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Pincher Martin and Piscine Molitor: Two Life Options – the Devourer and the Prolific

Abstract

I would like to examine two radically different attitudes to life as rendered in Golding's Pincher Martin and Martel's Life of Pi, using Blake's categories of the devourer and the prolific applied to the two main characters respectively. Their incredible life stories, taking place in extreme maritime circumstances, problematise the issue of survival in terms of everyday life. The concepts of place assume different dimensions in their world visions while memory plays a key role in their life struggles.

Résumé

Je propose d'examiner deux attitudes à la vie radicalement différentes telles que dépeintes dans Pincher Martin de Golding et Life of Pi de Martel, en me servant de deux catégories de Blake, celles du dévoreur et du fécond. L'histoire de leur vie problématise la question de la survie dans la vie quotidienne. Les concepts du lieu adoptent des proportions différentes dans leurs visions du monde pendant que la mémoire joue un rôle essentiel dans leur lutte de survie.

“How Canadians individually and corporately construct their identities through space and place” (Howells, 3), to borrow the words of Coral Anne Howells, has been one of the dominant topics in Canadian literature, and for almost twenty years now in its scholarly criticism as well. If it is commonly accepted that place plays an indisputably significant role in shaping and mirroring personal identity, then it may be puzzling that the same environment may produce two radically different world views. This paper explores the life options exercised by the main characters of William Golding's *Pincher Martin* and Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, who find themselves in hostile marine surroundings and resort to memory in the process of finding identity co-ordinates.¹ The categories of place and memory will serve as a focus in the present paper, which is also an exploration of possible differences between the Old (Europe) and the New World (Canada) in an attempt to place Canada in a global context.

Professor Howells provides a useful commentary on the assertion of one of the characters of Carol Shields' *The Republic of Love*, “Geography is destiny” (quoted in Shields, 1), which may be revisited regarding the plots of *Pincher Martin* and *Life of Pi*. Shields says:

In his brief introduction to *The Atlas of Literature*, Malcolm Bradbury (1996) quotes the American writer, Eudora Welty: “The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place.” He also quotes

Herman Melville: “nearly all literature, in one sense, is made up of guide-books.” Characters have to live somewhere, actions require locations, so – at the very least – geography functions as a container for plot. But the relationship between geography and literature goes far beyond this prosaic function. (Shields, 1)

However prosaic, the relationship between geography and destiny is far from simple. The significance of location is probably most self-evident on the individual level. Physical geography, region, cityscape, neighbourhood, class position, gender, political orientation, etc. often critically affect one’s personality, imposing a pattern which does not only develop organically from the inside but also moulds the individual from the outside.

Anthony Burgess is only one among many who contend that literature depends for its life on place, referring to English literature: “But to a writer, geography seems to be more important than history, and it is the geography of England that is perpetually reflected in its literature, far more than the pattern of events which we call history of a nation. England is an island, and the sea washes its literature as much as its shores” (Burgess, 11). He also recognises the influence of geography on identity formation just as Howells, who points out the relationship between geography and character building:

Interestingly, cultural geographers based in Canada have been especially interested in the conjunction of literary and geographical studies. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given Canada’s reputation both for introspection and as a country famously renowned for “having too little history, too much geography”, yet where the vast majority of the population live in urban settlements that occupy only a tiny proportion of the land surface and have only occasional contact with the vast non-urban area. In these circumstances, it is little surprise that landscape is drenched in mythology, nor that novelists have paid so much attention to the role of landscape in shaping and mirroring personal identity. (Howells, 2-3)

Geography is surely an inescapable container for life and if literature is the mirror of life, geography consequently becomes a container for plot, as stated by Howells. The question is: what sort of plot can be expected if geography is reduced to its most placid? In an interview with Sabina Sielke, Yann Martel explains his choice of strange setting for *Life of Pi*:

I tend not to be interested in autobiography, for two reasons. In a general way, I don’t find the ego that interesting. I would rather have a normal character face extraordinary circumstances than an extraordinary person face normal circumstances. Maybe this is the influence of religion, or philosophy, or asceticism, or whatever – but I find the good life is the one where you tend to shush the ego, where you forget yourself. Not to the point of desolation or self-destruction or denial, but I do dislike this sort of very Western dwelling on one’s little sores, little opinions, little life. This is a generalisation, but I am not really interested in psychological

novels. I'd rather take a character, put him or her in unusual circumstances and see how he or she evolves than have a novel set inside a room where the character endlessly dreams away. (Sielke, 14)

In this context, if all determinants of location are obliterated, if the city, neighbourhood, home, family, disappear, if the only spatial dimension remaining is the horizontal surface of the ocean, the question remains: what action can take place there to constitute the plot? What sort of fiction can be created located in a place which requires a blank-paged guidebook?

