

***Life of Pi: A Bildungsroman of Nonhuman Turn*¹**

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Abstract

Unlike most coming-of-age novels that deal with the hero's struggle with humans and within human societies, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001) is about a young hero's growing experience with nonhuman forces—a zoo garden, a tiger and the Pacific Ocean. When cast out to sea, Pi's self is crushed, and he must learn how to connect with the tiger to survive at the sea. Besides the changing relation between the boy and the tiger, somatic and bodily affect is carefully illustrated because it is the participation both of man and the tiger in the shared emotions of fear, love and wonder, which makes Pi grow from a boy to a man. And it is the harsh experience of drifting on the ocean for 227 days that initiates Pi into the great mystery of mother nature. Pi's grand adventure as a castaway is presented as Pi's religious coming-of-age ritual into the wilderness. The overall reading experience of the novel (boosted by Ang Lee's film version in 2012), elevates *Life of Pi* to become a collective eco-dream for modern audience. To sum up, this paper reads *Life of Pi* as a bildungsroman of nonhuman turn in the sense that the nonhuman world acts as

¹ In 2013, I published a Chinese paper, “《少年 Pi 的奇幻漂流》中「人與自然」的關係,” included in the anthology, 《生態文學概論》(Taipei: Booksman). This paper, written in English with a different title, is extensively revised and enlarged.

decisive forces able to challenge and to reshape a hero's sense of self.

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Nonhuman World under Focus

Unlike most coming-of-age novels that deal with the hero's struggle with humans and within human societies, *Life of Pi* is about a young hero's growing experience with nonhuman forces—a zoo garden, a tiger and the Pacific Ocean. Western civilization often sees its land according to its desires, and this could be seen by following the pastoral ideal in the garden design. Pi's retrospective narrative about the zoo garden in Pondicherry is his memory of a colonial landscape of good old days. When cast out to sea, he was thrown into the unpredictability of the sea, where man's footprint of desire is wiped out relentlessly. His old self is crushed, and his new self has yet to learn how to settle with the tiger to survive at the sea.

Responding to the advent of the Anthropocene which recognizes the humankind as a disruptive force on earth, critical thinkers of various disciplines are now engaged in decentering the human subject in favor of the nonhuman world. This paper intends to read *Life of Pi* as a bildungsroman of nonhuman turn in the sense that *Life of Pi* departs from other coming-of-age novels with its realistic fantasy of the nonhuman entities as decisive forces able to challenge and to reshape a hero's sense of self. "Nonhuman," in this paper, is used as an adjective to cover the nonhuman matters in this novel, which includes Pi's growing environment, animal species and his shipwreck experience on the Pacific Ocean. Next, the "nonhuman turn" refers to the ecocritical stance of moving aside human domination to turn toward the presence of nonhuman forces. Richard Grusin has used "The Nonhuman Turn" as a book title to cover multiple theoretical developments, such as animal studies, new materialism, assemblage theory, object-oriented ontology, and so on (viii-ix). Roughly speaking, all these theories are involved in one common practice—close examination on ways affect is produced (Massumi 1-17; Shaviro 19-43; Manning 45-79). Affect, in plain words, are "forces of encounter" (Seigworth 1). It concerns the intensities of lived

experience and the interaction between humans and the world. Under such a critical light, Pi's intense interaction with the tiger and his castaway experience on the sea will be closely examined as an eco-drama of Pi's direct encounter with nature. As Pi's suffering aggravates, it is the shared emotion of fear, love and wonder between the human and the animal, which pushes Pi to see through the test of drifting on sea for 227 days. Pi's incredible shipwreck experience is not only his coming-of-age ritual; it is also his religious initiation into the mystery of Mother Nature. Overall, *Life of Pi* is appreciated as an alternative bildungsroman of nonhuman turn, a pedagogical fantasy that reveals the ecological truth: "the human has always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the nonhuman world" (Grusin ix-x).

The following sections will interpret how the zoo garden, the tiger, and the life as a castaway at sea, function in Pi's apprenticeship to life, which is also presented as Pi's religious quest and his adventure of the world.

