III

Pincher Martin
Many critics have found William Golding's third novel, *Pincher Martin* (1956), his most challenging book, and a few have praised it in the highest—perhaps extravagant—terms. Frank Kermode describes it as "a wonderful achievement" in which "There is no distinguishing . . . between a compassion that might be called religious and the skill of an artist," and he goes on, "Yeats spoke of an intellectual construct which enables him to 'hold in a single thought reality and justice'; *Pincher Martin* is such a thought" (*A Source Book*, pp. 117–18). John Peter writes that "The book seems to me, in all seriousness, as brilliant a conception as any fable in English prose," and that it moves beyond Golding's earlier novels in being "richer because exploratory, a configuration of symbols rather than an allegory," a symbolic structure whose "meaning is difficult to exhaust" (*A Source Book*, p. 32). Certainly *Pincher Martin* is Golding's most problematic novel for anyone who is interested in literature's effects upon the reader or for anyone who puzzles about the status of the represented reality in a literary work; and the book's texture—especially once we come to sense what is going on in the story—is more dense than that of any other novel by Golding, makes more sustained demands on the reader's awareness.

These difficulties originate in the extraordinary fiction that Golding has imagined for this novel. Through most of its pages, we seem to watch a man from a torpedoed ship struggle by himself to survive on a rock in the North Atlantic and also show himself, through his recollections, to be a singularly unpleasant person. But the final sentence of the novel—and the ending made the book something of a *cause célèbre* soon after publication—reveals unequivocally that this person, Pincher Martin, has in fact been dead since
almost the start of the story, that what we have really been watching is a man driven by his ego to spin a world and an existence out of himself in a desperate attempt to evade the death which has occurred. Some critics, viewing *Pincher Martin* as analogous to Ambrose Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” understand the novel as an expansion of the few seconds just prior to Martin’s death by drowning. Yet such a reading strikes me as motivated by a wish to explain the book in commonsensical terms, and in effect denies Golding’s adventurousness in imagining a story about a dead person. The interpretation weakens the power of Martin’s ego, and it also seems to me to run against the grain of the novel, for we are constantly made to feel that Martin seeks to avoid acknowledging something that has already happened. Other critics, myself included, take Martin as dead—the title of the book as originally published in America was *The Two Deaths of Christopher Martin*—and the commentary by Golding himself on his novel indicates that such is the case. His remarks are so generally helpful an introduction to the story as to be worth reproducing at length:

Christopher Hadley Martin had no belief in anything but the importance of his own life: no love, no God. Because he was created in the image of God he had a freedom of choice which he used to centre the world on himself. He did not believe in purgatory and therefore when he died it was not presented to him in overtly theological terms. The greed for life which had been the mainspring of his nature, forced him to refuse the selfless act of dying. He continued to exist separately in a world composed of his own murderous nature. His drowned body lies rolling in the Atlantic but the ravenous ego invents a rock for him to endure on. It is the memory of an aching tooth. Ostensi-
ably and rationally he is a survivor from a torpedoed destroyer: but deep down he knows the truth. He is not fighting for bodily survival but for his continuing identity in the face of what will smash it and sweep it away—the black lightning, the compassion of God. For Christopher, the Christ-bearer, has become Pincher Martin who is little but greed. Just to be Pincher is purgatory; to be Pincher for eternity is hell.¹

Whatever his sense of Martin's condition, every reader feels unsettled to some degree by Golding's conclusion, I suspect, because the world created by Martin through most of the novel has seemed so compelling actual. And for many readers, the matter of their response is further complicated by the fact that Martin's extraordinary struggle to endure, as it originally unfolds in the book, affects them as heroic despite the nastiness that he also exhibits, despite the moral evaluation of him insisted upon by the book as a whole. Margaret Walters expresses this position very forcefully:

... the dominant imaginative impression the book makes upon us is neither the inadequacy of man's personal resources to achieve salvation, nor the ignobility of his preoccupation with his own small existence. We feel, rather, the resource and courage—the vitality—in Martin's fight for life, even as we recognize his egoism; in fact the egoism, which the book claims damns him, emerges as a necessary condition of that vitality. Such a struggle for life cannot, I think, serve as an image of damnation and spiritual death; it suggests possibilities and moral complexities that the author's thesis, the controlling pattern, fails to comprehend. (A Source Book, pp. 102-8)
Such a response to the novel, even when one does not share it, can hardly be quarreled with profitably.

And perhaps another issue that hardly admits of an answer satisfactory to all is the status as reality of the world that Pincher Martin imagines for himself in much of the story. Certainly that world strikes us as undeniably real: because of Martin's behavior, which is rendered in such convincing detail; because he is presented to us in the third person, the reporting of an omniscient author thus vouching, as it were, for the actuality of what goes on; and because of our normal expectations as readers of fiction, which Golding does little immediately to allay. (In spite of the author's claims about falling over backwards to make the novel clear, he could scarcely afford to represent Martin's death unambiguously on the book's second page, for I should think many readers unlikely to go on with a story about a dead person: Martin's struggle to survive will seem most dramatically convincing, most "real," if we believe him to be alive.) Yet by the end of the book we must regard what has happened to Martin as the projection of a dead man's mind—and to what order of reality do we assign that projection? This shift in levels of reality, and the consequently fluid relation of the reader to the events of the story, may tempt us to think briefly of The Counterfeiters in relation to Golding's book, Gide playing even more complicated games with different levels of reality too numerous for me to sort out here. But The Counterfeiters does not sustain so apparently uncomplicated a version of a conventionally substantial world as does Pincher Martin in its first chapters (though I might add that Gide's novel affects me finally, for all its deliberate violations of our sense of what is real in fiction, as offering us an illusion of actuality convincing because of its very inclusiveness). Even if we grant Golding the license as a writer of fiction to
make a "real" world out of a dead man's thoughts, what is the ontological status of those lapses into nothingness, into non-being, that occur—if that is the word—when Martin experiences his fits? I suppose we must take them as somehow akin to the intrusions of something other on Martin's ego that crop up periodically in the novel (such as the appearance of God near the story's end)—though nothingness seems to me to pose a special problem to our comprehension in the fiction that Golding has invented here.

