

“The Empathetic Imagination”

An Interview with Yann Martel

To date, Yann Martel has published three books: *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* (1993), a collection of short stories awarded the Journey Prize; *Self* (1996) shortlisted for the Books in Canada First Novel Award; and *Life of Pi* (2001),* his second novel, which received the Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction in 2001 and was nominated for the 2001 Governor General’s Award for Fiction. The 2002 Booker Prize for *Life of Pi* places Martel on par with V. S. Naipaul, Iris Murdoch, Salman Rushdie, J. M. Coetzee, Kingsley Amis, Keri Hulme, Michael Ondaatje, and Margaret Atwood.

Martel was born in 1963 in Salamanca, Spain to Canadian parents. His father’s postings as a diplomat took the family all over the globe, and Martel grew up in Alaska, British Columbia, Costa Rica, France, Ontario and Mexico. He has continued to travel as an adult, spending time in Iran, Turkey and India. He studied philosophy at Trent University and held various odd jobs—tree planting, dishwashing, working as a security guard—before he began to write. While he now generally makes his home in Montreal, he followed an invitation of the German Academic Exchange Service and Samuel Fischer Publishers to spend the academic year 2002/2003 as the Samuel Fischer Professor of Literature in the Department of Comparative Literature, Free University of Berlin, where he offered a seminar entitled “Meeting the Other: The Animal in Western Literature.” I had the pleasure of meeting Yann Martel in Bonn and Berlin in late 2002. We talked about empathy and imagination, otherness, religion, violence, and other subjects. The interview was conducted at Martel’s residence in Berlin Charlottenburg.

ssie How does it feel to be so famous all of a sudden? What was the most significant effect on your life?

YM You don't feel fame the way you feel hunger or thirst. It's more abstract. So far fame has been a deluge of e-mails, of mail in general. I realized how unusual my situation was when I had a twenty-minute conversation with the Prime Minister of Canada. He called me to congratulate me. When things like that happen to you, rather than you being elevated, the whole situation is lowered to you, which doesn't mean that you don't think you're not worthy of it, but it suddenly becomes normal and human. The man speaking to you is no longer that famous, powerful, inaccessible man far above you; it's just a voice on the phone, a chatty, human voice that sounds so familiar because you hear it every day on the news. Also, let's not forget that right now I'm in Germany. I'm a foreign writer who has won a foreign prize. If I were in Canada, if I lived in the UK, it might have been different: people might have recognized me on the street or I might have received even more requests for interviews. There's been a certain buffer created by the fact that I am in Berlin. Occasionally I think: "Hey, I won the Booker Prize, like Salman Rushdie won the Booker Prize, like V.S. Naipaul won the Booker Prize, like William Golding won the Booker Prize," and I'm thrilled. But most of the time I forget it. I still think of myself as a struggling writer. And that's not an act. It's not easy being a writer. The world makes you feel that it doesn't need another novel or another painting or another piece of music. You create in the face of indifference, and I say that and I've had an easy time of it. I know of many artists who struggle and struggle and struggle. You can't forget the fear of failure and oblivion overnight. So I still think of myself as being a struggling writer and then I think, "Wait a minute . . . I won the Booker Prize. I can't be struggling!"

It's also nice to know that my book is being read. I'm getting lots of letters. Letters from total strangers, letters from friends, letters from people in high places, from people I haven't heard of in years. It's always a bit of a surprise because these letters are addressed to me, when in fact they should be addressed to the book. It's the book that they liked. The author is somewhere else, something else. But it's nice to receive these letters, to get the attention. And the money is nice. It makes for a more comfortable life.

ssie You are quoted as having said that you write simple books. What do you mean by that? Does that phrase really apply? And is the apparent simplicity of *Life of Pi* the reason for its success?

YM That's what I meant: apparent simplicity. I meant that stylistically the book is simple. First of all, most of my stories are quite linear. There are parallel stories, but parallel still means two lines. So, 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. The language is uncomplicated, and the way of telling the story is not convoluted. Something happens and you live through the consequences, whether it's a sex change, AIDS, or a shipwreck. But you're right: it's an apparent simplicity. At one point you realize that with these simple little strokes I am creating a more complex picture.

SSie You already made reference to one of your other books, namely your first novel *Self*, so let's talk a bit about your earlier work. Your first book is *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, a collection of short fiction whose title narrative was turned into a movie. How did you come to writing and why short fiction and not poetry? And what are "the facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios"?

YM *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* is a collection of four long stories. In fact, the title story is more properly speaking a novella. I started with short stories because I was learning how to write, and short stories seemed more manageable than novels, even though they are as difficult to write as novels. In fact, if anything, short stories are less forgiving than novels. Nonetheless they are shorter and do not require strong characterization, just plot with an epiphany at the end, some sort of illumination. And to be honest, I started writing without having the faintest idea what I was doing. I certainly wasn't thinking in terms of literary categories: "This is a short story. This is a novel." As I was learning how to write fiction, I wrote a lot of stuff, some of it short, that could properly be called short stories, some of it longer, novellas, and eventually novels. I was experimenting. Now I only write novels and I'm comfortable with that. I haven't written a short story in years. I only think in terms of novels. I don't find novels at all daunting. Like any big thing you have to do, you break it down into smaller parts and then it becomes quite manageable.

