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Ecocriticism and Anthropocentrism in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

Abstract: Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi*, the winner of numerous prestigious awards, was described as "very bold and extreme with a wonderful central idea" (Irish Examiner 2002). The "central idea" of the novel has been described differently by readers and literary critics around the world. For many, it is Pi's relationship with the tiger, Richard Parker; for some, it is the decentering of humans in favour of animals; and yet for others, the central idea of *Life of Pi* lies in Martel's unusual treatment of religions and their role in human life. In this paper we argue that the main idea of the novel is Martel's ecocriticism of humanity in general, and especially the tendency of humans to put themselves at the center of any story, whether about animals or gods. Martel creates a tangled web of many different stories which define Pi's life in order to prioritize the role of fiction in the development of human personality and dissect the relations between the human, the natural world, and the text. Although he favors the animal story, the final chapter reveals that the only story humans find "real" is the one in which animals are seen as anthropomorphic.

Keywords: Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*, eco criticism, anthropocentrism, religion, fiction

Introduction

"That's what fiction is about, isn't it, the selective transforming of reality?

The twisting of it to bring out its essence?",

Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*
(Martel 2003, x)

The trials and tribulations of adulthood begin with the loss of faith in the power of imagination. Fortunate is he who, from time to time, stumbles upon a thing—be it an event, a tune, a movie, a book—which unexpectedly sparkles the imaginatively dead adult life and satisfies its hunger for something long gone: that uncanny ability to believe the unbelievable. Yann Martel wrote such

a book in 2001, and titled it *Life of Pi*. Suffice it to say that an adult who reads about the wondrous adventures of Pi Patel is very likely to start believing what his acquired rationality vehemently opposes. Martel sets himself not so modest a goal: he recounts “a story that will make you believe in God” (Martel 2003, xii), while readers, like amenable children they sometimes are, get mesmerized by the ostensibly simple, yet highly complex narrative.

The “central idea” of *Life of Pi* has been described differently by readers and literary critics around the world. For many, it is Pi’s relationship with the tiger, Richard Parker; for some, it is the decentering of humans in favor of animals; and yet for others, the central idea of the novel lies in Martel’s unusual treatment of religion and its role in human life. In this paper we argue that the main idea of the novel is Martel’s ecocriticism of humanity in general, and especially the tendency of humans to put themselves at the center of any story, whether about animals or gods. Martel creates a tangled web of many different stories which define Pi’s life in order to prioritize the role of fiction in the development of human personality and dissect the relations between the human world, the natural world, and the text. Although he favors the animal story, the final chapter reveals that the only story humans find “real” is the one in which animals are seen as anthropomorphic. Martel’s criticism of anthropocentrism can be seen as part of “the youngest of the revisionist movements that have swept the humanities over the past few decades” – ecocriticism. This relatively young interdisciplinary movement, which gained momentum in the 1990s, “first in the US and in the UK”, covers a broad range of interests and its scope has not yet been clearly defined. As Hannes Bergthaller of the National Chung Hsing University explains, it was “[i]nitially focused on the reappraisal of Romanticism ... and its cultural progeny”, but “it has since broadened to address the question, in all of its dimensions, how cultures construct and are in turn constructed by the non-human world”¹. The new focus makes ecocriticism extremely pliable, so that disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, history, and economics all fall within the scope of its interests. Literature represents an especially relevant field of ecocritical study: it “can be perceived as an aesthetically and culturally constructed part of the environment, since it directly addresses the questions of human constructions, such as meaning, value, language, and imagination, which can, then, be linked to the problem of ecological consciousness that humans need to attain” (Oppermann 1999, 3). Martel’s fiction is ecocritical because it forces the readers to acknowledge the bond between humans and nature, humans and animals, and finally the bond between humans themselves. His quest for the “greater truth” is primarily concerned with anthropocentrism. According to Oppermann, “ecocriticism can explore what we can call a discursively manipulated nonhuman world in liter-

¹ See <http://www.easlce.eu/about-us/what-is-ecocriticism/>

ature, and discuss how it gets marginalized or silenced by, or incorporated into the human language" (4), which is exactly what Martel has done by the end of his novel. In order to illustrate this, the paper will discover whether the author's "greater truth" lies in the story itself – the vivid, absurd, macabre, unreliable, sad, ecstatic, cunning, engrossing, disarmingly funny, and enormously lovable story, as it has been described by the critics all around the world. Is greater truth hidden behind the symbolism of the horrendous relationship between a resilient Indian boy and a redoubtable beast? Or is Martel's astounding religious milieu, which he creates for Pi, that perfect background which makes even the most hardened doubting Thomas a true believer in the power of God-as-Love?

In Search of the "Better Story"

" I know what you want. You want a story that
won't surprise you.
That will confirm what you already know.
That won't make you see higher or further or
differently.
You want a flat story. An immobile story.
You want dry, yeastless factuality."

Pi Patel
(Martel 2003, 302)

In his essay "Why Do We Read Fiction", Robert Penn Warren (1986, 63) claims that "the special and immediate interest that takes us to fiction is always our interest in a story". Since a story illustrates life in motion, with "individual characters moving through their particular experiences to some end that we may accept as meaningful" (Ibid), it is the author's duty to find an experience that is sufficiently appealing to the readers, who might then identify with the characters. *Life of Pi* begins with the author's search for the story, which does not simply frame the novel, but is its essential part that highlights the metafictional nature of the whole literary piece. Thus, the "Author's Note" functions as a Derridean *parergon*², influencing and manipulating our reading of the work.

The "Author's Note" introduces the five narrative voices of the novel, those of Martel himself, the unnamed narrator—the fictional persona of the author,

² In *The Truth in Painting*, Jacques Derrida defines the nature of a *parergon*:

A *parergon* comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon*, the work done [fait], the fact [le fait], the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside. Like an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border, on board [au bord, a bord]. It is first of all the on (the) bo(a)rd(er) [Il est d'abord l'a-bord]. (Derrida 1987, 54)

Mr. Adirubasamy / “Mamaji”³—who first reveals the story to Martel, the adult Pi Patel—who retrospectively recounts his adventures in the Pacific Ocean, and the Japanese officials—who appear at the end of the novel, only to question the story that has been told by Pi. These five voices, of which the narrator’s and Pi’s are the most prominent, reveal the story that should make one believe in God, as Mamaji assuredly claims (Martel 2003, xii).

