

SPECULAR TRANSFORMATIONS OF JOSEPH CONRAD'S PHILOSOPHY OF THE SEA IN *LIFE OF PI* (THE NOVEL AND THE FILM) – REFRACTIONS OF THE TRANSITION BETWEEN THE TWENTIETH AND THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Margreta Grigorova

The St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo

Abstract: Yann Martel, the author of the Booker-winning novel *Life of Pi*, says in an interview that if asked to invite an author or book character to coffee, he would opt for Joseph Conrad (but only if the latter was in the mood for conversation). He would be glad to learn more about Conrad's manner of writing. We can only make guesses at what form this imaginary conversation might take as it will remain unreported. Conrad is one of a number of authors who, along with Dante Alighieri, John Updike and John Steinbeck, live on in the Canadian writer's creative work and populate the equally successful film version based on it. Many are convinced that – in today's world of visual culture – it was the film which triggered mass interest in the book. The present article searches for refractions of Conrad's seafaring philosophy and poetics in both the textual and cinematic mirrors of *Life of Pi*. It undertakes a close reading of some specific features of this particular case of film-making that reveal the cinematic potential of Conrad's works and its realisation in the film interpretations.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Yann Martel, parallel, *Life of Pi*, refractions of Conrad's seafaring philosophy, nomadic biography

A fascinating parallel in terms of the discourses of navigation, peregrination, maritime philosophy and intercultural biography can be drawn between Conrad and Canadian writer Yann Martel (with a particular focus on his novel *Life of Pi* (2001) which seems to have attracted most of the contemporary critical attention that has been devoted to his writing). Conrad (1857-1924) and Martel (1963-) stand at almost a century's distance from each other and their authorial positions mark this transition from one century to the next, which is made evident by the intensity of initiation and liminality in their texts. As Allan Simmons points out, "the transnational Conrad is also a transitional figure in the development of the novel: a late-Victorian who helped usher in the inflection to bear upon the tradition of English letters, making it less insular and more self-aware than it had been in the past."¹ Martel is also a transna-

¹ A. Simmons. *Joseph Conrad in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. xvi.

tional and multicultural figure, whose stance, however, is determined by his sense of belonging to the Canadian literary tradition. It is significant that Martel's interpretation of the global dialogue between cultures, religions and geographic locations takes place as a late twentieth-century postmodern pursuit of both aesthetic continuity and distinction. Moreover, like Conrad's position, this stance is rooted in a nomadic biography and shows features of contemporary migrant writing.

My comparative study of Conrad and Martel was inspired by the cinematic version of the novel, which impelled me to read the book several times and start my exploration of Martel. At first, I managed to detect only a few major Conradian concepts in the film version (the concept of the hostile and benevolent sea, for instance), which led my research to undertake a further examination of more points of convergence, comparative observations and conclusions. The assumption that Conrad seems to be one of the writers whose work has exerted a visible impact on Martel's creative quests also turned out to be reasonable and contextually unique. The present paper follows the logic of a hermeneutic meditation on the parallels that can be drawn between Conrad and Martel through the optics of Martel's novel *Life of Pi* and its cinematic counterpart in David Magee and Ang Lee's eponymous film.

Life of Pi's cinematic version (2012) operates on several levels in order to highlight the major concerns of the book – the plot line; compositional and ideological selection; the meditative appeal of the frames and their visual expressivity. Both film and novel largely reconstruct the period of 227 days during which the protagonist Piscine Molitor Patel (Pi) sails the Pacific Ocean in a solitary lifeboat and in the challenging company of a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. The end of the book comments on this extraordinary experience in the following way: “very few castaways can claim to have survived so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger.”² The topos of the sea – stormy or calm, in daytime or at night – and the topos of a boat gliding on the surface of the sea with a man and a tiger on board are constructed with remarkable skill and outstanding vividness. The epic and poetic beauty of the ocean, along with the tense psychological situation, the exotic appearance and hypnotic gaze of the tiger are visions that correspond to Conradian fictional worlds and to the implications of battle in his representations of the sea. Likewise, the cinematic optic of the film adaptation offers a clearer perspective on the similarities between Martel and Conrad's universal sea philosophy and points to the possibility of a reciprocal cinematic adaptation of the works of Conrad – captain and writer – that could focus on the impressive and expressive effects of sea imagery and the relationship between seafarer, ship and sea.

