

RESISTING METAPHOR:

A phenomenology of cold and heat in William Golding's *Pincher Martin*

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ABSTRACT: Pete Hay (2006) argues that literary islands, in “acts of post-colonial appropriation,” tend to prioritise mainland perspectives that reduce islands to metaphorical projections from a continental vantage point. I offer a complication of Hay’s argument through an analysis of William Golding’s *Pincher Martin* (1956). Significantly, this novel is centred around a northern island whose predominant characteristic is its coldness. I suggest that *Pincher Martin* features phenomenological narration, manifested in descriptions focalised through the protagonist’s sensory and somatic perceptions. Central to the novel’s project of representing a phenomenological subjectivity is a constellation of sensory aspects through which *Pincher Martin* apprehends his situation, most particularly coldness. Through analysing the novel’s discourses of coldness and heat, I will argue that the phenomenological narration destabilises both the perception of the narrated space and the possibility of textual signification. This constructs a diegetic world that cannot be apprehended with any fixed understanding and an island that resists functioning as the vehicle of metaphor.

KEYWORDS: coldness, phenomenology, metaphor, island literature, Robinsonade, cold-water islands, fluidity

Introduction

“For readers reared on travellers’ tales, the words desert isle may conjure up a place of soft sands and shady trees where brooks run to quench the castaway’s thirst and ripe fruit falls into his hand, where no more is asked of him than to drowse the days away till a ship calls to fetch him home...” (Coetzee, 1998: 7)

Taken from a late 20th Century novel – J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* – this account of the desert island overtly engages with clichés that are often attached to literary desert islands. It is implied that this “desert isle” is tropical. The “shady trees,” the “castaway’s thirst” and the “ripe fruit” suggest sunshine and a warm climate. The idyllic stereotype brings to mind Pete Hay’s suggestion that literary islands, in “acts of post-colonial appropriation,” tend to reduce islands to “metaphorical abstractions” that prioritise continental perspectives (2006: 29-30). Hay’s concern is that representations of islands can appropriate physical islands and islanders by effacing them. Islanders “are being told... that the reality of their lives is of no account... Island metaphors... render irrelevant the realness of island lives” (30).² The

¹ The use of quotation marks here indicates this as a quotation in the original text.

² Critics have suggested ways in which island studies can respond to this continental bias. DeLoughrey calls for the development of an “archipelagraphy” and for a greater focus on the literatures of islanders

Coetzee quote above certainly abstracts the island: its plenitude reduces it to a good to be consumed and to a metaphor of paradise, while the references to “travellers”, “the castaway”, “a ship” and “home” focalise “readers” who view islands as spaces of alterity. However, the reference to readers also highlights the text’s textuality (as do the quotation marks that enclose the narrator’s words). *Foe* is constructed through a complex layering of voices working precisely to undermine the appropriation of the island, and foregrounds the voicelessness of the islander, Friday (*Foe* is a reworking and a critique of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* [1719]).

The paradigm of islands as paradisaical spaces is founded on “one crucial premise: a warm and arguably pleasant climate” (Baldacchino, 2006: 4). The supposed superiority of warmth is exemplified in Henry de Vere Stacpoole’s return-to-nature desert island novel *The Blue Lagoon*: “[t]o forget the passage of time you must live in the open air, in a warm climate” (2004: 68). Conversely, the idyllic description in Coetzee’s *Foe* serves as a point of contrast with the island upon which the protagonist Susan Barton actually lands, problematising representational conventions of paradisaical warm-water islands. Barton’s island is certainly warm: “[t]here I lay sprawled on the hot sand, my head filled with the orange blaze of the sun” (1998: 5). However, this island is no paradise; it is uncomfortable, inaccessible, dull, infertile, and threatens rather than affirms bodily integrity, thus Coetzee writes against the conventional paradigm of paradisaical warm-water islands:

*“But the island on which I was cast away was quite another place: a great rocky hill with a flat top, rising sharply from the sea on all sides except one, dotted with drab bushes that never flowered and never shed their leaves. ... and another pest, too, living in the dunes: a tiny insect that hid between your toes and ate its way into the flesh.”*³ (1998: 7)

Thus, while literature often reduces islands to “metaphorical abstractions” (Hay, 2006: 29), representations of islands have also been used to complicate and undermine such abstractions.

Cold-water islands have also been the objects of generalising paradigms. Riquet agrees with Baldacchino and Kaae that discourses of cold islands are often essentialising, characterising those spaces as “remote and foreboding” (Baldacchino, 2006: 7) or reductively placing them in contrast with their “warm-water cousins” (Kaae, 2006: 108). However, Riquet also argues that the “specific geographical inventory of Arctic islandscapes” can be used to “challenge rather than reinforce island clichés like ‘inaccessibility,’ ‘island isolation’ and ‘individuality’” (Riquet, 2016: 146). I intend to complicate Hay’s thesis through an analysis of William

as opposed to “European colonial images of islands” (DeLoughrey, 2001; 2006: 263). Stratford (expanding on her 2011 article with Baldacchino, McMahon, Farbotko and Harwood) suggests that “[t]hinking with the archipelago [may] enable island scholars and others to radically recentre positive, mobile, nomadic geopolitical and cultural orderings between and among island(er)s” (Stratford, 2013: 4). The aquapelago, a concept developed by Philip Hayward and others, referring to “the integrated marine and terrestrial assemblages that are generated by human habitation and activity in island locales” (Hayward, 2015: 114, also cf Baldacchino, 2012, Hayward, 2012 and Nash, 2012). Each of these suggestions owes a debt to Epeli Hau’ofa’s call for “a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships,” which conceives of a “sea of islands” rather than remote “islands in a far sea” (Hau’ofa, 1994: 152-53).

