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Crossing Oceans and Stories: Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* and the Survival Narrative

In Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001), "crossing" involves the exploration of a wide range of stories and genres. By paying close attention to the borders that keep cultures apart, the author seeks to problematize the boundaries that define East and West as well as the human and animal realms of existence. In this respect, Martel's novel testifies to the writer's ability to renew the classic survival story.

In her review of Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi* in the *Sunday Times*, Margaret Atwood wrote that the novel told a "far-fetched story you can't quite swallow whole" (*Intent* 224) about a sixteen-year-old Indian boy, a spotted hyena, a zebra, an orang-utan and a 450-pound Bengal tiger in a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. After the sinking of the ship that was supposed to take them to Canada, the hyena eats the zebra, kills the orang-utan before being killed and eaten by the tiger whose only companion in the lifeboat is a teenage boy. These are the premises upon which Martel wrote *Life of Pi*, the story of a young Indian boy named Pi (short for Piscine Patel) who leaves his native country in the late 1970s with his family and the remaining animals of their zoo to move to Canada in the hope of a better life away from the Indian state of emergency. Pi's journey across the Pacific Ocean on a lifeboat with a full-grown Bengal tiger named Richard Parker lasts 227 days and gives rise to a narrative of trial, self-discovery and spiritual development. In most survival stories, crossing a sea or an ocean is rarely linear; it is an odyssey that involves detours and bypasses that disorient and transform characters, stories and readers. The regular revisiting and rewriting of the survival narrative raises the question of its malleability, its protean nature and its ability to transform and adapt to contemporary concerns. This paper will question the seeming inexhaustibility of the survival story as *Life of Pi* belongs to a long tradition of survival narratives that range from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and Moacyr Scliar's *Max and the Cats* (1981) to more popular Hollywood films such as Robert Zemeckis's *Cast Away* (2000) or J. C. Chandor's more recent *All is Lost* (2013), in which stranded characters are displaced and forced to survive alone in the midst of a hostile environment. This study of Martel's novel will begin by discussing the writer's choice to elicit the malleability of the survival story by foregrounding the act of storytelling and its propensity for reshaping and transforming traditional narratives. On a more metaphorical level, the transformative act of storytelling is epitomized by the ocean that acts as a liminal space of transformation where both human and animal worlds connect. This relationship between both human and animal realms of existence also explains why the author chose to write a fable, a traditional and easily recognizable genre that bolsters the fictional pact between Martel and his readers.

Life of Pi: Revisiting and Rewriting the Survival Story

However simple Martel's stories may appear at first, *Life of Pi* is based on a structure of embedded narratives in which Pi's account of his transpacific journey is woven into a framing narrative which elicits the context of its writing. Pi is the narrating "I" telling

his own story in Canada decades after the shipwreck and the short italicized chapters in the main text reveal the presence of the fictional author. The main events of the embedded narrative are arranged in chronological order, starting with Pi's childhood in Pondicherry and the story of his name, Piscine Patel, and ending with his being rescued in Mexico and asked questions by the two men sent by the Japanese Ministry of Transport to find out why their ship (the *Tsimtsum*) had sunk. In the first part of the novel, the linearity of the embedded narrative is interrupted by comments from the author whose function is to foreground the act of storytelling.¹ The story is first set in Pi's house where Pi tells his story over dinner, the traditional *locus* of humorous exchange and prandial speech. Foregrounding the act of storytelling by including embedded narratives allows Martel to draw the reader's attention to the orality of language and the empathetic nature of storytelling. The exchange of food, for instance, not only serves to highlight Pi's past experience of hunger and near starvation, but it also alludes to the elaborate processes of preparing meals, cooking, eating and digesting, which all suggest processes of transformation. In the sixth chapter for instance, the narrator expands on Pi's kitchen and talent as a cook:

He's an excellent cook. His overheated house is always smelling of something delicious. His spice rack looks like an apothecary's shop. When he opens his refrigerator or his cupboards, there are many brand names I don't recognize; in fact, I can't even tell what language they're in. We are in India. But he handles Western dishes equally well. He makes me the most zesty yet subtle macaroni and cheese I've ever had. And his vegetarian tacos would be the envy of all Mexico. (31, italics in the original)

