

Tigers, Humans and *Animots*

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Summary

This article tracks the spoor of the tiger within recent literary imagination before turning to the narrative coils in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2003), where a young boy, Pi, is stranded on a lifeboat with Richard Parker, a 450-pound Bengal tiger. A tiger, as Margaret Attwood notes, "that burns bright ... that glows with life-force, that roars and rips things apart", "[a] tiger, that disappears without a trace into a jungle once land is reached leaving only a penned template behind". In the course of this discussion I will examine Jacques Derrida's notion of "absolute hospitality" toward the other as well as the idea of *animot* as a benign form of othering. Coupled to Derrida's ideas will be those of René Girard's exposition of mimetic rivalry, the sacrificial victim, and scapegoating.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel sny die spoor van die tier in resente literêre verbeelding voor dit 'n draai maak by die narratiewe kinkels in Yann Martel se *Life of Pi* (2003), waar 'n jong seun, Pi, vasgekeer is in 'n reddingsbootjie saam met Richard Parker, 'n 450-pond Bengaalse tier. 'n Tier wat, in Margaret Attwood se woorde, "burns bright ... that glows with life-force, that roars and rips things apart". 'n Tier wat, sodra hulle voet aan wal sit, spoorloos in 'n oerwoud in verdwyn en net 'n neergepende sjabloon agterlaat. In die loop van hierdie bespreking ondersoek ek Jacques Derrida se opvatting van "absolute gasvryheid" teenoor die ander asook die begrip *animot* as goedaardige vorm van verandering. Begrippe vervat in René Girard se eksposisie van mimetiese wedywering, die slagoffer, en versondebokking word met dié van Derrida in verband gebring.

Classifications and Signs of Empire

The tiger (*Panthera tigris*) belongs to the order *Carnivora*, the family *Felidae* and genus *Panthera*. Along with the other big cats its taxonomic classification was made by Linnaeus in 1758. Tigers' home ranges used to stretch from Indo-China, intermittently down to Sumatra and Java, and up and along to Siberia. Today, as a result of hunting and habitat loss, tigers are mostly found in nature reserves, tiger sanctuaries and zoos. Zoologists tell us that tigers have retractable claws, digitigrade gait, orange fur with black stripes. Mammals generally, are richly supplied with endocrine glands and their nervous systems, dominated by the brain, appear to be the most highly developed in the animal kingdom. Tigers are mammalia. As carnivores,

tigers have a preference for flesh and their dentition is typical of predatory animals. They have large, strong canines for fighting and seizing prey, sharp incisors for biting and some of the molar teeth, normally used for grinding, have modified to form blade-like carnassial teeth which act like scissors in cutting sinews.

Larousse has pointed out that like lions (but unlike leopards), tigers are amenable to being tamed (1973: 570). Despite a tiger's reputedly more tractable personality, I am not about to put my head in its mouth and count its teeth: 3/3 Incisors; 1/1 canines; 3/2 premolar carnassials and; 1/1 carnassial molars (Webb & Elgood 1977: 103). Scientists (and hunters and taxidermists), have delineated the schema of classification. Instructions for identification have been communicated. The tiger has been reconciled to the *Felidae* and can be distinguished from other big cats. The scientists who lived to declare that definitional consensus on the prototype had been found, used dead tigers. The description can be tested, but the words remain inert and unsatisfactory – they are cognitive signs which move only toward surface recognition.

Behind these signs lies the narrative of Europe's interest in natural history – the belief in a rational science, rational empires and irrational beasts. Hunting animals for national and private collections, as scholars have shown, is inextricably bound up with the expansion of empire. Ryan reports that in 1799 when Tipoo, the Sultan of Mysore, was killed by the British in battle, the Sultan's mechanical model of a tiger killing an Englishman was captured as a symbol of victory. The almost life-size model, which is today found in London's Victoria & Albert Museum, became one of the most visited exhibits of nineteenth-century London (1997: 103). Between 1789 and 1794, William Blake, no doubt already acquainted with exhibits, engravings and stories (fictional and otherwise), wrote "The Tyger" – a poem that continues to "burn bright" to this day as the tiger's "fearful symmetry" is imagined by schoolchildren and students alike.

As collectors' interests were satisfied, and as the sultans and princes were subjugated, the British in India also began to elevate tiger-killing to a field sport. No visit to India was complete without a tiger hunt. The Mughal symbol of the tiger as an animal of power and potency¹ was morphed by the British into one of "Oriental' ferocity and motiveless violence" (Ryan 1997: 104). Mukerjee describes the range of human qualities that Anglo-Indian writers have attributed to the tiger:

Memory, cunning, vengefulness, to mention only three – we shall realize that the tiger represented some enduring spirit of India that the British felt they had

1. *Vyaghra* is one of the Sanskrit words for tiger. The pharmaceutical company manufacturing the virility drug *Viagra* claims that the brand name is a combination of vigour and Niagara Falls. Surely, the similarities cannot just be coincidental?

failed to subjugate. No matter how many successful campaigns the British had waged, how many decisive battles they had won, how many cantonments they had founded to guard settlements, some basic fear of India continued to haunt British Indian life and imagination. Therefore the tiger had to be shot again and again.