Martel’s search for a “better” story was marked by “a misery peculiar to would-be writers”—that of an element missing, missing “that spark that brings to life a real story”, so that the writer knows his story is “emotionally dead”, leaving him “with an aching hunger” and a destroyed soul (x-xi). In the story of Pi Patel’s life, Martel finds that sparkle. The early promise of finding God in a piece of fiction foreshadows the role of imagination in Martel’s storytelling. He is not interested in a flat, or immobile story which consists of “dry, yeastless factuality” (302), but a story whose conflict will give us “the pleasure of entering worlds we do not know and of experimenting with experiences which we deeply crave but which the limitations of life, the fear of consequences, or the severity of our principles forbid to us” (Warren 1986, 64). In order to stimulate the readers’ imagination, Martel is very careful to tell Pi’s story in a particular way, bearing in mind that “how a story is presented is as important as the story itself” (Mill 2012, 48). Hence the need for playing with fiction and its different functions: to fully capture somebody’s imagination, *Life of Pi* evolves into “fiction that is self-conscious” (44), a metafictional text which functions as a “borderline discourse, as a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes that border as its subject”⁴ (Currie 2013, 2). Never does Martel let the readers forget that border between fact and fiction: he hints at it in the author’s note by advocating the twisting of reality to “bring out its essence” (Martel 2003, x), he then continually makes the readers question their understanding of Pi’s story by willingly admitting that there will be many who disbelieve it (256), and finally he uses the documentary character of the tape transcripts at the end of the novel as “an important strategy that assures a lasting sense of ambiguity” (Mill 2012, 101).

What, then, is so magical in the story of a young Indian boy’s life that we find so hard to believe? For many, *Life of Pi*’s appeal lies in the appearance of a tiger, as one reader confirmed in an online chat with Yann Martel, when he stated that it was specifically the book’s cover, which features the image of the exotic animal, that “drew” him to the book (quoted in Schwalm 2014, 52). Even Pi himself admits that “the sudden appearance of a tiger is arresting in any environment” (Martel 2003, 160), even in a literary one. Curiously named

³ “Mamaji”—an Indian word for a respectful and affectionate uncle.

⁴ “Metafiction” as defined by Robert Scholes in *Metafiction*, Mark Currie (ed.), New York: Routledge, pp. 21–39.

Richard Parker, he threatens (sometimes literally) to devour and outshine the main character of the story, much in the same way as Shakespeare's Shylock does with Antonio, the merchant of Venice. As for Pi, Martel gives him credibility by allowing him to talk about his childhood and early adolescence, which he spent in India, living with his family in the Pondicherry Zoo, managed by his father, Mr. Santosh Patel. We gradually get drawn in the world of the young man's fears, loves, hopes, interests, and peculiarities. The fact that later in his life Pi majored in religious studies and zoology accounts for many strange episodes in the novel. Furthermore, in Part One of the novel, titled "Toronto and Pondicherry", the voice of the adult Pi is interspersed with the narrator's voice, giving additional integrity to what is to come in Part Two, in which we learn of Pi's Pacific Ocean ordeal.

Thus, Martel gradually builds tension by beginning his story as a seemingly average "bildungsroman", which differs from other such novels primarily because of the special literary treatment of animals. In order to defamiliarize the animals of the Pondicherry Zoo, Martel describes them as seen through Pi's eyes, whose sheer love for them and knowledge of their everyday habits force the readers to see them in a new light. For Pi, three-toed sloths are wise beings with "intense imaginative lives", and such beautiful examples "of the miracle of life" (5) that they remind him of God, with a good-natured smile forever on His lips. Literally living in the Zoo, Pi had the opportunity of becoming acquainted with the animals' personal traits and habits—"the iridescent snout of a mandrill; the stately silence of a giraffe; the obese, yellow open mouth of a hippo; ... the senile, lecherous expression of a camel" (15). Pi's mastery of words helps us imagine the colourful noise of the Zoo, although Pi denies himself the power of truthfully describing all its beauty: "I wish I could convey the perfection of a seal slipping into water or a spider monkey swinging from point to point or a lion merely turning its head. But language founders in such seas. Better to picture it in your head if you want to feel it" (Ibid).

In spite of Pi's love for the animals, the fact remains that they are living in a zoo, an infamous institution plagued by "[c]ertain illusions about freedom" (19). Pi, however, depicts the Pondicherry Zoo as a home to animals, not a prison as many would immediately think. According to Schwalm (2014, 50), "[t]he notion that animal entertainment within zoos ... is not only attractive, but also beneficial to the animals themselves, reassures consumers and alleviates any feelings of guilt arising from the animals' incarceration". The "mythology of "good zoos" as a kind of Ark" is "underpinned ostensibly" by "Pi's expertise as zoologist" (Ibid), and indeed, in the novel, Pi argues that "if an animal could choose with intelligence, it would opt for living in a zoo, since the major difference between a zoo and the wild is the absence of parasites and enemies and the abundance of food in the first, and their respective abundance and scarcity in

the second” (Martel 2003, 18). The claim that there have been examples of “animals that could escape but did not, or did and returned” (19), justifies Richard Parker’s behaviour in the lifeboat. For Martel, “zoos are good in principle, if not always in practice” (Schwalm 2014, 53), so “Pi speaks of ideal enclosures that contain the supposed essence of any given animal’s natural habitat, which meets all of the animal’s needs, and provides stimuli and protection” (54).

However, this does not by any means glorify humans as the species that wants to save animals. On the contrary, in the Pondicherry Zoo,

“[j]ust beyond the ticket booth Father had had painted on a wall in bright red letters the question: DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE ZOO? An arrow pointed to a small curtain. There were so many eager, curious hands that pulled at the curtain that we had to replace it regularly. Behind it was a mirror” (Martel 2003, 31).