As to what the stories are about: I tend not to be interested in autobiography, for two reasons. In a general way, I don't find the ego that interesting. I would rather have a normal character face extraordinary circumstances than an extraordinary person face normal circumstances.

Maybe this is the influence of religion, or philosophy, or asceticism, or whatever—but I find the good life is the one where you tend to shush the ego, where you forget yourself. Not to the point of desolation or self-destruction or denial, but I do dislike this sort of very Western dwelling on one's little sores, little opinions, little life. This is a generalization, but I'm not really interested in psychological novels. I'd rather take a character, put him or her in unusual circumstances and see how he or she evolves than have a novel set inside a room where the character endlessly dreams away. That also goes for my own person. Even though I have what seems to be an interesting life, because I have moved around a lot, that's only the outside. I find neither my own life nor my own personal history that particularly interesting. I'd rather look out than in and very few of my stories are autobiographical. In *Helsinki*, the last story has autobiographical elements to do with my grandmother, this woman who lost her husband when she was very young and who accumulated all these objects. Her grandson comes for a visit and is bothered by this mountain of clutter she keeps in her house. That is autobiographical. But the point is not mere self-revelation; the story draws a lesson that can be applied beyond my life. At least I hope. The other stories are not autobiographical.

I have never written poetry, though I like to think that I have a sense of poetry. I don't feel comfortable in a genre that seems to have no rules. Grammar—forget it; syntax—forget it; punctuation—forget it; just plain sense—forget it. That's too arbitrary for me. I like the limitations of sentence and story. But I hope what I write is infused with a certain poetic

ssie It certainly is. In fact the poetic quality of your writing inspired my question. Was there something in the form of shorter fiction that no longer worked for you? Or is the development—from the composition of short stories to that of novels by way of the novella—a movement that most writers aspire to?

YM I don't know. It depends. Alice Munro, for instance, is a brilliant short story writer. No reason to turn to another genre when you're brilliant at it. No, the short story is very difficult. It's very, very tight, not a word is wasted. It takes a lot of effort for something that is, let's say, twelve pages long. No, I started writing novels because it suited my creative nature. I'm not a very fast writer. I do one thing for a long time slowly. I'd rather get involved in a project that is long-term. Also, I like doing research. It's my way of learning. But to do a whole pile of research for a single

short story seems more work than it's worth it. At least for me. But it's a great genre, the short story, much maligned. Who can read Munro, Gallant, Maupassant, Daudet, and not like it?

SSie Could we talk about your first novel, *Self*, which you allude to in the "Author's Note" at the beginning of *Life of Pi* and which I hear you do not really like to talk about? *Self* is preoccupied with the old theme of identity, at least that is how it has been read. And it uses an ancient trope to approach this theme, namely that of metamorphosis. Its first-person narrator goes through a whole series of metamorphoses, turning from male to female to male, transgressing boundaries of bodies, gender, and identity, self and other which, in the book, are also transgressions of form (pages are divided, for instance, and the text is reduced to individual terms like "fear" and "pain"), genre, and modes of perception. In *Pi* it seems that you are no longer as interested in such transgressions of form and identity?

YM Except that Pi practises three religions, which is transgressive. *Self* actually was less theory-driven than your question makes it sound like. Reducing it to its simplest form, it is a story of a boy who becomes a woman on his eighteenth birthday. In the book this is a completely natural process, not the result of an operation. He has no desire to be a woman, he just wakes up being one. Actually, he becomes one over the course of a week while he is traveling through Portugal. His body starts changing and he turns into a woman. And he is a woman for seven years and then turns into a man again. The reason I wrote this story—well, as with any work of art, I suppose there are many reasons—but one of the reasons I am aware of was that when I got to university I discovered things about myself that I was not pleased with. Most of us move through life convinced that we are good people. We tend to sweep under the carpet the hypocrisies, the lies, the deceptions. That is a normal part of living, a normal way of dealing with childhood injuries and our various inadequacies. I think most of us when we reach adulthood are under the impression that we are not bigoted, that we are not racists. We tend to think that our prejudices are reasonable ones and therefore not prejudices at all. Few of us would openly say: "Oh I don't like blacks" or "I don't like Jews" or "I don't like women" or "I don't like fat people" or "I don't like—whoever".

Well, when I got to university I realized that I was not treating women, thinking of them, fairly. That I was sexist, which nowadays

sounds like I'm trying to be horribly politically correct. That's not it at all. No one likes to discover ugliness in oneself and I discovered something ugly. It had nothing to do with fashionable conformism. It was something private. The discovery came slowly. One shaft of light was an American study I read which showed that men interrupt women a lot more often than women interrupt men. After that I would catch myself interrupting a girl and think: "I just interrupted her. Was that right?" Which is not to say that women don't sometimes deserve to be interrupted. What I was discovering was that, as an eighteen-year-old male, I was a bit of a bull in a china shop. There was a psychological bluntness to my approach to human relations and more specifically to women. I was regulated in my relations with them by modes of thought that I was not aware of, and these modes of thought imbedded in me were not equitable. I wasn't happy with that. There was another American study, too. Psychologists asked girls how they would feel if they woke up one morning and were boys, and asked boys how they would feel if they woke up one morning and were girls. The girls' responses were varied. Some said: "Oh great, that would mean I could play baseball, or I could climb trees, or I could become an astronaut." Some didn't want to be a boy, but they had a variety of responses. Boys, on the other hand, every single one, without *one single exception*, reacted with horror. I had two reactions. One, there's something wrong with that picture. Two, I can see why. I understood why the boys reacted the way they did. I could see that in their eyes it would be terribly disempowering to be turned into a girl. "But why is that?" I thought. Why is being a woman disempowering? What power are we talking about? Is life about being powerful? Is that the whole picture? *What is the picture?* I believe in the empathetic imagination so I thought the best way to find out would be to pretend to be a woman.