(Mukerjee 1987: 12)

The high noon of the anthropocentric tiger was probably reached with Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Nyman convincingly argues that the "English national identity contains its Others [where] different racial and national Others are constructed to promote a particular version of Englishness" (2001: 205) and that Kipling's *The Jungle Book* harnesses the animal Other to enable the construction of British identity. In this book – relegated to shelves in the children's rooms – the wolves are the free people, the monkeys hedonistic and ungovernable while Shere Khan, the tiger, challenges the colonial order with an "anarchic nativism" (Nyman 2001: 208) by insisting that Mowgli, the Indian boy being raised by the wolves be given to him as he was his "meat from the first" (Kipling 1998:28). As Nyman argues: "This Edenic space is transformed into dangerous colonial space by introducing the native Other ... who has no respect for the Law of the Jungle" (2001: 209). Shere Khan insists on breaking the Law of the Jungle (read colonial law) even though the other beasts have reasoned that it would be "unsportsmanlike" to eat men because "they are the weakest and most defenceless of all living things" (Kipling 1998: 10). The anarchic beast meets his end when he is ambushed, trapped and mangled underfoot by the village cattle which have been stampeded by Mowgli with the help of his wolf-brothers.

It is ironic that the tiger that has become such a compelling symbol of Anglo-India has actually been treated with relative indifference in ancient Indian literature, art and religion. Until the arrival of the Mughals, "the epic imagination in India was very little impressed with the beast" (Mukerjee 1987: 2) and in the Hindu realm of deities and animal/ human gods the tiger barely merits reverence in comparison to the anti-human gods, Ganesha and Hanuman. Only in Bengal, where tigers were abundant, do a few minor tiger deities exist – Daksin Raye being the best-known one. In this area the deity is "eulogised in various folk verses and one famous long poem, the Rayemangal of Krishnaram Das (1786)" (Mukerjee 1987: 30). In the folk verses the tiger is often represented as a comic character which is outwitted by the jackal.

The Mughals, on the other hand, from Akbar onwards (circa 1600), provided the tiger-shoot template that the British became so obsessed with. Tigers hunted on elephant back were eventually supplanted by shoots from open Rolls Royces and later, as the idea of spectacle receded, from Land Rovers by people with cameras. Nonetheless, despite the fact that tigers certainly entered the imaginations of both the Mughals and the British, the

lion was India's "national animal" for more than 2000 years. The tiger only achieved this "status" in 1972 (see Mukerjee 1997: 3). Further east, the Chinese accord the tiger with medicinal and sexual potency and trade in tiger body-parts continues to flourish. The Siberian tiger has been poached almost to extinction and today more of these tigers exist in captivity than in the wild.

Representation and Imagination

The problem of representation of the animal cannot be divorced from the cultural and political imaginations of historical periods. These imaginations, as the Anglo-Indian examples of Empire from the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries illustrate, is that the tiger becomes a crude stand-in for something else. The "other" transforms into the "alien", is regarded with suspicion and becomes the scapegoat (more on the scapegoat below). The tiger's being-in-this world had become an equivocation for imposing order on the perceived Indian disorder by colonial authorities and by boys-own-adventure novelists who needed to impress. Of course it was even better if the tiger was a maneater because then the native population could be defended and protected from the "anarchist".

In Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* Elizabeth Costello remarks that one cannot know what it is to be a bat or sense its life, but one needs to acknowledge that to be "a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being To be full of being is to live as a body-soul" (1999: 45). Philosophers have pondered being for thousands of years – from Aristotle (at least what the West has in writings preserved) to Heidegger and beyond. But, as Eco reminds us,

[b]eing is even before it is talked about The moment we talk about being, we are still not talking about it in its all-embracing form, because ... the problem with being (the most natural and immediate of experiences) is the least natural of all problems, the one that commonsense never poses: we begin to grope our way through being by carving entities out of it and gradually constructing ourselves a World.

(Eco 1999: 20)

And, in order to construct ourselves a world we need to name those entities we are in the process of carving out. Eco continues by writing that while "we have irrepressible proof of the existence of individuals ... we can say nothing about them, except by naming them through their essence, that is to say by genus and differentia (not therefore 'this man' but 'man')" (1999: 23). The process of naming through language is that the individual becomes blurred into the universal. Being, that which is but remains incognisable – we know it is, but we cannot conceptualise it, cannot define it – that which

Costello calls body-soul/full of being must necessarily always be singular and individual. As soon as ideas of being blur to the universal the possibilities grow exponentially for the animalisation of individuals and the bestialisation of animals. Derrida maintains that

[a]nimal is a word men have given themselves the right to give They have given themselves this word in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept: “the *Animal*.” ... There is no animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single indivisible limit. We have to envisage the existence of “living creatures” whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity.

