-sounds and the disregarded
feelings [...]. It rejected the detailed bodies of women, [...] ignored the pains and the insistence of the shaking body. It was looking for a thought.

(PM, p. 30, emphasis mine)

It is almost as though the past extirpated the present. The oppressive force of the time remembered overburdens Martin’s psyche virtually nullifying its ability to participate in the present moment.

Albeit Martin succeeds, on the one hand, in coordinating the movements of his body and, on the other, in consolidating his fragmented personality, he fails to overcome the insidious dualism of the two. His efforts to merge the two are blocked for all his life “the dark center” has been counteracting the body. The “machine in the head” has been cheating, setting traps for others while the face-mask remained friendly and helpful. In the boundary-situation the two finally split regardless of Martin’s will.

The “film-trailers” from his past assure him that he still exists but they have not made him reconsider his identity yet. So far Martin has always been the doer, the perpetrator, however, now he becomes a passive observer of his inner self. Acting on the stage (and above all in life), he has never been compelled to heed other people. On the contrary, the spectators listened to him. He was being observed, applauded, permanently in the spotlight. On the island the roles reverse. Martin becomes a passive observer of the past where, although he plays the main part, nothing depends on him. There is an additional facet of his occupation, namely as an actor he performed different roles, always keeping a safe distance. He put on and took off various costumes without much identification. At the same time he never bothered to examine his identity.

The identification could have been complete only once, had Martin brooded over his employer’s desperate speech. In extremis Martin recollects the weird presentation.

“Chris – Greed. Greed – Chris. Know each other”.

“Let me make you two better acquainted. This painted bastard here takes anything he can lay his hands on. Not food, Chris, that’s far too simple. He takes the best part, the best seat, the most money, the best notice, the best woman. He was born with his mouth and his flies open and both hands out to grab”.

“Think you can play Martin, Greed?”

(PM, p. 120)

The remembrances are viewed by Martin as obstacles to maintaining his egoistic “grip on reality” (PM, p. 81). Instead of seeking the foundations of his ‘selfness’ in memories, he bases them on the external values. The man does not enquire for the raison d’être, he takes it for granted. The notion of being redundant does not cross his sharp mind. Quite the contrary, he is positive about his right to be.
Since his only aim is to endure, he invents tactics which should aid him in staying alive. His assets consist of education, intelligence as well as strong will and he intends to use them in defining the new reality. As a rationalist, Martin strives to downplay the horror of the reality and to organise it by means of making the unfamiliar familiar. He calls the anonymous and indifferent parts of the rock according to the function he confers upon them, for example “The Food Cliff”, “Safety Rock”, “The Red Lion”, “The High Street”. He creates the illusion of meaningfulness, usefulness of the absolutely senseless rock. He cherishes the thought of adopting the area for his needs, of being once again a master.

I am netting down this rock with names and taming it. [...] What is given a name is given a seal, a chain. If this rock tries to adapt me to its ways I will refuse and adapt it to mine. I will impose my routine on it, my geography. I will tie it down with names. If it tries to annihilate me [...] then I will speak in here where my words resound and significant sounds assure me of my own identity.

(Speech for Martin secures identity. The greatest enemy for him is madness which may develop within himself. He fears losing definition of “selfness” and considers speech to be a remedy against disintegration.

The first portent of shattering of his personality is the ever greater discrepancy between his body and mind. He experiences a bizarre feeling of concentration of his self within his mind which for him becomes a globe with eyes as windows and a mouth as a gate (PM, p. 82). This state intensifies when more and more snapshots from the past present themselves. He was a man who used humans as building material to erect his palace of comfort and pleasure. He recalls his seamy behavior towards women, the surrepticious plan to murder his close friend, at the same time losing the sense of past and present.

All those memories haunt Martin, they rule over his consciousness. He perceives them as independent images whose meaning is unfathomable. As long as Martin does not comprehend that this time he is not a master, he will misinterpret the pictures which is the case when he visualises the faces of people he crumbled to dust flooded with tears, and he harbours no doubts that they are crying out of pity and compassion for him.

To “protect normality” he parries every omen of finale. It follows that he is afraid of sleep because Morpheus annihilates the human grip on reality.

[S]leep was a consenting to die, to go into complete unconsciousness, the personality defeated, acknowledging too frankly what is implicit in mortality that we are temporary structures [...] There the carefully hoarded and enjoyed personality, our only treasure and at the same time our only defence must die into the ultimate truth of things [...] the positive, unquestionable nothingness.

(PM, p. 91)
The longer he fights for the direct experience of the present moment the less graspable it becomes. Memories take over the present so that it seems unavoidable for Martin to immerse in the past to reinterpret it.

