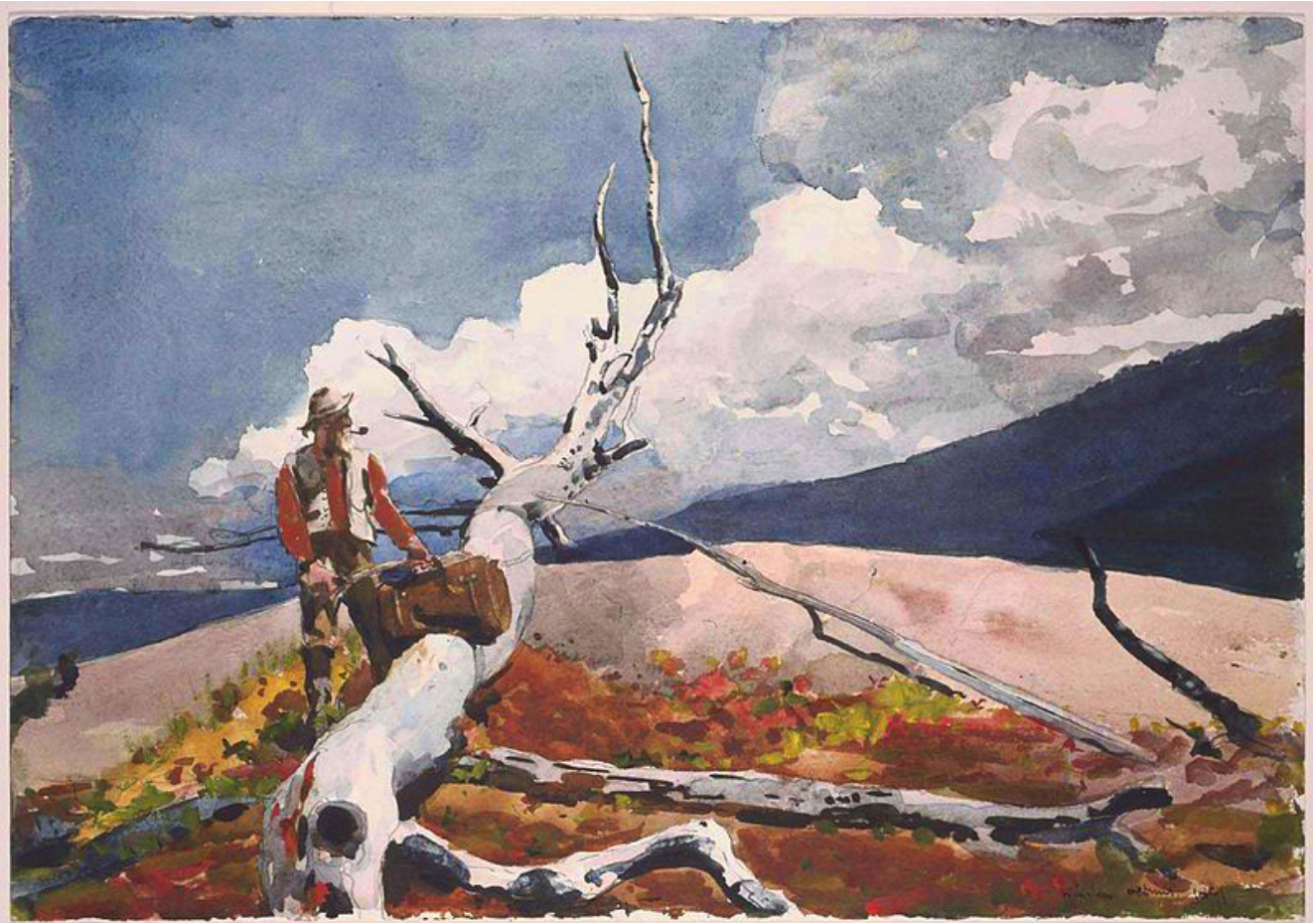


# The Oppressive Essence of Beauty



Woodsman and Fallen Tree, Winslow Homer, 1891

*Now that God is dead, all that remains are history and power. For a long time now, the whole effort of our philosophers has been solely to replace the idea of human nature with the idea of situation and ancient harmony with the disorderly outbursts of chance or the pitiless movement of reason.—Albert Camus, Helen's Exile (Lyrical and Critical Essays, 1970)*