I did "Feminism 101" as fast as I could and I read classics such as *The Second Sex* and *The Female Eunuch*. And I decided to write a novel in which the male protagonist would become a woman. Feminism I think is probably the most important, richest force to come out of the twentieth century. Whereas Marxism is dead and gone, and capitalism is dead and still in place, feminism is still rich and responsive. And yet there's a discrepancy between theory and practice. The theory sounds good, very convincing, but some women still come home and do the cooking quite happily. Some women *stay at home* and do the cooking quite happily.

How do we figure out division of labour? What is the true nature of a man, of a woman? Much of feminism is theoretical, academic. This, I think, is ultimately detrimental. Feminism must be lived, not thought. I thought a novel in which a character would live the life of a man and of a woman would shed some light for me. And the reason why I got bogged down and don't particularly like the novel anymore is precisely because the issue is so rich and complicated, because there is so much theory and so much practice. It was quite difficult getting the novel finished.

One of the key turning points in the novel is a rape scene. What exactly is rape? I often compare rape and the Holocaust, with the difference that whereas the Holocaust is acknowledged, rape often isn't, even though rapes happens all the time. Rape is rarely talked about in public discourse and hardly appears in fiction. When it does, it's just as a device to move the plot forward. There is no actual focus on the event, on what exactly happens psychologically. Rape is a very complicated crime. I did a fair bit of research on it. The rape scene in the novel I consider quite a successful rape scene in that it is impossible to project pleasure onto it due to the parallel structure of two texts: on the left-hand part of the page, the rape is described in a straightforward manner, on the right, we read the woman's emotions reduced to a repetition of two words, "pain" and "fear." But once I had described that scene, I wondered: I have just described this minute Holocaust. Now what? Where do I go from here? It's the same point Adorno made when he visited Auschwitz and wondered whether there could still be art after Auschwitz. I felt at the end of that rape scene that I had nowhere to go creatively, and the novel ends on a grey, defeated tone. That has tainted my view of the novel.

SSIE Using the trope of the Holocaust for an act, or rather, a representation of rape, will probably meet with a lot of resistance, I would assume?

YM I don't know. I'll find out when my next novel comes out. But in both cases you dehumanize someone. At the same time, you're right. During the Holocaust the Jews were killed, whereas in a rape the victim is not necessarily killed. But spiritually, it's the same thing; if you rape or kill you don't see a person as a full human being and because of that you use of them as if they were objects. In both cases, it's a hate crime with a dash of pleasure. The Nazis and their acolytes took pleasure in terrorizing and killing the Jews. And they profited materially by robbing their goods, by taking over their houses. Rapists often do the same. And I

think it's an appropriate parallel in another way: in the silence that surrounds both. No one really wants to talk about the Holocaust except out of weary duty. The only exception is some of the people directly affected by it, mostly Jews, and a smattering of historians and artists. Considering the staggering magnitude of the event, it is astonishing how little public discourse we hear about it, how little it is discussed on a daily basis. The Holocaust is still not something that we've integrated into our daily way of being. The same with rape. It is mostly muffled in silence.

ssie Are there questions of perspective involved in any of this? Did you experiment with point-of-view in writing *Self*?

YM Yes, explicitly. I wanted to look at point of view and terrain. One of the notions I was exploring in writing the book was that the body is an environment. I was working with the idea that if our body is an environment, then our living with our body, in our body, must be a process of adaptation similar to our adaptation to the external environment. This adaptation would affect our behavior, our sexuality and our sexual orientation. I wanted to explore how sexual identity and orientation maps onto the body. In *Self* the narrator is always lagging behind or catching up with his or her body. When she becomes a woman she is still thinking like a man. She's in a woman's body but still thinking like a man. So she's still attracted to women. But over time, she starts changing. There are many reasons for this. One is the appeal of the forbidden. Though on the outside her new attraction to men is banally heterosexual, at first for her it's homosexual. The first time she kisses a man she thinks, "This is homosexuality. I am a homosexual." And she's shocked, yet thrilled. So there's the appeal of the forbidden. That's one of the conscious reasons for the change. But beneath that I think there's an environmental adaptation, a linking between the mind and the body. I'm not being deterministic here. Of course we can override our "body environment," much like we largely ignore our external environment. But it's there, our bodies, as gentle pressure that tells us how to be. In any case, in exploring this, in how the narrator shifts and changes, point of view was central.

ssie For me reading your work, otherness evolves as a major theme in your writing. And this goes both for *Self* and for *Life of Pi*, where otherness figures in the otherness of religions as well as in the confrontation with the big other, nature and its inhabitants. In fact I got the sense that boundaries between self and other are quite fluid in your fictions. So

what about this relation of self and otherness? And what about that relation if the territory is fiction?