Both the book and the film *Life of Pi* have proved fairly quickly that they are worthy of high critical acclaim. They have won an array of awards, making each of them an immediate commercial success: the book was awarded the Booker prize in 2002 and the film received quite a few nominations and four Oscars in 2013 – for filmmaking, visual effects, camera operation and soundtrack. The book came out in Bulgarian just after the film had made its spectacular debut in 2012. The publication

² Y. Martel. *Life of Pi*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2003, p. 401.

of the book was hastened by the award it had received and the first translation (by Zbigniew Batko) came out in 2003. By 2013 it had been published five times in two translated versions. The success of *Life of Pi* makes Martel's fiction more appealing to increasing numbers of readers and researchers and paves the way for publication of his other works. His first two novels – *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* and *Self* (a fictional autobiography) – were published in 2004 and 2005 respectively, but were denied the critical acclaim of *Life of Pi* by readers and critics alike. These first books, however, bear traces of Conrad's influence on Martel.

At the same time, *Life of Pi* has been plagued by accusations of plagiarism owing to its explicit reference to Brazilian writer Moacyr Scliar's *Max and the Cats* (1990)³. In his essay entitled *How I wrote Life of Pi*, Martel mentions John Updike's explanation of the way Scliar accomplished his work. Scliar's novella is an account of the journey of a Jewish family who escape Fascist persecution in Berlin and migrate to Brazil in the company of an animal that operates as part of Scliar's allegorical vision of fascism – a black jaguar. Martel's observations, which – rather than being stated explicitly, form an implicit, paraphrased and mystified version of Updike's article – provoke further questions in their claim that a rewrite of Scliar's work can produce an improved version of the story as a whole and of the story of the travelling jaguar in particular. Sailing in the company of an exotic carnivore is what inspired Martel to reconstruct this plot line as a productive, compelling and expanded creative vision of the sailing tiger. In the author's notes to *Life of Pi*, Martel extends special gratitude to Scliar for having helped him to find the creative impulse for his literary quests. According to Martel's notes, the initial draft project of the novel tended to base its plot pattern on Portugal and fascism, but this creative design soon failed to meet the writer's expectations. Martel's creative plans changed significantly during his stay in India, where he found a more suitable setting for the novel. In *How I wrote Life of Pi* he explains that his writing consists of three major elements – influence, inspiration and hard work⁴ – of which Scliar's work and his stay in India account for the first two, while the rest is the outcome of hard work.

³ The accusations of plagiarism are the subject of one of the most productive conversations with Martel, which have been published under the title "The Empathic Imagination: an Interview with Yann Martel". Interviewed by Sabine Sielke for *Canadian Literature*, Martel underscores the fact that prior to writing his book he had not read Scliar's complete novel, but only the article's comments on it. Sielke dwells on the problematic comparative reading of Scliar and Martel and concludes that their works are actually entirely different in terms of their thematic concerns, imagery and diction, adding that they even belong to two different genres – the *novella* (Scliar's work) and the *novel* (Martel's narrative). She draws attention to the fact that the jaguar episode, which crops up most frequently in the accusations, is less extensively developed in Scliar's novella (see S. Sielke. "The Empathic Imagination: an interview with Yann Martel". *Canadian Literature* 2003, Vol. 177, p. 29). Florence Stratton bases her observations on the same fact, claiming that the jaguar episode takes up only 17 out of a total of 99 pages in Scliar's book, while Martel explores it on 211 pages (out of a total of 354). See: F. Stratton. "Hollow at the core": Deconstructing Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*". *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne* 2004, Vol. 29, № 2, p. 9, <http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/12746/13690>.

⁴ Y. Martel. *How I wrote Life of Pi*. Retrieved from: <http://www.powells.com/fromtheauthor/martel.html>.