(Derrida 2002: 400, 415)

In like fashion Elizabeth Costello refers to the death camps of the Second World War and says that the actual horror was “that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims They said, ‘It is *they* in those cattle-cars rattling past.’ They did not say, ‘How would it be if it were I in that cattle-car?’” (Coetzee 1999: 48). *They* can be gassed (or hunted, captured, caged, slaughtered, processed and eaten). *I* am afraid to die, do not desire to be treated inhumanely – *I* am full of being. I would then recognise a person or an animal’s “unsubstitutable singularity” (Derrida 2002: 378). Derrida points out that Western metaphysics has been asking the wrong questions all along with regard to animals. The issue is not whether animals can reason or talk but “rather to know whether animals can suffer” (p. 396). The answer is invariably, yes, and this provides an intersection, a bridge even, between ethics and action with regard to the treatment of animals.²

Eco asks, “[W]hat do we refer [to] when we talk [or write], and with what degree of reliability?” (1999: 13). He relies heavily on Charles Peirce’s “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities”, which argues amongst other things that we have neither “power of thinking without signs” nor do we “have a conception of the absolutely incognizable” (Eco 1999: 33). And yet there are persistent strains in Western thought that there is some kind of bond between reality and language; that the sign is capable of bridging the divide between actual and actuality (see Terblanche 2004: 221). Inasmuch as a complex mental process takes place when we see something (refraction, inversion, etc.) the “gaze encounters words as if they had strayed to the heart of things, words indicating the way to go and naming the landscape

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2. The concern with animal rights and the ethicality of zoos gained particular momentum in the 1960s and many zoos were quick to respond to new ideas about the animal other: cages were replaced with more natural habitats and animals often grouped in common ecosystems. As a result of better scientific awareness of animal behaviour zookeepers began to cater for animals’ psychological comfort as well. The zoological yardstick of animal response to these changes is whether they are sufficiently “content” to reproduce.

being crossed” (Foucault 1983: 33). But, the sign and the image cannot merge and neither can it intersect. They are two different systems. In *The Order of Things* Foucault maintains that neither system

can be reduced to the other’s terms And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying And the proper name, in this context, is merely an artifice: it gives us a finger to point with, in other words, to pass surreptitiously from the space where one speaks to the space where one looks; in other words, to fold one over the other as if they were equivalents.

(quoted in Foucault 1983: 9)

It takes an equally complex process to break the “mystical” bond and not take the word for the real or verisimilitude. This is of course the problem that present-day mimetic theory is grappling with. Cheryll Glotfelty feels that one of the projects of ecocritical theory needs to be “the retheorization of mimesis and referentiality, especially as applied to literary representation of the physical environment in literary texts” (1994: 1). States points out that Gadamer looks at representation and maintains that what is “experienced aesthetically is, as an experience, removed from all connections with actuality” while Iser argues that a “mimetic object can become such only when it has wiped out [or “irrealized”] the representational features of the materials that have enabled [it] to assume its shape”. Thus it becomes a “super-likeness” or an “imaginary object”... in its own right rather than a representation of something other than itself” (Gadamer & Iser quoted by States 1993: 7). The ecocritical project demands more than aesthetics and/or super-likeness in representation – it requires, according to Glotfelty, a “study of literature as a site of environmental-ethical reflection – for example, as a critique of anthropocentric assumptions” (1994: 1). In particular, how does one represent the Animal Other?

In *The Lives of Animals*, Elizabeth Costello talks about the caged panther³ in a Ted Hughes poem:

That is the kind of poetry I bring to your attention today: poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead a record of an engagement with him But when we divert the current of feeling that flows between ourself [sic] and the animal into words, we abstract it forever from the animal. Thus the poem is not a gift to its object, as the love

3. Earlier in her talk, Costello had dismissed Rilke’s poem, “The Panther” because the cat “is there [in this particular poem] as a stand-in for something else” (1999: 84). Derrida notes that recently there has been a retranslation of the poem by Richard Macksey which reinvigorates the issues of “gaze” (2002: 376, footnote 7). It is not known if Coetzee’s Costello had this or an earlier translation in mind.

poem is. It falls within an entirely human economy in which the animal has no share.

(Coetzee 1999: 86)

If there is an animal loose in a text it is paradoxically always already captured and always already escaped. The tension between the real and the mimetic is unresolvable and unsharable. If we wish to record an engagement with the animal, all that can be done then is to try and discern between a malign or a benign way of representing that animal other. This is the ethical concern that Glotfelty talks about. The animal might have no share in the abstraction of words but could be victim of the metaphors of animality that spread like contagion in keeping the animal, the wild, that which cannot be tamed, outside of the human so that absolute otherness is perceived as malign. The beast and the brute, the monster and the alien, places the animal in perpetual opposition to the human. While the animal (its trace) might originally have been diverted into words, those words always contain the potential within them for a configuration towards a landscape of violence. The need for the tiger to be shot again and again and again in British India is an example of this. The immolation of the tiger as the quintessence of evil and malignity is, to use another animal metaphor, scapegoating.

Girard and the Scapegoat

René Girard's⁴ seminal ideas have to do principally with human interactions, culture and religion and would be impossible to elucidate fully in an article of this length. Girard argues that violence is endemic to all human societies and that unlike many animal species there is really no "braking mechanism" to stop the violence except through the rituals provided by religion. These rituals, often involving killing, are rationalised as "sacrifice" and ultimately serve to sublimate the elements of rivalry and reciprocal retaliation by evolving rituals of controlled sacrifice, which centre on the surrogate victim. In the Abrahamaic religions for instance, the lamb is often the surrogate for the human. Girard's ideas can be extended to underscore human engagement with the animal other. He notes that

4. René Girard's thinking has had a seminal impact on ways in which we conceive of violence, civilisation and religion. He contends that religions bolster civilisation through sanctioned violence against outsiders and scapegoats. In critiques of James G. Frazer's *Golden Bough* and of Freud's theories of desire, Girard's ideas on mimetic desire and the universal use of scapegoating has engendered revisionings of society, literature, anthropology and religion.

modern use of the word scapegoat ... refers to an intrinsically irrelevant victim ... who is perceived as “guilty” not by a single individual but by an entire human group. A process of mimetic contagion transfers upon this vicarious victim all the fears, hostilities, and other difficulties that this group will not directly confront.