In his work on Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin defines prandial speech as a "free and jocular speech" (284) that encourages transformation and, in Martel's fictional world, cooking serves precisely as a metaphor for material as well as cultural transformation. Stories freely emerge through the process of taking ingredients from different cultures and rearranging them in order to cook up a new, yet transformed version of a given story. In a more postcolonial context, Pi compensates for the loss of his native India by clinging to Indian culinary traditions. In this passage, the narrator prepares the reader for a hybrid, chutnified story that attempts to renew the survival narrative by including elements from both Western and Eastern traditions. Indeed, Martel seeks to challenge more traditional Eurocentric survival stories and, more precisely, Canadian stories that recount the experiences of characters who have nothing to gain but their own survival. In *Survival*, her thematic approach to Canadian literature, Atwood writes that

Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience – the North, the snowstorm, the sinking ship – that killed everyone else. The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life. (33)

Pi's survival is meant to suggest much more than mere gratitude and Martel's novel aims precisely at renewing a narrative too often characterized by rigid conventions. Instead of writing a survival story in the vein of traditional narratives recounting the protagonist's struggle with an unfamiliar environment in diary form, replete with listings and inventories as in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Martel resorts to unlikely plot devices such as the presence of a full-grown Bengal tiger in a lifeboat and Pi's experience on a flesh-

1. The term "author" here refers to the implied author of the "author's note" and not Yann Martel himself.

eating island. Pi emerges from the plot as a character whose knowledge of himself and the world has more value than the mere “fact of his survival.”

Nevertheless, *Life of Pi* draws on a long tradition of survival narratives that tell the stories of sailors who went seeking fortune in exotic lands and ended up marooned like Robinson Crusoe, a fictional character inspired by Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor who was shipwrecked in 1704 and lived on the island of Juan Fernandez for over four years before being rescued. In his article “*Robinson Crusoe*: The Self as Master,” John J. Richetti focuses on the novel’s “egocentric preferences [...] as a genre which really cares only for personality and its triumph over environment and circumstances” (358). Martel precisely makes a detour and chooses to tell the story of an Indian boy sailing from India to Canada as a means to bypass the imperial perspective that marked the beginnings of the genre. In nineteenth-century Canadian literature, writers like Susanna Moodie and her sister Catharine Parr Traill chose Canada over the United States because it represented a new world where it remained possible for them to preserve “their imported values based on family, education, property and propriety” (Dvorak 156). In other words, these writers developed what Northrop Frye termed a “garrison mentality” that encouraged settlers to recreate their traditions in an alien environment. While crossing an ocean rarely incited writers like Moodie to question the precedence of the British Empire over its colonies, the ocean has become a fluid space in a postcolonial world where such clear-cut distinctions and hierarchies no longer apply.² As a response to former Eurocentric vantage points, Martel resorts to parody and irony to challenge the canonical text and mock the formal language of the classic survival manual:

The injunction not to drink urine was quite unnecessary. No one called “Pissing” in his childhood would be caught dead with a cup of pee at his lips, even alone in a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific. And the gastronomic suggestions [eating turtles] only confirmed to my mind that the English didn’t know the meaning of the word *food*. Otherwise, the manual was a fascinating pamphlet on how to avoid being pickled in brine. Only one important topic was not addressed: the establishing of alpha-omega relationships with major lifeboat pests. (211)

The irony of the passage lies in its lightness of tone, its onomastic tricks and, more importantly, the incongruity of the situation in which classic British logic fails to consider the presence of a tiger in a lifeboat. Martel rewrites the classic survival narrative by attempting to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western survival stories. While Robinson Crusoe explores actual islands, Pi Patel lands on a carnivorous island that recalls the voyages of Sinbad the Sailor whose adventures involved fighting sea monsters and giant eagles. The magic realism that characterizes the island episode of the novel serves to challenge the centrality of the Western canon by enabling the reader “to recognize continuities within individual cultures that the established genre systems might blind us to [...]” (Slemon 10). In this respect, rewriting rhymes with the revision and the reassessment of the various boundaries between stories and genres. The ocean metaphor

2. In twenty-first century Canadian literature, there are many examples of texts that focus on the relationship between diaspora and identity. Dionne Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001) brings together different places, different genres and challenges discourses of identity and nationhood. In their introduction to *Canada: Images of a Post/National Society* (2009), Gunilla Florby, Mark Shackleton, and Katri Suhonen suggest that identity in Canada is now more shaped by statelessness than by belonging to a nation. However, they remain cautious by reminding their readers that there is no clear-cut answer to this question and that the “slashed “Post/National” is the acknowledgement that there is not as yet a consensus about Canadian nationhood [...]” (11).