**When addressing the relationship of subjectivity and objectivity, essence and form, students often ask me the oft asked question: If a tree falls in the woods, and there is no one present to hear it, does it make a sound? That's an honest question that, when posed by healthy young minds, should be**

treated with respect and a modicum of inspiration. Much rides on one's answer to questions posed by young people.

After a decent amount of attention paid to the question, I ask: In a time when few people suspect the essence of beauty, does beauty still exist? Again, genuine questions merit intellectually honest answers.

In an age consumed by relativism many people doubt whether beauty exists. Beauty takes savage revenge by making the lives of the killers of beauty irrelevant to themselves and others.

Many unsuspecting killers of beauty miss the point of beauty's revenge, yet still experience the life-long misery brought on by their hubris. Like people who curse at a hammer after smashing a finger, beauty's revenge only emboldens the hedonistic nihilism of the slayers of beauty to slash, maim and further corrupt innocence's pursuit of beauty and spiritual nobility.

As a consequence, when human existence becomes irrelevant to itself, life is exhausted long before physical death.

### **William Golding's *Pincher Martin***

✘ *Pincher Martin*, William Golding's follow up novel to his masterful *Lord of the Flies* appears, on first encounter, to be a novel about a shipwrecked man. This is not incorrect. *Pincher Martin* is blown off the deck of a Royal Navy ship that has been torpedoed in the Atlantic during World War II.

Once in the water, helpless Martin struggles to survive, what is Golding's harrowing depiction of death by drowning. Martin's physical struggle for survival is just one of the levels of suffering that the author explores, for throughout the novel Golding describes Martin's existential and spiritual purgatory—in more ways than a casual reading of the work will detect.

Death, holding on to physical reality, and the lament of the living for truncated possibilities, are some of the clues that the author offers his readers about the construction and meaning of *Pincher Martin*.

The suggestion of purgatory, a spiritual nether land that is squeezed between heaven and hell, no longer conveys significance to the imagination of children of the age of social media and electronic pornography. How can it? Postmodernism's destruction of the life-affirming sense of self obliterates interiority. Yet, in art as in life, we are rewarded according to our sincere and willful engagement with reality, not the embrace of self-serving make-believe.

*Pincher Martin* was published in 1956. Golding's novel entertains several nihilistic aspects of postmodern collective psychosis worth noting. Thus, what appears as a novel of a hapless sailor who is shipwrecked turns out to be an exploration of what happens to the soul of a person who clings on to a hollow material existence.

Without explicitly delving into the Christian belief of the afterlife, immortality and salvation of the person as an incarnate soul, Golding tantalizes proponents of the here-and-now with a form of purgatory that afflicts philosophical materialists – people who do not vouch for immortality – but who cringe at the idea of death.

Woeful *Pincher Martin* hangs on to physical sensation like a ghost holding on to sensual reality. What else can he do? *Pincher Martin* implicitly reminds readers that people ultimately conceive of death in the same measure they think of life.

**Georges Simenon, *Madame Maigret's Own Case***

✘ Grouchy Inspector Maigret's world is peopled with the type of individuals that long ago decent people only

rarely came across. The shady characters that populate George Simenon's novels live in a sub-society of their own. As a Parisian police inspector, Maigret is reluctantly dragged into their world. Though, Maigret does not lament this. He does his job with flair and cautious optimism, believing that he is making a dent in Parisian criminal life, while realizing he cannot change man's nature.

