The Intertwining of Incommensurables

Yann Martel’s Life of Pi

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In the “Author’s Note” that introduces the Life of Pi, Yann Martel claims that he first heard of Pi in a coffee shop in India. A chance acquaintance tells him, “I have a story that will make you believe in God” (LP, vii).1 The story concerns the life of an Indian boy who grows up surrounded by the animals of his father’s zoo. When Pi is sixteen, his family decides to emigrate. His father sells off the animals to an American zoo and the family travels with them across the Pacific. The steamer sinks during a storm and Pi finds himself on a lifeboat with a hyena, a wounded zebra, an orangutan, and a Bengal tiger. The hyena attacks the zebra and then the orangutan, devouring both. He, in turn, is killed and eaten by the tiger. Pi stays alive by acting as the tiger’s zookeeper. Feeding it with the fish he catches and giving it water from the solar stills that he finds on the lifeboat, he survives until the boat, carried by the equatorial current, reaches the shores of Mexico.

How is this improbable tale supposed to bring belief? What has this story of animals, first in the zoo, and then on the raft, to do with God? The mystery deepens when at the end of the book Pi relates a second story, one where humans rather than animals are the agents. In this account, related after the first provokes incredulity, the ship’s French cook becomes the hyena, a wounded sailor the zebra, Pi’s mother the orangutan, and Pi himself plays the role of the Bengal tiger. On this telling, the tale becomes one of cannibalism and human savagery. A Japanese official, who hears these stories while interviewing Pi, remarks “What a horrible story” (LP, 345) and admits: “The story with the animals is the better story,” to which Pi responds, “And so it goes with God” (LP, 352). Again the question recurs: What have the animals to do with God? How can the first account, where animals take the place of human agents, lead to God?

Martel’s tale is an account of alterity—the alterity both of animals and God. Like Pi, we tend to define our humanity by drawing a line between it and our animality, where the human is defined by a boundary excluding the animal. Yet animality is not just other than us; it is also within us. In Levinas’ phrase, our relation to it is a “difference that is not indifference.”2 The same holds for our relation to the divine. This is also other and yet within

us. How do we draw the line between our humanity and divinity, defining our humanity in terms of it? In the story, Pi confronts these two forms of alterity, at times accepting, at times rejecting their presence within him. His passage across the Pacific is, in fact, a journey into the depths of these questions, the hidden reaches where our relations to our animality and divinity are deeply entangled. The entanglement is such that we cannot understand our humanity without including both forms of alterity. Indeed, Martel’s tale shows how our humanity is defined by the boundaries we draw and the ways we are forced to trespass them.

I.

The first part of the Life of Pi contains a defense of the well run zoo and the lives animals lead in its enclosures. We should not think of the animals as imprisoned and yearning to be free. For the animal housed in a good zoo, his enclosure is his home. “A house,” Martel writes, “is a compressed territory where our basic needs can be fulfilled close by and safely. A sound zoo enclosure is the equivalent for an animal” (LP, 19). The inhabitant finds within it “all the places it needs—a lookout, a place for resting, for eating and drinking, for bathing, for grooming, etc” (ibid.). Miraculously, without the need of hunting, food appears (LP, 19). By contrast, “animals in the wild live lives of compulsion and necessity” (LP, 17). They face “an environment where the supply of fear is high and the food low and where territory must constantly be defended and parasites forever endured. What is the meaning of freedom in such a context?” (ibid.). In fact, offering freedom to an animal comfortably settled in its enclosure is, Martel asserts, as “if you went to a home, kicked down the front door, chased the people who lived there out into the street and said, ‘Go! You are free! Free as a bird! Go! Go!’ “ (LP, 18). Neither humans nor animals would appreciate the gesture. What we have in the well run zoo is, in fact, an artificial Garden of Eden, one where “all animals are content” (LP, 20). Martel concludes his defense of zoos with the words: “I know zoos are no longer in people’s good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both” (LP, 21). He does not specify what the illusion of freedom is that plagues religion. To learn this, we have to consider existence outside of this Eden-like state.

In his first days in the life boat, this existence assumes the form of a savage struggle. The zebra, whose leg has been broken by its jump into the life boat is the first to be attacked by the hyena. He bites and pulls the skin of his victim, which “came off the zebra’s belly like gift-wrap paper comes off a gift….” (LP, 138). As Pi describes what follows:

The zebra’s attempts at self-preservation only whipped the hyena into a frenzy of snarling and biting. It made a gaping wound in the zebra’s side…. It started pulling out coils of intestines and other viscera. There