The answer is: probably the one of the highest rank, the fiction that functions most metaphorically, as exemplified by Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner*. The vast expanses of the ocean stand for existential options, for the blank page of life to be inscribed by the two castaways, Pincher and Pi, who therefore represent essential humanity.

The plots of these two novels begin in a realistic manner. Pincher Martin is a naval war-time officer on board of a man-of-war while Piscine Molitor is an adolescent on board of a cargo ship bound for Canada. Pincher is British, an ex-coloniser, Piscine Indian, a former colonee. The differences between them are as wide as the ocean but just as they accidentally share the same initials, P.M., they also share common human potentials. Likewise, they experience the same type of life crisis which will put their humanity to the most severe test and force them to reconstruct their identities in the most discouraging of all places. At the moment of shipwrecks, the novels shift from realism into a fictional space of existential drama staged on the metaphorical sea of life alternatives. It is therefore possible to interpret these novels following the three chronological and symbolic stages identifiable in both of them: the stage of rebuilding one's identity after the fall, the stage of its manifestation in practical life, and the stage dealing with the identity co-ordinates at the present moment.

The first stage after the fall concentrates on the reconstruction of identity through memory. The two castaways have to secure both physical and psychic survival in an uncharted territory of the ocean. The location of "here" is unknown which makes the process of transforming it into home a heroic feat.² The only possible way of achieving it in the midst of the ocean is by resorting to the mind and its potentials, which is what our castaways do. Imagination helps them create subjective visions based exclusively on memory so that physical geography becomes mental landscape and physical survival critically dependent on psychic disposition. All of Pi's subsequent life will be inseparable from memories as the narrator realises: "Memory is an ocean and he bobs on its surface" (42). The quality of past life remembered at the moment of crisis turns into the building material for identity reconstruction.

Widdis and others give particular attention to how "Identity develops as people engage in placemaking, i.e., 'the way all of us as human beings transform the places in which we find ourselves into places in which we live'" (Widdis, 50). That Martin and Molitor have to engage in placemaking in the blank space of their unfortunate surroundings may be propitious after all since they are given an opportunity to improve their old and perhaps develop new identities in an

endeavour to accommodate to new circumstances. If “identity is a concept that is both discovered and invented” (Widdis, 51) then theirs was not invented afresh but re-discovered in a mental struggle to survive. They are archetypal pioneers who first have to discover themselves in order to be able to discover their homeland. In this sense, who-ness precedes where-ness in a journey of discovery, while memory and imagination are the means whereby the old identity is reconstructed by both Pincher and Piscine.

In this context, the nicknames these characters have are more than revealing being symbolic of their life patterns. Martin’s first name is Christopher, the light-bearer, standing for the noble and godly potentials of human nature. However, he betrayed the divine gifts in his previous life and fully deserved the nickname of Pincher:

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 flaps open and both hands out to grab. He’s a cosmic case of the bugger who gets his penny and someone else’s bun. (120)

In Blake’s terminology, he is a devourer, a self-centred selfish personification of Greed who efficaciously destroys not only himself in all possible meanings of the word but spreads pestilence all around, to the point of murder. One act of unmotivated hatred and violence ironically tumbles him overboard in a metaphorical fall into moral, and therefore existential nothingness. His past life offers no room for redemption and when he hits the water, Pincher drowns.

Unlike Pincher, when Molitor is thrown overboard, providence places a lifeboat under him which is thoroughly deserved by his conduct in previous life. This is symbolically implied in his nickname, the mathematical symbol π , which he chooses himself in preference of his given name, the ridiculous and embarrassing Piscine, thus saving himself from a life-time of discomfort. Though only a boy, he proves his potential for creative problem solving by, for example, practising three different and opposed religions at once. He represents Blake’s category of the Prolific, believes there is “no greatness without goodness” (87) and opens himself up to life and new beginnings:

I never thought finding myself confined in a small space with a spotted hyena would be good news, but there you go. In fact, the good news was double: if it weren’t for the hyena, the sailors wouldn’t have thrown me into the lifeboat and I would have stayed on the ship and I surely would have drowned. (110)