Our primary concern, however, is to see how Conrad enters Martel's reading lists as one of the multitude of writers whose mentorship Martel acknowledges and trusts. Reading Conrad turns out to be one of the cornerstones in Martel's reading and writing experience. He mentions him along with Hardy,⁵ Milton, Gogol and Dante as a "must" in his early reading habits and describes his own reading tastes as "eclectic". At the same time, he steers very close to the tradition of Canadian writing, embracing a wide sea of other influences, but claiming his literary "kinship" with this nearest port. Addressing some assumptions that a parallel can be drawn between Melville's *Moby Dick* and *Life of Pi*, he says that the former is indeed a great novel, but that his own work owes more to the decisive influence of Scliar, to whom he can trace his creative intention.⁶

In an interview for the AbeBooks website occasioned by his Booker prize, he provides a witty answer to the question of who he would like to have coffee with: Joseph Conrad – though only if he was in a good mood⁷ – and in order to discuss matters of writing.⁸ However, the very fact that he mentions Conrad's name, albeit in the context of a joke, is more significant than it might at first seem. As Stratton points out, Conrad is one of Martel's most substantial influences, an influence that has persisted in his writing career since his earliest works: the above-mentioned *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* and *Self*, where Conrad's name is mentioned quite a few times. In *Self*, Conrad is mentioned as being part of the education and one of the specialisations of English literature teacher Roger – a character who is the focaliser of a number of Conrad's works. Stratton sees one of the most evident points of convergence between Conrad's fiction and *Life of Pi* in the story of Pi and the French chef (the moral monster in the book that plays an outstanding part in the second version of Pi's account – the story without God), and interferes with the theme of cannibalism. Stratton sees this relationship as being comparable with the Marlow-Kurz relationship – a fascinating instance of paraphrase of Conrad's plot in *Heart of Darkness*.

My vision of Conrad-Martel depends on other concepts which I shall address while focusing on the idiosyncrasies, similarities and distinctions between the two authors. Martel is similar to Conrad not only because his lifetime and career coincide with the transition between two centuries. As I have pointed out at the beginning of this article, he could also be seen as being a counterpart of the English author of Polish origin by virtue of his nomadic biography, his globe-trotting journeys and the multicultural worlds of his fiction. Unlike Conrad, however, he did not experience the early loss of his parents or a period of banishment from his native land. Nevertheless, the motif of early parental death is present in the fictional biographies

⁵ See E. Bearn. "A life as simple as Pi". *The Telegraph*, 30th October 2002. Retrieved from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/donotmigrate/3584981/A-life-as-simple-as-Pi.html>.

⁶ S. Sielke. *The Empathic Imagination*, p. 30, 25.

⁷ Here Martel refers jokingly to Joseph Conrad's proverbial moodiness.

⁸ "Life of Yann Martel. AbeBooks speaks with Booker Prize-winning author Yann Martel. Exclusive Interview". 4th August 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.abebooks.co.uk/docs/authors-corner/yann-martel.shtml>.

of Martel's characters – in *Self*, for instance, the protagonist's parents lose their lives in a plane crash; in *Life of Pi* – during a shipwreck. The repetitive occurrence of this plot line in Martel's works deserves special attention.

The motif of parental loss shapes the works of many migrant novels, including those of Iliya Troyanov – a German writer of Bulgarian origin who is a veritable “nomad of four continents” and a “gleaner of worlds”. One of his most discussed works – *The World is Big and Salvation Lurks around the Corner* – is an autobiographical novel that also stages the death of the protagonist's parents – this time in a car accident – and then focuses on his grandfather's endeavours to reconnect him with his roots. I assume that the accidental break in the family line is symbolically related to the contemporary patterns of nomadic biography in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Contemporary multicultural lifestyles and writing practices problematise questions of the native land, genealogical roots and family ties. They reconsider the problem of identity to the point of its utter disconnection from mainstream concepts of *native* and *foreign* (or their revision). Parental loss can also be seen as a moment of initiation, growth and maturation in the threatening immensity of a globalised world. *Life of Pi* also bears traces of a *Bildungsroman* and critics frequently associate it with this type of writing. The initiation pattern is likewise a characteristic feature of Conrad's work and is particularly well developed in *The Mirror of the Sea*, *Youth*, *The Shadow Line* and *Typhoon*.