George Simenon's verve for the roman policier displays the author's penchant for logical exercises, what was not long ago referred to as critical thinking. In *Madame Maigret's Own Case*, Inspector Maigret tackles criminals who make lying an art. Maigret knows this is the extent of their virtue.

Maigret's genius is his realization that the morals of the criminal world have become normalized in postmodern life.

One wonders, what profound beauty, vast swaths of human energy, and good will are consumed by criminality and its attendant values in the postmodern world? What possibilities might there be for righteousness and decency in societies that do not condone criminality?

Simenon's Inspector Maigret novels operate on two levels: the art of detection, which is exemplified by Maigret's work ethic and the study of human nature.

Readers of Simenon experience the intersection of these two components of his novels as a keyhole look at dysfunctional behavior that goes beyond the pale. Maigret does the dirty work while readers are treated to the mayhem and destruction of liberalism's warped public policy.

Through Maigret, readers gain confidence that the roman policier may not solve man's zest for criminal behavior, but policing does keep the tide of barbarity at bay and the barbarians at the gate. Every evening Maigret returns home and ponders, but for how much longer?

## Nicholas Monsarrat, *The Kappillan of Malta*

✘ I end these three literary vignettes with Nicholas Monsarrat (1910-1979), an underrated British novelist who is best known for his naval novels, including *The Cruel Sea* and *Three Corvettes*, *The Tribe that Lost its Head* and *Richer than All His Tribe*.

Many readers of Monsarrat's work argue that his 1973 *The Kappillan of Malta* is his best novel. I agree. The island of Malta's history is the center of attention in the novel, even though the protagonist is a Catholic Kappillan named Salvatore Santo-Nobile, a well-respected priest who the locals call Don Salv.

*The Kappillan of Malta* is a novel that follows the history of Malta, dating back to the Phoenicians, through the knights of Malta and the Great Siege of the island in 1565, when the Ottoman Empire attempted to rule the island-nation.

Monsarrat treats the latter historical periods as asides, yet relevant commentary that is organically tied to the events of the novel. Part of the story is narrated by Don Salv to his flock, many of whom have taken refuge in a newly discovered catacomb that a bomb uncovered during WWII.

*The Kappillan of Malta* is a multi-dimensional novel that develops many spirited themes; a work that deserves more discussion than the space allotted in this essay.

*The Kappillan of Malta* reflects on the spiritual and moral leadership that Don Salv supplies his huddled and frightened brethren, in addition to the Islands' historical importance to Mediterranean commerce. The most vivid scenes of the novel are the attacks that the island suffered during WWII at the hands of Italian forces, working in conjunction with the Germans.

Monsarrat is a meticulous researcher, making *The Kappillan of Malta* a poignant and instructive historical novel. Vast spans

of the novel recount the colorful history and characters that made the island a central player in the history of the Mediterranean.

The author divides the novel into six hexamers (chapters), a biblical term that describes God's six days of creation. This structure makes for a tight plot progression that is as historical as it is thematic.

Each hexamer introduces the lively characters that Don Salv associates with, and who play pivotal roles along the many intricate paths that the novel weaves as an historical and human-interest story.

Don Salv is a respected Catholic priest during a time when Malta was being bombed and merchant ships in her harbor were being torpedoed and mined.

The importance of moral and spiritual leadership in desperate times is Monsarrat's bread and butter, as it were. During the Siege of Malta, the Knights of Malta battled the invading Ottomans.

Monsarrat offers a lengthy history of Malta that is worthy of a nonfiction book. During WWII, Don Salv attends to the moral-spiritual needs of his people. The novel tells his story in retrospect, as people celebrate his memory.

The beauty of *The Kappillan of Malta* is how the author weaves the passage of time throughout the scenes of the novel. Rather than degenerating into a cynical conception of trivial human existence and its alleged transitory nature, as is the case with many postmodern writers, Monsarrat showcases the importance that moral-spiritual fortitude has to posterity.