Pi’s father never lets him forget that he is just a man, which proves to be the most valuable lesson to Pi when he is left alone on the lifeboat with a fully-grown Bengal tiger. In fact, the only animal that is more dangerous than the human animal is “*Animalus anthropomorphicus*”—“the animal as seen through human eyes”, the one we often see as “cute”, “friendly”, “loving”, “devoted”, “merry”, “understanding” (Ibid), without realizing that “[l]ife will defend itself no matter how small it is”, and that “[e]very animal is ferocious and dangerous” (38).

In his childhood, Pi often fell prey to this “obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything” (31). It all changed when he found God, not only in Brahman and atman of his Hindu religion, but also in Christianity and Islam. It is at this point that Martel’s extraordinary talent for storytelling reaches its peak, in his way of presenting different religions as superb pieces of fiction which help us “escape not from life but to life” (Warren 1986, 64). The better story now becomes the story that “will awaken belief” (Stephens 2010, 43).

Pi’s Escape to God

“‘All religions are true.’
I just want to love God.”

Pi Patel
(Martel 2003, 69)

Whenever someone claims he has a story which will *make you* believe in God, he risks sounding too pretentious and producing the reverse effect. Martel again turns to the magic of his fiction and storytelling to make us forgive him for such pretentiousness, since the way he delivers his ideology is very likely to make “even the atheist, literary critical reader want to believe in God, and

want to enjoy the story in its own way, rather than seeking to (over)interpret it” (Brown 2008). The secret lies in his consistent, yet unobtrusive insistence on the Gandhian philosophy of tolerance and love, which is based on a simple notion that all religions are equal. For Gandhi (1962, 4), “all the principle religions are equal in the sense that they are all true. They are supplying a felt want in the spiritual progress of humanity”. Martel goes even further than this and begins his modest preaching with atheists, hinting that atheism is also a form of religion. Mr. Kumar, Pi’s biology teacher, is “the first avowed atheist” Pi ever met (Martel 2003, 25). He describes religion as darkness to the confused teenager overwhelmed by the notion that religion is light (27). But Mr. Kumar’s deep irreligious convictions not only inspire Pi to accept logic and science as one essential part of his life⁵, but also to regard atheism as a separate religion: “[A]theists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith, and every word they speak speaks of faith ... It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics ... To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation” (28). Martel advocates belief over doubt, even if such a belief means believing in fantastic stories. *Life of Pi* “makes the reader want to believe in God. Martel gives the reader the democratic choice: the *desire* to believe rather than the belief itself”⁶ (Brown 2008). And fiction can awaken our sleeping desires, it may give us things we hadn’t even known we wanted: “All our submerged selves, the old desires and possibilities, are lurking deep in us, sleepless and eager to have another go. Fiction, most often in subtly disguised forms, liberatingly reenacts for us such inner conflict. We feel the pleasure of liberation even when we cannot specify the source of the pleasure” (Warren 1986, 64). Along the way, Warren claims, fiction and role taking lead us “to an awareness of ourselves ... to the creation of the self” (Ibid). Consequently, the creation of Pi’s (religious) self becomes our own.

Pi respects atheists’ capability to believe and feels sorry for agnostics because of their inability to believe:

I can well imagine an atheist’s last words: “White, white! L-L-Love! My God!”—and the deathbed leap of faith. Whereas the agnostic, if he stays true to his reasonable self, if he stays beholden to dry, yeastless factuality, might try to explain the warm light bathing him by saying, “Possibly a f-f-failing oxygenation of the b-b-brain,” and, to the very end, lack imagination and miss the better story. (Martel 2003, 64)

Therefore, to perceive “the better story” one must be able to imagine and believe it. Pi’s quest for the better story begins with Hinduism, “the original

⁵ Pi later studies zoology, “the science that constitutes half his worldview” (Stephens 2010: 44).

⁶ My italics.

landscape” of his “religious imagination” (50). The universe makes sense to Pi through “Brahman, the world’s soul”, which manifests itself in two ways: as *Brahman nirguna*—“One, Truth, Unity, Absolute, Ultimate Reality”, beyond understanding, description, or approach, and as *Brahman saguna*—called Shiva, Krishna, Shakti, Ganesha, that is “Brahman made manifest to our limited senses” (48). The world’s soul is related to human soul, or “the spiritual force within us”, called “atman”, “in the same way the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit relate: mysteriously” (49). The human soul yearns “to be united with the Absolute, and it travels in this life on a pilgrimage where it is born and dies, and is born again and dies again, and again, and again” (Ibid).

But although Pi has been a Hindu all his life, he does not cling to one religion. One spring family holiday, when Pi was fourteen years old, marked the beginning of his religious quest. In the mountainous town of Munnar, there were three special hills which differed from their surrounding: “on each stood a God-house”—“the hill on the right ... had a Hindu temple high on its side; the hill in the middle ... held up a mosque; while the hill on the left was crowned with a Christian church” (51). It was there and then that Lord Krishna put Jesus of Nazareth in Pi’s way.

To a Hindu who has been taught all his life that “[t]he world soul cannot die” and that “divinity should not be blighted by death” (54), the humanity of Jesus is at first unfathomable. If the Christians dared humiliate and kill a God, there is no limit to what else they are capable of. What is more, they come back to the story of Jesus’ death “again and again, over and over” (53), and take pride in the fact that a God had to die simply to atone for their sins. By such and other philosophical questions and doubts is Pi assailed as Father Martin, the Parish Priest, tries to make him understand that all the stories which came before the story of Jesus were “simply prologue to the Christians” (Ibid), and that Christianity is in essence a religion with *one* story, at the core of which stands—love. To each of Pi’s questions, there can only be one answer—love—, which deeply annoys Pi: “He bothered me, this Son. Every day I burned with greater indignation against Him, found more flaws to Him” (56). But a bother soon becomes an obsession: “I couldn’t get Him out of my head. Still can’t. I spent three solid days thinking about Him. The more he bothered me, the less I could forget Him. And the more I learned about Him, the less I wanted to leave Him” (57). Finally, the humanity of Jesus becomes too compelling for Pi to resist and before he knows it, he becomes a Christian in his heart.