³ The use of quotation marks here indicates this as a quotation in the original text.

Golding's *Pincher Martin* and will argue that the most significant feature of the island in this novel is its coldness, and that its textual construction allows it to resist metaphorical signification.

In this project I am disputing not only Hay's claims about literary islands but also his suggestion that "literary and cultural studies perspectives that dismiss the physicality of islands" ought to be viewed "sceptically" (2006: 29).⁴ I do so on the basis that literary and cultural studies often engage critically with reductive representations of islands, serving not to perpetuate but to challenge their abstractions. Scholars of western culture need "to examine the pervasiveness of the island as a specifically metaphoric (albeit continental, colonial) construction" (Kinane, 2016: 5). Critiquing the representation of islands can realign how they are conceived. The recent work of Graziadei et al offers a mode of critical engagement with literary islands that prioritises the "multilayered experiences of islands conveyed by island narratives" by focusing on their sensory qualities, among other aspects (2017: 240). The authors respond to Hay's call for a "phenomenology of islands" (2006) by foregrounding *literary* islands' "sensory, corporeal, and material textures" (ibid). In the following I will show how the narration of sensory experience might enable a literary island to resist functioning as a metaphor. While no literary text can represent in full the richness of a lived place, I argue that the island in *Pincher Martin* embodies fluidity of meaning to such an extent that it functions not as a vehicle for metaphor but as a space that resists the possibility of meaning. Crucially, this is manifested in a phenomenological apprehension of the island space through the protagonist's sensory faculties, in particular his perception of the island's coldness. There is an irony here: I am taking a phenomenological approach to *Pincher Martin* in order to interrogate Hay's own call for a "phenomenology of islands" (2006). Hay suggests that "particularity of identity and experience" might be revealed by a "multi-sensorial receptivity" to islanders' "vernacular constructions of meaning" (ibid: 33). I argue that a similar receptivity to the narration of *Pincher Martin* reveals a literary island that avoids being reduced to "metaphorical abstraction" (ibid: 30).

Throughout the novel, the narration provides intimate access to Martin's own perception and understanding. Thus, the opening of *Pincher Martin* offers only a gradual disclosure of the nature of the events it represents but foregrounds the protagonist's lived experience. The first paragraph describes the eponymous protagonist "struggling" against a lack of light and air and calling for help, but offers no explanation of what is actually happening:

He was struggling in every direction, he was the centre of the writhing and kicking knot of his own body. There was no up or down, no light and no air. He felt his mouth open of itself and the shrieked word burst out.
"Help!" (7)

As such, the text precludes an analysis of events and instead elicits a focus on sensory experience. We are told not that "his mouth opened" but that "[h]e felt his mouth open" (7). Central to the narrative mode is that Martin "was the centre of.... his own body" (ibid); the subjectivity with which we are aligned is Martin's identity, which he experiences as

⁴ In a later article, Hay makes clear that he prioritises "island specificity and the construction of island meanings in the unique terms of emotional dialogue between the hard biophysicality of each island and the people who live, or regularly interact, with it (and each other)" (2013: 211). While I acknowledge the value of research in this direction, I dispute that literary studies of island narratives "smear out real lives and real islands into the bland non-being of abstraction" (ibid: 212). Which approach is the "dominant paradigm" in island studies (ibid: 213) seems largely irrelevant.

being somehow separate to (but located in) his physical self. The text provides rich detail of his sensory and emotional experience of events without explaining what those events are; we are given the same degree of knowledge as Martin himself. From this narrative style emerges a novel that is deeply phenomenological in character. Although narrated in the third person, the diegetic world is described in terms that represent Martin's subjective experience rather than any objective reality. It gradually becomes apparent that Martin is drowning; the novel goes on to describe an island on which he (apparently) takes refuge. As such, the novel can be seen as a survival narrative in the Robinsonade tradition. However, an epilogue in a relatively conventional realist narrative style reveals that Martin is dead and that he died almost instantly on entering the water; *Pincher Martin* is thus a failed survival narrative and a deviant Robinsonade whose island fails to provide refuge. In fact, the implication (assuming we are supposed to trust the 'objective' epilogue) is that the island exists only as mental phenomena in Martin's perception, and not in any external reality.⁵

The novel's phenomenological narration is manifested in descriptions focalised through the protagonist's sensory and somatic perceptions. The sensorium of *Pincher Martin* is unstable, as perceptual categories are described in terms that erase the boundaries between them. Indeed, central to the novel's project of representing a phenomenological subjectivity is a constellation of sensory aspects through which Martin apprehends his situation: pain, hardness, pressure, colour, and – most of all – temperature, primarily in terms of coldness but also of heat. I will argue that the phenomenological narration destabilises both the perception of the narrated space and the possibility of textual signification. This constructs a diegetic world that cannot be apprehended with any fixed understanding and an island that resists functioning as the vehicle of metaphor. Taking an approach that prioritises "the ways in which island topographies are... presented as a confluence of sensory experiences" (Graziadei et al, 2017: 240), I will analyse the textual construction of the island first through the discourse of coldness and then through the discourse of heat. I will then discuss the poetics of the novel's climactic section, in which the sensorium of the novel disintegrates further, with dissolution, wateriness and aurality prioritised over temperature, solidity and visibility.⁶