As for the difficulties that reside in the dense texture of Golding's prose itself in this novel, most of them admit of solution, at least on a second or third reading of the book, when our knowledge of Martin's death has prepared us to understand why he flinches from certain thoughts and why his mind moves as evasively at moments as it does, even while his ego creates that astonishingly substantial world of rock and day-to-day suffering that so dominates one's initial impression of Pincher Martin. The texture of Golding's prose I shall illustrate later on in this chapter, through exploring a rather long passage in which Martin ostensibly endures a fever. But first I want to separate several narrative threads that are woven together in the finished novel and glance at one typically oblique sequence of events; then I shall comment on the series of flashbacks that constitute one of the novel's structures. Finally, after treating the long passage just mentioned, I shall take up the ending of Pincher Martin and argue for its relevance to Golding's meaning.

To the person first reading Pincher Martin, the novel appears to record the desperate struggle for survival of a man after the destroyer on which he served as an officer has been torpedoed. Golding takes us through this struggle inch by inch: the locale and events of the story are narrowly
limited, and he subjects us to so sustained a close-up of the
man's experience that physical details seem to register on our
muscles and even minor decisions by Martin are fraught
with consequences. Blown off his ship, Martin manages to
get to a rock that suddenly looms up in the mist, scales a
small cliff by using limpets to help him up, and takes shelter
under a slab of stone. Gradually he pulls himself together to
explore the rock: discovering a pool of water he can drink,
building a pile of stones which he calls "the dwarf" as a
signal for rescue, and forcing himself to eat anemones and
mussels. His reconstitution of himself seems complete when
he verifies his existence through his identification disc—
"Christopher Hadley Martin. Martin. Chris. I am what I
always was!"—and goes confidently on to "survey the estate"
of the island. Yet the strain on him increases in spite of his
efforts to impose patterns of his own upon the rock: after all
his labor over the dwarf, he suddenly realizes that he should
have made a sign recognizable by planes rather than by
surface vessels; but his strength and will to finish the job give
out before he has completed an effective signal by piling
seaweed in a line, just as they give out before he has com-
pleted the Claudian, the cuttings in the rock by which he
plans to add to his supply of water. Through the last third of
the novel, Martin appears to disintegrate slowly. He suffers
first from what appears to be a fever, and his thoughts
become more and more like the hallucinations of a man
under tremendous pressure. Just when it seems to him that
he has recovered himself physically by a self-administered
enema which purges him of the harsh food he has eaten, he
falls into a fit—and then must strive harder than ever to
re-create the self out of its shattered remnants: "Something
was coming up to the surface. It was uncertain of its identity
because it had forgotten its name. It was disorganized in
pieces. It struggled to get these pieces together because then it would know what it was. There was a rhythmical noise and disconnection. The pieces came shakily together and he was lying sideways on the rock and a snoring noise was coming from his mouth” (p. 167). Martin clings to his sanity for a time, though apparently on the verge of madness. But a terrible storm sweeps over the rock during which he first challenges the elements, next challenges a manifestation of God Himself, then destroys his own supply of water, and finally broods—reduced to a pair of red claws—as the “black lightning” obliterates his world. In the concluding chapter, Golding shifts us to an island in the Hebrides where Martin’s body has washed ashore; and the naval officer who has come to identify the body assures his listener, in the last sentence of the novel, that the drowned man could not have suffered because “He didn’t even have time to kick off his seaboots” (p. 208)—the act that we apparently witnessed Martin performing on the fourth page of the story.

So much for the ostensible narrative of Pincher Martin. But even the surface of the story is more difficult than I have just suggested, the play of Martin’s consciousness developing in rather complicated ways which I want now to indicate. In the novel’s first paragraphs, when Martin is about to drown, Golding dramatizes his physical existence as quite literally elemental, a struggle for air among water that burns or feels like “stones” and “gravel.” I quote a passage to show how concretely Golding renders Martin’s situation:

When the air had gone with the shriek, water came in to fill its place—burning water, hard in the throat and mouth as stones that hurt. He hutchet his body towards the place where air had been but now it was gone and there was nothing but black, choking welter. His body let
loose its panic and his mouth strained open till the hinges of his jaw hurt. Water thrust in, down, without mercy. Air came with it for a moment so that he fought in what might have been the right direction. But the water reclaimed him and spun so that knowledge of where the air might be was erased completely. Turbines were screaming in his ears and green sparks [the machinery of his nervous system] flew out from the centre like tracer. There was a piston engine too [his heart], racing out of gear and making the whole universe shake. Then for a moment there was air like a cold mask against his face and he bit into it. Air and water mixed, dragged down into his body like gravel. (p. 7)

In this paragraph, "knowledge"—"of where the air might be"—is wiped out, yet Martin gathers himself for one last scream, "Moth—," which is cut off in the middle. And Golding goes on: "But the man lay suspended behind the whole commotion, detached from his jerking body. . . . Could . . . a face have been fashioned to fit the attitude of his consciousness . . . that face would have worn a snarl. But the real jaw was contorted down and distant, the mouth was slopped full. . . . There was no face but there was a snarl" (p. 8). Disregarding his physical death, Martin's consciousness persists, focuses on a "picture" out of the past—significantly, a picture of "a little world . . . which one could control" (p. 8)—and advances via mental associations with this picture to a "realization of the lifebelt" which supposedly supports him; as a result of this "realization," "a flood of connected images came back" (p. 9), and Martin's consciousness has in effect reconstituted him: "Suddenly he knew who he was and where he was" (p. 10).