A Cage in the Garden

Life of Pi is a bildungsroman that shows Pi's coming-of-age journey from his childhood to adulthood, with a focus on the trial of shipwreck that affects the hero's growth. A representative English novel of bildungsroman is Charles Dickens' masterpiece, *David Copperfield*, in which the hero tells in first-person point of view his "life education"—how he gradually achieves maturity by seeing through his crisis and self-cultivating his proper identity within the world. The same formula appears in *Life of Pi* but with a playful parody in both narrative and content. The importance of storytelling is emphasized through a double layer of first-person narrative. Besides, Pi's "education" is not a normal education of any kind. In the opening chapter, Pi said retrospectively that he took a double-major of religious studies and zoology in order to sooth his shattered self (3) because his shipwreck experience made him heartbroken

and suspicious of established human values. Though he never fully recovered from his traumatic past, his misfortune was interpreted as a gift that made him believe in God.

In the beginning, we learn how Pi got his name from a swimming pool. Then how his childhood centered around the Pondicherry Botanical Garden, “a huge zoo, spread over numberless acres” (15). The middle-aged Pi invited his listener to imagine “a hot and humid place, bathed in sunshine and bright colours” (16). And his detailed description is reminiscent of Frances Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1910):

The riot of flowers is incessant. There are trees, shrubs and climbing plants in profusion—peepuls, gulmohars, flames of the forest, red silk cottons, jacarandas, mangoes, jackfruits and many others that would remain unknown to you if they didn’t have neat labels at their feet. There are benches. On these benches you see men sleeping, stretched out, or couples sitting, young couples, who steal glances at each other shyly and whose hands flutter in the air, happening to touch. (16)

In *The Secret Garden*, the protagonists, Mary and Colin, both sickly and bad tempered when we first meet them, mature into healthy and empathetic children in the environment of Yorkshire moors. The change of human world is woven together with the green power of the secret garden—its verdant colorfulness embodies the wonder of life. Glorifying such a vision, Yann Martel also adopts the image of “garden pastoral,” which is a symbol of childhood innocence and an undisturbed space, well-protected from the complexity of the adult world. More than that, Pi’s zoo town is like a heavenly Eden, where the mankind and animals could live together in harmony:

Suddenly, amidst the tall, and slim trees up ahead, you notice two giraffes quietly observing you. The sight is not the last of your surprise. The next

moment you are startled by a furious outburst coming from a great troupe of monkeys, only outdone in volume by the shrill cries of strange birds. You come to a turnstile. You distractedly pay a small sum of money. You move on. You see a low wall. What can you expect beyond a low wall? Certainly not a shallow pit with two mighty Indian rhinoceros. But that is what you find. And when you turn your head you see the elephant that was there all along, so big you didn't notice it. And in the pond you realized those are hippopotamuses floating in the water [. . .] (16)

Intricate details present a picturesque zoo garden, a leisure space, rich of animal creatures and green wild. Founded by Pi's father, the zoo is a "paradise on earth" for Pi (15). The above paragraph gives the reader an impression of an Eden, in which humans could wander around at ease in natural beauty, bumping into animals who had no fear of man.

Part One of *Life of Pi* is like Blake's "Songs of Innocence and Experience." The innocence of the child Pi is constantly intruded by the adult voices of experience. Pi's father, Mr. Patel, applied his zoo keeping practicality to child raising. He forced Pi to watch a tiger devour a goat alive in order to break up Pi's innocence of seeing the caged animals as pets. More of his relentless education of "truth" was comparing humans to predatory animals. One of Pi's most memorable scenes was: "Just beyond the ticket booth Father had painted on a wall in bright red letters the question: DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE ZOO? An arrow pointed to a small curtain [. . .]. Behind it was a mirror" (38-39).

The mature Pi's philosophical reflection on a zoo reveals the environmental unconsciousness of a modern city, in which the zoo represents humans' repression of dangerous instinct of the wild. Moreover, the zoo is a living testimony of humans' raising themselves above "the other-than-human world" (Plumwood 144), misusing

and commodifying animals with a tourist industry. Pi, with his professional opinion as a zoologist, states that “we commonly say in the trade that the most dangerous animal in a zoo is Man. In a general way we mean how our species’ excessive predatoriness has made the entire planet our prey” (36). To pursue this matter further, Pi describes in detail how zoo animals die of being fed with harmful objects, being poisoned, or being tormented by sadistic tourists. Then his narrative leads this matter into an “anthropocentric” tragedy:

[. . .] I learned at my expense that Father believed there was another animal even more dangerous than us, and one that was extremely common, too, found on every continent, in every habitat: the redoubtable species *Animalus anthropomorphicus*, the animal as seen through human eyes. (39)