Therefore, Pi survives the fall. While the nickname ‘Pincher’ connotes the exclusively rational approach to life of Martin, Molitor’s nickname Pi stands for the irrational, or better transcendental vision of life, encoded in the mathematical symbol π . It is significant that π is only one of the irrational transcendental numbers which are, incidentally, more numerous than non-transcendental numbers. It was probably Martel’s intention to make the reader recognise the

disproportion between the devourer and the prolific, the destructive and the creative, the rational and the visionary, by placing Pi at odds with everybody else, especially the two investigators at the end of his ordeal. To create a fully functional society (evolutionary stable strategy), there should be a majority of people like Pi with a minority of people like the investigators, or Pincher Martin for that matter. The nicknames are representative of their personalities so that Pi sees options which are invisible to Pincher, and it is only logical that he survives while Pincher drowns.

If the first phase of the two novels deals with the reconstruction of identity formed in the past, the second phase recounts the ways of practical manifestations of personality traits specific for each of the characters. It is taken up with different survival techniques employed by Pincher and Pi. Namely, though Pincher drowns, he refuses to die and instead struggles with all the mental, and probably instinctual power he can summon to beat this last adversary, death. Yann Martel refers to the natural phenomenon of death which he explores in literary terms:

And death is rich metaphorically. It's the basis of all religion. If we didn't die, I don't think there would be religion. So, looking at death is yet another approach to the other. And death, violence, and fear are phenomena that impel us to change. Some change is self-willed, some, through fear of death, is forced upon us. (21)

However, the category of change does not apply to Pincher Martin. His imagination restores his old self as a patchwork of memorised scenes drawing up a permanent pattern of behaviour which he, for the last time, now imposes on his environment. Pincher imagines a rock from a memory of an extracted tooth, colonises it, charts it with streets, maps it with names, completely subordinates it to his will. His master mentality cannot imagine any other alternative to overpowering and defeating the other from which he is separated by the boundaries of his own self. Memory cannot help him reconnect nor can his concept of religion relate him to what is out there, the boundaries of his self being impermeable and definite. Finally, he cannot adapt even to the environment of his own body, which is now a dead body, and he rejects and discards it, isolating himself in the dark, inscrutable centre of his self-awareness, out of where he suspiciously watches the world for the signs of the coming extinction³. He triumphantly exclaims: "I am who I was" (131) and in fact damns himself to eternal hell of egotism. It is an incredible life option, characteristic of the devourers, who aggressively instrumentalise their environment and selfishly subject it to their own will. It is incredible in the sense of being depleted, reductionist, dehumanising, yet it is frequently practised and almost taken as a norm.

On the other hand, Pi seems to be perfectly aware of the moral traps disregarded by Pincher. He says: "When your own life is threatened, your sense of empathy is blunted by a terrible, selfish hunger for survival" (120). Though younger, he is wiser than Pincher since his imagination helps him transgress the boundaries of the self; curiosity and the ability to wonder make him watch and perceive the beauty of the other while "the empathetic imagination" (17) does not allow him to

inflict more pain than necessary for survival. Pi clearly reflects Martel's point of view who asks: "Is life about being powerful? Is that the whole picture? *What is the picture?*" (17). Pincher Martin's answer to these questions would be affirmative, "Domination, identity" (191) and as for his picture, he throws these words at God: "I have created you and I can create my own heaven" (196).

Pi's picture is different. He believes that "[f]aith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love" (208). Temporary lack of faith is compared to blackness always driven away by memories of his lost family, his religious teachers, the beloved zoo, the dreams which became his legacy: "The blackness would stir and eventually go away, and God would remain, a shining point of light in my heart. I would go on loving" (209). Obviously, Pi's universe revolves round the axes of the heart, while Pincher's hinges on that of the mind. Pi also reconstructs his old self by establishing the only possible relationship with the tiger he has to share the lifeboat with⁴ – the relationship of respect. It is quite consistent with his earlier personality pattern spontaneously established on love and trust. In his mature age he can explain it logically: "To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation" (28). He grasps the truth which is a key to his survival: "It was not a question of him or me, but of him *and* me" (164). This sound ecological and existential philosophy saves his life and he survives for seven months on the open sea, proving that miracles can happen and that another incredible alternative to Pincher's is also plausible: preserving oneself not at the expense but to the benefit of the other. Such an altruistic life option may seem incredible in an age of individualism, alienation, competition, but Pi survives and prospers in his modest way, filling up his human dimensions with graceful ease. Clearly, different survival techniques of the two men correspond to the quality of their existence after the fall.