After he reaches the island, he is further revived by an-
other thought, "valuable . . . because it gave him back a bit of his personality":

"I should be about as heavy as this on Jupiter."
At once he was master. (p. 27)

But behind Martin's rationality, though often informing his thoughts through the first part of the story, lurks a more powerful force, what comes to be called the "dark centre," his ego: "There was at the centre of all the pictures and pains and voices a fact like a bar of steel, a thing—that which was so nakedly the centre of everything that it could not even examine itself. In the darkness of the skull, it existed, a darker dark, self-existent and indestructible" (p. 45). It is this ego that compels him to resist admitting the first fit he suffers or to hold out when—in a passage reminiscent of Simon's confrontations with the pig's head in Lord of the Flies, though Simon's motives are the reverse of Martin's—the "chill and the exhaustion" that he experiences on the rock tempt him to "Give up. Leave go" (p. 45). And it is the ego that gains its happiest triumph when he has clutched and read his identification disc, which assures him briefly that he exists ordinarily in a real world: "All at once it seemed to him that he came out of his curious isolation inside the globe of his head and was extended normally through his limbs. He lived again on the surface of his eyes, he was out in the air. Daylight crowded down on him, sunlight, there was a sparkle on the sea. The solid rock was coherent as an object. . . . It was a position in a finite sea at the intersection of two lines, there were real ships passing under the horizon" (pp. 76-77).

For a time Martin's ego, assisted off and on by his reason, operates fairly successfully to sustain the illusion of his physi-
cal existence. The mind works out a series of determinedly rational points to govern behavior on the rock. When the body undergoes a fever, the ego may veer towards an admission of the death that has happened, but the mind—now associated with what the mouth utters—chirps on to explain everything in terms of “sexual images” (p. 146). And when the ego is frightened by its intuition of “a pattern emerging” from all of Martin’s past—a pattern that acknowledges the presence of something other, something alien to the self, in the universe—the ego defends itself momentarily on the grounds that patterns are created only by one’s intellect acting on its own: “Education, a key to all patterns, itself able to impose them, to create” (p. 163).

But rationality, at least in any ordinary form, proves an insufficient support for Martin’s world, especially after he has suffered his second fit, knows himself to have lapsed temporarily into a nothingness that belies everything which his self has struggled to create. Through the last part of the novel, both the mind and the ego in their separate ways periodically take refuge in pretending to madness, for madness does anyway predicate existence; but their efforts are doomed to failure. Initially, they can accommodate the vision of “the old woman” on the rock—an image of otherness out of Martin’s past—by identifying her with “the Dwarf,” the pile of stones that Martin has built (p. 176). And the first touch of the black lightning that later dissolves Martin’s world is normalized by the rational mouth as mere “Lightning,” though the “centre” then “made the mouth work deliberately” to utter “Black lightning,” perhaps because even to formulate the phrase is to control the phenomenon to some extent (p. 177). This flaw in their universe immediately drives the mouth and the center to embark on the role
of Shakespeare's "Poor Tom," but the degree of madness that Edgar represents is not enough to protect the center. The mouth may try to assert that the rock is real and the creature on it mad: "... Who could invent all that complication of water, running true to form, obeying the laws of nature to the last drop? And of course a human brain must turn in time and the universe be muddled. But beyond the muddle there will still be actuality and a poor mad creature clinging to a rock in the middle of the sea" (p. 180). Yet the ego knows better: "There is no centre of sanity in madness. Nothing like this 'I' sitting in here, staving off the time that must come. The last repeat of the pattern. Then the black lightning" (p. 181). Nevertheless, the self continues attempting to evade the truth, later allowing the mouth to demonstrate logically the madness of them both as it addresses the center: "You are the intersections of all the currents. You do not exist apart from me. If I have gone mad then you have gone mad. You are speaking, in there, you and I are one and mad" (p. 191). But when they work together to "Be a naked madman on a rock" by slashing to death the vision of the old woman, "They knew the blood was sea water and the cold, crumpling flesh that was ripped and torn nothing but oil-skin" (p. 193). Climactically, they seek to arm themselves against the manifestation of God by arguing that "hallucination" is what "a madman" can "expect" on a "real rock," by insisting that He is "a projection" of Martin's "mind" (p. 194), by declaring to the figure—in words through which the self interweaves a pretense of madness with the sheerest egotism—that "On the sixth day he created God. Therefore I permit you to use nothing but my own vocabulary. In his own image created he Him" (p. 196). But the black lightning comes on all the same, though the center tries at last to
prove its madness by breaking up the pool in which it has hoarded water, and Martin's universe disintegrates into nothingness.