“*Animalus anthropomorphicus*, the animal as seen through human eyes” is part of human life now. Such animals become dangerous because they are but dispensable toys, always under the mercy of their human masters:

We’ve all met one, perhaps even owned one. It is an animal that is “cute”, “friendly”, “loving”, “devoted”, “merry”, “understanding”. These animals lie in ambush in every toy store and children’s zoo. Countless stories are told of them. They are the pendants of those “vicious”, “bloodthirsty”, “depraved” animals that inflame the ire of the maniacs I have just mentioned, who vent their spite on them with walking sticks and umbrellas. In both cases we look at an animal and see a mirror. The obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything is the bane not only of theologians but also of zoologists. (39)

In other words, it is not the animal itself is dangerous. It is the animal, which is idealized or demonized by humans, thus misunderstood and maltreated, that is truly dangerous.

Pi's song of innocence also refers to the innocent imagination of general public toward zoos and wild animals. The reader learns about how animals are territorial, in favor of living in a fixed comfort zone rather than in harsh wilderness. Besides, what makes Pi's casual talk of zoology and animal behaviors entertaining is that the zoo reality is shown side by side with Pi's religious adventures around his neighborhood. Born a Hindu, Pi learned various cosmic myths about Indian avatars. Around the age of twelve, he was intrigued by a Christian myth of Jesus' being crucified as Son of God. And later he frequented a mosque to learn how to practice Islam prayer from a Sufi mystic. Meanwhile, in school, Pi's favorite was his biology teacher, Mr. Satish Kumar. An avowed atheist, Mr. Kumar claimed that "religion is darkness" (34) and the zoo is "the temple" (33). Mr. Kumar praised each animal as "a triumph of logic and mechanics, and nature as a whole [is] an exceptionally fine illustration of science" (32). He even said that "If we had politicians like these goats and rhinos, we'd have fewer problems in our country" (33). Mr. Kumar's adoration of animals is close to the belief of deism. Pi grew up in a zoo world where animals were like his extended families (122). The image of humankind as higher being than other species was severely debunked in the mirror that miniaturized every tourist as the most dangerous animal of the zoo. Likewise, Mr. Kumar's deistic appraisal of animals was an ironic discord of Pi's naïve apprenticeship of the three religions.

Religion is the motif that runs through the whole novel. The sentence keeps repeating: "this was, indeed, a story to make you believe in God" (xi). At the age of sixteen, Pi was found out "practicing Hindu, Christian and Muslim at the same time" (81). When pressurized by the adults to choose just one religion, Pi answered: "Bapu Gandhi said, 'All religions are true.' I just want to love God" (87). At the end of Part One, Pi did not choose any particular faith. After his human world sinks under the Pacific Ocean, his religious quest continues at the sea. God shows its face no more in

chapels, temples or zoos. Religious epiphany comes to him as a sea baptism, a coming-of-age ritual of life and death, which he could not have survived without the companion of Richard Parker, a 450-pound Bengal tiger.

It Is the Animal That Makes Us Human

Before humans' agricultural revolution began between 10,000 and 5000 BCE, our ancestors lived in the unexplored world for millions of years whose immediate neighbors were wild beasts. Animals were respected as envoys of the Unseen Power; they served as guide and provider of food as the buffalo myth of Native America shows us (Campbell 86-100). Now the wild beasts are caged in our zoos. Still, benign memories of animal friends are kept in children's books and cartoons in which animals are personified as good companions, endowed with the ability to reason and speak. After the rise of postmodernist and eco-critical thinking, human subjectivity (especially the author's) is under assault. For instance, in *The Jungle Book*, animal characters are reduced to allegorical beings of British colonial ideology because its author is suspicious of having pathetic fallacy (Boehrer 2-5). Jacques Derrida in his *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, refuses to assign language violence onto animal other. And there is a growing trend to excavate the figurations of "animal and animalistic" to deconstruct the human-animal divide (Huggan 151-53).