The third phase of the two novels deals with the present moment. In *Pincher Martin* that is the moment when Pincher's dead body is discovered on the shore. The officers watch the remains in a lifebelt pitifully and quite confidently conclude he drowned on the spot since not even his sea-boots had been kicked off. Their comments, however, only bring to doubt the reliability of objectively perceived reality, since there is no telling whether the spark of life still flickers in Pincher's stubborn dark centre or not. He drowned on the first page of the novel, his dead body is washed ashore on the last, and his existential drama took place in between. Yet, exactly what happened in between makes one feel the transcendental drama is not over. More likely, it is an equivalent to eternal damnation, to biblical hell, to a life void of any moral sense. One of the officers compares Pincher's body to a derelict lean-to on the shore: "Broken, defiled. Returning to the earth, the rafters rotted, the roof fallen in – a wreck" (207). Unawares, he passes comment on the whole western civilisation represented by both Pincher and himself. It is a construct built on religious, political and moral pillars that seem to be rotten since the setting is a world war, always an indication and symbol of failure. It seems the achievements of such a civilisation cannot last, its roof is falling in, it is washing ashore dead bodies. And the human being produced within such a cultural framework is a derelict himself, a wreck, a moral ruin of Pincher's type who should better return to the earth and transform into another form of life.

This harsh judgement on the European predicament rendered in *Pincher Martin* is certainly encouraged by the altruistic and benevolent alternative embodied in Pi. It is significant that Pi originally does not belong to the European civilisation. His family is an idealised Indian family: the father hard-working and successful owner of a zoo, the mother wise and feminine centre of the household, the elder brother a bullying but loving athlete, the aunts good-hearted but interfering etc. Pi himself is a vegetarian, creative, introspective boy “marching to a different drumbeat of progress” (75) than the one his father was infatuated with. Namely, Mr. Patel believed in the New India supposedly introduced by Gandhi. After India’s long colonial period under the British, he was clearly contaminated with the ideas of technological progress, prosperity, innovation, change. Ironically, with “Mrs. Gandhi’s dictatorial takeover of the nation” (78) in February 1976, even this enthusiast and patriot decides to move to Canada. Pi states a positive political ideal when he analyses his father’s decision:

To prosper, a zoo needs parliamentary government, democratic elections, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to associate, rule of law and everything else enshrined in India’s Constitution. Impossible to enjoy the animals otherwise. Long-term, bad politics is bad for business. (79)

This is also a nut-shell criticism of all governments. As an individual trying to secure well-being for his family, Mr. Patel makes a crucial decision that will prove fatal to all of them but Pi. He opts for Canada, most probably following a popular belief that it is a safe haven for immigrants, especially after it adopted an official multiculturalism policy in 1971. In his essay on the Canadian model of multiculturalism, Kymlicka explains the presence of a great number of Indian immigrants in Canada:

As a result, the new wave of immigration into Canada which began in the 1960s differed from previous waves in two important respects: 1. The immigrants were selected on a points system based on their skills, education, age and so on, without regard to their race or ethnicity. As a result, the new immigrants were increasingly non-White (and non-Christian), and these ‘non-traditional’ immigrants now form the majority of Canada’s immigrants. 2. The long-standing assimilationist Anglo-conformity model of immigrant integration was replaced with a more pluralistic and ‘multicultural’ model. This new model respected the desire of immigrants to cherish and express their ethnic identity and made a commitment to reform public institutions (e.g. schools, hospitals, police) so as to recognise and accommodate this immigrant ethnicity. (Kymlicka, 12)

In line with this, Mr. Patel was hoping for “the political, economic or social stability of a democracy” (Kymlicka, 17) he did not enjoy in India. He sailed Columbus-like, searching for the new world, but taking a reversed route: Columbus was searching for India while these disillusioned Indians were heading towards the last promised land of all – Canada of 1977.

The third phase of the novel *Life of Pi* outlines the present moment in Canada through Pi's experience. It has been Pi's new homeland for over 20 years since his rescue and he is an almost ideal case of successful immigrant integration. Homeless and parentless, he was adopted by a good Quebecois family, educated and afterwards employed, well-settled and married, with two children, a dog and a cat. The only visible evidence of his castaway experience is a house full of food and warm clothes he puts on regardless of the weather.