(Girard 1991: vii)

He continues to write that while contemporary society may know quite a bit more about scapegoating than in the past, our ability to detect the practice of scapegoating among our friends and within ourselves is most often impossible. The targeted other is transformed into an alien and the literal or figurative isolation that occurs is a form of sacrificial strategy which “furnishes many communities with their sense of collective identity” (Kierney 1999: 1). Hostile metaphor quite often becomes a sophisticated and at times, subtle form of sacrificial substitution especially in terms of the animal other. Scapegoating can effectively be disguised as it takes more and more surreptitious forms of mimetic rivalry. Should a human be compared to an animal, care must be taken that his “impurity” does not become contagious – quarantine to the “outside” (often through censure) is deemed necessary. Society (and the self) rely on the known – that which is tame. “Animality” as Laskin observes, “is what is supposedly wild” and the human attempts to “cast the wild outside of itself, to quarantine wildness in such concepts as ‘animal’, or in such regions as ‘parks’ ... is wildness that cannot be tamed ... To think that the wild can be cast out of the human and isolated” ... “provides the opening for the human self to define itself within” (2003: 10, 7).

“The tiger does not have to declare its tigritude”, Wole Soyinka famously declared when he voiced his misgivings about the philosophical underpinnings of negritude. Negritude needed constantly to disrupt the perception of its black negative, to proclaim its positive otherness in order to give voice to itself as mimetically desirable. The tiger that is full of being, that is, is transported to a being-in-the-world anticipated by humans. Writers and artists, animationists and bureaucrats have persistently appropriated the being of the tiger in declaring for themselves, what tigritude is. A record of violent engagement creates a kind of Manichean delirium – in which the tiger has no direct participation but is forced into putative engagement where it continues to confute, confuse, block, equivocate and complicate simply because it refuses to talk back. Does the tiger know, as scapegoat, that it is being rehabilitated and revered? No – but it still can suffer.

Absolute Hospitality and the *Animot*

“*Ecce animot*” Derrida neologises several times in “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow) (2002) and these words bear some further

clarification: *Ecce* (Latin: Behold, See, Lo!) and *animot* (a combination of the Latin/French/English word “animal” and the French *mot(s)* signifying “word(s)”) – Behold/See the animal-word/animal and word/animal of words/words for animal/words by an animal/words against the animal/the speaking animal/the responding animal. Derrida did not say “*ego animal sum* or *je suis un animal*” (I am an animal) thereby intimating that the metaphysical divide has been bridged between humans and other animals. Refusal to acknowledge the difference is asinine, he feels. *Animot* is “neither a species nor a gender nor an individual, it is an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals” rather than a “monstrous hybrid” (Derrida 2002: 409) where we are invited to “envisage the existence of ‘living creatures’ whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity” (p. 415). When Derrida first introduces the neologism, *animot*, he dreams about his “crazy project of constituting everything [he has] thought or written within a zoosphere, the dream of an absolute hospitality and an infinite appropriation. How to welcome or liberate so many animal-words” (p. 405).

The action of according “absolute hospitality” to the living creatures in Derrida’s “personal and somewhat paradisiac bestiary” (2002: 405) has its origin in earlier works where he deconstructs the notions of “host” and “hospitality” and the feeling that justice requires or demands that unconditional hospitality by a nation-state be afforded the human alien/refugee/adversary/absolute other. “Hospitality is only truly just,” explains Kearney, “when it resists the temptation to discriminate between good or evil others, that is between the hostile enemy [also stranger] (*hostis*) and the benign host” (1999: 5). But, the host may indeed become the hostage. Hospitality and hostility lead to a paradoxical “hostipitality” (in Kearney 1999: 6). Kearney also calls a “benign host” a *hostis*. In English this has close links with “host” while in Latin a host is *hospes* – providing a closer link with *hospitalis* or hospitality. Deriving from the same root, *hostio*, meaning to strike, transmutes to *hostia* which literally means the thing struck, and refers to an animal slain in sacrifice or a victim. Derrida is writing about human aliens and requires that the host/host country makes an absolute leap of faith in providing the justice of hospitality (as opposed to claims about the right to) to the other/absolute other/alien. When it comes to animals the “absolute hospitality” Derrida dreams about in his “paradisiac bestiary” is within the Garden of Eden of words (except for his real cat that gazes at him naked and the fact that should a live tiger open its mouth and invite Derrida to count its teeth, Derrida would not do so!). “Infinite appropriation” is possible because the *animots* are just that – words for/about animals. Through words he can extend hospitality, throw open the doors of his house and his study and invite animals in via his writing. The only hostility that might be shown to him will be from fellow academics and those words can be deflected with more words.

Life of Pi

In an interview on how he composed *Life of Pi* Martel reveals what his principal concerns in writing are:

The solipsistic, the self-involved, the angst of the solitary do not interest me. I'd rather look at the other, whether it's the animal other, the cultural other, the religious other – it's through them that we come to understand ourselves Everyone has multiple identities So yes, I am interested in otherness, because it strikes me that it's the very matter not only of fiction, but of life.