YM Well, what else is there to write about but the confrontation with the other, whether that other is another person or our environment? As I said earlier, in general I'm not interested in psychological novels because they never get beyond the doorstep of one consciousness. 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 is through them that we come to understand ourselves. Let's take an example. Let's say you're chocolate ice-cream. If you're chocolatensess through and through, if all you've ever known your whole life is chocolatensess, then, on one level, you have no idea what chocolatensess is, though it permeates your whole soul. You will only understand chocolatensess once you meet strawberryensess and vanillaness and butterscotchness. It's in meeting the other that you start to understand, first, that you are different, and then how you are different. Of course, understanding chocolatensess remains extraordinarily complicated. Socrates's "Know thyself" stumps chocolate ice-cream as much as it does us! And that's just ice-cream flavors—imagine when you're a human being. Everyone has multiple identities. But because it's a big, complicated sometimes frightening world, we tend to want to simplify our identity, forgetting that all of us all the time are wearing many, many hats. Yet we tend to meet only one otherness at a time. So when I am in Poland, I see only Polish otherness. I forget, or diminish, the otherness of women, of children, of body-types, of character, of social status, etc. So yes, I am interested in otherness, because it strikes me that it's the very matter not only of fiction, but of life. I strongly believe in the empathetic imagination, in making the effort to understand the other. Because in understanding the other, you eventually understand yourself.

ssie Both *Self* and *Life of Pi* include scenes that are quite violent, though the situations themselves—the rape scene and Pi's first days on the lifeboat—do not necessarily compare. What function does violence take in the encounter of self and the other?

YM It's a platitude to say that violence is disturbing. Unfortunately, the truth of that only hits home when we're genuinely confronted with violence. I don't mean just the odd scuffle or verbal violence, but actual, physical violence. Even strong verbal violence with signs of aggression

is extraordinarily upsetting. I'm interested in violence in part because I'm afraid of it, in part because I've witnessed it in others. And I guess I hope that looking at violence in writing is protecting me the way an insurance policy would; I write about it so that if it should ever happen to me, hopefully I'll better be able to deal with it. Also, the response to violence is in a compressed way, like a sort of shorthand, the same response to what will happen to all of us, which is death. My grandfather died when my father was ten and that has marked my father's life, and mine by extension. And I volunteer in a palliative care unit, a hospital unit for the terminally ill, for the dying. I've become quite familiar with the dynamics of death, with how death actually creeps up on a living body. And death is very rich metaphorically. It's the basis of all religion. If we didn't die, I don't think there would be religion. So, looking at death is yet another approach to the other. And death, violence, and fear are phenomena that impel us to change. Some change is self-willed, some, through fear of death, is forced upon us. In *Life of Pi*, Pi is confronted with fear and violence and has to deal with it—a situation I was interested in exploring.

SSIE One of the German reviewers of *Life of Pi* entitled his piece "Belated Animal Lover" which was meant to refer to you. Why that interest in animals? Is this more an ecological, philosophical or literary matter to you, if those can be separated at all? And why such preference for zoo animals in particular?

YM The reason is a lot less romantic than you might think. What started me on *Life of Pi* was a review I read of the novel *Max and the Cats*, by the Brazilian author Moacyr Scliar. In a part of that novel a man ends up in a lifeboat with a jaguar. What attracted me to that premise was that it was perfectly Aristotelian: there was perfect unity of time, action, and place. While I was in India, I decided to tell my own story with a similar premise because it had that mix of the improbable and the appealing that suited the story I wanted to tell. So the heartless answer to your questions would be: I used animals simply because they served the purpose of my narrative. But of course, I'm also interested in animals for their own sake. Animals fill me with wonder. But it's the novel that drew me to animals, not the other way around. I find animals to be very useful and versatile. I'm not finished with them. I'll be using them for the next one, a novel about the Holocaust. It will feature a monkey and a donkey. And the novel after that will feature three chimpanzees.

And like everyone, I am concerned about the destruction of the environment. I do believe that it's good that we have zoos because if we don't, children will never see animals in the flesh. An animal becoming extinct will have no more impact on them than a TV show that's been discontinued. Children won't really feel for an animal the way they would if giraffes were being pushed to extinction and they had seen giraffes. So I am concerned about animals and do have a fairly good knowledge of animals. Still, my interest is mainly artistic and not necessarily political, though I am politicized. And although I did have a lot of pets when I was a child and we lived in tropical countries, my attraction to animals wasn't obvious. But it is true that there are animals in every one of my books. In *Helsinki*, there is a dog named George H., after George Harrison. It plays a minor but charged role. And in *Self*, there is a bulldog that also plays a small, but emotionally significant part. I find animals useful primarily because we project a lot onto them. We project onto people, too, but we know that this is not necessarily acceptable and that there are limits to that. Whereas on animals we happily project: We talk to our cats and dogs; we see tigers as ferocious and hyenas as cowardly, etc. When people claim *Life of Pi* is an allegory, in fact they're mistaken. The animals are possibly allegorical, but otherwise they really are animals.