that is meant to stand for continuity and infinity, at least from a human perspective, sets the main character in a fluid space where cultural borders between belief systems and certainties, animals and human beings are reassessed and questioned. By incorporating marvellous episodes in the text, Martel seeks to explore an interstitial space in which both Eastern and Western traditions of storytelling merge into a heterogeneous whole. Transformation does not only apply to humans, animals and plants, but it equally applies to stories, as previous narratives are constantly rewritten and renewed to appeal to a different readership and downplay cultural, linguistic and religious differences. Even though Martel's story is a rewriting of the classic survival narrative, the readership easily recognizes the patterns that determine the story. In his work on the popular novel, *De Superman au surhomme*, Umberto Eco suggests that popular narratives are characterized by iterative patterns that respond to the reader's desire for entertainment and pleasure (131-2). He gives the example of the popular detective novel that leads the reader through a series of questions that will ultimately solve the crime. In a similar fashion, by following the basic patterns of the survival story and having his readers identify the traditional genre of the fable, Martel encourages his readers to be part of the story by establishing a cathartic relationship with the character and his unlikely situation.

Strolling through the Pacific

The first part of the novel dwells on the family's past in Pondicherry, once a French territory, Pi's education at Petit Séminaire and his father's beliefs in the development of a "New India" based on progress and secular values. Pi's background, Western education and taste for conflicting fields of study lead the character to embrace religious studies and zoology at university level. In addition to his Hindu, Christian and Muslim beliefs, he writes a zoology thesis on the three-toed sloth, with a view to confronting myth with the systematics of biology. The scientific classification of life forms dates back to Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae*³ which organised vegetal and animal life into a taxonomic system based on binomial nomenclature. From that moment on, the living organism would be defined in terms of genus and species and would therefore be subsumed under a totalizing system. If removed from the system, the life form under study would simply lose its meaning. Nature was to be explained away by reason and by the philosophers and scientists of the Enlightenment, and their scientific investigations resulted in an inevitable separation between the human and animal worlds and a fixed view of nature that would remain unchallenged until the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in 1859.⁴ Pi's father Santosh, a passionate promoter of Western science, warns his son against the individual's natural tendency to anthropomorphize wild animals and refers to the zoo animals as part of "the redoubtable species *Animalus anthropomorphicus*, the animal as seen through human eyes" (39). However, Pi's journey across the Pacific

3. Linnaeus was a Swedish botanist and zoologist of the Enlightenment whose taxonomic system is still used today. A tenth edition of *Systema Naturae* was published in 1758.

4. Even though Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was one of the most significant turning points in natural history in the second half of the nineteenth century, there had been significant writings prior to the publication of Darwin's theory of natural selection. In *Les mots et les choses*, Michel Foucault recalls how divided eighteenth-century philosophers and natural historians were on this issue. While Tournefort and Linnaeus believed that nature was determined by fixity, other thinkers such as Benoît de Maillet and Diderot posited that nature was endowed with creative and transformative powers (Foucault 138-9). This debate laid the groundwork for Lamarck's *Zoological Philosophy* (1809) that suggested that animals derived from other species and could evolve into a more complex form.

Ocean in a lifeboat with an adult Bengal tiger compels him to find the middle ground between the human and animal worlds and question totalizing systems with stable categories and names.

The reader discovers the truth about Richard Parker's identity in the thirty-seventh chapter of the novel in which he turns out to be a full-grown Bengal tiger whom Pi inadvertently saves when the ship sinks. The forty-eighth chapter tells the story of the tiger's name: a hunter named Richard Parker captures a tiger cub drinking water in the nearby river and so decides to call him Thirsty. The shipping clerk at the train station makes a mistake filling out the form and mixes up owner and property, thereby naming the property "Richard Parker" and the hunter "Thirsty None Given." The clerk, whose administrative task consists in giving the right names, ironically pinpoints nomenclatural shortcomings and epistemological uncertainty. Nevertheless, Pi has little choice but to rely on his education and his scientific observations in order to tame the tiger. His description of the various sounds made by tigers echoes Konrad Lorenz's ethological study of animals and the process of imprint:⁵