The third narrative strand that I want to isolate in the novel is the series of fractures in Martin's world which hint, more or less obliquely, at the fact of his death. In a general way, Golding's phrasing itself often suggests Martin's condition. His pains are recurrently described as fiery: "a burning without heat" (p. 24); "fires . . . flaring and spitting in his flesh" (p. 55); "their distant fires, their slow burnings, their racks and pincers were at least far enough away" (p. 49). This imagery, indicative of a hell of sorts, finds an ironic echo in such statements by Martin as "I'm damned if I'll die" (p. 72) or "I went through hell in the sea" (p. 122). At moments, Martin views himself as "Like a dead man" (p. 34), feels the flying seagulls to tell him "that he was far better dead, floating in the sea like a burst hammock" (p. 56), and searches "for hope in his mind but the warmth had gone or if he found anything it was an intellectual and bloodless ghost" (p. 117). But of course we are inclined to take all such expressions as figurative rather than literal on first reading the book. And Golding renders the violations of Martin's universe, so substantial a projection of Martin's ego, with a similar indirection that makes them easy to overlook.

I shall not rehearse all these violations, but simply indicate some of the items that turn up several times, acquiring added significance on each appearance, and cite a brief sequence of charged reactions on the part of Martin. One of the important items repeatedly referred to is a "tooth": alluded to first in a simile (p. 24), the tooth—which Martin has lost years earlier—is gradually revealed as the model for
the rock that he has invented to prolong existence. Golding's second mention of a tooth will show how ambiguously he handles such references:

"Where the hell am I?"

A single point of rock, peak of a mountain range, one tooth set in the ancient jaw of a sunken world . . . and how many miles from dry land? An evil pervasion . . . a deep and generalized terror set him clawing at the rock with his blunt fingers. (p. 30)

In this context, early in the novel, the "tooth" seems simply a way of describing a real rock; and Martin's "evil pervasion" and "generalized terror" seem a reaction normal enough to a living survivor of a ship that has been sunk, rather than the response of Martin's ego to a dimly intuited fact it resists recognizing. In the same way, the pressures of Martin's apparent situation disguise his first fit, that gap in his existence which so terrifies him when he later comes to acknowledge what has happened. As his reaction is initially represented by Golding, the major hint that something untoward has transpired is Martin's notice of the "white water" in which his face has been lying and the "too-smooth wetness" on his cheek (p. 42)—details which are not explained for over one hundred pages, when the "dark centre" remembers that "Guano is insoluble" and so that the white stuff must have been produced by the fit rather than the gulls (p. 174). A third critical item is the lobster that Martin seems to perceive in the seaweed about the island: "At once, as if his eye had created it, he saw the lobster among the weed, different in dragon-shape, different in colour" (p. 111). But, unless we are reading very carefully, we will realize neither the force of
the dependent clause nor the false color of the living lobster until the impossibility of a red lobster swimming in the sea dawns on Martin himself (p. 167).

A fairly characteristic sequence of hints about Martin's real condition occurs in a passage after he has climbed down the rock to collect seaweed and happens on a stone that he recalls having tried to move earlier but that "wouldn't move although it was cracked." As he looks at the stone now, however, "the crack was wider. The whole stone had moved and skewed perhaps an eighth of an inch. Inside the crack was a terrible darkness" (p. 124). Maybe the "terrible darkness" foreshadows the black lightning that wipes out the rock later on; anyway, this violation of the remembered details, whatever its cause, unnerves Martin to the extent that he starts "envisaging the whole rock as a thing in the water" and brooding on its familiarity (pp. 124–25). No overt reference to the tooth is made in the paragraph during which Martin gropes for the source of the rock's familiarity to him: the closest he comes is in recollecting "the rocks of childhood . . . remembered in the darkness of bed . . . imagined as a shape one's fingers can feel in the air—" (p. 125). Farther along on the same page,

He put his hands on either cheek to think but the touch of hair distracted him.

"I must have a beard pretty well. Bristles, anyway. Strange that bristles go on growing even when the rest of you is—"

But he catches himself on the verge of uttering "dead" and tries to ignore his situation by gathering a load of seaweed.

Through the last part of the book, the flaws in the logic of Martin's world assail his awareness more and more insist-
ently, his realization that he could not have seen a red lobster in the sea, for example, bringing on his second fit immediately, which in turn leads him to recognize that he has manufactured the rock out of the memory of a tooth. As his world dissolves, his consciousness is increasingly invaded by indications of otherness in the universe, an otherness that itself denies the postulate of Martin's private universe, the total self-sufficiency of the ego. Thus his memory of a nightmarish childhood compulsion, to go down into the cellar for some portentous confrontation, keeps infringing on Martin's consciousness until he finally relives the experience:

Darkness in the corner doubly dark, thing looming, feet tied, near, an unknown looming, an opening darkness, the heart and being of all imaginable terror. Pattern repeated from the beginning of time, approach of the unknown thing, a dark centre that turned its back on the thing that created it and struggled to escape. (p. 179)

Whatever its precise contours, "the unknown thing" evidently has its source in something other than Martin's ego, while the fact that it "created" Martin's "dark centre" implies that "the thing" is to be associated with God. And, as the reference to its repetition suggests, the "Pattern" applies even on the rock, connecting Martin's past with his present and confirming the impossibility of his shielding himself ultimately against the otherness, whether it manifests itself as the image of God which he later sees or as the black lightning which at last "erased like an error" the world that Martin has invented (p. 201).