In my next novel animals allow me to speak indirectly about something that's hard to talk about directly: namely, the Holocaust. Just as we use jokes sometimes to say something very serious, I am using a monkey and a donkey, because everyone likes monkeys and donkeys, to talk about something no one likes talking about. And for the novel after that, I'll be using three different kinds of chimpanzees: one's a sculpture, one's a real chimpanzee, although dead, and one's a real, true-to-life, totally un-anthropomorphized chimpanzee. I'm using them as different approaches to understanding Christ. I'm using chimpanzees because they are primates, thus similar to us, in fact 98.4% genetically similar, which is, of course misleading because the 1.6 percent makes all the difference. So they are quite close to us in some ways and very different in others, like Christ.

As Samuel Fischer Professor at the Freie Universität Berlin you are currently teaching a seminar entitled: "Meeting the Other: The Animal in Literature." In your course description, you claim that the animal is remarkably absent in Western literature. What then are you talking about with your students, what are you reading?

YM We started with Coetzee, with a modern piece, but I meant to start with the Bible. The animal is absolutely central to Jewish identity because of the dietary laws. A Jew knows his or her relationship to every animal in relation to whether it is clean or unclean. This does not mean that Jews sanctify animals, or treat them with ecological kindness. No, they kill them, they eat them. But every Jew knows: this animal I can eat, that animal I can't, and this implies a relationship with the animal world. And you see that if you look at the Old Testament. It's chockablock full of animals. In Genesis, animals are mentioned first, and in a fair bit of detail, and they are created *on the same day* as Man. So there is a hierarchy in the Jewish worldview, but it's one in which animals are right next to us.

The Jewish point of view entails a guardianship, a custodianship of the animal world more than an absolute domination. And this has to do, I think, with the fact that Judaism has a strong sense of place. When Jews say, "Next year in Jerusalem," they mean that literally. The Holy Land is not a metaphor; it's a real place, with real geographical features, real flowers and trees, and real animals. Christianity, on the other hand, has a strong sense of *person*. Everything in Christianity comes down to Christ. Christ was a person. Persons can move. Persons who move have less of a sense of place. Christ had nothing to say about animals. There are animals in the New Testament, of course. Christ rides on a donkey, but it's a metaphorical donkey. It's a humble animal as opposed to the proud Roman horse. And there's a cock that crows to signal Peter's betrayal of Christ. But these animals are mere figures that move the plot forward, or are just symbols. There are no dietary laws in Christianity. The emphasis is on the person, which meant, as an unintended consequence, the slow evacuation of the animal from the Christian world. In it, animals are killed any which way—and any animals. They are eventually stripped of whatever dignity they had under Judaism. The culmination of this thinking might be Descartes, to whom animals are mere automatons, with no emotions or thoughts. Actually, the real culmination is the industrial food business, in which animals are treated with absolutely no respect. Real live chickens are treated like they were rubber chickens being manufactured in a smoke-belching factory. I don't believe in treating animals with exaggerated respect, but any animal can feel fear and every life form is worthy of basic respect. When you kill an animal, you should at least be aware of what you're doing. I object to going to the supermarket, buying a slab of meat all wrapped up in plastic for

which you've played no role in raising the animal, killing it and butchering it. I believe in taking responsibility for our actions.

The course I teach is in fact a bit of a disaster because I've been so busy and have had no time to prepare for it. But in essence I want to point out that absence of the animal. So we've started with the Old Testament, moved to the New Testament, to the Gospels. Then I arbitrarily chose one play of Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, basically to point out the absence of real animals, the obsessive humanness of Shakespeare's world, in which everything was by humans, for humans and about humans. The natural realm is otherwise incidental. Change came with Darwin, who suddenly brought animals much closer than people ever imagined. After that you start having writers like Jack London and Hemingway, where the natural world plays a prominent role in which humanity plays a diminishing role.

ssie Your novels dramatize transgressions of boundaries and in *Life of Pi* religion plays a significant part in this dramatization. In the "Author's Note" that opens the book you present the protagonist Piscine Molitor Patel's story as one that will "make you believe in God." To me it seems, though, that the story your book presents makes one believe not so much in religion, but in fiction. Somewhat in the same way as Daniel Defoe makes us believe in fiction in *Robinson Crusoe* when he presents himself as the editor of the story that the first-person narrator has experienced first-hand. Your "Author's Note" very much reminded me of Defoe's device.

YM Yes, but then the question is: What do you mean by fiction? I discovered in writing *Life of Pi* that in a sense religion operates like fiction. A good novel works by making you suspend your disbelief. When you read a novel that doesn't work, you sense that, "Oh, this happened and it was so improbable. That's not how they do it." Novels that don't work are emotionally dead, their mistakes in idioms or in cultural habits are annoying. A good novel—even though there are robots and flying dinosaurs—just takes us in. Religion works the same way—it makes you suspend your disbelief so that factual truth becomes irrelevant. It's not because the facts are ignored. It's more how you interpret the facts and how much you value facts that affect the totality of your sense experience. So to say that the book will make you believe in fiction, to me, isn't very far from saying it'll make you believe in God. I think it's acceptable to say that God is a fiction, if you understand that this

doesn't necessarily mean that this fiction doesn't exist. It just exists in a way that is only accessed through the imagination.