Tigers make a variety of sounds. They include a number of roars and growls, the loudest of these being most likely the full-throated *aaonh*, usually made during the mating season by males and oestrous females. It's a cry that travels far and wide, and is absolutely petrifying when heard close up. Tigers go *woof* when they are caught unawares, a short, sharp detonation of fury that would instantly make your legs jump up and run away if they weren't frozen to the spot. (205)

This passage shows that the character's effort to describe the tiger's sounds objectively in order to anticipate the animal's reaction to external stimuli is linked to his subjective understanding and representation of the animal. In his study of the relations between literature and the natural world entitled *Ecocriticism*, Greg Garrard argues that pioneering ethologists such as Lorenz tended to analyse animal behaviour in "abstract" terms (164) and dismissed anthropomorphism as a subjective approach without scientific validity. While the incongruity of the characters' situation in the lifeboat seems to justify the need for ethological discourse as a means of survival, it challenges its ability to provide the reader with an overall explanation of nature and the animal. The anthropomorphic depiction of Richard Parker in the previous passage and Pi's efforts to interpret the tiger's "language" are counterbalanced by Pi's choice to further anthropomorphize the wild animal for the sake of survival and adopt a zoomorphic behaviour that will allow him to become the alpha animal and Richard Parker the omega. Through the narrator's humorous play on names and anthropomorphism, Richard Parker transcends Linnaean constructs and objective ethological categories. In this respect, the animal is transfigured and changed into a being that supersedes the mere animal. As a result, Pi gradually gives up on human social structures to embrace feline ones and "speak" the tiger's "language," suggesting the possible interchangeability of humans and animals in the *axis mundi* that is meant to connect heaven and earth and transcend space and time.⁶

5. Konrad Lorenz (1903-1989) was an Austrian zoologist who devoted most of his studies to bird behaviour, seeking to understand how the image of the mother was imprinted in the memory of the newborn. In 1970 and 1971, he published two volumes of *Studies in Animal and Human Behaviour* along with his *Motivation of Animal and Human Behaviour: An Ethological View* with Paul Leyhausen in 1973.

6. Ang Lee's film adaptation of the novel blurs the border between human and animal worlds by resorting to camera effects that shift the focal point from Pi to Richard Parker. The scene can be found in chapter 18 of the film, between 71'50" and 71'58".

In his treatment of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands*, John Thieme writes that animals stand for "a world which may exist before Western rationalist thought imposes dualistic modes of description. They represent life before discourse, before history and before gender stereotyping" (74). In other words, animals are the reminders of a prelinguistic world untouched by rational categorization. In Martel's fiction, it is precisely language that lacks precision and efficiency and his previous writing dwells on the inability of language to adequately represent feeling and experience. Pi is at a loss when trying to recount his experience with animals in the zoo his father keeps: "I wish I could convey the perfection of a seal slipping into the 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" (18). For Pi, language works as an obstacle insofar as it testifies to the impossibility of full presence. The gap between presence and language is so unbridgeable that words prove to be inadequate when it comes to relating feeling or experience. Martel's use of animals in his stories precisely serves to promote a sensualist approach to reality which attempts to downplay the need for language. In his empiricist treatises on sensations and animals, Etienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714-1780) once argued that knowledge was derived exclusively from sensation and that animals could feel and experience pain just as acutely as human beings. Condillac considered that animals were more than material objects and that they were endowed with the ability to judge and to remember (333), memory being little else than transformed sensation (292). Martel's use of "sensationism" in *Life of Pi* foregrounds the postmodern nature of the novel insofar as language is simultaneously represented as an obstacle to the representation of true experience and as a means by which a story is told. This discrepancy between language and experience is also central to his former novel *Self* (1996) which tells the story of an anonymous male narrator who changes into a woman when he comes of age. One day when opening the door to her apartment, she is beaten and raped by her neighbour and Martel vividly pinpoints the powerlessness of language and its inability to appropriately render traumatic experience:

He seemed pleased when	
I said yes. He knelt beside me	 pain.....
and took hold of my hair	
again. He twisted it hard	 pain.....
around his fist.	
"I'll do anything you	... fear fear fear fear fear
want, anything. Just please	fear fear fear fear fear fear
don't kill me."	fear fear fear fear.....