A year later, Pi discovers the magic of Islam, a religion with “a reputation worse than Christianity’s—fewer gods, greater violence” (58). But the intricate Muslim stories about the Beloved, *fana*—union with god, *dhikr*—“the recitation of the ninety-nine revealed names of God” (61), *hafiz*—“one who knows the Qur’an by heart” (61–62), the ardent prayers, the exotic sounds of Arabic, all

make Pi realize that Islam is “a beautiful religion of brotherhood and devotion” (61). The person who introduces Pi to Islam is a pious baker who, by coincidence, carries the same name as his biology teacher and devout atheist, Mr. Kumar. The two Mr. Kumars are “the prophets of [*Pi's*] Indian youth” (Ibid), who brilliantly symbolize, through their juxtaposition of science and religion, the scope of Pi's ability to believe (and make the verb “believe” significantly intransitive). Once Pi adds this third religion to his religious landscape, he begins to feel one with Nature: “I knelt a mortal; I rose an immortal. I felt like the centre of a small circle coinciding with the centre of a much larger one. Atman met Allah” (62).

Martel suggests that the number of circles is not at all relevant: it is the centre which they share that matters. In Pi's mind, the centre marks the “presence of God” (63), although the nature and understanding of that God may be different for different people. This is also the crux of Gandhi's teaching:

In theory, since there is one God, there can be only one religion. But in practice, no two persons I have known have had the same and identical conception of God. Therefore, there will perhaps always be different religions answering to different temperaments and climatic conditions. But I can clearly see the time coming when people belonging to different faiths will have the same regard for other faiths that they have for their own. I think that we have to find unity in diversity. We are all children of one and the same God and, therefore, absolutely equal. (Gandhi 1962, 10)

Martel even adds science and atheism to the equation, proposing that belief *per se* is crucial for our understanding of our innermost desires and wants. This is illustrated in Chapter 23, when Pi gets exposed as a Hindu, a Christian, and a Muslim, in front of a pandit, a priest, and an imam. The three don't agree to disagree about their respective religious views and try to make Pi choose, but his answer silences them. “Bapu Gandhi said, ‘All religions are true.’ I just want to love God”, he blurts out (Martel 2003, 69), leaving them confused and somewhat embarrassed. Not long afterwards, Pi buys a prayer rug and gets baptized (76–77).

To prove his point, Martel “allows” the two Mr. Kumars to meet with Pi in the Pondicherry Zoo at the same time. The passage that follows demonstrates the clever fashion in which Martel proves that the opposite beliefs of these two gentlemen do not affect their humane side, and that, in fact, regardless of their religions, they can be indistinguishable:

An alert zebra had noticed my carrot and had come up to the low fence ... I broke the carrot in two and gave one half to Mr. Kumar and one half to Mr. Kumar. “Thank you, Piscine,” said one; “Thank you, Pi,” said the other. Mr. Kumar went first, dipping his hand over the fence. The zebra's thick, strong, black lips grasped the carrot eagerly. Mr. Kumar wouldn't let go. The zebra sank its teeth into the carrot and snapped it in two. It crunched loudly on the treat for a few seconds, then reached for the remaining piece, lips flowing over Mr. Kumar's fingertips. He released the carrot and touched the zebra's soft nose.

It was Mr. Kumar's turn. He wasn't so demanding of the zebra. Once it had his half of the carrot between its lips, he let it go. The lips hurriedly moved the carrot into the mouth.

Mr. and Mr. Kumar looked delighted. (83)

Charlotte Innes was quite right when she described *Life of Pi* as “a religious book that makes sense to a nonreligious person” (quoted in Stephens 2010, 41). By spurning agnosticism and depicting science as another religion, Martel reinforces the idea that we should believe in something, even the things which at first glance seem impossible, like the story of a young Indian castaway who survived 227 days at the Pacific, stuck on a lifeboat in the company of an adult Bengal tiger. This story, “unparalleled in the history of shipwrecks” (Martel 2003, 319), is set against the backdrop of Pi's religious quest for a good reason. Apart from the “Author's Note”, Pi's discovery of the different religious faces of God serves as another *parergon* to the novel, “an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border” (Derrida 1987, 54) of the shipwreck narrative. It is within this religious framework that we should interpret the *ergon*—Pi's Pacific ordeal—since “a good religion works like a good novel: it makes you suspend your disbelief” (Edemariam 2002), as Martel stated in an interview after winning the Man Booker Prize for *Life of Pi* in 2002. He also provides his readers with a valuable clue as to the subtle, yet extremely important difference between belief and faith: “Fanatics do not have faith—they have belief. With faith you let go. You trust. Whereas with belief you cling”⁷ (Ibid). *Life of Pi* is essentially a novel about *finding faith* in God, however much He beggars belief, and in whatever form we imagine Him—as Krishna, Mohammed, Jesus, science, fiction, or even a tiger.

“What immortal hand or eye /
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?”

“Solitude began. I turned to God. I survived.”