A religious person will not say that his belief contradicts reality. In fact it's remarkable how people who have faith, no matter what happens to them, keep on having faith. Perfect proof of that is Judaism. How there can still be practising Jews, how they can still think they're the chosen people, considering what has happened to them these last twenty centuries, is crying proof that there's more to faith than facts. It's not that goes beyond facts, or ignores them. It's that religion interprets the facts, interprets reality differently. In my novel, the proof is not a reasonable one, it's an existential one. Now clearly, you have to use reason. Reason is a tool that is useful in nearly every circumstance, and it's simplistic to say that religious people are unreasonable and agnostics are reasonable. The mechanism of faith uses imagination *and* reason. If you suspend your cynicism, it is remarkable what a call on the imagination the Gospels are. It really does colour your world. You view other people in a different way and the universe—as I say at one point in *Life of Pi*—becomes built along moral, rather than intellectual lines.

Maybe God's silence is an appeal to get beyond factuality. Maybe God's trick is to call us through the imagination. If you don't have any imagination, you live a diminished life. The overly reasonable life is a shrunken life. So much alienation in Western cultures is due to an excess of reason. A homeless person in Montreal has nothing, truly nothing, whereas a homeless person in India is materially bereft, but will most likely have some sort of Hindu thought coursing through his mind which will somehow give him a perspective, a way of understanding his suffering.

ssie Your protagonist Pi Patel irritates his family because he insists on practising three religions: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Does fiction or the imagination thus propose a solution for our current clashes of cultures and religions?

YM Yes, an emphatic YES—the empathetic imagination is the great solution. This is so true, so obvious, it becomes practically a psychotherapeutic tool. If you are an Israeli, you should imagine yourself a Palestinian. Then you will understand why the Palestinians are angry. If you're a Palestinian, you should make the effort of imagining yourself an Israeli, and then you will understand why the Israelis are afraid. If you're a man and you become a woman, you understand. If you're

white and you imagine yourself black, etc. Such an approach will not only make the universe more peaceful. It's also very enriching. It's much like traveling. The empathetic imagination allows you to travel just as catching a train or a plane does.

SSie In her review of *Life of Pi*, Margaret Atwood calls upon *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *Moby Dick* as ancestors of your book. Let me pick Hermann Melville's *Moby Dick*, which is a book that interrogates both science and transcendentalism, or rather calls scientific truths into question by looking beyond mere matter. Do you consider *Pi* as part of this tradition or do you find those comparisons inappropriate, even though they are certainly flattering in some sense?

YM They're very flattering. Honestly, however, I'm indifferent to these sorts of comparisons. I must be following some tradition, but it's for other people to tell me that. I'm Canadian, and Canadian literature has a tradition. I've written a story with animals, and there's a tradition about that. But at one point every artist does his or her own thing. Someone also mentioned Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which was one of the sources for the name Richard Parker [the name of the Bengali tiger that comes along on Pi Patel's travels]. Now the truth is, it's a terrible novel. The only reason it has survived is because Poe wrote it. So I was aware of it, but it played no influence other than giving me a name for one of my characters. Same thing with *Moby Dick*: it's a great novel but it didn't have influence on my book as far as I can tell. There is a wink to Scliar in the novel, although it's mistaken one. I name a panther in my novel's zoo after what I thought was the one in Scliar's lifeboat, but in fact that jaguar has no name. I don't know where I got the idea that it did. My imagination again, buzzing about like a bothersome fly. So every artist does something new and eventually is told that he or she is part of a lineage. But that's imposed from the outside.

SSie What about the relation between science and fiction? Like *Moby Dick* your book seems to call scientific truths into question, though often quite ironically. Your protagonist, for instance, is named Pi, after "that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe."

YM I think both texts would not work if their tone was fable-like. They have to be realistic to work. And to be transcendental, you must first be somewhere. So my novel works in part because it is rooted in gritty facts, in a very *terre-à-terre* view of things. I wanted to use science for

practical narrative reasons to pull in the reader. After all, we operate with a mixture of the scientific and the transcendental. That's our approach to life. We are reasonable animals. That's what makes us more powerful than other animals. And we're the only animal with a strong sense of imagination. Dogs do have dreams, some capacity to be here but imagining something else, but it's far more limited than ours. However, we tend to be overly reasonable, because it has yielded so much materially, technologically. We've tended to denigrate the transcendental and parked transcendentalism with the arts as a "leisure product."

SSie What kind of research went into *Life of Pi*?

YM A fair bit of it. In terms of the castaway element, I mainly read real life accounts. *Survive the Savage Sea*, for example. It's a terrible title for a brilliant book from the early seventies by a Scottish man who was traveling on a yacht with his family and a Welsh hitchhiker. Their yacht was attacked by killer whales west of the Galapagos. He was a former merchant marine and he had a good knowledge of the sea. They survived thirty-seven days at sea. They were eventually rescued by a Japanese fishing vessel. Then he wrote this beautifully understated book about their odyssey. It's also a manual about survival at sea, an absolute goldmine for me.