(*Self* 290)

Just as his gender-bending novel *Self* resorts to dichotomized layouts and polyglossia to shed light on the shortcomings of language and speech, Martel's *Life of Pi* portrays language as a source of division and disenchantment in the diegetic world of the novel while sustaining the fictional pact between writer and reader.

Such a Simple Story?

Crossing the border into the animal world enables Martel to blend Canadian animal stories with Indian ones. In *Survival*, Atwood devoted an entire chapter to the represen-

tation of animals in Canadian literature and wrote that the difference between Canadian and American stories lay in the fact that “the stories were told from the point of view of the animal” (74). Similarly, Indian culture abounds in animal figures such as Ganesha, the elephant-god, or Vishnu who returns as a fish, a turtle or a boar. In the first part of the novel, the fictional author of the story describes Pi’s house and, more importantly, his office which testifies to Pi’s taste for syncretism: “Upstairs in his office there is a brass Ganesha sitting cross-legged next to the computer, a wooden Christ on the Cross from Brazil on a wall, and a green prayer rug in a corner” (58). The abundance of reterritorialized religious symbols in Pi’s home sets religious discourses in a dialogic relationship, with a view to constricting their differences and setting aside certain political and social realities in a blatantly simplistic fashion. Even though the framing story is set in Canada where multiculturalism has become a policy that encourages cross-cultural practices, Martel still feels the need to search for a common denominator for all religions and cultures by focusing on the prelinguistic animal world and the genre of the fable.

The genre of the fable is explicitly referred to in the third part of the novel that takes place at (and is entitled) the Benito Judrez Infirmary in Tomatlán (Mexico) and recounts Pi’s exchange with Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba. Both characters play the roles of the listeners or readers whose task is to choose one interpretation of the story. Their inability to believe the story finally convinces them to ask Pi to do them a favour and tell a different one, that is to say a “flat story” that contains only “dry, yeastless factuality” (381). The second version of the story in which Pi’s mother is identified with the orangutan and Pi with the tiger reduces the central narrative of the journey to the traditional genre of the fable. The fable is traditionally riddled with animals that take on anthropomorphic qualities in order to criticize society or mock a specific feature of human nature, and it is the zoo that becomes the interstitial space within Pondicherry where the border between animals and their human counterparts is progressively blurred:

I would like to say in my own defence that though I may have anthropomorphized the animals till they spoke fluent English, the pheasants complaining in uppity British accents of their tea being cold and the baboons planning their bank robbery getaway in the flat, menacing tones of American gangsters, the fancy was always conscious. I quite deliberately dressed wild animals in tame costumes of my imagination. But I never deluded myself as to the real nature of my playmates. (42-3)

The English-speaking pheasants and simian gangsters are there to remind the reader that animals trigger laughter only when directly compared to human beings. In his essay on laughter, Henri Bergson argues that it is not the animal itself that can cause laughter, but rather the human traits the onlooker sees in the behaviour of that same animal (3). The humorous tone of the fable lies in the animal’s ability to imitate its human counterparts, in either an appropriate or awkward fashion, and by resorting to anthropomorphism and the fable, Martel adds comic effects to the story to curtail the seriousness of rigid and authoritarian discourses, be they political, social or religious. In Martel’s terms, humour can just as well defuse cultural conflict as it can bridge the gap between the writer and the implied reader insofar as there can be an author/reader contract based on mutual understanding. If Martel had a preference for the fable (a preference that was to be confirmed in his subsequent novel, *Beatrice and Virgil* [2010] where Beatrice, the donkey, and Virgil, the monkey, both stand for the suffering endured by the Jewish

people in Nazi Germany), it was mainly because the fable seemingly favoured simplicity and clarity. For instance, in an interview published in *Canadian Literature* entitled "The Empathetic Imagination," Martel insisted on the fact that he made a point of keeping his stories simple: "I would say that in terms of narrative, my stories are simple and classical. You have characters and events that move in a straightforward, linear way. There's no stylistic trickery, no impenetrable style" (Sielke 14). Even though such an assertion may be true when it comes to the linear structure of the framed story of Pi's journey. It is not the case with regard to the overlapping of the different stories. The apparent simplicity of the novel is at odds with its open-ended structure which encourages the reader to choose between two possible interpretations; either the enticing story told by the first-person narrator or the harsh reality which is hinted at by the sudden appearance of the fable as genre in the last part of the novel.