Going beyond the human-animal divide is a main theme of *Life of Pi*. In Part One, Pi's juxtaposition of human religions and zoology, the parody of human as the most dangerous animal in zoo and how a Bengal tiger got a human name, are key events that sharply undermine human superiority over animals. Part Two: "the Pacific Ocean" starts with an apocalyptic image of world flooding—"The ship sank. . . . Everything was screaming: the sea, the wind, my heart . . ." (121). The cage is gone, so is the wall between humans and animals. Pi woke up in the midnight and found the human world

he relied on destroyed. No human beings survived. On the same boat were Pi and a Bengal tiger. Does this scene mean that there is no more divide between man and animal? Probably not. Like what we have learned in the zoo garden, there is no innocence of eliminating the conflict or evading the opposition between people and animals. What makes Part Two inspiring is that the detailed record of how a boy interacts with a tiger and their ever-changing relationship, which makes it difficult to say where the boundary between the human and animal lies. The transforming experience for Pi is the direct contact with the tiger and the process of feeling fear, wonder, and love that Richard Parker evokes in him.

In the opening scene, Pi saw and talked to is Richard Parker like a family friend: “Do you see this lifebuoy, Richard Parker? Do you see it? Catch hold of it! HUMPF! I’ll try again. HUMPF” (123). Then the prey animals’ killing each other reminds Pi of Richard Parker’s nature as a prey hunter. To survive, Pi had to keep the tiger in safe distance, observing him closely every moment:

Richard Parker made his point with me four times. Four times he struck at me with his right paw and sent me overboard, and four times I lost my shield. I was terrified before, during and after each attack, and I spend a long time shivering with fear on the raft. Eventually I learned to read the signals he was sending me. I found that with his ears, his eyes, his whiskers, his teeth, his tail and his throat, he spoke a simple, forcefully punctuated language that told me what his next move might be. I learned to back down before he lifted his paw in the air. (261)

Pi is forced to study Richard Parker’s “tiger nature” without the shield of cage and without the presumption of zookeepers. As the seafaring goes on, shared by both human and nonhuman animals alike was the bodily suffering on the sea: seasickness, hunger and thirst. Gradually, Pi knew better what a tiger fears and needs. Pi also

learned that cleaning Richard Parker's waste is a way to subordinate him (265). Pi even felt proud of himself because he had survived [his] apprenticeship as a high sea animal trainer" (261):

My crude exploitation of Richard Parker's weak sea legs is not the only explanation. There is another: I was the source of food and water. Richard Parker had been a zoon animal as long as he could remember, and he was used to sustenance coming to him without his lifting a paw [. . .] when he looked beyond the gunnel, he saw no jungle that he could hunt in and no river from which he could drink freely. Yet I brought him food and I brought him fresh water. My agency was pure and miraculous. It conferred power upon me [. . .] (282)

But Pi's pride and superiority over the tiger is a mixed feeling. Every time Pi looked at the tiger, he was full of "fearful wonder" (206). Pi once thought of killing Richard Parker or tricking him into dying first (207). Still, Pi had to admit that as much as the tiger depended on him, he also needed the tiger:

[. . .] I will tell you a secret: a part of me was glad about Richard Parker. A part of me did not want Richard Parker to die at all, because if he died I would be left alone with despair, a foe even more formidable than a tiger. If I still had the will to live, it was thanks to Richard Parker. He kept me from thinking too much about my family and my tragic circumstances. He pushed me to go on living. I hated him for it, yet at the same time I was grateful. I *am* grateful [. . .] (207)

The relation between the tiger and Pi is more a matter of affective providence than species difference. Every breath, move and emotion of Richard Parker evokes Pi's response. Their daily interaction with the external nature changes their relation. There are times when Pi had to use his human intelligence to "tame" the tiger when Richard

Parker appeared threatened. And there are more times when Pi saw the tiger as a partner: they suffered together and survived together. There is even the moment when Pi felt a sense of responsibility towards the tiger: “I was more affected by his imminent demise than I was by my own. But truly, broken down and wasted away as I was, I could do no more for him” (305). And, time and again, the same old fear surges. An inner monologue occurs when Pi was losing his consciousness at the door of death:

This was the terrible cost of Richard Parker. He gave me a life, my own, but at the expense of taking one. He ripped the flesh off the man's frame and cracked his bones. The smell of blood filled my nose. Something in me died then that has never come back to life. (321)

In coma, Pi was still hunted by the fear that Richard Parker, a tiger after all, was going to devour him alive when his hunger became unbearable. In the end, the survival story does not lead to the opposition between the big boy and the big tiger. Pi's relationship with the tiger displays an ecological ethic of “to live and to let live.” He fed himself and fed the tiger as well. It is the tiger's presence that triggers Pi to exercise his human potential. Not killing the tiger out of fear, Pi asserts his humanity in a more positive way by establishing a friendly and sustainable relationship with the tiger.