(Martel 2003, 311)

The story of Pi's ordeal begins on July 2nd, 1977, when the Japanese ship, significantly named *Tsimtsum*, sinks in the Pacific, and makes the ocean the

⁷ In Pi's own words, “...we should not cling! A plague upon fundamentalists and literalists! I am reminded of a story of Lord Krishna when he was a cowherd. Every night he invites the milkmaids to dance with him in the forest. They come and they dance. The night is dark, the fire in their midst roars and crackles, the beat of the music gets ever faster—the girls dance and dance and dance with their sweet lord, who has made himself so abundant as to be in the arms of each and every girl. But the moment the girls become possessive, the moment each one imagines that Krishna is her partner alone, he vanishes. So it is that we should not be jealous with God.” (Martel 2003, 49)

final resting place of Pi's family—father, mother, brother, and the animals, who were being transported from India to Canada. The *Tsimtsum* largely resembled Noah's Ark, not only because of its passengers, but also because of the way it "had pushed on, bullishly indifferent to its surroundings. The sun shone, rain fell, winds blew, currents flowed, the sea built up hills, the sea dug up valleys—the *Tsimtsum* did not care. It moved with the slow, massive confidence of a continent" (Martel 2003, 100). The fact that it sank with no apparent reason, draws attention to Martel's symbolic use of the ship's name and brings us back to the very beginning of the novel, when we learn that Pi studied "certain aspects of the cosmogony theory of Isaac Luria, the great sixteenth-century Kabbalist from Safed" (3). It was Luria who used the term "Tsimtsum" to explain the way in which God created the world and filled it with other creatures, despite the fact that He is infinite and omnipresent (Stratton 2004, 14): "The Godhead contracted and withdrew itself in order to make a void in which to create: it is an eternally repeating event that connects the Godhead with every creature during the evolving progression of a divine creative moment" (Dunn 2008, 26). God literally withdrew "into self in order to make room for the physical universe", as Stratton explains:

God then tried to fill the space with emanations of divine energy, but the material vessels of the world were not strong enough to hold them and they shattered. According to Luria, the major task of humanity from the time of creation has been to work to repair the broken vessels and overcome the separation between divinity and materiality. (Stratton 2004, 14)

"Tsimtsum", thus, literally means finding a way to be present in your absence, as God does, and that is the concept that Pi must master through his suffering. The *Tsimtsum*, the material vessel of *Life of Pi*, burst and shattered "divine energy" all across the Pacific for Pi to find. The first piece of the divine energy that he "finds" is a 450-pound adult Royal Bengal tiger, whom he recklessly saves from drowning and makes him a companion on the lifeboat, together with a "prize Borneo orang-utan matriarch" (Martel 2003, 111), a zebra with a badly broken rear leg, and a grinningly ferocious spotted hyena.

The "decidedly baffling" ecosystem (122) on the lifeboat becomes an oceanic stage for a bloodthirsty Senecan tragedy, starring the animals. While the tiger stays hidden under the tarpaulin for the first four acts of the tragedy, the hyena plays the role of the gory villain, attacking the injured zebra, and eventually eating it alive from the inside (125). The hyena then turns to Orange Juice, the orang-utan, and after a violent struggle beheads the poor creature, who to the very end reminds Pi of humans—"her eyes expressed fear in such a humanlike way, as did her strained whimpers" (131), and after her death, with her arms "spread wide open" and her legs "folded together and slightly turned to one side", she "looked like a simian Christ on the Cross" (132). The vicious

omnivorous hyena was on a killing spree and Pi was to be next, but for the *deus ex machina* who finally “emerged from beneath the tarpaulin” and killed the petrified hyena “without a sound” (150). The appalling sight justifies Pi’s earlier assertion that the “upfront ferocity of a dog” is better than the “power and stealth of a cat” (110). And this cat was an outstanding piece of art, exquisite and terrifying at the same time:

I beheld Richard Parker from the angle that showed him off to greatest effect: from the back, half-raised, with his head turned. The stance had something of a pose to it, as if it were an intentional, even affected, display of mighty art. And what art, what might. His presence was overwhelming, yet equally evident was the lithesome grace of it. He was incredibly muscular, yet his haunches were thin and his glossy coat hung loosely on his frame. His body, bright brownish orange streaked with black vertical stripes, was incomparably beautiful, matched with a tailor’s eye for harmony by his pure white chest and underside and the black rings of his long tail. His head was large and round, displaying formidable sideburns, a stylish goatee and some of the finest whiskers of the cat world, thick, long and white. Atop the head were small, expressive ears shaped like perfect arches. His carrot orange face had a broad bridge and a pink nose, and it was made up with brazen flair. Wavy dabs of black circled the face in a pattern that was striking yet subtle, for it brought less attention to itself than it did to the one part of the face left untouched by it, the bridge, whose rufous lustre shone nearly with a radiance. The patches of white above the eyes, on the cheeks and around the mouth came off as finishing touches worthy of a Kathakali dancer. The result was a face that looked like the wings of a butterfly and bore an expression vaguely old and Chinese. (151)

Yet unbeknownst to Pi, from this moment the tiger assumes the role of an animal God who guides Pi to his final salvation. To have faith in the power of the tiger to save the human castaway is at first too absurd a notion to accept, even for the always-eager-to-believe Pi, who thinks of numerous ways to get rid of Richard Parker: “*Push Him off the Lifeboat...Kill Him with the Six Morphine Syringes...Attack Him with All Available Weaponry...Choke Him...Poison Him, Set Him on Fire, Electrocute Him...Wage a War of Attrition*” (157–158). It is only with the realization that Richard Parker calms Pi down, brings him peace, purpose, and even wholeness (162) that Pi understands what he has to do: “Keep Him Alive” (166).

The tiger and the boy are placed in close juxtaposition with one another, similar to the way in which William Blake juxtaposed experience with innocence. In his “Introduction to William Blake”, Alfred Kazin (1997) identifies the central subject of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as “that of the child who is lost and found”. Symbolically, “[i]nnocence is belief and experience is doubt”, and since “[t]he tragedy of experience is that we become incapable of love”, innocence and experience are challenged so that love, imagination, and faith can be restored through a Blakean *vision*—“the total imagination of man made

tangible and direct in works of art" (Ibid). In *Life of Pi*, the young Indian boy is not only literally lost and found, but his shipwreck narrative is also "both developmental and historical" (Dwyer 2005: 10), presenting "an ecological story line, which means that the human protagonist has emotional, moral, and intellectual interest in the animal in question" (15). Thus Martel's tiger becomes the *contrary* of Pi, in the same way that "[e]xperience is the "contrary" of innocence, not its negation" (Kazin 1997). Pi recognizes early on that only hope and trust can defeat the fear of the tiger (Martel 2003, 161–162), and that ultimately, he "was glad about Richard Parker":