One component in the story of *Pincher Martin* I have hardly touched on yet, the series of flashbacks spaced
through the novel to show us Martin's earlier life as a civilian and as a naval officer. The flashbacks are important in various ways, but also the least satisfying sections of the book, to my mind, and I want now to consider them briefly. One important point easy to overlook is that they, too, are projections of Martin's consciousness. He does not really sleep on the rock because, as he once admits, "sleep was a consenting to die, to go into complete unconsciousness, the personality defeated" (p. 91); while he seems to rest, then, his ego sustains itself, warding off nothingness through remembering the past. These memories also serve the story through developing a narrative thread of their own in the gradual revelation of how Martin has acted toward his best, indeed only, friend, Nathaniel Walterson. Even in Martin's first jumbled recollections, when he struggles in the water or after he has landed on the island, an order that he has given isolates itself in his mind, presumably the right order for his ship to avoid the torpedo that has sunk her. Through later flashbacks, we become aware of how sensitive he is on the score of Nat and learn that Martin has contemplated killing his friend—by having the ship change course unexpectedly and thus causing Nat to topple into the sea as he prays by the railing—because Nat has married the one girl to reject Martin's advances. But only in the last of the flashbacks do we discover that Martin has given the order he did, not to avoid a torpedo, but to murder Nat (pp. 185-86). The chief office of the flashbacks, however, is to make clear how nastily egocentric Martin is, and they reveal his essential nature more directly than do his actions on the rock. His vanity, his unremitting exploitation of everyone else in his determination to get on, his greedy indulgence of every appetite are emphasized again and again. To cite two examples of his behavior: although he has been forced into military service
because the director of the plays in which he appears will not declare his work essential (pp. 153–54), he acts the role of the humble patriot when asked why he joined the Navy and wishes to become an officer, talking glibly of his desire to “help” and his hope of “hitting the old Hun for six” (p. 94). This charade juxtaposes him absolutely to Nat, who, though conscientiously objecting to war, nevertheless feels that “the responsibility of deciding” not to serve “is too much for one man” (p. 155). A sharper commentary on Martin is provided by the first detailed recollection of Mary that he allows himself, rather late in the novel (pp. 147–53). She is the girl whom Nat has married, but who so lives for Martin because she is the only person to violate his ego: for she has rebuffed his advances, and when in effect raped by him (though Martin has tossed in a promise of marriage which he quickly retracts once he has gotten what he wants), she cries, her “real tears” convincing even Martin of how enduringly she hates him.

The relevance of the flashbacks to illuminating Martin’s character is plain. But, perhaps because Golding’s plan for the novel forbids him to develop them at length, or because the world of sea and rock that he creates is so substantial, the life and characters represented in the flashbacks seem to me relatively wan: asserted rather than dramatically compelling. The passage in which Martin’s colleagues in the theater discuss his casting as one of the Seven Deadly Sins, for instance, strikes me as somewhat labored and over-explicit (pp. 118–20). The triangular relationship involving Martin, Nat, and Mary appears to me too pat in its execution, especially when the innocent Nat insists that Martin be his best man and Martin uncharacteristically shows, for the only time in the novel, some trace of conscience in warning Nat against Martin himself (p. 158). It is difficult for me to
imagine that a person like Martin would anyway feel affection for someone like Nat. But, leaving that objection aside, and granting that Nat's religious interests may entitle him to speak as he does early in the novel of "black lightning" and "the technique of dying," his statements about Martin's "extraordinary capacity to endure" and his declaration that Martin will die within a few years seem to me frightfully arbitrary (pp. 70-71)—as arbitrary, and unnecessary, as Simon's prediction in *Lord of the Flies* about Ralph's ultimate survival.

Although I have been complaining that the quality of life and character rendered by Golding in the flashbacks themselves of *Pincher Martin* is relatively thin, the life of Martin's consciousness, as he fights to sustain the illusion of his existence on the rock, is densely imagined and can be exceedingly complicated. In outlining the narrative progress of the novel, I have indicated that Martin splits up into a pain-wracked body, a mouth that clings to the rational, and a dark center that strives to ignore the death which has happened; and these three elements interact in the rather long passage which I shall examine. It will be clear at a glance how much the passage differs from, say, Golding's dramatization of a typical reaction by Lok in *The Inheritors*. There, Lok's sensuous response to the physical details of the external world counted for almost everything and the activity of his mind for very little. But, though physical details from an apparently real external world crop up repeatedly in the passage to follow, the whole experience seems an hallucination of Martin's mind, and to interpret the experience we must puzzle out the associative patterns of his private consciousness. Ostensibly, he is suffering from a fever, brought on by something he has eaten, as he lies in the crevice of
stone that shelters him on the island. Actually, as I read the passage, the movement of his thoughts brings him close to reliving his drowning and thus to being confronted with the fact of his death, though the ego finally resists this knowledge again. Such is the drama that I shall try to sketch, though the passage is too charged with significant details for me to pretend to gloss it fully and so long that I must break it into segments (pp. 143–46).

Two bits of information by way of a prelude to the first section: the “tin box” is from an anecdote applied to Martin by one of his colleagues in the theater, the box containing one huge maggot that has fed on all the others but will itself be finally eaten; and the persons named toward the close of the section have all been exploited by Martin.

The crevice enlarged and became populous. There were times when it was larger than the rock, larger than the world, times when it was a tin box so huge that a spade knocking at the side sounded like distant thunder. Then after that there was a time when he was back in rock and distant thunder was sounding like the knocking of a spade against a vast tin box. All the time the opening beneath his window [the rational mouth beneath his eyes] was dribbling on like the Forces Programme, cross-talking and singing to people whom he could not see but knew were there. For a moment or two he was home and his father was like a mountain. The thunder and lightning were playing round the mountain’s head and his mother was weeping tears like acid and knitting a sock without a beginning or end. The tears were a kind of charm for after he had felt them scald him they changed the crevice into a pattern.

The opening spoke.
"She is sorry for me on this rock."

Sybil was weeping and Alfred. Helen was crying. A bright boy face was crying. He saw half-forgotten but now clearly remembered faces and they were all weeping.

"That is because they know I am alone on a rock in the middle of a tin box."