Coldness

Pincher Martin's opening chapter details Martin struggling in the water before reaching land, and the perception of cold constructs a world that is unstable and unreliable. The coldness of the air lends it solidity: Martin "bit into it" (7). Undermining the material distinctions between land, water and air, this recalls Riquet's observation (regarding

⁵ The figure of the protagonist on an island, and the fact that Martin is ultimately revealed to have died, has led several commentators to posit the island as a kind of afterlife (cf Biles and Kropf, 1969, Johnston, 1978, and Surette, 1994). The dichotomy of cold and hotness might be mapped onto that of heaven and hell, casting this liminal island as a purgatorial in-between space. However, I would dispute this reading given that I, along with Whitehead (1971), read the island not as where Martin goes when he is dead, but what he experiences as he dies.

⁶ The increasing evocation of the island through its aurality reverses the trajectory of the textual construction of Skull Island in the film *King Kong* (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1933). Skull Island is initially conceived through sound and only subsequently constructed visually, problematising the paradigm in which visibility is understood as the primary sense through which islands 'should' be understood (Graziadei et al, 2017: 242-43, glossing Létoublon, Ceccarelli and Sgard, 1996: 11).

Serres's *Le passage du Nord-Ouest* [1980]) of "an archipelagic space where the solid, the fluid and the gaseous intersect" (Riquet, 2016: 146). The air itself is contradictory, as it is both oppressive (the air is a "cold mask against [Martin's] face") but provides salvation from the water. Soon afterwards, the coldness of the air endows Martin with both solidity and instability: "[h]is head and neck and shoulders... were colder than the rest of his body. The air stiffened them. They began to shake" (12).

Coldness is then evoked and then revoked, heightening the instability of the perceived world:

His teeth were chattering again and sometimes this vibration would spread till it included his whole body. His legs below him were not cold so much as pressed, squeezed mercilessly by the sea so that the feeling in them was not a response to temperature but to weight that would crush and burst them. (13)

Cold is textually present, implied by the chattering teeth, but is then disavowed. This speaks to the phenomenological nature of the text, which apprehends the world through Martin's changing perception rather than describing any objective reality: at a textual level cold is here both present and absent. The association of cold and pressure is modified again only a few pages later, as "the cold was squeezing him like the hand that had snatched down the ship" (18). Here coldness exerts pressure rather than being opposed to it. The meanings attached to the diegetic world that is thus constructed are radically unstable due to its focalisation through Martin's senses; the space is apprehended not as it is but as it is subjectively perceived. The intermingling of temperature and pressure creates a highly subjective understanding of the island that recalls Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001), whose island is perceived through a combination of visibility, aurality, tactility, and smell. The difference is that while the "multisensory ... approach allows Pi to better interpret his surroundings and thus assimilate the island as a reality" (Graziadei et al, 2017: 245), multisensory perception here destabilises the island's ontological status and its ability to signify.

Coldness is made contradictory through a description that simultaneously personifies and depersonifies the water: "the waves were nothing but... cold persistent idiot water" (19). Persistence and idiocy are descriptors that would usually be applied to a person, but would emphasise that person's inhumanity, with 'persistence' implying a mechanical unnaturalness and 'idiocy' connoting a lack of intelligence. Almost immediately afterwards, water is described in a way that directly contrasts with the hardness with which it was first linked (7): "[t]here was an infinite drop of the cold, soft stuff below them and under the labouring, dying, body" (19). The description of "cold, soft stuff" seems almost oxymoronic given the more intuitive association of coldness and hardness. Indeed, softness seems to speak of life rather than death, and of flesh rather than water, and thus adds to the myriad conflicting ways in which the cold water is understood, extending the fluidity with which the diegetic world is apprehended.

At the end of Chapter 1, Martin seems to have landed on an island: "[h]e lay still" (23). Shortly afterwards, the island is situated geographically: Martin wonders "how many miles from the Hebrides" he might be, revealing that he is in the far north of the Atlantic (31). In this space, the text itself begins to exhibit instability, with words not signifying conventionally. This is evident in Martin's perception of a "new kind of coldness over his body... It was air that felt like slow fire" (26). Coldness is described in terms that directly contradict its meaning: fire is defined by its production of heat. What does it mean to

describe fire as “slow”? The syntagmatic bond between words breaks down as if to reflect textually that Martin has not regained a solid grip on his existence. Cold is representative here, and throughout the novel, of Martin’s vulnerability, his failing grasp on his identity and, as is ultimately revealed, his death. It might be argued that this cold island is metaphorical of death and thus exhibits just as much reductive projection onto the idea of ‘the island’ as a literary tropical island that is metaphorical of paradise and/or prison. Two aspects of *Pincher Martin* coalesce to resist such metaphorical abstraction. Firstly, the densely phenomenological narration means that the island is never fixed. Meaning is ascribed to the elements of the diegetic world at one moment but then revoked. As such, any metaphorical associations are contingent and slippery. The island does not represent anything that is not undermined elsewhere. This fluid realm of meaning comes closer than any fixed metaphor to representing the unfixed-ness of “lived experience” (Hay, 2006: 34). Secondly, the reliability of language (and therefore the possibility of such concepts as truth and meaning) is called into question by the breakdown of significance at the level of the text.