A part of me did not want Richard Parker to die at all, because if he died I would be left alone with despair, a foe even more formidable than a tiger. If I still had the will to live, it was thanks to Richard Parker. He kept me from thinking too much about my family and my tragic circumstances. He pushed me to go on living. I hated him for it, yet at the same time I was grateful. I am grateful. It's the plain truth: without Richard Parker, I wouldn't be alive today to tell you my story. (164)

The fact that Richard Parker is a pliable, omega animal (273), "the one with the lowest social standing in the pride" (44) makes it possible for Pi to train him: he provides him with water and food, marks his territory with urine, stares aggressively into the tiger's eyes, and uses the deafening sound of his orange whistle to calm the tiger down. Nevertheless, Richard Parker does not become more domesticated, but Pi becomes more like a wild animal (Dwyer 2005, 16). Although a former vegetarian, Pi grows into a meat-eater, hunter, and killer, in order to survive. He reluctantly admits that "[a] person can get used to anything, even to killing" (Martel 2003, 185), and that he "descended to a level of savagery" he "never imagined possible" (197). In the grand setting of the Pacific Ocean, with no humans around, Pi literally becomes "a point perpetually at the centre of a circle" (215), while above him "two opposing circles spin about" (216). Pi's description of himself being "caught in a harrowing ballet of circles" (Ibid) is purposely strikingly similar to his understanding of the three religions, whose rites and rituals he continues to practice even at the open sea because of what they stand for—hope, faith, the will to live: "Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love—but sometimes it was so hard to love" (208). Despite the blackness which would sometimes overcome Pi, "God would remain, a shining point of light in my heart. I would go on loving" (209). Armed with his unyielding love for God and on the alert for his "contrary", Richard Parker, Pi sails the Pacific surrounded by many different skies and many different seas (215), until he stumbles across "an exceptional botanical discovery" (256): a low-lying island comprised of trees which grow not out of soil, but of "a dense mass of vegetation" (257).

Having established religious stories as a kind of fiction that can instill faith into people during the times of great distress, Martel embarks on their deconstruction by favouring “a good story over either religion or science” (Stephens 2010, 42). His “better story” evolves from the harsh realism of the *Tsimtsum*’s sinking to Pi’s unlikely living arrangements with the tiger on the lifeboat, and keeps evolving into “a far more radical departure from realism” (Mill 2012, 80) in the floating island episode. Thus the “better story” turns out to be “itself an object of adoration, a primary means through which one achieves or glimpses faith” (Stephens 2010, 42). But Martel is careful not to thrust the story of the magic island too abruptly into the readers’ faces. Instead, he quite realistically rationalizes it by the story that precedes it—the story about Pi’s resolution to die after three days with no food or water, when, finally, darkness succumbed both him and Richard Parker, and they went blind. The strange vision that Pi has in the blackness of his dying mind (Martel 2003, 242) is credible in the given context. Blind and dying, Pi engages in a conversation with a weary, rasping voice, stemming, as it first seems, from Pi’s hungry imagination. The two voices speak about their voracious appetites, until Pi “realizes” that the other voice is not imaginary, and that he has been speaking to Richard Parker all the while (246). The tiger admits to having killed two people, a man and a woman (247), and continues to speak about food, but Pi is bothered by something in this version of his vision: it suddenly dawns on him that the tiger has a French accent, which is “utterly incongruous” (248) given Richard Parker’s background. Pi transforms the origin of the other voice yet again and believes he has “met another blind man on another lifeboat in the Pacific” (250). And so Martel continues to play with different versions of fiction, all of which are equally incredible, yet believable if we accept them as the ravings of a madman: “Misery loves company, and madness calls it forth (242) ... If you’re not happy with this pigment of your fancy, pick another one. There are plenty of fancies to pick from” (243). Pi settles for the last version of his vision, in which his fellow sufferer tries to kill him and eat him, but is himself butchered by Richard Parker, who thus gives Pi life “at the expense of taking one” (255). In the ensuing story about the strange island, Martel is pushing the boundaries between fiction/fantasy and reality/rationality, with Pi still asserting that “there will be many who disbelieve the following episode” (256). This is the pivotal moment in the book, since by now the author has made the readers want to believe in at least one form of fiction, whether a God, or one of Martel’s own inventions.

Pi describes the island that he stumbled upon as a “chimera, a play of the mind” (257), which may be taken literally if one explains it rationally as an oasis conjured up by the castaway’s feeble mind. There is a strong emphasis on the use of imagination in storytelling and the need to suspend disbelief as readers learn about the magical properties of the unusual island. An enormous mass of green apparently grows out of itself, with no soil underneath, and the “fabric

of the island” resembles “an intricate, tightly webbed mass of tube-shaped seaweed” (257). The seaweed consists of a special type of algae, “wet with fresh water” (259) and with a sugary taste. In the centre of the island there is a “great green plateau with a green forest” around which there are “hundreds of evenly scattered, identically sized ponds with trees, sparsely distributed in a uniform way between them, the whole arrangement giving the unmistakable impression of following a design” (265). All the ponds are freshwater ponds, which is explained by the fact that the “algae naturally and continuously desalinated sea water” by sucking it in and “oozing the fresh water out” (268). The “design” is already so miraculous that we must understand it as either God’s or fiction’s design. It is populated with “hundreds of thousands of meerkats”, who are not in the least afraid of either Pi, or Richard Parker, not even when the latter starts “devouring one meerkat after another, blood dripping from his mouth” (269). But this is no Noah’s Ark: apart from the meerkats, the shining green algae, and the shining green trees, there is no other organic or inorganic matter on the island, “no flies, no butterflies, no bees ... no rodents, no grubs, no worms, no snakes, no scorpions ... no weeds, no crabs, no crayfish, no coral, no pebbles, no rocks” (271). The island seems to be “a free-floating organism, a ball of algae of leviathan proportions” (271–272).