A delirium appropriate to fever is suggested by the reversal and yet repetition of the second sentence in the third. But the encompassing reality in the second sentence is the "tin box," which is only a couple of steps away, for Martin, from a confirmation of his death; by the third sentence, this reality has become something much safer for him, a real rock and storm. The mouth goes "dribbling on like the Forces Programme" to evade actuality, but the ego has further resources of its own. Thus what seems a remembered quarrel between his parents about Martin gets transformed, I would guess, into a mythological tableau replete with security, where an angry Zeus does not interfere with a Fate working on an endless lifeline ("knitting a sock without a beginning or end"). More important, the physical sweat presumably starting in Martin because of the fever is translated by his ego into "tears"—"tears" that "changed the crevice into a pattern" both because, as sweat, they promise Martin that he is alive and because, as tears, they minister to his self-pity by assuring him that the whole world weeps for him. By his last statement he is still holding to the notion of a rock, though the reality of the "tin box," of his death, is threatening again.

He continues to stave off the truth in the next segment, though his ego is nearly put to rout. On one level, the paragraph records Martin's fantasies as he lies in the crevice,
looking at the stone about him and becoming enveloped by his own sweat:

They wept tears that turned them to stone faces in a wall, masks hung in rows in a corridor without beginning or end. There were notices that said No Smoking, Gentlemen, Ladies, Exit and there were many uniformed attendants. Down there was the other room, to be avoided, because there the gods sat behind their terrible knees and feet of black stone, but here the stone faces wept and had wept. Their stone cheeks were furrowed, they were blurred and only recognizable by some indefinite mode of identity. Their tears made a pool on the stone floor so that his feet were burned to the ankles. He scrabbled to climb up the wall and the scalding stuff welled up his ankles to his calves, his knees. He was struggling, half-swimming, half-climbing. The wall was turning over, curving like the wall of a tunnel in the underground. The tears were no longer running down the stone to join the burning sea. They were falling freely, dropping on him. One came, a dot, a pearl, a ball, a globe, that moved on him, spread. He began to scream. He was inside the ball of water that was burning him to the bone and past. It consumed him utterly. He was dissolved and spread throughout the tear an extension of sheer, disembodied pain.

At first the ego still converts the sweat into “tears” of the world’s pity (Martin seems to imagine the “tears” being shed endlessly for him, given the faint allusion to Niobe in “stone faces,” and thus endlessly guaranteeing his existence). Then his attention swings back, via the mourners he has earlier mentioned, to his past in the theater. But it swings too far,
for in the sentence about “the other room” and the “gods” who sit “Down there,” Martin is glancing backward at his terror as a child of that presence lurking in the cellar, that force uncontrollable by his ego. In short, the sentence refers obliquely to his awareness of death, so he must yank himself back to the “faces” that are supposedly weeping for him alive. However, the thought that has intruded of death combines with Martin’s physical awareness of the water (sweat) increasing around his ankles to drive his mind back—not so far, initially, as to his actual death in the sea—but to the escape from death that he created by “struggling, half-swimming, half-climbing” up the funnel of rock on the island. Having been pushed this far back towards its crucial experience, the ego gives way for a moment. Even in recollection, the escape fails: “The wall was turning over. . . .” And in the rest of the paragraph Martin again goes through his death by water (“that was burning him to the bone and past”), though the same sentences, on the simplest level, describe his envelopment in sweat.

But the ego is not yet defeated. With a thrust of energy, it reenacts its escape from death again:

He burst the surface and grabbed at a stone wall. There was hardly any light but he knew better than to waste time because of what was coming. There were projections in the wall of the tunnel so that though it was more nearly a well than a tunnel he could still climb. He laid hold, pulled himself up, projection after projection. The light was bright enough to show him the projections. They were faces, like the ones in the endless corridor. They were not weeping but they were trodden. They appeared to be made of some chalky material for when he put his weight on them they would break away so that only by constant
movement upward was he able to keep up at all. He could hear his voice shouting in the well.

"I am! I am! I am!"

And all the time there was another voice that hung in his ears like the drooling of the Forces Programme. Nobody paid any attention to this voice but the nature of the cretin was to go on talking even though it said the same thing over and over again. . . .

"Tunnels and wells and drops of water all this is old stuff. You can’t tell me. I know my stuff just sexual images from the unconscious, the libido, or is it the id? All explained and known. Just sexual stuff what can you expect? Sensation, all tunnels and wells and drops of water. All old stuff, you can’t tell me. I know."

Intent upon avoiding the knowledge of “what was coming” (the black lightning that will wipe it out), the self again struggles up the tunnel of rock to escape the drowning, even though the tunnel becomes a vision of Martin’s whole progress through life (which has been as dominated by his ego as is his drive to evade death). In spite of this vision, the ego proclaims its own identity—"I am! I am! I am!"—proclaims it even while fundamentally aware that the escape is an illusion, as is clear from the self’s inability to make any headway up the tunnel and from its sense of inhabiting a place “more nearly a well than a tunnel.” Desperately powerful as this assertion is, however, there remains something mechanical about the operation of the ego, suggested both by the image of Martin climbing and climbing to stay in the same spot and by the repetition of “I am.” And this mechanical quality has its counterpart in the line taken by the rational mouth, out at the periphery of Martin’s being: for the mouth, ironically enough, goes on manufacturing a
reasonable explanation in its talk about "sexual images." But, for the moment, the mind and ego have won out, and Martin has again postponed his admission of being dead.