(Martel 2006: 5)

In a novel of such multitudinous layers it is difficult to do justice to the loops and coils it takes in the course of Pi's struggle to survive. Only a few of the different narrative threads will be discussed here. For several years before the protagonist, Pi's, family decides to emigrate from India to Canada, he practises, formally, three religions – Hinduism, Islam and Christianity – to the bemusement of his parents, the ridicule of his elder brother and the begrudged agreement of the iman, pandit and priest in Pondicherry. Hovering in the background to the city he grew up in is a statue of Mahatma Ghandi whose philosophy of life entailed the acceptance of the truth of all religions. In the light of the traditional enmity of these three religions and the wars their faithful have engaged in, Pi's sincere participation in all three girds him with innumerable deities and a monotheistic God upon whom he can call when his survival is at stake – as it is in all 227 days that he drifts on the Pacific Ocean. Pi's eccentric and highly unorthodox practices of worship immediately place him as the other in that the ideological encrustations that have adhered to each religion over thousands of years are swept aside and the believed originary purity of each faith brought to the surface again. Pi, in a sense, practises absolute hospitality and allows the religious other into his very bosom. He denies the scape-goating religions' conduct against each other – Hinduism and Islam; Christianity and Islam – and he denies the possibility of mimetic rivalry between the three faiths. He retains, however, the strict vegetarian dietary prescriptions of the Hindu faith together with its general reluctance to kill animal beings. The Abrahamaic religions do not have as many scruples and apart from Islam's injunction that one should not eat an unclean animal, killing is forbidden only in terms of humankind. Once Pi is at sea, each faith's injunctions (apart from the eating of pork) are put to the test in Pi's survival narratives – and he lives to tell these tales. In Canada as an adult with a job, house, wife, children and pets – the very mimesis of middle-class existence – Pi continues to practise his hospitality toward all three faiths. This hospitality, given unconditionally, marks a break with the conventions of admission and hosting governed (albeit silently sometimes) by religions generally. Derrida argues that it is required that

I open my home and that I give not only to the stranger (furnished with a family name and the social status of a stranger etc.) but to the absolute other, unknown and anonymous; and that I give place (*donne lieu*), let come, let arrive, let him take his place in the place that I offer him, without demanding that he give his name or enter into some reciprocal pact.

(Derrida 1997 quoted by Kearney 1999: 6)

While he drifts on the sea, Pi works out a schedule of daily tasks essential to physical survival. And each session of tasks is accompanied by prayers to Krishna, to Allah, to Christ and the Virgin Mary. Throughout, he tends to and observes Richard Parker, his co-survivor and a tiger to boot. By turns the animal is cranky, contented, lethargic, fierce and territorial, submissive and calm. He is perpetually hungry and thirsty. This tiger has a name (more about this later), his provenance is known and he is habituated to humans as he has spent the greater part of his life in a zoo – but he remains the absolute other, the alien and “refuses” finally, to enter into a pact of gratitude for the hospitality rendered him. When the lifeboat reaches landfall in Mexico after seven months of drifting along the equatorial countercurrent, Richard Parker leaps off the boat and disappears into the jungle. His footprints in the sand are erased by the next tide and he leaves only a trace as *animot*. When we put that animal into words it becomes a trace – but the trace is captured by the pen – the writing implement and the literary enclosure.

This double bind, this equivocation, is rendered “deniable” by Martel when he refuses to metaphorically cast a bridge between the radical alterity of the animal and the desire of the human. The writer who records Pi’s story long after he has settled in Canada, knows that the memory of Richard Parker will stay with Pi forever, who thinks of him everyday and who struggles to understand how “he could abandon me so unceremoniously, without any sort of goodbye, without looking back even once. The pain is like an axe that chops at my heart” (2003: 6). Both the writer and Pi have been authored by culture – expecting a tiger to exhibit the cultural manners appropriate to farewells. But, it is also a very mindful commentary on the family of animal films by, amongst others, the Disney Corporation where the wolf, the polar bear, and other sundry cinemals turn round and gaze, stand up or raise a paw in farewell to the human (usually a child) before loping off into the wilderness. This is, as O’Hearne announces in *The Lives of Animals*, a kind of “prelapsarian wistfulness” (Coetzee 1999: 113).

***Life of Pi*: One Narrative Thread**

There are several narrative threads in *Life of Pi* that track the Bengal tiger, Richard Parker, through the text. Firstly, there is the writer’s engagement with the tiger via a photograph of important personages standing in front of

the enclosure at the Pondicherry Zoo which Pi Patel's father, Santosh, owned. The writer of Pi's tale is amazed:

*I look closely, trying to extract personality from appearance. Unfortunately, it's black and white again and a little out of focus. A photo taken in better days, casually. Richard Parker is looking away. He doesn't even realize that his picture is being taken.*⁵

(Martel 2003: 87)

At this stage the reader does not know who/what Richard Parker is. The writer knows, however, that the story of Pi's engagement with Richard Parker is one that "will make [him] believe in God" (2003: xii). John Berger maintains that

[n]owhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. At the most, the animal's gaze flickers and passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond. They scan mechanically That look between animal and man, which may have played a crucial role in the development of human society, and with which, in any case, all men had always lived until less than a century ago, has been extinguished.