In a realistic manner, the tension between human desire and animal nature in this novel is enacted in a convincing way. Though the tiger is not portrayed as a supernormal animal, who can speak or think, its plain existence as a beast itself is as powerful as a human agent. Richard Parker—not a suave name a pet usually has—is given a tiger's true presentation with its threatening animal nature. In the 227 days of sea drifting, Richard Parker is the only companion who could interact with Pi. First regarded as an enemy, it is the tiger who pushes Pi to act and to fight for survival. Later, in a crisis of life and death, Pi declares his feeling of love toward this animal

creature: “[. . .] I love you, Richard Parker. If I didn’t have you now, [. . .] I don’t think I would make it. I would die of hopelessness. Don’t give up, Richard Parker, don’t give up. I’ll get you to land. I promise, I promise!” (298). Pi’s declaration of love for the tiger sets aside our prejudices against prey animals.

Under the strange condition that “we were, literally and figuratively in the same boat. We would live—or we would die—together” (207), Pi’s survival story rewrites what is humanity. Pi’s showing affection of love towards a prey animal is a psychological growth. It is also a symbolic step toward renewing human bond with other species. The function of a literary tale is to open a space where relations of any kind could be explored and redefined. Even though the human-animal difference is still there, the author turns the space of a tiny boat in which both cruelty and love occur as holy ground where man and animal witness together the cosmic mystery of nature.

Castaway Experience as a Healing and Erotic Encounter

Modern people have been repressed or disowned because the advancement of human civilization leads not to the fulfillment of human nature but to a numbed-out mode of living. Different excursions or holiday packages are promoted to help people ease their life pressure. But in many cases, a holiday today is “much more than just hopping on a plane, taking a handful of pictures, and departing for home once again, unaffected by what has been seen, heard, and experienced” (“Ecotourism—A Holiday with A Difference”). What makes the matter worse, as Terry Tempest Williams contends, is that humans have constructed a whole industry to “keep our true erotic nature tamed” (28). What is “erotic,” for Williams, is “that moment in a relationship when heart, mind, spirit, and flesh are fully engaged” (27). Nowadays we not just surrender to the make-believe world that defies our participation. We are also seduced

into believing that our only place in nature is a spectator behind the lens of a camera or the window of an automobile. Furthermore,

The erotic world is silenced, reduced to a collection of objects we can curate and control, be it a vase, a woman, or wilderness. Our lives become a place in the puzzle of pornography as we go through the motions of daily intercourse without any engagement of the soul. (29-30)

To put it another way, modern people are in a great need for a full engagement with nature, which is never a Disneyworld where “natural environment has been perfected and packaged to eliminate any of nature’s troubling variables” (Mander 1991:155).

Cultural industry at that time also catered to man’s need for an engaging living experience. Roughly made at the same time as *Life of Pi* (2001), the movie *Cast Away* was released at 2000. *Cast Away* is a survival drama about how the protagonist stranded on an uninhabited island after his plane crash in the South Pacific. In the same year, similar drama of the same name was made into reality TV programs by the BBC (Dunn 185-93). Up till now, more people volunteer in becoming castaways because the primitive way of living on a remote island is more than a voluntary simplicity; it is a “healing and empowering process,” enabling people to discover a more vital existence (De Castro 254).

Under such a context, *Life of Pi* could be regarded as a literary creation that satisfies our longing for an engaging castaway experience. Nevertheless, *Life of Pi* outstrips other castaway stories in many ways. Take *Robinson Crusoe* as a contrast example. The shipwreck Robinson Crusoe soon lands the island of Despair where he becomes a master of the land and of the barbarians. Yet, Pi does not land on any island for a good long rest, except his short stay on the island of giant algae and meerkats. Next, the castaway life on land is hugely different from the life on sea. On land, it is easier for the human to find a cover, to measure nature in a distance, and to achieve

his mastery (Ong 255-83). On sea, man is not in his own control. Even in a big cruiser, man is surrounded by the vast ocean, always under the sway of unpredictable waves. In Pi's case, he is left in a raft with a minimum food supply, and he is stripped almost "naked," utterly vulnerable to the power of nature. However, Pi's "flesh-to-flesh contact" with the ocean provides him a rare gift—the nature's aesthetic qualities are out there to be registered by the human body; therefore, Pi's castaway experience is also his education of aesthetic immediacy. All in all, Pi is immersed in the erotic encounter with the ocean, which means, to quote Williams' words again, that Pi's every moment is "in a relationship when heart, mind, spirit, and flesh are fully engaged" (27).