I also read the odd literary story about shipwrecks, though these tended to be more annoying than helpful because they were a finished result by some other artist on a theme I was tackling. Plus, I wanted my facts to be right. You can never trust an artist, whereas you can trust people who don't claim to be artists. For the religious element, I read the foundational texts—the Bible, selections of the Koran, the Bhagavad Gita and other Hindu texts as well as secondary texts to help with these texts. I read a history of zoos, some books on zoo biology, on animal psychology. And I visited zoos. I interviewed someone at the Toronto Zoo as well as the director of the Trivandrum Zoo in India. In India I also did experiential research: I went to temples, churches, and mosques, spent time in Pondicherry and Munar. And I read odd little things here and there on currents, on winds, on storms. I can't understand writers who don't do any research. If I was just going to write a novel about a guest professor in Germany and people he meets—it'd be so boring. I'd rather do something that is outside my life and allows me to do research.

- ssie If you were shipwrecked on a lonely island, what book and what animal would you take along?
- YM There's a great line by Chesterton on that very question. He answered: "A guide to ship-building." What book would I bring? It would have to be something big, not a novella. The book that impressed me most was Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It's the closest a book has ever come to capturing an entire world. It's just an extraordinary book. Maybe *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Maybe just the Oxford dictionary and a lot of blank paper and ten thousand pens.
- ssie And your animal choice if you could take a companion?
- YM Well, if I had to take a companion, it wouldn't be a tiger. It would be something more personable. The obvious choice would be a dog, because that would be the most resilient, useful animal. Or maybe a primate. But see, we have this idea of considering animals as pets and very few can be pets, very few are domestic. Honestly, I'd probably take a dog, a big dog like a St. Bernard, a German Shepherd, or a Labrador. Or maybe a donkey. I like donkeys.
- ssie You have already mentioned *Max and the Cats* (1981), a novella by Moacyr Scliar from which your text received its "spark of life," as you put in the "Author's Note" to *Life of Pi*, and with which your text shares one of its premises. Scliar's book tells the story of a Jewish boy who survives both the Holocaust and a shipwreck, sharing a lifeboat with a panther. Soon after receiving the Booker Prize you were charged with plagiarism, a charge which not only made for "a scandal that wasn't," as one critic put it, but also for much publicity. And while I know you have talked enough about this matter, how do you see the case now as things have cooled down a bit?
- YM Something was missed by the scandal. The real interest in this scandal to me was the question of what is an appropriate source of inspiration for an artist. That was the only really interesting issue, because clearly I didn't plagiarize. You can't plagiarize a book you haven't read. And until three weeks ago, I hadn't read Scliar's book. I had read a review of a book and that inspired me and I borrowed the premise. Is it dishonest to borrow a premise? Is it theft? To say that it is betrays, I think, an ignorance of the artistic process, in fact of the history of literature. The premise is the beginning of something. It's like the jokes that run along the lines of there's a Chinaman, a German, and a Frenchman in a plane; the plane is going to crash, and there's only one parachute.

That's the premise and then the joke develops. So for me the premise was a boy in a lifeboat with a wild animal. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* it's not just the premise that was borrowed from Boccaccio, but the entire plot. Did Shakespeare therefore plagiarize? We've borrowed countless times from the Greeks. That didn't bother people. Is it because Scliar is alive that people thought it was inappropriate? His book and mine are totally different and everyone who's read them sees that. First of all, Scliar's book is a novella. The part with the jaguar in the lifeboat is just sixteen pages long. Mine is over three hundred pages. To plagiarize sixteen pages for 350 pages is starting to sound like the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand with three loaves of bread! But that's not the only difference. The two books are totally different in theme, character, language and tone. So, why did it bother people? There's a movie by Fellini called *E la nave va*, which at one point has a man in a boat with a rhinoceros. I never saw the movie but I saw the poster two years into working on *Pi*. If I'd said it was that poster that had inspired me, I don't think that would have bothered anyone because it's a different medium, it's film.

The engine that fuelled this scandal was in fact political. Brazil and Canada have had poor relations for many years now, mainly due to commercial squabbles. That's what fueled the high emotions in Brazil, which is where the scandal started. Brazilians aren't very fond of Canada. But the whole thing came and went like a spring shower. I spoke with Scliar. He's a very nice man and a fine writer. Thanks to this scandal, I now know a writer in Porto Allegre.

SSie Well, such cases obviously make for publicity. But it seems evident to me that people who make these kind of claims miss what literature is all about. Literary critics and theorists simply call such textual echoes intertextuality.

YM Well, I'm not of the school that any publicity is good publicity. I didn't need the extra publicity. The Booker Prize was publicity enough. Two weeks after the thrill of winning the Booker to have mud thrown at me was hurtful and annoying. It did blow over and there were follow-up articles in the US, in Canada and in the UK. But in some places—in France, for instance—there were merely brief articles saying “Booker Prize Winner Accused of Plagiarism.” And that was it. And when you're accused of something, it lingers. People forget that you are innocent until proven guilty. But anyway, the book will live and this nonsense will die.

ssie Besides Scliar you have mentioned Conrad, Kafka, Milton, Dante, Gogol and Sinclair Lewis as part of your reading and inspiration.