Just as the first part of the novel aims at foregrounding the act of storytelling, the conclusion of *Life of Pi* testifies to the writer's choice to foreground the act of reading and interpreting by attempting to cross the border that separates the diegetic world of the novel and the extraliterary world of the reader. That the novel has precisely one hundred chapters materializes the border between the sense of closure suggested by the number and the very act of interpreting the text, which is put forth in Martel's novel as yet another transformation of the story. It may also be worth noting that this sense of closure is offset by the absence of a period at the end of the final sentence. Martel's emphasis on open-endedness and interpretation is already central to his first collection of stories, *The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* (1993), in which stories are either left unfinished or told differently to let the readers choose which version suits them best. For instance, "Manner of Dying" gives nine different versions of a character's state of mind the night before his execution, and the second chapter of *Self* begins on the very last page. Martel's use of numbers is also meant to convey the idea that interpretation can change according to a specific historical period and that stories cannot be reduced to a limited number of interpretations. Even though Pi's name alludes to the very stable and rational world of mathematics, Martel posits that rationality and irrationality are in fact not as distinct as they seem. By dwelling on its irrational, infinite numbers like π ($= 3,1415\dots$)⁷ and φ ($= 1,6180\dots$ aka the golden section) and by having his protagonist study science, religion and kabbalah,⁸ Martel aims at convincing the readers that Western dichotomies are simply human constructs that distort the reader's view of reality and that they have to fill in the blanks in the story. In *The Implied Reader*, Wolfgang Iser argues that "the role of the reader as incorporated in the novel must be seen as something potential and not actual. His reactions are not set out for him, but he is simply offered a frame of possible decisions, and when he has made his choice, then he will fill in the picture accordingly" (55). By letting the reader "fill in the picture," Martel hints at the unlimited number of possible interpretations and conclusions. In this respect, survival stories, just like the number π , are meant to undergo an endless series of transformations and adapt to all forms and genres.

7. In mathematics, π is a constant, the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter. It is said to be an irrational number because it cannot be expressed as a common fraction as well as a transcendental number as it cannot be the root of a polynomial. The decimal representation of π is endless and never repeats itself.

8. Kabbalah is the mystical Judaic exegetic tradition that seeks to find hidden answers to ontological questions relative to the meaning of life and the universe in the Torah. Numbers, for instance, are believed to be highly significant.

To conclude, crossings are central to Martel's fiction insofar as they trigger processes of transformation that affect character, story and reader alike. For readers, crossing never ends as each destination is but another step in their transformation. The vitality of the survival story lies in such processes of questioning and rewriting and its inexhaustibility is illustrated by its popularity and ability to freely cross over from one genre to the other, say from documentary realism to science-fiction in series like *Lost* (Jeffrey Lieber and J. J. Abrams, 2004-2010) and films like *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013). Even Ang Lee's film adaptation of *Life of Pi* is but one reading of the novel and his choice to shoot a 3D film precisely serves the same purpose: creating the illusion that the space between the story and the viewer can disappear and that the viewer can be immersed in the story. Film directors who have chosen to tell a survival story have been trying to accomplish what Daniel Defoe strove to achieve in *Robinson Crusoe*, that is to say have the readers muse on the seemingly paradoxical need for both society and solitude and have them experience the story as a personal "event in their own lives" (Iser 37). Calling for more active participation on behalf of readers and viewers in the reading and viewing processes implies contracting the space between story and reader. As Iser suggests in his work on the interaction between writer and reader, "the distance between the story and the reader must at times be made to disappear, so that the privileged spectator can be made into an actor" (37). Prioritizing the relationship between story and reader may account for what critics believe to be Martel's tendency to oversimplify reality and avoid the most controversial questions that have shaped the extraliterary world of the reader.⁹ Although this may be true of Martel's text, the success of the novel lies precisely in the author's choice to give preference to the simple form of the fable and to his relationship with a reader who, at some point, feels the need to re-imagine a world in desperate need of re-enchantment.

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9. In his article "Believing in Tigers: Anthropomorphism and Incredulity in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*," Stewart Cole criticizes Martel's tendency to conflate certain types of belief: "To conflate these two types of belief [in a story and in God] is to obliterate the important epistemological distinction between subjective and objective truth, a distinction which, though often derided in other contexts, is still crucial to discussions of religion" (24).

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