These resistances to abstraction are particularly evident when the nexus of temperature and identity is considered. Thus, an ontological uncertainty over Martin’s identity and where it might be said to reside is interwoven with the discourse of coldness. Chapter 4 opens with the assertion that “[t]he man was inside two crevices. There was first the rock, closed and not warm but at least not cold with the coldness of sea or air” (48). The space is described negatively, in terms of what it is not. Indeed, the next sentence states that “[t]he rock was negative” (48). The polysemy of the word ‘negative’ is significant; the rock is negative both in the sense that it represents Martin’s death, but also in that it seems to be an interior space, an opening rather than a projection: “It confined his body so that here and there the shudders were beaten; not soothed but forced inward” (48). This description of a “closed” space positions Martin *in* an interior, rather than *on* the surface of an essentially convex island protruding from the ocean, as islands are usually conceived. The description of a negative space not only undermines the objective realism of the text but also undoes some of the metaphorical baggage placed on islands. Hay points out that, through metaphorical projections of “man-against-nature and man-against-society heroism,” islands have gained a representative significance in which they are “wedded... to masculinity” (27). Without going too far down a Freudian rabbit-hole, I would suggest that the island-as-negative-space resists the phallic connotations of a point of land thrust up from the ocean floor. Yet, while the representation of an island as female might resist the cliché of the masculine island, it is still a metaphorical projection, as Hay points out (2013: 28). What is particular to *Pincher Martin*, however, is that this narration of negative space is juxtaposed with its opposite as the perception and the perceived spatial practice were previously of an exterior, projecting body of land. The space was experienced as “the solidity that held up his body” (25), “a little pebble slope” (27), and “the rock around which the waves had whirled him” (28). Thus this island is both interior and exterior, negative and positive.

The narrative dimension of the island’s uncertain existence becomes clear in the opening of Chapter 5, which is a textually volatile passage. This volatility is again bound up with the perception of cold:

But he could not fall into the pit because he was extended through his body. He was aware dimly of returning strength; and this not only allowed him to savour the cold and be physically miserable but to be irritated by it... [H]e had

continually to rub one foot over the other or press with his body against the slab of rock in an effort to shut off the chill on that side. (68)

At a diegetic level, Martin's identity now extends throughout his physical self. This suggests that Martin is regaining his grip on his existence, with his mind and body reconciled. However, the word "But" opens the chapter *in medias res*; this seems to be the second half of a sentence whose beginning is absent. Textually, then, his identity is left dangling. This is reinforced by the diegetic inconsistency of coldness: the suggestion that he is "allowed to savour the cold" conflicts with the suggestion that it makes him miserable and his "effort to shut off the chill" (68). Like Martin's identity, the text is fragmenting and refusing to operate as the reader might expect. At the end of this chapter, Martin observes that "[t]he rock had diminished from an island to a thing" (77). This phenomenological description focuses the narrative through Martin's perception of the situation, without communicating anything about the space to the reader. The significance seems to be that perception cannot give us any access to objective truth. The island does not "exist" or "not exist" apart from the fact that it exists in Martin's experience of the world in his dying moments. That this perceptual event takes place not in the warmth but in "the sunlight and absence of cold" again contradictorily binds the existence of the island up with heat and coldness, and reinforces *Pincher Martin's* textual representation of the impossibility of truth (77). This is further emphasised when "[t]he blue, [sic] igloo-roof over the rock went away to a vast distance, the visible world expanded with a leap. The water lopped round a tiny rock in the middle of the Atlantic" (79). The "roof" of the island (whose colour and comparison to an igloo evoke ice and coldness) constructs the island as an interior space. At the same time, the narrative perspective of the island suddenly shifts to offer the reader a glimpse of the island from a distance. The description is no longer focalised through Martin (or if it is, his perceptual centre is located away from the island). Just for a moment we see the island as a whole, but this is not a visual apprehension of the island that allows control.⁷ Rather, it is a view of the island as it begins to disintegrate.

Heat and Fire

As a counterpoint to the novel's discourse of coldness, heat and fire are also recurring motifs. While coldness is usually discussed in reference to the water and the island, heat is most often attached to Pincher Martin himself, in particular his physical manifestation. There are two contrasting themes linked to this discussion of heat and fire, firstly the use of fire to figuratively represent life: "The slow fire of his belly, banked up to endure, was invaded. It lay defenceless in the middle of the clothing and the sodden body" (17). The paradigm in which existence is represented by fire is clearly metaphorical. However, this is in tension with the second theme attached to heat: the physical discomfort that Martin experiences. These contradictory discourses complicate the idea that heat can be said to mean anything with any degree of stability. Further, each of these themes is itself made unstable.