YM My reading is quite eclectic and these are people who have influenced me, who have formed my sensibility. I think for any writer it's important to have read, especially when you're young. I find I read a lot less now, in part because I'm more preoccupied with my own creation, and have less patience for other writer's creations. What's great when you're young is that you have such a capacity to wonder. It's so much easier to suspend your disbelief; it means you can believe so much more and the effect of what you read is that much more powerful.

ssie You're Québécois and your mother tongue is French, yet you write in English. I assume you consider yourself a citizen of the world?

YM No. I'm Canadian. I don't believe there are citizens of the world. Everyone is from somewhere, rooted in a particular culture. We're also citizens of the languages we speak. Some people speak many languages—I speak three, I'm a citizen of English, French and Spanish—but no one speaks World. World is not a language.

ssie You prefer writing in English, obviously?

YM Yes, I grew up going to school in English. It's the language I learned to write in and to think in at my most subtle. But French and Spanish are dear to my heart.

ssie How does it feel to live and teach literature in Berlin?

YM I love living in Berlin. And I don't mean to complain about winning the Booker, but it has ruined my stay in Berlin. I love Montreal, but it's nothing new to me. If I had won while living in Montreal, I could have involved myself fully in the Booker Prize without worrying about neglecting my home town, whereas Berlin, I had to neglect. I just haven't had time to do much here. A couple museums, one concert, a few movies, that's it. I'll have done in five months what some tourists would do in one week.

As for teaching—never again! I don't mind speaking in public. And there's nothing more stimulating than a young mind opening itself to the world. But I'm not an academic. I'm a creative artist. My knowledge of things is extensive but superficial, it's not systematic, it's totally partial, it's unfair, it's biased. So I have difficulty operating within an academic milieu. I'm not an expert on anything.

ssie What are you currently working on?

YM Currently? Nothing, because I'm too busy. But I'm thinking about and

jotting down the odd notes for my next book, which will be a fable. Everything I say about this, I hate saying because it seems so *déjà vu*. When I told people about *Life of Pi* they were sort of rolling their eyes and it will be the same thing here. People are going to roll their eyes and say: "This can't work." My next novel will be a Holocaust fable featuring a monkey and a donkey with no references to the Holocaust, Germany, Jews, Poland, or concentration camps. It will be a fable that takes place on a large shirt the size of a country. There will be soil and rivers and trees and villages as well as button holes and collars and seams. The monkey and the donkey—they're both completely anthropomorphized—will be traveling through this country, discussing and enduring various tribulations. The shirt will be afflicted by a phenomenon they will call "the Horrors," which obviously is a stand-in for the Holocaust. And as they travel around the shirt, the monkey and the donkey keep on telling each other little stories, folk tales, trying to find a way of capturing the Horrors, of speaking about it. They start at the back of the shirt, make their way up to the capital of the country, which will be called Yellow Star because of the colour of the brick used and the shape of the fortification. It is obviously the shirt of a Jew. The fable will be about how we understand evil, how we live with it, how we speak of it, how we remember it. The monkey and the donkey try to find what I'm calling a portable metaphor, a metaphor that can be applied, not only to their situation, but to other situations that are Holocaust-like. So I'm self-consciously trying to create a metaphor that will, I hope, stimulate people to consider the Holocaust and the lessons that we must draw from it.

The word Holocaust is already a metaphor. Holocaust is a religious term designating an animal sacrifice, something that happened routinely in ancient Judaism. To use that term for what happened between 1933 and 1945 is arguably an improper appropriation because it puts a positive spin on a horrible event. Jews who were persecuted by the Nazis did not think they were part of a religious ritual! I'm trying to find a different way to speak about that evil. And I would like it to be applicable to the extermination of European Jewry as well as to the violence that took place in Rwanda, Yugoslavia, to rapes and murder—any situation where a group is dehumanized.

ssie So are you basically against the assumption that the Holocaust is an exceptional historical event?

- YM That's a very contentious issue. On the one hand, the Holocaust is certainly exceptional. Never before had a government, an entire state apparatus, right from its inception, been devoted to exterminating an entire people. And the Holocaust was unique because of its scale and the use of advanced technology. But I also think there's a danger in saying the Holocaust is a unique event. If it becomes totally unique, standing there on its own, apart from everything else in human history, there's the danger we'll learn nothing from it. Because to learn you must compare. To remember and cry over Anne Frank, and then turn around and discriminate against gays, blacks, women, Arabs, the handicapped, etc, serves no purpose. There's a danger to over-sacralizing the Holocaust. It's got to be a living, breathing contentious matter open to debate and analysis and comparison. It must enter the rough tumble of discourse, even at the risk of sometimes disrespecting it. What I want to do in this new novel is to talk about a heavy event in an engaging way.
- ssie So it's in the tradition of Roberto Benigni's movie *Life is Beautiful*?
- YM No, not really. I didn't like the movie. It was brave of Benigni to try a different approach. But it didn't work. It was too improbable emotionally. My approach will be different. It may very well fail, but I'll risk that.
- ssie Just one final question, returning us to Berlin. Are there places that are particularly conducive to writing or is that a wrong idea about how writing works for an author of fiction?
- YM I can work pretty well anywhere. I only need my computer, a table, a little light and a little quiet. I can definitely work in Berlin.
- ssie As a native Berliner, I am very happy to hear this. And I thank you very much. It has been a pleasure talking to you.

* See p. 163 of this issue of *CL* for a review of *Life of Pi*.