Both Pi and Richard Parker feel rejuvenated after several days spent on the island—the tiger kills the meerkats beyond his need, Pi’s skin heels, their vision is back, they return to life (269). Pi trains the tiger during the day, whereas during the night, he sleeps in a tree, while the tiger conspicuously runs back to the lifeboat every night. What is more, every night literally all the meerkats abandon the ponds and go for the trees, so that in a matter of minutes, there is not a square inch of space left among the branches. On one occasion, Pi is woken up by the commotion of the meerkats and is amazed to see dead fish floating on the surface of the ponds. By that morning, the fish have disappeared. It is clear to Pi that despite its precious gifts of food and water, the island has a sinister side to it, whose true nature he discovers the day before he leaves the island (278). In the midst of the forest, he discovers a special tree, which has a dull green fruit, “the size and shape of oranges” (279). On closer inspection, the fruit is not a fruit, but “a dense accumulation of leaves glued together in a ball”, with each leaf containing a human tooth: in one fruit, Pi discovers a complete human set of thirty-two teeth (281), and realizes that the island is carnivorous.

Since Pi is no Bellerophon, and Richard Parker no Pegasus, they cannot defeat the chimera of an island and Pi decides to flee. Although this is the perfect opportunity for Pi to get rid of the tiger, he cannot abandon him: “To leave him would mean to kill him. He would not survive the first night” (283). His decision to save the tiger indicates that Pi Patel still clings to what is left of his humanity. After spending so many days sharing the lifeboat with the ferocious animal, Pi

forgets the first rule his father taught him, that “an animal is an animal” (31), and unconsciously begins to regard Richard Parker as a human companion in distress, an *animalus anthropomorphicus*, and finally as a fearsome godlike figure who will lead him to salvation by giving him something to always worry about—the constant threat of death. Once they escape the island, Pi explains that “it was natural that, bereft and desperate as I was, in the throes of unremitting suffering, I should turn to God” (284). Conspicuously, no further explanation as to which God he turned to is given. The lifeboat reaches Mexico after 227 days on the Pacific. Pi is, after all, rewarded for keeping the tiger alive—in return, the lamb too is spared by the tiger, who jumps off the boat as soon as they reach the Mexican beach. But Pi needs “a more humanly satisfying end to his relationship with Richard Parker” (Dwyer 2005, 17) and cannot understand the animal’s natural instinct for survival, since this animal is more than an animal for him:

He didn’t look at me. He ran a hundred yards or so along the shore before turning in. His gait was clumsy and uncoordinated. He fell several times. At the edge of the jungle, he stopped. I was certain he would turn my way. He would look at me. He would flatten his ears. He would growl. In some such way, he would conclude our relationship. He did nothing of the sort. He only looked fixedly into the jungle. Then Richard Parker, companion of my torment, awful, fierce thing that kept me alive, moved forward and disappeared forever from my life. (Martel 2003, 284–285)

The lack of closure, the unordered form of his story and the inability to conclude things properly, torment Pi in a typically human way. This may be the better story which Pi has been searching for, but the bungled farewell suggests that the readers must keep searching for a story that is easier to believe—one that deals with humans, not animals.

The Best Stories Lack Conclusions

“The theme of this novel can be summarized in three lines.
Life is a story.
You can choose your story.
And a story with an imaginative overlay is the better story.”

Yann Martel
(Viswanathan 2011)

Yann Martel believes that the imaginative overlay which makes “the better story” is “some kind of religious thing”, because “God is a shorthand for anything that is beyond the material—any greater pattern of meaning” (Viswanathan 2011). As his sole companion, Richard Parker fascinates Pi in ways which

transcend the material world, so he finds solace in searching for the greater pattern of meaning of his Pacific plight. Most people ascribe human properties to what they call God, and Pi is no exception, only he ascribes them to a tiger. Richard Parker is the true star of Pi's better story because he is akin to the Old Testament God—cruel, unpredictable, ireful, but able to control Pi with his volatile nature and help him stay alert.

However, humanity gave up animal-worshipping long time ago. The obsession with putting humans at the centre of everything is evident in the adults' need to be told stories without animals, something they could more easily believe, or at the very least to be allowed to interpret the animals from Pi's story as allegorical figures which symbolically represent humans. Though critical of such a view, Martel does not deny his readers the pleasure of reading a story that won't surprise them. Attempting to determine the true cause of the *Tsimtsum's* sinking, two Japanese officials, Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba, listen to Pi's amazing story about having survived for 227 days with a tiger on board. Both officials may stand for those readers of *Life of Pi* who have just started reading the novel and are still very skeptical about the meaning of Martel's fiction. Hence they want another story, the one with no animals, but with straight, dry, yeastless facts, and Pi is willing to tell it. In the final story of *Life of Pi*, four people survived the sinking of the ship: Pi, his mother, a Chinese sailor with a badly broken right leg, and a domineering French cook. The cook first cut off the sailor's leg and used it as a fishing bait. When the sailor died, the cook butchered him and eventually ate him. Afterwards, he killed Pi's mother who was protecting her son from the French brute. The bereaved son then killed the cook, who "let himself be killed" because he "knew he had gone too far, even by his bestial standards". Too fatigued to think like a human, Pi then ate the cook's heart and liver, which "tasted delicious, far better than turtle" (Martel 2003, 311).

Although this "other story" does not explain the meaning of the carnivorous island, it does parallel Pi's animal story: the Chinese sailor is the zebra, Pi's mother is the orang-utan, the French cook is the hyena, and Pi is Richard Parker. There is the same amount of bloodshed in both stories, yet we are more likely to believe the "other story", because it utilizes complex human emotions to rationalize and interpret such brutal acts of violence, whereas animal's violence can easily be ascribed to their instincts. Thus the "other story" is Pi's story allegorically explained. One of the best explanations of allegory is given by Dorothy Sayers in her "Introduction" to Dante's *Divine Comedy*:

Allegory is the interpretation of experience by means of images. In its simplest form it is a kind of extended metaphor. Supposing we say: 'John very much wanted to do so-and-so, but hesitated for fear of the consequences'; that is a plain statement. If we say: 'In John's mind desire and fear contended for the mastery' we are already beginning to speak allegorically: John's mind has become a field of battle in which two personified emotions are carrying on a conflict ... In this

purest kind of allegory, John himself never appears: his psyche is merely the landscape in which his personified feelings carry out their maneuvers. But there is also a form in which John himself—or what we may perhaps call John's conscious self, or super-self – figures among the personages of the allegory, as a pilgrim or knight-errant, exploring the wildernesses of his own soul and fighting against opposition both from within and without. (Alighieri 1949, 11–12)

Pi is the knight-errant of his own story, a pilgrim who explores the depths of his own soul. But, “[i]n neither kind does the actual story pretend to be a relation of fact; in its literal meaning, the whole tale is fiction; the allegorical meaning is the true story” (12). So, while we ponder on the meaning of the story, the way in which the story is told is equally important. The form of allegory makes the brutality of the “truth” in fiction much easier to tolerate. After listening to both stories, Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba, like many readers of *Life of Pi*, agree that the story with animals is the better story (Martel 2003, 317). For those who do not agree, there is the “other story” to satisfy their hunger for facts. Mr. Okamoto's report on the cause of the ship's sinking makes him one of those “readers” who have learned to appreciate the beauty of storytelling:

As an aside, story of sole survivor, Mr. Piscine Molitor Patel, Indian citizen, is an astounding story of courage and endurance in the face of extraordinarily difficult and tragic circumstances. In the experience of this investigator, his story is unparalleled in the history of shipwrecks. Very few castaways can claim to have survived so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger. (319)

If *Life of Pi* doesn't make its readers believe in God, it does make them ask themselves why they don't (Stratton 2004, 5). According to Stephens (2010, 43), “an essential component of a story that makes us believe in God is that it decenters human beings” and “puts animals back at the center of our secular and religious imaginations”: “Thus “believing in God” in some sense is a willingness to suspend disbelief while we listen to fantastic stories, inevitably informed by religion, about a world in which truth is stranger than fiction”. For Wolf Werner (2004, 107), *Life of Pi* is a “post-postmodernist attempt at eliciting (poetic) faith”, which may not make you believe in God, but will reinforce your “faith in the considerable redemptive powers of fiction” (Whittaker 2002). Stratton (2004, 6) sums this up by saying that Martel “is not out to prove the existence of God, but rather to justify a belief in God's existence”, by organizing his novel “around a philosophical debate about the modern world's privileging of reason over imagination, science over religion, materialism over idealism, fact over fiction or story”. Martel's narrative successfully deconstructs the “reason/imagination binary hierarchy” (7), while allowing for tolerance and free will. He applies the Gandhian view of religion as one tree with several branches (Gandhi 1962, 6) to fiction, and invites his readers to choose the branch they want to sit on. Like the religious tree, the tree of fiction is human-made, and we are

like the princess in one of Hans Christian Andersen's tales; she refuses her suitor when she discovers that the bird with a ravishing song he has offered as a token of love is only a real bird after all. We, like the princess, want an artificial bird—an artificial bird with a real song. So we go to fiction because it is a *created* thing. (Warren 1986, 65)

We choose our gods, our better stories, and their meanings, while trying to relate them to our human experience. *Life of Pi* draws our attention to the fact that the human world is constructed by the non-human world and that the centre of the circle which represents Humanity coincides with the centre of the circle which belongs to Nature.

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*Екокритика и антропоцентризам у роману
 Пијев живот Јана Мартела*

Роман Јана Мартела *Пијев живот*, добитник многобројних престижних награда, описан је као „веома храбро дело са дивном средишњом идејом“. Међутим, читаоци и критичари широм света су на различите начине описали ову средишњу идеју. Једни сматрају да се она односи на Пијев однос према тигру, Ричарду Паркеру; други истичу да се роман бави децентрирањем човека у корист животиња; постоје и они који као главну идеју овог романа виде Мартелов необичан опис различитих религија и њихових улога у људском животу. У овом раду се као средишња идеја романа *Пијев живот* издваја Мартелова екокритика човека, који је склон да себе смести у срж сваке приче, било да је она о животињама или боговима. Прича о Пијевом животу исткана је од многих прича како би се истакла улога фикције у развоју људске личности и како би се темељно испитао однос између људског света, природног света и текста. Иако Мартел сматра да је животињска прича најбоља и најубедљивија, у последњем поглављу се открива да је једина прича у коју људи могу да поверују она у којој су животиње виђене као антропоморфне.

Кључне речи: Јан Мартел, *Пијев живот*, екокритика, антропоцентризам, религија, фикција

*Eco critique et anthropocentrisme dans le roman
L'histoire de Pie de Yann Martel*

Le roman «*L'histoire de Pie*», lauréat de nombreux et prestigieux prix littéraires, a été décrit comme «un ouvrage courageux, osé et intelligent avec une idée merveilleuse et centrale» (Irish Examiner 2002). Cependant, les lecteurs et les critiques du monde entier l'ont décrite de différentes manières. Les uns considèrent qu'il s'agit de Pie et de sa relation avec le tigre, Richard Parker, les autres soulignent que le roman décrit l'anthropocentrisme de l'homme au profit de l'animal, d'autres encore considèrent que l'idée principale du roman réside dans l'inhabituelle description par Martel des religions et leurs rôles dans la vie des hommes. La présente étude remarque que l'idée centrale du roman «*L'histoire de Pie*» de Martel réside dans l'éco critique de l'homme; celle-ci a tendance à se placer au centre de chaque histoire, qu'il s'agisse d'animaux ou de dieux. «*L'histoire de Pie*» est constituée de plusieurs histoires qui soulignent le rôle de l'imagination dans le développement de la personnalité de l'homme et qui examinent pleinement la relation entre l'humanité, la nature et le roman. Même si Yann Martel considère que l'histoire d'un animal est la meilleure et la plus convaincante, l'auteur dans son dernier paragraphe dévoile que la seule histoire est celle où les animaux sont vus comme anthropomorphes.

Mots clefs: Yann Martel, «*L'histoire de Pie*», éco critique, anthropocentrisme, religion, imaginaire

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