The analogy made between Martin's identity and fire is bound up with the emerging representation of the island as a (spatially) negative space. When he arrives on the island, the fire of Martin's existence is "almost extinguished... There was not more than a spark" (29). The fragility of life in this cold space prompts Martin to question its purpose: he asks

⁷ It has been suggested that the "intense focus of the observer's eye can be lodged so firmly on this miniaturised zone that she or he can claim simultaneously empathy and control" (Beer, 1989: 23).

what would be “the use of the spark if it winked away in a crack of [this] ludicrous isolation” (31). The description of the island as a “crack,” connoting absence, emphasises the extent to which this space resists being characterised positively rather than in terms of what it is not. The interiority connoted by the word “crack” is foregrounded when Martin attempts to climb the rock, the spatiality of which becomes particularly difficult to comprehend: “The cleft narrowed until his head projected through an opening, not much wider than his body. He got his elbows jammed on either side and looked up” (34). In what surface is this “opening” supposed to be? Martin perceives himself to be on a pebble beach: in what sense can such a space have an “opening”? The difficulty of this description indicates that this is not a space that abides by Euclidean geometry but a space that changes as it is perceived by Martin and is inherently unstable. Rather than being metaphorical of a robust “masculinist western... individual identity” (Ledwell, 2002: 13, cited in Hay, 2006: 27), this (decidedly non-tropical) island seems to represent the fragility both of meaning and of identity.

The discourse of heat-as-pain is also bound up with the theme of identity. Specifically, pain that is described in terms of fire or burning is often accompanied by conflicting assertions as to where Martin’s selfhood exists physically. In his first moments on the island, Martin experiences “hardnesses [that] passed through pressure to a burning without heat, to a localized pain” (24). The apparent oxymoron of “burning without heat” emphasises the phenomenological nature of the narration, which is descriptive of experience rather than dealing in absolutism.⁸ The hardnesses that are “burning without heat” serve to “pull him back into himself and organise him again as a single being” (24). So at the very moment that Martin’s existence seems once again to be stabilising, the terms with which it is described are unreliable and paradoxical.

The contradictions in these associations between body, fire and identity are foregrounded in a passage in which the word “fire” is repeated five times in as many sentences:

He felt... distant pain that was sometimes to be mistaken for fire. There was dull fire in his feet and a sharper sort in either knee. He could see this fire in his mind's eye because his body was a second and interior crevice which he inhabited. Under each knee, then, there was a little fire built with crossed sticks... He endured these fires although they gave not heat but pain. (48)

It is unclear what the word “fire” is supposed to signify when it is stated that “these fires... gave not heat but pain.” If this pain is not supposed to be understood as characterised by heat, then the metaphor of “fire” is empty, carrying no meaning. At the same time, the association of fire with pain undermines the previous link made between fire (as the spark of life) and identity. The description here of the body as an “interior crevice which he inhabit[s]” relates back to the assertion that “[t]he man was inside two crevices”; the island and his body. Further, Martin’s identity resides somewhere within his body rather than being extended throughout it: “[h]e himself was at the far end of this inner crevice of flesh. At this far end, away from the fires, there was a mass of him lying on a lifebelt that rolled backwards and forwards at every breath” (48). The location of Martin’s identity then radically expands: “[b]eyond the mass was the round, bone globe of the world and himself

⁸ Human perception sometimes struggles to distinguish hot and cold (think of putting one’s hand under a running tap and being momentarily unsure whether it is scalding or freezing). Frostbite is caused by cold but is often experienced as a burning and is “a frequent condition referred to burn centers for management and therapy” (Nguyen and Song, 2011: 247).

hanging inside. One half of this world burned and froze but with a steadier and bearable pain” (48-49). The world itself is made a negative space, a globe that contains Martin (rather than a globe on which Martin resides, as the world is usually understood). Clearly, the “bone globe” also represents Martin’s skull. Everything he perceives is within his head, given that the rock is a mental projection. The assertion that Martin’s identity resides somewhere within a body (itself described negatively as a “crevice of flesh”, my emphasis) within the “round, bone globe of the world” figures his existence as dislocated. Martin’s very existence is contingent on his perception of it. Finally, the contradictory discourse of temperature (“burned and froze”) is linked back to the notion of wateriness, as we are told that Martin “floated in the middle of this globe like a waterlogged body” (49).

The effect of heat on Martin’s body – sunburn – is also bound up with the location of his identity. His existence is located within (but is not identical to) his physical body, and his eyes are figured as a frame through which he apprehends the world: “All at once he found that he was seeing through a window again. He was inside himself at the top end” (82). The connections between Martin’s selfhood, his body, and his sense of visual perception are emphasised here as he inspects his body:

*He turned the windows on his own body and examined the skin critically. Great patches were pink over the scars and he cried out.
‘Sunburn!’ (82)*

That visual perception is the default mode of rationalist, modern apprehensions of islands is elucidated by Edmond and Smith’s suggestion that “islands, unlike continents, look like property” because their “[b]oundedness makes islands graspable, able to be held in the mind’s eye and imagined as places of possibility and promise” (Edmond and Smith, 2003: 12). The “unit of land which fits within the retina of the approaching eye” can be constructed as “a token of desire” (Hamilton-Paterson, 1993, cited in Edmond and Smith, 2003: 2). The phenomenological narration of *Pincher Martin* constructs the island in close-up; apart from one moment, discussed above, there is no framing view of the island. That exception aside, the “boundedness” of islands, to use Edmond and Smith’s term, is effaced here because the island is not apprehended from a distance: there is no “approaching eye.” As such there is no economy of desire attached to this island: it is not viewed as property. On the contrary, the constantly changing details of the island as it is experienced through Martin’s senses mean that it refuses to be known. Rather than revealing an objective reality, visuality in *Pincher Martin* constructs an island that only exists from the perspective of Martin’s subjectivity. Martin’s vision emphasises the contingency of his epistemology; his knowledge of the world is restricted to what he is able to see through the framed “window” of his eyes.