(Berger quoted in Coetzee 1999: 72, footnote 7)

Martel comments directly on the attempts by the writer to remove the alterity of the animal and appropriate it into the realm of the knowing human self. Richard Parker refuses the gestures of gaze by a camera in the surroundings of a zoo where he is cast by the public as a source of entertainment. But in the lifeboat, Pi and Richard Parker are, so to speak, swept back to within a time before the war against animals was won. Literally "at sea" Pi cannot rely on any mechanical or physical backup in his engagement with the animal. He has to rely entirely on the resources within the storage locker of the lifeboat and on a manual for survival at sea. But there are no directions on coping with a tiger. He has no means to sacrifice a tiger. In a sense, Pi, as a kind of prehistoric Everyman, is placed in a situation where there was more direct engagement between humankind and animal. Pi's first thoughts, after unthinkingly helping Richard Parker reach the boat, are ways and means of getting rid of him. He is overcome with terror and ironically, it is the very gaze of the tiger that calms him down:

He was looking at me intently. After a time I recognized the gaze. I had grown up with it. It was the gaze of a contented animal looking out from its cage or pit the way you or I would look out from a restaurant table after a good meal, when the time has come for conversation and people-watching He was

5. The writer's story is written in italics to distinguish it from Pi's first-person tale and the transcripts of the Japanese shipping agents.

simply taking me in, observing me, in a manner that was sober but not menacing.

(Martel 2003: 162)

There are no bars of a cage – but there are two levels of space in the boat: the floor and bow benches for Richard Parker and the tarpaulin stretched over the stern and the crude little raft being pulled along by the boat for Pi. The alterity cannot be erased, but the other can be acknowledged and a very careful, always observant kind of “diplomatic peace” can reign.

It is only in the last 50 years that tigers have been declared a protected species. Now scientists, conservationists and film-makers have converged and entered into its natural habitat so that the entire world can see tigers sleeping, preying, eating, mating, fighting and nurturing. If I were to encounter a tiger from the safety of a Jeep in one of India’s national parks or tiger sanctuaries, it would, perfectly habituated to the smell of diesel fumes, metal and rubber, probably just saunter past as I clicked with my camera. On the other hand, if I were on foot in the Sundarbans, that “jungle which is so thick that history has hardly ever found a way in” (Rushdie 1982: 359), I would be a sitting biped for a hungry tiger, even if I had all my wits about me. Their usual prey, chital (*Axis axis*), would have fled long ago as I splashed through the muddy mangrove roots. Evolutionary biology has ensured that the tiger is eminently suited to bringing me to ground – it has been genetically enabled with spring-loaded back legs, freely moving shoulder blades which extend the front legs, smooth, rounded vertebrae which give the backbone an elastic flexibility and at full acceleration it will cover six metres in one bound and grab me. How then, does Martel engineer the absolutely incredible to the level of the credible?

Martel does so through the notion of “diplomatic peace”. He provides, via Pi, an advocacy of the necessity of a biologically sound zoological garden where the welfare and contentedness of the animals is the principal concern of owners and keepers. The question of zoos is one of impassioned debate in contemporary times and it is not one which I shall engage with in this article. Nonetheless, Pi feels, along with many zoologists, that if an animal reproduces there is an element of security and contentment in its very circumscribed territory – a territory that is not threatened, where food and water is provided regularly, parasites and illnesses treated and where routine provides a semblance of security (2003: 12-19). “A good zoo”, Pi says, “is a place of carefully worked-out coincidence: exactly where an animal says to us, ‘Stay out!’ with its urine or other secretions, we say to it, ‘Stay in!’ with our barriers. Under such conditions of diplomatic peace, all animals are content and we can relax and have a look at each other” (pp. 18-19). Richard Parker, inured to being looked at, accustomed to the smell of humans, used to having its food and water provided, accepts his place as subordinate in the lifeboat. Pi can and does provide food and water, he has a whistle from a lifejacket that makes an infernal racket with which to cow

the animal, and he can, if needs be, rock the boat so that Richard Parker succumbs to debilitating seasickness. Pi and Richard Parker spend hours simply looking at each other, but when it comes to establishing hierarchy, over and over again, Pi advises that eye contact must never be lost – stare down the animal. The Everyman Pi is naked before a superbly engineered predator – he needs to establish dominance. There is no absolute hospitality, but there is absolute responsibility.

The exposure of many readers to documentaries of animals in the wild will confirm that Martel has done his homework. There are amongst most species in the wilderness and in zoos, sound concepts of territory and pecking order. Pi, of necessity, must eschew the notion of a prelapsarian Garden of Eden and move into the realm of the Fall where new orders are established. A diplomatic peace is established. Any diplomatic peace in the human realm is one of threat and promise and negotiation. Almost inevitably, parties display strengths in different areas (morally, militarily or otherwise) and agree to suspend outright hostilities to see if differences can be settled. Circumstances or a third party often bully nations/factions into following this option. Pi has ingenuity and dexterity on his side, Richard Parker has TEETH. If Pi were to have faltered for one second, he would have been dinner. In the true sense of the notion, in the sense of the actual, absolute hospitality must need falter as well. All that is left is the question of an ethically acknowledged alterity towards the *animot*.