Born into a family of Canadian diplomats in Spain, Martel begins his migrant experience even in his childhood, which abounds in journeys to Alaska, Columbia, Costa Rica, France, Ontario and Mexico. This life pattern endows him with a desire to travel and, as Sielke remarks, he continues his journeys as an adult, spending time in Iran, Turkey and India.⁹ He has a good (spoken and written) command of three languages, writes fluently in English, but admits that French and Spanish are dearer to him.¹⁰ Martel comes up with the idea of writing *Life of Pi* during his stay in India and most of the events in the book occur on the way from India to Canada via the Pacific Ocean (the first two chapters of the novel are entitled “India and Canada” and “The Pacific Ocean” respectively). The author imagines himself as a Canadian writer who goes to India in search of a viable plot for his story. There he meets *Mamaji* (the swimming instructor of his future protagonist Pi), who advises him to return to Canada and find Pi, an Indian who survived a shipwreck and has a story to tell. The story is one of a kind and can turn the staunchest atheist into a devout believer. Pi's ship, which leaves India and is bound for Canada, is engulfed by the ocean and his family – together with some zoo animals which are being transported with them – perish in the vicinity of the Mariana trench. After spending 227 days afloat all by himself, Pi is finally rescued and reaches Canada. The dynamic of the India-Canada route is significant, both as a means of shaping the narrative frame of the story and as a clue to our understanding of this transcontinental journey. In the novel, the direction of the journey is likewise indicative of the geographical paradox of Columbus that Pi

⁹ S. Sielke. “The Empathic Imagination...”, p. 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

and his father discuss prior to the journey – Pi remembers that Columbus discovered America, but thought that he was on his way to India.

Having graduated in philosophy from the University of Trent (Ontario), Martel goes through several occupations – exterior designer, kitchen assistant and security guard – before finally embarking on a literary career. The outstanding designs of his fictional worlds can be traced to the two major areas in which he takes a keen interest – religion and animals. In the interviews in which he gives an account of *Life of Pi*, Martel explains that he has undertaken serious professional research on the world of animals in order to produce a plausible description of every single animal in the book. The construction of the tiger helps us to read the message of the text properly. After *Life of Pi*'s sweeping success, Martel held a seminar entitled “Meeting the Other – the Animal in Western Literature” at the Department of Comparative Studies of the Free University of Berlin in the academic year 2002/2003, though he did not feel comfortable in the position of an academic teacher. To a great extent, the course dealt with the way animals are represented in the Bible. As Martel himself points out, there are plenty of animals in the Old Testament and they were created on the same day as human beings. He is also aware of the metaphorical significance of animals in the Bible.¹¹ The ship that transports the zoo animals in *Life of Pi* can easily be juxtaposed with Noah's ark. However, the hermeneutic representation of animals in Martel goes beyond Judeo-Christian associations and claims an extended kinship with Eastern religions – Hinduism and Islam. As Martel himself points out in his essay *How I Wrote Life of Pi*, the Bengal tiger – a figure that conveys the suggestive power of the book and becomes more vivid in the film – has, when all said and done, been borrowed from India's fauna and stands as a symbolic reference to that country. Martel comments in a funny way that opting for an elephant would have been ridiculous owing to the animal's gigantic body, so he decided to choose the tiger. But the tiger, though better suited in size to meet Martel's criteria, is appealing because of its expressive appearance – the majestic, mesmerising and exotic stature of a predator that evokes awe, hypnotic authority and intimidation. To fulfil the purposes of his creative design, Martel deliberately provides his protagonist with a companion that – far from being a typical friendly animal – is a predator.