Pi's diary mentions a different number of days about people's survival at sea: 38 days of the Roberston family; 47 days of Captain Bligh and his fellow castaways; 83 days of Owen Chase, whose account of whaling ship *Essex*, inspired Herman Melville; 173 days of Korean merchant sailor in the 1950s; and at last, 227 days of his own survival on the Pacific. Pi emphasizes: "I survived 227 days. That's how long my trial lasted, over seven months (239). Apparently, the long duration of shipwreck experience makes a huge impact on Pi's life. To materialize in words Pi's minute-to-hour, morning-to-night, and day-to-week experience of erotic sensation is a big endeavor. In Part Two: "the Pacific Ocean," pages and pages are Pi's monologues of make-and-do with limited resources—how he kept the tiger at bay, stored rainwater, caught fish, observed the tide. And there are paragraphs of nature observation, written deliberately in short and repetitive pattern to mimic the tedious temporal experience of seafaring:

There were many skies. The sky was invaded by great white clouds, . . . the sky was thinly overcast. The sky was dappled with small, white, fleecy clouds. . . . The sky was painted with a small number of flat clouds that

looked like sandbars. . . The sky was a distant black curtain of falling rain
[. . .] (272)

Nevertheless, in between the repetition there is a variation:

There were many seas. The sea roared like a tiger. The sea whispered in
your ear like a friend telling you secrets. The sea clinked like small change
in a pocket. The sea thundered like avalanches. The sea hissed like
sandpaper working on wood. The sea sounded like someone vomiting. The
sea was dead silent.

And in between the two, in between the sky and the sea, were all the winds.

And there were all the nights and all the moons. (272)

As time passed, Pi was forced to learn to discern the voices of the sea and the many
faces of the sun and the moon. Meanwhile, Pi was caught up in grim and exhausting
opposites, bearing extremely hot and cold. The boredom and terror of the sea almost
drove him mad (274).

Still, there were romantic moments when Pi was entertained by the dazzling
display of nature's bounty—fish species, with different speed, playful moves and
variants of color and shape, parade under him:

[. . .] At multiple depths, as far as I could see, there were evanescent trails of
phosphorescent green bubbles, the wake of speeding fish. As soon as one
trail faded, another appeared. These trails came from all directions and
disappeared in all directions. [. . .] The dorados—there must have been over
fifty patrolling beneath the raft—showed off their bright gold, blue and
green as they whisked by. Other fish that I could not identify were yellow,
brown, silver, blue, red, pink, green, white, in all kinds of combinations,
solid, streaked and speckled. Only the sharks stubbornly refused to be
colorful. [. . .] busting above the surface of the water and splashing down in

showers of luminescence. I gazed upon this urban hurly-burly like someone observing a city from a hot-air balloon. [. . .] (222)

Such aesthetic radiance of diversity is more than awe-inspiring. It is also therapeutic. For the first time in Pi's five days of never-ending struggling to survive a storm hit, this scene gives him "a little bit of hope—hard earned, well deserved, reasonable" (222-23).

Furthermore, natural beauty encompassing Pi makes himself feel like a blessed sage peeing into God's mystery as if he were sharing Vishnu's cosmic dream:

I woke up once during the night. I pushed the canopy aside and looked out. The moon was a sharply defined crescent, and the sky was perfectly clear. The stars shone with such fierce, contained brilliance that it seemed absurd to call the night dark. The sea lay quietly, bathed in a shy, light-footed light, a dancing play of black and silver that extended without limits all about me. The volume of things was confounding—the volume of air above me, the volume of water around and beneath me. I was half-moved, half-terrified. I felt like the sage Markandeya, who fell out of Vishnu's mouth while Vishnu was sleeping and so beheld the entire universe, everything that there is. (223)

The author carefully arranges this episode to happen after Pi's body was continually assaulted by nature for several months. Being alone on the sea for months, Pi could not help feeling being listened to, or sensed, by the watery and heavenly surroundings. He is gradually attuned to the heartbeat of mother nature. In a right moment, nature's magic is ready to be heard when his full-bodied alertness is open. And the tenor of the cosmos sings in religious terms:

Before the sage could die of fright, Vishnu awoke and took him back into his mouth. For the first time I noticed—as I would notice repeatedly

during my ordeal, between one throes of agony and the next—that my suffering was taking place in a grand setting. I saw my suffering for why it was, finite and insignificant, and I was still. My suffering did not fit anywhere, I realized. And I could accept this. It was all right. (It was daylight that brought my protest: “No! No! No! My suffering *does* matter. I want to live! I can’t help but mix my life with that of the universe. Life is a peephole, a single tiny entry onto a vastness—how can I not dwell on this brief, cramped view I have of things? This peephole is all I’ve got!”) I mumbled words of Muslim prayer and went back to sleep. (223-24)

During the darkest moment of Pi’s life, the animating power of faith is tested and finally proved. The above declaration is Pi’s epiphany, his conversion narrative—one’s life journey is but the “in and out” of cosmic dream. Pi’s religious exaltation of nature’s grandeur is an echo of the Romantics’ presentation of the Sublime. But different from Wordsworth experience of “Tintern Abbey,” in which the narrator’s “memory buttresses the interiority of the human as a privileged space” (Broglia 32), Pi submits to the Sublime and the experience overwhelms and shatters him. He comes to the realization that no matter how insignificant his suffering is, his existence is a tiny hole which opens to the grand cosmic wonder. It is his participation that matters.

Apart from Pi’s game with the animals, young readers might find Part Two: the Pacific Ocean “very boring and slow [because there are] too many chapters without any action” (“The Life of Pi: book review – level 2”). But if we see the Pacific Ocean as a wild stage where natural phenomena are players and both human and animal participants, Part Two is indeed an affective drama of natural elements as vibrant bodies, each moving in all their capacities. They produce a wide range of affect on Pi in their commingling with one another—touch, taste, smell, rhythm, motion-sense,

sound, vision, different kinds of emotions, and sentiments: fear, despair, surprise, boredom, fatigue, joy, hope, etc. Every affect is proof of “a body’s immersion in and among the world’s substances and rhythms” (Seigworth 1). In Spinoza’s words of religion, “there is no transcendence, only immanence” (qtd. in May 38). God is not outside Pi’s body; it is everywhere in Pi’s fear, thirst, hunger, consumption, and in all his crackling experiences of sense opening. Pi’s extreme experience of a new world of lively flesh crushes his old self. His survival of the cosmic test of life and death is his rite of passage and his holy communion with Mother Earth. Completing his sea baptism with the tiger, the boy grows to a man with a more authentic vision of himself and of the world.

Jerry Mander argues that there is a danger of people’s living in the modern office building, the environment of which is sensory-deprived—it is always the same. . . no changes in temperature, the same route, the same fluorescent light, etc. Nowadays our natural environments have largely given way to artificial environments. “What we see, hear, touch, taste, smell, feel and understand about the world has been processed for us” (1999: 207). Our sense organs, which are originally endowed with great flexibility and capacity to adjust to the nature’s bounty, are limited and regressed. Our experiences of the world are also mediated and reduced. And worse still is the vicious circle in which children and adults alike retreat even deeper into the cyber space of human illusion, which further alienates the humans from their own nature and from nature’s process. Eco-therapists suggest that we need to reintroduce sensory stimuli of nature to help those depressed souls that are trapped in repressed bodies (Harper 183-200). Andy Fisher even proposes the eco-pedagogy of introducing “wilderness rites among youth and adults” (185). The wilderness, with its varied and multidimensional beauty and sensory experiences, could never be replaced by human invention. In the wilderness quest, the participants learn to live their own lives bound

up in the flesh of other living things, and, thus, widen their spheres of belonging to and responsibility for the Earth. In this sense, Pi's adventure into the wild ocean bears special significance of eco-pedagogy. Martel's compelling realistic presentation of Pi's castaway adventure as a coming-of-age ritual of wilderness may be the novel's most singular contribution to environmental literature.

The Sense of An Ending: Eco-Dreaming for Everyman

The narrator of *The Life of Pi* deliberately envelopes the boy's adventure within the grown-up version of Pi. After the survival, Pi is forced to offer two variants under the pressing questions of the Japanese transport investigators. The author tries to establish the credibility of Pi's story with reasonable analyses and scientific details. Oddly, the italicized "Author's Note," which stands in between, often reminds the reader that Pi's tale remains a story to be verified. Does Martel, writing under the prevalent postmodern milieu of disbelief, intend the reader to read *Life of Pi* through a lens of disbelief or uncertainty? Or rather, by blurring the boundary between children's fantasy of "a man lying together with a lion" and adult's realistic writing of establishing credibility, Martel is inviting the reader to participate in the conspiracy of making-believe?