***Life of Pi*: Narrative Thread Two**

In the final chapters of *Life of Pi*, Martel confronts the reader with an alternative narrative thread. Two incredulous maritime investigators from Japan listen to Pi's story of his survival with Richard Parker and finally insist that they "would like to know what really happened" (2003: 302). Pi accuses them: "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" (Martel 2003: 302).

After a long silence, Pi substitutes the animals which found refuge on the lifeboat immediately after the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*, with humans. With a deft kind of "folding over of a wave" the wounded zebra becomes a Taiwanese sailor, the orang-utan Pi's own mother, and the hyena the ship's cook. Pi, one of the Japanese investigators guesses, becomes Richard Parker. As sole survivor when the boat beaches it is assumed that the "law of necessity on the high seas" prevails and fellow humans, who have either died or been killed, are eaten.

In this narrative thread Pi and his mother watch in horror as the cook dismembers and cuts up the Taiwanese sailor. Strips of his flesh are

arranged all over the boat to dry in the sun. When his mother sees the cook eat some flesh, she shouts: “I saw you! You just ate a piece You monster! You animal! How could you? He’s *human!*” (2003: 308). Pi and his mother resist eating human flesh then but find that the cook is also stealing food caught from the sea. The cook, however, keeps them alive with sea catches and it is only when Pi drops a turtle that he kills Pi’s mother and pitches her severed head over to the boy and then drinks her blood. While he is quite capable of killing a weakened Pi, he keeps him around “like a bad conscience” (p. 310). With quiet factuality Pi continues his story by relating how he took up a knife and stabbed the cook: “Still he didn’t fall over. Looking me in the eyes, he lifted his head ever so slightly. Did he mean something by this? I took it that it did” (p. 310). Like a sacrificial animal, the cook’s throat is punctured and Pi finds it hard to stop his frenzied stabbing: “His blood soothed my chapped hands. His heart was a struggle – all those tubes that connected it. I managed to get it out. It tasted delicious, far better than turtle. I ate his liver. I cut off great pieces of flesh” (pp. 310-311).

Girard is of the opinion that “the function of ritual is to ‘purify’ violence; that is, to ‘trick’ violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals” (1979: 36). In a sense, because neither Pi nor his mother can flee the scene of violence when the cook dismembers the sailor, there is a feeling of contamination even if each is utterly repelled by it. The freshly flowing blood that soothes Pi’s hands once he has killed the cook sound like part of an ancient ritual – as is eating the heart and liver. But the violence of the repeated stabbing awakens desire as well.

In a documentary on cannibalism,⁶ the correlation between starvation and breaking the taboo on eating another human was highlighted by several medical experts and neurologists. It would appear that the mind’s resistance to the taboo of cannibalism is broken down by the physiological and psychological stresses caused by starvation. In order to combat starvation the body first uses up its own fat resources and thereafter the body’s own protein. It begins to eat itself. If no food is forthcoming thereafter the body shuts down organs not essential to survival such as the stomach, liver and intestines and concentrates on keeping the heart, lungs and brain going. Beyond that, the brain begins to shut down: in particular the cerebral cortex – that part of the brain that is responsible for higher thought pertaining to notions of beauty, love and ethics. None of these is considered essential to survival. This leaves the starving body with the remnants of a primitive brain whose sole purpose is survival. Ethics having been “shut down” along with the cerebral cortex makes it is easier for a starving human to do what it needs to do in order to survive – including killing and eating other humans.

6. *Cannibals*, directed by Amy Bucher and Whitney Wood for History Television Network Productions, 2005.

One could argue that Pi's senses of the ethical had shut down. But his killing of the cook has too much of the notion of reprisal in it and as Pi admits, it is hard to stop once imbued with a knife's "horrible dynamic power" (2003: 310).

Generally, we consider desire to be related to an object, but it is, so Girard's argument goes, actually because someone else desires that object as well. Desire is learned, by imitating the other, and soon it becomes not primarily a desire for the object, but a desire to be like the other. But the closer one comes to the imitated who "invited" that desire in the first place, the greater the hostility and rivalry that occurs: "Veneration and rejection, mimesis and difference, are therefore experienced in tension ... which transforms the image of the model into that of the 'monstrous double'" (Hamerton-Kelly 1987: 9). The monstrous double needs to be changed into a saviour in order to curb the rivalry. Violence, the very mark of the crisis, is generative of religion and ritual where aggression becomes redirected and guilt is displaced. The transformation of the monstrous double into a kind of saviour occurs in that memories of rivalry and rejection are erased, "allowing only the beneficial effects of the 'sacrificial death' to be remembered" (p. 9). A form of mythic rationalisation takes place where the truth of the original event is often forgotten or entirely sublimated. The truth would destroy the community, or if Pi, the Everyman, were to sustain the "truth" of his actions, he would not have survived. He tells the maritime investigators that the cook that he had killed was "such an evil man". "Worse still, he met evil in me – selfishness, anger, ruthlessness. I must live with that. Solitude began. I turned to God. I survived" (Martel 2003: 311). The Japanese investigators are horrified by the cold brutality of Pi's story. Pi has sketched a picture of the beast in man – the recognition of the "animal" in each individual's body-soul. The cerebral cortex of humans poses questions of being and essence but recoils at the thought of the monstrous double and deflects the idea that when necessity and survival are paramount humanity's violence prods through the thin surface over and over again. The contamination needs to be purged and deftly then, Pi's recognition of the "monstrous double" is transformed into the fantastical saviour-victim: Richard Parker. The only story he tells the writer, decades after the sea journey, is that of the tiger – hence too, Pi's repeated avowals that it was Richard Parker that kept him alive as he could not afford to fall into a state of perpetual despair.