Viewed as a whole, the passage is certainly an extreme instance of the dense verbal texture in *Pincher Martin*, for many of the images in the quoted paragraphs have values which are multiple as well as constantly shifting. Yet the passage is also essentially representative of the entire novel in that, on any given page, Golding is likely to fuse several apparently different levels of reality—memories of the past, intimations of the actual death, the substantial world of the rock, the ego's fight to survive—and to require that we separate them in order to interpret precisely the flow of Martin's consciousness.

There is no question of a verbal surface complicated by the representation of subjective processes in the closing chapter of *Pincher Martin*, which records the arrival of an officer named Davidson at a remote island in the Hebrides to identify Martin's body, Davidson's conversations with Mr. Campbell—who has found the body—about death, and Davidson's final assertion that Martin had no time to suffer because "He didn't even . . . kick off his seaboots." But the chapter does present a difficulty in interpretation. Many critics read it in a strictly literal fashion and consider it a rather tricky and inept device on Golding's part to reveal, at long last, Martin's death in the water. It seems to me, however, that the mode of the final chapter is essentially allegorical and that the point of Golding's conclusion is to show how a human type very different from Martin, Mr. Campbell, may behave when facing death on a bare island.

Surely we are encouraged to think of Davidson not simply as a naval officer but as Death itself. He comes on "a black
shape” out of the “west” and “a wintry sunset” (p. 202); works “seven days a week” (p. 203); is repeatedly described as a death's head, with “eyes that did not blink,” eyes “just a fraction too wide open” (p. 203), and “a grin without humour” on the “lower part” of his face (p. 203). As for Campbell, I would guess that his name is common enough, especially in combination with the stripped-down locale, to suggest that he is an Everyman. At least he is a more normal sort than Martin: twice tipping his cap to Death humbly, in contrast to Martin’s arrogant rejection of death; continually showing his compassion for others, whereas Martin is caught up in himself; questioning, where Martin asserts; above all, confronting Death and its mystery, whereas Martin has sought to avoid them.

In the course of the final chapter, Campbell gradually brings himself to meet the gaze of the officer and to study his face, which is to say that he recognizes Davidson as Death. And Davidson himself is represented with some consistency as behaving in ways appropriate to that allegorical personage, it seems to me, in that Golding makes the officer regard death primarily as a sheer recurrent fact rather than as an event charged with the emotional and metaphysical complications that it has for Campbell. Thus Davidson's rather superior air in dealing with Campbell; his interest in the identity disk alone, as opposed to Campbell’s human interest in all the circumstances surrounding the discovered body (p. 204); and his dig at Campbell's lack of “second sight” (p. 206). All the unequivocal compassion in this meeting emanates from Campbell, for the officer who must identify the dead and for Martin himself. Davidson's reactions and words strike me as ambiguous. His drinking, before and after identifying Martin’s body, may be a mark of the stress he feels as a man or a kind of toast to the newly dead. To
Campbell's expression of sympathy at the officer's daily task—"A sad harvest for you, Captain. I do not know how you can endure it"—Davidson replies, to the accompaniment of a disappearing "grin," "I wouldn't change [my job? my nature?]" (pp. 203–4) : a response which may mean either that, as a human, he is dutiful though distraught or that, as Death, he is devoted to his work. What Davidson says specifically about Martin, which might at first glance seem compassionate—"I have to thank you, Mr. Campbell, in the name of this poor officer" (p. 207), or his final assurance that Martin did not suffer—becomes grotesquely inappropriate if we remember the Martin we have seen throughout the novel. And, true to his role as Death, Davidson is simply "bewildered" when Campbell's questions become metaphysical.

Meanwhile, Campbell has progressed from admitting his own human fear of death (pp. 204–5) to watching, when Davidson goes to claim Martin in the hut, the very advent of death: he "contemplated the lean-to as though he were seeing it for the first time" and sees in its ruins "a profound and natural language that men were privileged to read only on a unique occasion" (p. 205). When Davidson returns from the hut, Campbell may flinch after having "read the face line by line as he had read the lean-to," but he goes on to look at Davidson "carefully, eye to eye"—and to raise the questions that every human would raise with Death, given the "chance" of a "meeting" like this, one "unpredictable and never to be repeated" (pp. 206–7). Studying the "wreck" of the lean-to again, which functions even more obviously now as a surrogate for the dead Martin, Campbell first asks what one is to make of life itself: "Would you believe that anything ever lived there?" Davidson is nonplused—"I simply don't follow you, I'm afraid" (p. 207) —so Campbell tries again, setting aside his "official beliefs"
and extending his question to inquire about the possibility of life after death: "Would you say there was any—surviving? Or is that all? Like the lean-to?" But Davidson/Death evades this ultimate question, unable to answer it or unconcerned with it, and reverts instead to the physical facts of Martin's death, asserting that Campbell need not worry about the drowned man's suffering: "You saw the body. He didn't even have time to kick off his seaboots" (p. 208).