The reason for the disintegration of his identity is isolation. For the first time in his life Martin is totally alone. There are no people he could order about or fawn upon. This time he is compelled to look into the horror of his self all by himself. Till he was shipwrecked, he used to be surrounded by people who defined his identity for him. He avoids facing the truth about the ultimate value of his life by looking for the causes of losing the sense of self-identity.

How can I have a complete identity without a mirror? That is what has changed me. Once I was with twenty photographs of myself [...]. Even when I was in the Navy there was that photograph in my identity card so that every now and then I could look and see who I was. I did not even need to look, but was content to wear the card next to my heart, secure in the knowledge that it was there, proof of me [...]. I could spy myself and assess the impact of Christopher Hadley Martin on the world. I could find assurance of my solidity in the bodies of other people [...]. There were other people to describe me to myself [...], they defined [this body] for me.

To defeat the isolation and the threatening dissolving of the self in the past, he finds ersatz companionship – a deep hole which echoes his utterances. Talking aloud becomes a warrant of sanity. But soon, even this method of protecting selfness is invalidated. The words spoken by the people in Martin’s recollections merge with the sounds articulated by him. The boundary between past and present fades and finally disappears:

There was still the silent indisputable creature that sat at the center of things but it seemed to have lost the knack of distinguishing between pictures and reality. Occasionally [...] words would come out but each statement was so separated by the glossy and illuminated scenes the creature took part in that it did not know which was relevant to which.

Martin begins to discover his true identity as soon as he gives up “imposing patterns” on the rock. Then he observes closely his memories and is absorbed by them. Consequently, Martin realizes that his manner of living was that of consuming. He took advantage of all the people whom he happened to encounter on his way. The key to his existence was satisfaction and fulfillment. While considering his past, it dawns on him that he had suppressed the only human emotion he cherished namely that for Nathaniel. Martin evinces his feelings long after Nathaniel was remorselessly swept out of the ship deck. Nat joined the large heap of victims of Martin’s voraciousness. Suddenly Martin fathoms that his life could be best illustrated by a horrible joke he has heard.
Y’see when the Chinese want to prepare a very rare dish they bury a fish in a tin box. Presently the lil’ maggots peep out and start to eat. Presently no fish. Only maggots. [...] Well, when they’ve finished the fish, Chris, they start on each other. [...] 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.

(PM, p. 136)

Martin always wanted to be that last, victorious “maggot”. He broods over the order he gave which brought about Nathaniel’s death and later he openly admits: “Eaten”. Only at the final moments of his life does he realize that this “invincible” maggot will be eaten too, since it was planned long before as a “rare dish”.

Martin is unable to understand his predicament of *homo viator* since he denies the temporariness of his existence. When he is faced with death he rejects the possibility of rethinking his life by means of accepting the atrocious burden of the past enclosed in the memories and perhaps discarding his false identity. Although he does not achieve that ultimate understanding of Kurtz’s “The horror! The horror!” and the only catharsis he experiences is an enema he applies himself, still he comprehends that he missed something in life. If he had had more time than just several seconds, he would have perhaps accepted his past as well as reevaluated it.

The entire experience is hallucinatory. Not only is Martin stripped of all the human pleasures he delighted in but the tantalizing struggle seems to be nothing more than just a figment of his imagination. According to an expert, Officer Davidson who arrives to identify and collect Martin’s body the whole struggle did not last more than just a few seconds. However, his expertise is immediately undermined. Since he misunderstands a question posed by a man who found the body: “Would you say there was any – surviving? Or is that all?” (PM, p. 208). The man enquired for a possibility of an afterlife whilst the officer took it to mean mere physical preservation. Davidson’s response is false for Martin’s plight on the island may be regarded as his afterlife, his eternal damnation. Such interpretation is supported by the fact that Martin dies by drowning; and water was considered by Heracleitus to be one of the manifestations of “an ever-living fire”.

Concluding, analysing William Golding’s text we could discern the paradoxical qualities of memory. On the one hand, it is seminal to forming one’s identity but on the other, it can constitute an obstacle to our “process of becoming” to paraphrase Kierkegaard’s statement. Memory is a janus faculty because without it the notion ‘selfness’ would be undefinable but it may also weaken the sense of one’s identity.

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7 For a broader understanding of the novel it may be significant to explore the meanings of the protagonist’s names. The given name *Christopher* is evocative of St Christopher, making a difficult passage across water, as a test of his spiritual potential. Unlike the saint, the protagonist is concentrated on self-preservation. *Martin* is a type of swallow which further can be associated with the act of swallowing performed during consuming food.