The boat's arrival at the island of paradise in the middle of the ocean promises absolute hospitality – a realm where Pi can gorge on the nutritious algae and where Richard Parker can regain his strength by scoffing on the meerkats.⁷ When Pi discovers that the algae turn into flesh-eating acid at

7. In all, Pi is at sea for 227 days. Within a couple of months at sea the first symptoms of scurvy would have started showing and he would have been

night and that a tree contains human teeth in its leaf balls, the serpent in the paradise is recognised. Pi does not hesitate in taking Richard Parker with him when he casts off away from the island. He needs him – he is part of him and cannot be cast away. However, instead of being cast from the island by an angry god, Pi exercises the choice to leave because of the horror it contains. Pi, in turn, becomes the saviour of Richard Parker again even though Pi, on the underside of the narrative, already has the mark of Cain on him. It is significant that upon arrival in Mexico, the local women scrub him till his skin is raw – thereby defining his “humanness” as a victim-survivor who has been cleansed before he enters society again.

Outside *Life of Pi*: Another Narrative Thread

Another narrative thread is found outside the text and clamours to be heard as well. It concerns the name Richard Parker – a thread that the author, Yann Martel, considered when he was doing his research on survivor and castaway narratives through several hundred years before writing *Life of Pi*: Richard Parker is a name that has appeared on a number of occasions in literary and juridical history. In Edgar Allan Poe’s novel,⁸ *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), a ship, the Grampus, founders and the third man, Richard Parker is eaten by the crew. In 1846, a ship, Francis Speight, sank in Table Bay and a crewman, Richard Parker, lost his life. In the 1870s a yacht, the Mignonette, sank and the crew drifted in a dingy for 19 days. After drawing lots the captain and crew killed the youngest crew member, Richard Parker, and ate him. Subsequently, the crew that had been rescued by a passing ship was tried for murder in an English court and found guilty. The sea’s defence of necessity was invoked by the public, the crew and the navy and after six months the defendants were released. These coincidences of nomenclature raise the question that *Life of Pi*’s Richard Parker is actually the ultimate victim in terms of the extratextual historical coincidences.

dead within six. From a medical viewpoint, the island is nutritionally essential to both Pi and Richard Parker. Pi absorbs essential vitamins including Vitamin C through the algae, while the carnivorous Richard Parker builds up his condition again with sufficient proteins. Their atrophying muscles are reinvigorated and their bodies hydrated. Typical of tigers in the wild who learn to hunt there are occasions of “senseless slaughter” and “motiveless violence. If Richard Parker is Pi’s double then Pi needs the meerkats who have no fear of humans to learn to hunt as well.

8. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Narrative_of_Arthur_Gordon_Pym_of_Nantucket> for more details on the name Richard Parker.

Richard Parker, the tiger, lopes off into the Mexican jungle – a territory where the Bengal tiger will have to establish dominance and territorial rights over a like-sized animal, the jaguar (*Panthera onca*), or *el tigre* as southern and central Americans call their supreme predator. In a documentary on baboons being released back into the wild on Animal Planet, the narrator persistently reminded the audience that these baboons were being given “the ultimate reward – freedom in the wild”. It would appear that Martel, along with many zoologists, is asking the question whether Richard Parker is actually getting the ultimate reward. This tiger is desperately out of condition and out of his element. While he could conceivably mate with *el tigre* any offspring would be infertile. Martel leaves the ambiguity of escape/release into the wild open.

Conclusion

To be literally absolutely hospitable toward the animal in the Derridean sense would mean that a great many humans will get eaten. Such a hospitality is only possible through the responsible *animot*. Hospitality and appropriation need to be just, and justice demands an ethical relationship with animals as *animots* but there needs to be an ethical judgement as well and an acceptance of insights into matters of literary scapegoating. Will the stories we tell finally contribute to our survival or extinction and will these stories contribute to the survival and extinction of other animals? How does one comport oneself in a text? The German notion of *vorleben* might be a guide in this respect. In elucidating this concept, Horsthenke and Kissack say that “*vorleben* appears to have few, if any, synonyms in other languages. It means to set an example of something to someone, to exemplification-in-conduct, to live one’s life as an example or guide It may also mean exemplifying (good) practice” (2006: 11). A literary work by extension may be considered a template of *vorleben* were it to display “an ethical disposition or comportment”. *Vorleben*, as Horsthenke and Kissack continue, “transcends the merely descriptive: it also has a distinctly normative content” (2006: 12). In *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel has, I believe, displayed an ethical disposition toward the unapprehendable – the tiger as an animal that has a being radically different from humans. Because a tiger neither knows nor cares about its authoring it remains the writer’s responsibility to *animot* an alterity that cannot be bridged. At the same time, Martel has bridged the perceived undersides, gaps and fissures that ontology insists exists between “humanity” and “animality” – by showing Pi as metaphor for both.

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