When Sielke wonders which animal Martel would take as a companion on a desert island, he answers:

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.¹²

Martel's books entitled *Life of Pi* and *Beatrice and Virgil* (where Beatrice and Virgil are a monkey and a donkey) assert that animals are a reality by means of which humans experience both the familiar and unknown manifestations of Nature.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

The possibility of Pi's coexistence with the tiger (Richard Parker) on a lifeboat after being shipwrecked could be seen as being analogous to the well-known Conradian concept of the friendly and hostile sea. The philosophical meaning of the latter is most succinctly rendered in *The Mirror of the Sea* (See: *The Character of the Foe*), but it permeates all his work.

The length of passages, the growing sense of solitude, the close dependence upon the very forces that, friendly today, without changing their nature, by the mere putting forth of their might, become dangerous tomorrow, make for that sense of fellowship which modern seamen, good men as they are, cannot hope to know. And, besides, your modern ship which is a steamship makes her passages on other principles than yielding to the weather and humouring the sea. She receives smashing blows, but she advances; it is a slogging fight, and not a scientific campaign.¹³

The similarity between Conrad and Martel is also heightened by the fact that most of the events described in the novel take place in the ocean, where Pi finds himself alone with the tiger after the shipwreck (according to Pi's god-centred version of the story, a couple of other animals – an orang-utan, a zebra and a hyena – also jump onto the lifeboat, but the stronger destroy the weaker. As a result, Pi has to achieve at least two goals in his maritime peregrination: to survive despite the harsh conditions and to survive in the company of his only friend the tiger, i.e. *to confront the sea and the tiger, which are at one and the same time both friendly and hostile*.

Confronting the sea requires a superhuman effort and is an overwhelming challenge to both spirit and body; it is an extreme experience.¹⁴ For Conrad, withstanding gales amounts to a duel-like personal combat in which sea storms have their own distinctive characters which the sailor comes to know as he battles against them. The duel takes the form of a tournament, very much in compliance with the norms of the aristocratic ethos defined by Conrad's background. As Stefan Zabierowski notes, "Conrad above all remains faithful to what is represented by the essence of his background, i.e. the ethical standards defined by the Polish Nobility (the *Szlachta*). These ethical norms govern the life of Conrad himself and – more importantly – the lives of his characters. The concept of honour dominates this type of ethos and is the principal factor dictating Conrad's choice of a maritime career."¹⁵ Again, we read how Conrad depicts a battle with a gale in *The Mirror of the Sea*: "It was a hard, long gale, grey clouds and green sea, heavy weather undoubtedly, but still what a sailor would call manageable. Under two lower topsails and a reefed foresail the barque seemed to race with a long, steady sea that did not becalm her in the troughs."¹⁶

¹³ J. Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea & a Personal Record*. Ed. K. Carabine. Ware: Wordsword, 2008, p. 89.

¹⁴ See: A. Adamowicz-Pośpiech. "Cywilizacyjne jądra ciemności, czyli o sytuacjach granicznych u Conrada i Herlinga-Grudzińskiego". In: *Granice w kulturze*. Eds. A. Radomski, R. Bomba. Lublin: Wyd. Portalu Wiedza i Edukacja, 2010, pp. 6-20; A. Adamowicz-Pośpiech. "Gustaw Herling-Grudziński as a Reader of Conrad". *Yearbook of Conrad Studies (Poland)* 2007, Vol. 3, pp. 181-193.

¹⁵ S. Zabierowski. *Jak czytać "Lorda Jima"*. Katowice: Książnica, 1997, p. 9.

¹⁶ J. Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea*, p. 91.