The disintegration of the body and the unreliability of the island’s solidity come together in Chapter 9, again bound up with the discourse of heat. Martin notices that his “hands and skin felt lumpy” (140) and identifies the growths as “heat lumps,” thus associating heat with illness and the corruption of the body: “I said I should be sick. I said I must watch out for symptoms” (140). Indeed, Martin’s body slides into fever, characterised by heat and cold becoming entangled in his somatic experience: “The burnings and shiverings of his body succeeded each other as if they were going over him in waves” (141). Heat predominates, and is characterised by its liquidity: “Suddenly they were waves of molten stuff, solder, melted lead, heated acid, so thick that it moved like oil” (141). Martin’s hands are “swell[ing] and diminish[ing] with a slow pulsing” (142), yet he insists (against all the evidence

presented by the narration) on a distinction between his experience of existence and 'reality': "That's not real. Thread of Life. Hang on. That's not real" (142).

The entwining of these somatic opposites seems to precipitate the dissolution of the physical world as Martin perceives it. Thus, hot and cold remain entangled as the heat of fever prompts Martin to undress himself:

the burning was intolerable so that he tore off his clothes and threw them anywhere. He stood up naked and the air was hot on his body, but the action of being naked seemed to do something, for his body started to shiver. He sat painfully on the wall by the white scar of the Claudian and his teeth chattered.

'I must keep going somehow.'

But the horizon would not stay still. Like his hands, the sea pulsed. At one moment the purple line was so far away that it had no significance and the next, so close that he could stretch out his arm and lay hold. (142-43)

It is not only Martin's body and the island that are now dissolving but the whole perceptible world. It becomes apparent that it is not just the island whose ontology is insecure but everything that Martin perceives. And if, as the novel implies, the nature of existence is phenomenological, consisting of subjective experience, then it is Martin's entire self that is disintegrating.

Heat is later explicitly linked through the image of hot tears both to the body and to wateriness, complementing the association of water and cold made earlier in the text. Martin remembers or imagines several of his acquaintances crying:

Their tears made a pool on the stone floor so that his feet were burned to the ankles... 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. (144-45)

The location of this memory is unclear, but becomes entwined with the island as it has previously been described. The wall "curving like the wall of a tunnel" recalls the island as a negative space in the opening chapter. The suggestion that the tears were, at one point, flowing into the sea implies that this space is, in some sense, the island. (We are told that the tears are "no longer running down... to join the burning sea," implying that they previously were. Again the narrative mode here is to negatively imply a presence by describing its present absence.) The tear that becomes a burning "ball of water" that "consume[s]" Martin is an echo of the "round, bone globe of the world" he earlier inhabited (48), thus suggesting that the island is analogous in some way to the world. Of course, the island is the world, in that the perception of this rock and the water that surrounds it is all that remains of Martin's understanding of his own existence. Martin's experience of his physical existence no longer conforms to an understanding of external reality in which the subject is separate from the world. That this island/rock/globe (which is also a burning tear) manifests his entire being begins now to be apparent in Martin's perception: "[h]e was dissolved and spread throughout the tear an extension of sheer, disembodied pain" (145).

Dissolution

In the last quarter of *Pincher Martin*, which marks Martin's final descent into non-existence, the sensorium of the novel disintegrates further. The discourses of heat and cold have, throughout, been contradictory (both internally and of one another). Now, as the novel reaches its climax, they are replaced with a greater focus on wateriness and a discourse of black versus white. Martin's senses become increasingly entangled, and visibility (which has been the primary mode of perception other than the somatic) is replaced by aurality. This greater sensory instability is accompanied by the island becoming progressively more fluid. Finally, the diegetic world and the narrative collapse into one another as the novel's textual stability disintegrates.

The greater liquidity of the island is signalled by Martin's body being made watery, as he uses the rubber tubing of his lifebelt to give himself a seawater enema:

He hunched himself back against a rock with his legs sprawled apart. The music rose, the sea played and the sun. The universe held its breath. Grunting and groaning he began to work the rubber tube into his backside... He felt the cold trickle of the sea water in his bowels. He pumped and squeezed until the bladder was squashily flat. He extracted the tube and crept carefully to the edge of the rock while the orchestra thundered to a pause. (165)

By filling his bowel with seawater, Martin seems to figuratively turn himself inside out, to replace what is interior with what is exterior. This recalls the understanding of the island as a negative space and, as such, reaffirms the link of identity between his body and the island. Meanwhile, the presence of music in Martin's perception marks a shift from a visual to an aural apprehension of the island. The music's designation as "background music" (164) foregrounds the text's textuality, evoking a cinemacity in which Martin is both protagonist and auteur. Further, the ontology of the music is itself made unstable, as the "music swelled and was torn apart by brass" (164). Apparently, the music destroys itself, a logical impossibility like the "hard lumps of sound" much earlier (43).