Multicultural Canada celebrates and welcomes diversity within the policy of the cultural mosaic. However, disintegration of immigrant cultures seems inevitable "as successive generations become upwardly mobile and willingly absorbed" (Moran, 425) into the mosaic which is nevertheless Canadian. Through intermarriage and social adaptation the cultural and racial identity of the Indian, and other immigrants, gradually fades and loses its significance despite all the institutional efforts to preserve it. What gains in importance is the individual profile, regardless of ethnicity or culture, and even regardless of the points system. In this sense, a third novel is required which would give Pincher another chance. It is questionable whether Pincher Martin, rescued and domesticated in Canada, would have preserved his old self, becoming a ruthless and egoistic actor, despite a generally tolerant atmosphere.

On the other hand, Pi's accommodation to Canada proves that an authentic and original personality capable of reconciling opposites can further develop in a favourable social climate. He also remains true to his old self and studies seemingly incompatible disciplines, religion and zoology, finding in both a satisfactory answer to the question of freedom. He perceives interesting common points between them such as anthropomorphism: "The obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything is the bane not only of theologians but also of zoologists" (31). After rescue, Pi goes on living his childish dream of loving God and turns his home into a temple of three religions. On the individual level, he contributes to Canada what its official policy propagates, toleration. Belonging to the category of the prolific, he finds connections where other people usually do not see them: "Hindu, in their capacity for love, are indeed hairless Christians, just as Muslims, in the way they see God in everything, are bearded Hindus, and Christians, in their devotion to God, are hat-wearing Muslims" (50). Pi is a spiritual peacemaker who speaks the language of love not hate, like Pincher Martin so that his insights into human nature are a plea against violence and aggression: "For evil in the open is but evil from within that has been let out. The main battlefield for good is not the open ground of the public arena but the small clearing of each heart" (71). Being an archetypal devourer, Pincher may never perceive the evil outside as the projection of his own evil. In all these points Pi is, unlike Pincher, ideally human, and it may be significant that the place where he is allowed free expression of his humanity is his new homeland. According to Martel, who, unlike Golding, is an optimist, "This story has a happy ending" (93). Though half a century divides the two novels, their authors may have pinned down the basic distinction between the Old and the New world, the category of hope. It seems there was no hope for Pincher Martin, while Piscine Molitor survived because his hope survived all ordeals. If re-directing identity-coordinates

from the devourer towards the prolific is at all possible, then Canada may be a plausible place for the transformation.

Endnotes

1. The phrase was used by Marco Adria in the context of cultural production: "Cultural expression is a process of finding coordinates. The cultural producer tries to find a 'space' within which to make a connection to an audience. The 'space' is defined by both physical and temporal boundaries." The same categories will be employed in this paper with some modifications (Adria, 125).

2. Widdis is one of the critics who refer to Frye and his question of the highest priority: Where is here?, within the context of regional borders in Canada: "He [an individual] asks himself "Where is here?" but this leads him into unchartered territory. In this quest, the voyager must recognize that a body of cultural assumptions, formed by regional/local consciousness, influences an appreciation of the nature of Canada and filters its imagery. Frye reasons that an individual's 'Here' is neither static nor complete but continually evolves as new ideas, events and experiences permeate one's consciousness" (Widdis, 52).

3. It seems apparent that Martel has been reading Golding. There are many instances in his *Life of Pi* which echo images and ideas Golding used in his works. For example, in this context Martel's narrator says: "It's astonishing what you hear when you're alone in the blackness of your dying mind" (242). The following sentence commenting Pi's delight at understanding the tiger reminds one of Golding's astonishment at sea life: "It was something to pull me out of my limited mortal ways and thrust me into a state of exalted wonder" (233). Or a direct reference to *The Inheritors*: "It was frightening, the extent to which a full belly made for a good mood" (213).

4. What makes *Life of Pi* an excellent read, especially for young people, is that Martel explains all points in very unintrusive poetic language. The whole paragraph is worth quoting: "I had to tame him. It was at that moment that I realised this necessity. It was not a question of him or me, but of him *and* me. We were, literally and figuratively, in the same boat. We would live – or we would die – together. He might be killed in an accident, or he could die shortly of natural causes, but it would be foolsh to count on such an eventuality. More likely the worst would happen: the simple passage of time, in which his animal toughness would easily outlast my human frailty. Only if I tamed him could I possibly trick him into dying first, if we had to come to that sorry business" (164).

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