"So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can't prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?"

Mr. Okamoto: "That's an interesting question. . ."

Mr. Chiba: "The story with animals."

Mr. Okamoto: "Yes. The story with animals is the better story."

Pi Patel: "Thank you. And so it goes with God." (398-99)

Martel presents the story as a postmodern survivor narrative in which Pi attempts to

restore unity to his traumatic selfhood by making coherent and searching acknowledgement of his incredible story (Duncan 167-83). Pi's thanks to Mr. Okamoto's choice of the better story implies that it is his experience of being alone in a lifeboat with a tiger that makes him believe in God and helps him make sense of his own life. In other words, the sea fantasy with an animal protagonist has a redemptive potential, a cure to his fragmented self.

To alleviate environmental destruction in the age of Anthropocene, we need new stories to help us go beyond old humanism, and to rethink who we are and what we are made of. In this sense, the value of *Life of Pi* is more than an entertaining fantasy of undermining anthropocentrism. It shall be treasured as an alternative bildungsroman of nonhuman turn, in which the key players are not human but marginalized "matters" in the human world—a zoo, a tiger, and an ocean. Nor longer are the animal, the ocean and its inhabitants appear as passive entities. They are powerful actants that produce unexpected pressures and challenges to the hero. Pi must learn to discern their voices and subjugate himself to their beauty, horror, and sublime. Meanwhile, Pi's affection of love and sense of awe naturally arise together with his natural piety and compassion for other species.

Pi's incredible journey also sets free modern men's desire of venturing into the wilderness to be reborn in the cosmic dream of Mother Earth. Even though the narrator's self-reflexive statement tries to liberate the reader from the illusion of his own tale, the reader is participating in Pi's eco-dreaming. The reader is greatly entertained by Pi's "taming of a Bengal tiger, their shared adventure with flying fish, glowing jellyfish, storming sea waves, an island of meerkats, and a humpback whale swathed in plankton" (Rainer). And again, and again, the reader joins Pi in his distress when he is invaded or penetrated by the midday languor of the rolling waves and the sullen mood of the tiger. As Pi's grand adventure reaches its end, the reader is left

with the striking image of “a boy, a tiger, and a lonely boat”—an archetypal image, which brings back the oldest memory of how our survival in the hostile world depends on humbly negotiating with the wild and fitting into the process of nature.

The great reading experience of the novel, with its popularity greatly boosted by Ang Lee’s blockbuster film adaptation (2012), elevates *Life of Pi* to become a collective eco-dream for modern audience, which calls our shared adventure of re-visioning humanity and humans’ relationship with the Earth.

《少年 Pi 的奇幻漂流》：成長小說的「非人類轉向」

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摘要

《少年 Pi 的奇幻漂流》是一部成長小說。有趣的是，裡面主角的成長驅動力不是來自人或社會的挑戰，而是非人類的力量——動物花園，一隻老虎跟海上漂流。本篇論文以「非人類轉向」一詞探索非人類的力量在主角歷險中，如何解構人類世界，並幫助主角跨越了成人的考驗。發生船難後，主角熟悉的世界崩塌了，一切歸零。舊的我受到挑戰，被徹底粉碎。Pi 必須學習如何跟一隻老虎共存，刻苦的在海上漂流 227 天。這漫長的漂流敘述會被仔細分析，彰顯作者如何細緻描述主角拼搏大海，過原始生活的整個過程，如何對主角產生各種情意作用 (affect)。雖然人一直以理性把自己跟野蠻隔開，但動物跟人兩者都有感知覺受，相互影響。人跟動物一起受海洋神秘的洗禮，分享恐懼、焦慮和愛。這樣的特殊體驗，取代了傳統小說中人與人的互動的情節，被賦予了宗教意義。這場冒險是主角通過大自然考驗的成年禮，也顛覆了人與野獸，人與大自然對立的傳統印象。李安改編的電影 (2012) 大受歡迎，也讓這本小說更加暢銷。小說的全球風行將「人跟獸共乘一舟」的大洋歷險奇蹟變成當代人類的集體夢境。

關鍵詞：動物 成長小說 自然 生態批評 非人類

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