The dissolution of the island into liquidity continues but, for a moment at least, the increased wateriness can be understood as nothing more than a heavy storm, albeit one that is conjured by the power of Martin's own speech:

*'I said there would be rain!'
Let there be rain and there was rain.
...There was water running in the crevice, under his face, dripping from the rock, water running round his loins, water. (171)⁹*

At the end of Chapter 11, Martin has a realisation relating to the island's wetness and to dissolution, which causes renewed awareness that the island exists only in his perception. Recalling his observation that "there was a deposit under the water, reddish and slimy" (60), it occurs to Martin that "[g]uano is insoluble" (174). Somehow this recollection leads

⁹ *Pincher Martin* describes an island that is shown to become more watery as its power to signify decreases. As such, the novel predates Hayward's conception of aquapelagic interfaces, which recognise the ocean's importance in the formation of "qualitatively different senses and meanings for life on islands" (Hay, 2013: 222).

Martin to question why the island is watery, and to recognise the source of the island he has imagined:

His tongue felt along the barrier of his teeth—round to the side where the big ones were and the gap. He brought his hands together and held his breath. He stared at the sea and saw nothing... [He] understood what was so hauntingly familiar and painful about an isolated and decaying rock in the middle of the sea. (174)

Rather than an island that exists in any external reality, Martin has imagined an island that is based on his teeth. There is no man on an island. Instead, there is a subject perceiving an island that is always already identical to his self. The analogies made between the body and the island are not metaphorical. The island is not *like* the self, and is not being appropriated for a project of self-creation. Rather, the island *is* the self as it is perceived in a doomed project of self-preservation. At the diegetic level, the self is not metaphorically projected onto the island; the island *is* the island is constituted entirely as the self's apprehension of its own existence.

In the midst of this realisation, Martin “stared at the sea and saw nothing.” His visual perception, the mode of perception most bound up with the appropriation and reductive treatment of fictional islands, is failing. The failure of visual perception deepens through the climactic section of the novel, and is bound up with – sometimes indistinguishable from – the disintegration of the island. Indeed, whether the island can no longer be seen because visibility is unreliable or because the island no longer ‘exists’ is moot; the function of the island's disappearance is to represent the failure of Martin's imagination of it. Failing visibility is still bound up with coldness here: “the depth was obscured and the water grave and chilly” (175). Whiteness, connoting both cold and absence, also plays a greater role in the perception of the island. Martin finds a “chunk of rockleaf [that] had fallen from the side of the trench” (177). The island is physically coming apart, and doing so in terms that resist interpretation: the meaning of the term “rockleaf” is left unexplained (and it is not found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Further, when Martin examines the chunk he discovers that it “was a considerable book and there was a strange engraving in the white cover” (177). The island is, on a diegetic level, becoming reduced to text. This is accompanied again by instability in the language used. The book's leaves “were white as muck” (177); whiteness is evoked but then thrown into question.

Whiteness is then revoked, as blackness is used to describe Martin's interior emotional state and his exterior surroundings. The former of these two black elements is linked to water and its predominance: “Black. A familiar feeling, a heaviness round the heart, a reservoir which any moment might flood the eyes” (181). Indeed, at this stage the island appears to be inundated with water to the extent that its (seeming) physicality is threatened. This, in turn, is associated with whiteness rather than blackness:

He got up and staggered in the wind with the rain and spray pelting him. He went down the High Street and there was his oilskin made into a basin and full of water... Every now and then the rock shook, a white cloud rose past the look-out and there were rivulets of foam in the upper trenches. (187)

The shaking of the island suggests that it is not simply sinking or being flooded, but dissolving or disintegrating. The second aspect to which blackness is ascribed comprises the entirety of Martin's perception: “The world turned black and came to him through

sound” (187). This makes explicit the turn from visual to aural perception, further repudiating the visual apprehension of the world that promotes the appropriation of islands. The aural continues to be prioritised over the following pages, and is bound up with the increasing unreliability of Martin’s self: “The centre quivered and dwindled. There was another noise beyond the storm and background music and sobbed words from the mouth” (188).

In *Pincher Martin*’s penultimate chapter, the discourses of cold, instability, liquidity, pressure, and blackness/whiteness combine rapidly as the instability of the novel’s sensorium intensifies. Indeed, the concept of ‘sense’ itself becomes destabilised as phenomena are apprehended sensorially with the mode of sensation left unspecified: “Sensations. Coffee. Hock. Gin. Wood. Velvet. Nylon. Mouth” (191). This is followed immediately by wetness, bound up with the vulnerability connoted by nakedness and, once again, with interiority: “Warm, wet nakedness. Caves, slack like a crevice or tight like the mouth of a red anemone” (191). Wateriness is again bound up with cold and with the island’s instability: “The rock shook and shook again. A sudden coldness struck his face and washed under him” (191). This sudden confluence of senses and sensed phenomena precipitates an attempt by Martin (or whatever is constituted by the “centre”) to reassert his existence, but the attempt fails amid the increasing submersion of the island by water:

Black centre, trying to stir itself like a pudding.