So Campbell is left at the close of the novel in the position of all of us. And in his role as Everyman through this final chapter, especially an Everyman who gets no answers to his questions about death, Campbell stands for the readers of the story, thus serving as a means—the naval officer in *Lord of the Flies* is another such, and Tuami in *The Inheritors* still another—by which Golding relates the preceding narrative and its issues more directly to his audience. But within the novel, as I have indicated, Golding uses Campbell's encounter with death to contrast in a variety of ways with Martin's. The underlying and vital difference between the two men is that Campbell accepts his limitations as a human being and as an individual. Golding dramatizes the fact most movingly, I think, in the last words Campbell utters in the novel: to Davidson's "If you're worried about Martin—whether he suffered or not—," Campbell replies, after a pause and a sigh, "Aye... I meant just that" (p. 208). For one thing, the response shows him admitting, as it were, that his previous metaphysical question about a life after death is not susceptible to a definitive answer in the human world; while his question has allowed for the sort of dimension to existence that Martin has been everywhere bent on denying, Campbell in effect acknowledges himself bound at last by the imperfection of human knowledge. His statement also betrays, in its concern with the suffering at-
tendant on death, his own fears as an individual about that crisis, fears which—so his resignation suggests—he has settled himself to endure. But his reply also declares explicitly his compassion for Martin, that flow of feeling out from one ego to include another which is so notably lacking in Martin himself. In depicting Campbell as ordinary, as a person humanly limited who accepts his limitations, Golding provides an important counterpart to the central figure of the novel, who reveals his extraordinariness in his struggle—when faced with the proof of his limitations as man—to create out of his ego a universe that he would will to be self-sufficient and unbounded by death. But of course Martin fails; and, though his struggle may seem heroic at times, what the novel as a whole insists upon is that he is so compelled by the imperatives of the self, so utterly encased within himself, as to become monstrous. Certainly his compulsion and the degree of his encasement are extreme, yet in a very general sense Martin may be said to take his place alongside the boys in *Lord of the Flies* and the new men in *The Inheritors* as a representative of the liabilities indigenous in the human condition. In *Free Fall*, Golding’s fourth novel, he again treats a character terrifyingly imprisoned in self, but one who also has access to a different order of experience.

2. *The Two Deaths of Christopher Martin* (New York, 1957), pp. 76–77; this is the edition to which I give page references.
3. Critical opinion is divided on the question of whether the God who appears is real or an illusion of Martin’s mind. It seems to me that he must be regarded as real, as a further intrusion of the non-egotistical on the world that Martin has imagined, if we take into account the
whole trajectory of the story; surely Martin's ego, acting in its own interest, would never dream up this manifestation of otherness. The problem of interpretation arises, I suppose, because Golding's fiction thus insists on the reality of God.

4. Golding himself has confirmed this interpretation in a private letter to John Peter: "The cellar in Pincher Martin represents more than childhood terrors; a whole philosophy in fact—suggesting that God is the thing we turn away from into life, and therefore we hate and fear him and make a darkness there" (quoted in A Source Book, p. 34).

5. Ironically enough, it would appear that Martin bears a heavy responsibility for the sinking of the destroyer, and so for his own death, because—in pursuing his plan to kill Nat—he has sent the port lookout below, the man who might have seen the torpedo approach. James Baker feels that the coinciding of the torpedo's explosion with Martin's order intended to dispose of Nat may suggest a moral judgment on Martin by some "agent or cosmic force" mysteriously at work in Golding's universe (William Golding, p. 46); I take the coincidence simply as commenting ironically on Martin in the ways that I have indicated. Frank Kermode has also written of these events, finding Martin's "order . . . freely willed and murderous," but "also necessary and proper in the circumstance" of the submarine's attack. If I am interpreting him properly, Kermode implies that Martin is aware of the approaching torpedo, but I miss the evidence for this in Golding's description of the incident. Kermode praises the multiple relevance of Martin's order—to avoiding the torpedo and to killing Nat—as an "invention" on the part of Golding that "Only the best in fiction" can offer (p. 117); to me, the coincidence seems too startling, too manufactured.

6. James Gindin objects to the ending because he feels that it reduces "the whole drama on the rock" to "a momentary flash in Martin's mind," and that this compression of time, in turn, undermines the story by finally compelling us to regard all that Martin has gone through as tinged with "parody" (A Source Book, p. 137). But for one thing, this objection presumes that most of the book transpires in an instant while Martin drowns, whereas the fiction of the novel seems to be that the ego continues to create a world for itself after the body has died. Secondly, Gindin understands the "drama on the rock" as a defeat by nature's forces of Martin's "sanity" and of "man's careful and calculated attempts to achieve salvation" (p. 137); but Martin's struggle in fact dramatizes how egocentric he is and how utterly he resists salvation. To such a struggle, an implication of parody—if it exists—might not
be inappropriate. Finally, I think Gindin misses the contrast with Martin's reaction to death provided by Mr. Campbell's reaction in the closing chapter, a subject I take up in my text.

7. One might interpret the sentence that follows, in which Campbell looks at the officer, as a possible exception to my claim about Davidson's lack of compassion: "He glanced up at the too-wide eyes, the face that seemed to know more than it could bear" (p. 204). But the statement may record Campbell's reading of the face, and in any case "seemed" is a qualified phrasing.

8. James Baker makes the same point in arguing against the claim that Martin is heroic: "Instead of depicting the assault of reality on the hapless soul of rational man, Golding shows the outrageous attack of a rational man, who is far more sick than heroic, upon nature and God" (William Golding, p. 40). Most often in his book, Baker views man's rationality as the enemy that Golding takes under attack, and Pincher Martin seems to me to provide the surest support for this thesis among Golding's novels—though even in this story, we may remember, the ego itself, not rationality, is the "dark centre." Later on in his discussion of Pincher Martin, Baker also seeks to check those who would read Golding in too determinedly Christian a fashion; but, though I sympathize with his intent, I think he goes too far in saying, "there is no risk in asserting that Golding's beleaguered castaways suffer and die in a universe which is more pagan than Christian" (p. 45). For it seems to me that a Christian orientation is always there in the novels, sometimes heavily muted, sometimes dominant. In the case of Pincher Martin, the narrative's focus on death, the presentation of God, and the thesis concerning the arrogance and limitations of man—so central a feature of Christianity, as well as of other systems of belief—all force the reader, I think, to imagine the story as unfolding in a Christian context.