

PINCHER MARTIN

Disasters affecting large numbers of people are often said to be of biblical proportions. Disasters in the lives of individuals, on the other hand, are usually called tragedies, the frame of reference in that case being Greek drama rather than the Judaeo-Christian Old Testament.

A tragedy must have to do with more than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The complex relationship between mortals and immortals in the classical world raised questions about morality that were of a different order from those in the Jewish tradition, where the argument was between man and God. God knows best, man pays for his disobedience and even for his innocent mistakes, human suffering being God's way of making a point. The Flood was meant to wipe out the whole human race and would have done if God had not made an exception for Noah.

The New Testament, being the first written expression of the new Romano-Judaic philosophy of the Jewish renegade prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, made the situation even more complicated. Love thy neighbour on the one hand, Crusades on the other. Human suffering became man's way of making God's point for him. Onward Christian soldiers.

Which brings us to William Golding.

The suffering of the characters in Golding's novels is more biblical than classical. His heroes don't have tragic flaws, at least no more than the rest of us, they are just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Disasters of biblical proportions, specifically the Second World War, often form the background to the story but are not themselves the story. The story is about the suffering, not what caused it.

Pincher Martin is about a sailor who is blown off the bridge of a British ship, part of a convoy crossing the Atlantic during the Second World War, when it is hit by a German torpedo.

'Must have hit us bang under the bridge. And I gave the right order. And I get blown to buggery.'

Kept afloat by his life-belt, he swims round in circles. He sees a shape which he thinks must be one of the other ships in the convoy and swims towards it, shouting for help. The shape turns out to be a rock.

'... his body gave up and he lay slack in the waves and the shape rose over him. He heard the sound of waves breaking. He lifted his head and there was rock stuck up in the sky with a sea-gull poised before it.'

He swims towards it but is constantly pushed back by the waves.

'He went under into a green calm, then up and was thrust sideways. The sea no longer played with him. It stayed its wild movement and held him gently, carried him with delicate and careful motion like a retriever with a bird. Hard things touched him about the feet and knees. The sea laid him down gently and retreated.'

The next twelve chapters of this short novel, Golding's third, give a detailed account of Christopher 'Pincher' Martin's struggle to survive on his rock. He humanises it by giving each part of it a name - Safety Rock, The Look-out, Prospect Cliff, The Red Lion. He eats barnacles and mussels. He builds a tower of stones to attract the attention of passing ships and calls it The Dwarf. He cures his constipation by using the tube of his life-belt to give himself an enema.

His memories, in dreams and day-dreams, become increasingly vivid. He has hallucinations. He starts to go mad, realises that he is going mad, tries to hold onto his sanity.

'The man was inside two crevices. There was first the rock... his body was a second and interior crevice which he inhabited.'

His confusion between inside and outside continues to grow.

'The light changed before the staring eyes but so slowly that they did not notice any difference. They looked, rather, at the jumble of unsorted pictures that presented themselves at random. There was still the silent, indisputable, creature that sat at the centre of things, but it seemed to have lost the knack of distinguishing between pictures and reality.'

He hears himself talking as if he is listening to someone else.

'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.'

In none of this is he a tragic hero, just a man in the wrong place at the wrong time. 'The solution,' he says to himself at the end of chapter 11, 'lies in intelligence. That is what distinguishes us from the helpless animals that are caught in their patterns of behaviour, both mental and physical.' But this is quickly revealed as a conventional idea with no basis in reality, a bit of received wisdom which is meaningless. Knowledge comes from a different part of him. Feeling around inside his mouth, '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.'

A man with an intelligent tongue learns from it the truth about his own existence. Tragedy is simply the human condition. We are merely helpless animals caught in their patterns of behaviour, both mental and physical.

Though the immediate cause of the events in *Pincher Martin* is war, Golding has nothing to say about it. It could be anything. The same is true of his other novels, in none of which does he consider what causes the predicament in which his characters find themselves, only the predicament itself. It is something he shares with Samuel Beckett. The predicament both men write about is simply that of being human.

Beckett would have known as well as Golding did what it was that was so hauntingly familiar and painful about an isolated and decaying rock in the middle of the sea.