The darkness was shredded by white. He tumbled over among the sensations of the crevice. There was water everywhere and noise and his mouth welcomed both. It spat and coughed. He heaved himself out amid water that swirled to his knees and the wind knocked him down. The trench was like a little sea, like the known and now remembered extravagances of a returning tide among rocks. (191)

The blackness, connotative of absence and lack, is replaced by whiteness, at once its opposite and signifying those same qualities. Total blackness and whiteness then seem to rapidly alternate, representing a return to visibility, but a visibility that perceives nothing: “It went white. An instant later the light was switched off and the sky fell on him. He... struggled through bouts of white and dark” (192). Finally, the blackness and whiteness resolve into black ink on white paper:

The sea stopped moving, froze, became paper, painted paper that was torn by a black line. The rock was painted on the same paper. The whole of the painted sea was tilted but nothing ran downhill into the black crack which had opened in it. The crack was utter, was absolute, was three times real. (200)

The reduction of the world to ink on paper plays (at least) a double function. Firstly, as far as this is still a description of the world as Martin perceives it, it represents the continued disintegration of the world and his perception of it (which, of course, amount to the same thing). The subject and its objects of perception have atrophied to the point that there is now no movement. Secondly, this freezing can be read as a metafictional acknowledgement to the reader that this island has never existed outside of Martin’s perception (and the novel’s narration of Martin’s perception). *Pincher Martin* enacts not the appropriation of ‘the island’ for a particular meaning but the impossibility of fixed meaning. Martin calls his island ‘Safety Rock,’ recalling the ironically named ‘Castle Rock’ in Golding’s 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies*; that novel is also about an island failing as a space in which to consolidate the body and the psyche. ‘Safety Rock,’ though, is an apt name when one considers that it

exists solely in Martin's perception, and exists there as the very substance of safety: the island is Martin, and as long as the island exists, so does he. Inversely, the island's resistance to metaphorical abstraction is constituted in the fact that both it and Martin ultimately cease to exist, as is manifested textually in the island's refusal to *be*, its essence as nothingness:

There was no noise now because noise had become irrelevant. There was no music, no sound from the tilted, motionless sea... A valley of nothing opened up through Safety Rock. (200)

The novel's central thesis is the assertion of the subjectivity of human experience: existence is perception.

Conclusion

Robinson Crusoe was not the first desert island fiction: *The Tempest* predates it by a century and Ibn Tufail's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* by some 600 years, not to mention stories from mythologies and oral traditions. However, Defoe's novel has been constructed as prototypical of that narrative *topos*, as is evident in the designation of the 'Robinsonade' (see Kinane, 2016).¹⁰ Exemplifying the ideological individualism of the modern era, *Robinson Crusoe* set a precedent in which literary islands act as analogues of the subject. Edmond and Smith observe that the island's monadic nature (literary islands are often constructed as remote rather than as part of archipelagoes) gives them "a marked individuality, an obstinate separateness that we like to think corresponds to our own... In post-Freudian terms, islands readily become the territorial expression of both the ego and the body" (Edmond and Smith, 2003: 4). The elision of the subject and the island is perhaps the central metaphor of island stories and has, for Hay, the potential to negatively affect real islanders' lives. Hay quotes Fiona Polack's exhortation that "the privileging of the relationship between the isolated individual and the bounded physical space" ought to be "continually interrogat[ed]" (Polack, 1998: 229). Representations of islands have become part of this interrogatory process, with some desert island fictions especially from the past century onwards prioritising ambiguity and dissolution. To take two examples among many, Coetzee's *Foe* and, more recently, the US television drama *Lost* (2003-2010) work both diegetically and in their textuality to undermine and destabilise the analogy made between the island and the subject (see Samson, 2020).

It could be argued that these texts still use the island as a metaphor, albeit one far more fluid and complex than that of *Robinson Crusoe*. If one agrees with Hay's thesis, these texts can be seen to simply transpose onto the island meanings of ambiguity, unknowability, and dissolution, effacing the reality of lived island lives and negating what Hay sees as the positive potential of "island identity" formation (2006: 28). However, while the island in William Golding's *Pincher Martin* is bound up with a European, continental subjectivity, the novel interrogates the privileging of the relationship between the subject and the island by radically undoing the understanding of an island as a "bounded physical space" (Polack, 1998: 229). Martin tries to sustain his own existence not by projecting himself *onto* an island but by perceiving himself *as* an island. Not only does this effort fail but this perceptual stratagem extends to the text's narration, which is phenomenological to a

¹⁰ This is perhaps due to its (debated) status as the first novel in English (Watt, 2001: 74).

radical extent, particularly in terms of the island's coldness. Not only is the island an unstable space, but it is constructed as such through language which is itself unstable. *Pincher Martin* does not (and does not intend to) communicate "the reality of islands" (Hay, 2006: 30) but neither does it appropriate 'the island' by populating it with "metaphorical abstractions" (ibid: 29). Rather, the novel foregrounds precisely that representation "is ever an attempt – doomed always to be partial at best – to communicate the interiority of some elusive reality" (Hay, 2013: 213). Golding's text works to reveal that human existence and experience are intrinsically meaningless; an island means only what it is perceived to mean by a given subject at a given time, and therefore has the potential to mean everything and nothing.

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