Just as Conrad's characters confront an otherwise cherished sea when a storm breaks out and their battle is both fearsome and majestic, Martel's protagonist loves the tiger, who is his only companion on the lifeboat in their mutual experience of hope, despair and the quest for salvation,¹⁷ but has to fight him and find a way to subdue him. The figure of the tiger can be read as the embodiment of the beastly, unconscious, elemental powers of nature. Pi knows that the hunger and character of a predator make him an enemy that he has to tame. My contention is that *the taming of the tiger during their long and solitary sojourn in the middle of the Pacific Ocean is analogous to the art of navigation*¹⁸ which Conrad wields and depicts in his fictional worlds.¹⁹ The story of the protagonist Pi and the Bengal tiger – which begins when they are still on dry land (at Pondicherry zoo where Pi receives his first lesson)²⁰ – takes the form of an even more recognizable experiment in taming and the performance which Pi stages in the middle of the ocean acquires the dimensions of a circus show. This particular scene, which appears to be one of the most spectacular developments in the cinematic version, could be read as a reference to Conrad's concept of the spectacular meaning of human life, i.e. the idea that human life is a theatrical spectacle.

In chapters 11-13, Martel – a diligent interpreter of animal psychology – pays attention to the way in which animals make sense of space. He observes that they tend to rule over their territory and attack any intruder whatsoever:

So you see, if you fall into a lion's pit, the reason the lion will tear you to pieces is not because it's hungry – be assured, zoo animals are amply fed – or because it's bloodthirsty, but because you've invaded its territory. As an aside, that is why a circus trainer must always enter the lion ring first, and in full sight of the lions. In doing so, he establishes that the ring is his territory, not theirs, a notion that he reinforces by shouting, by stomping about, by snapping his whip. The lions are impressed. Their disadvantage weighs heavily on them. Notice how they come in: mighty predators though they are, "kings of beasts," they crawl in with their tails low and they keep to the edges of the ring, which is always round so that they have nowhere to hide ...²¹

¹⁷ "I love you!", Pi whispers in the tiger's ear after a ship steering close to the horizon leaves them behind, "The words burst out pure and unfettered, infinite. The feeling flooded my chest. 'Truly I do. I love you, Richard Parker. If I didn't have you now, I don't know what I would do. I don't think I would make it. No, I wouldn't. 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!'" See: *Life of Pi's* pageless electronic pdf edition at <https://khurambukhari.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/life-of-pi-yann-martel.pdf>. End of Chapter 86.

¹⁸ Conrad's navigational skills are discussed in A. Braun. "Abakart". In: *Szkola Conrada*. Sopot-Gdańsk-Warszawa: Verba, 1995; J. Miłobędzki. *Conrad w żeglarskiej kurcie*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1972.

¹⁹ The idea of the relationship between Conrad's excellent command of ships and the discourse of navigation in his biography and works takes shape in my study entitled *Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski. The Writer as Seafarer*. Veliko Turnovo: St. Cyril and St. Methodius UP, 2011.

²⁰ This is a major instance of initiation: attracted by the tiger at first, Pi is willing to befriend him. However, Pi's father interferes in his son's plans to feed the animal through the cage bars and forces him to see how the tiger tears apart a goat in order make him realize that the next goat the tiger devours might be Pi himself.

²¹ *Life of Pi*. The beginning of Chapter 13. All quotes from the book are from the pageless electronic edition.

The principle of territoriality is essential to the process of taming, when the animal has to learn the limits of human space. Pi makes use of this knowledge and turns the boat into an unusual circus arena.

Conrad, enraptured by the majesty of gales and the huge waves which toss his ship about, describes his sea storms in detail. "But of the delight of seeing a small craft run bravely amongst the great seas there can be no question to him whose soul does not dwell ashore", he writes in *The Mirror of the Sea*. In a similar way, *Pi goes into ecstasy when he himself contemplates a sea storm*. Further on, both Conrad and Martel endeavour to deify the storm, whose manifestly transcendental nature develops as the sign of a divine ordeal. The gale accounts for one of the most exquisitely rendered and memorable scenes of both novel and film. It breaks out after a prelude of spectacular flashes of lightning that crack a primordial darkness (a similar pattern of depiction can be observed in *Typhoon*). Pi rejoices in the celestial majesty of the storm, while the tiger is lying at the bottom of the boat, prostrate and trembling:

For two, perhaps three seconds, a gigantic, blinding white shard of glass from a broken cosmic window danced in the sky, insubstantial yet overwhelmingly powerful [...] The sea turned white and all colour disappeared. Everything was either pure white light or pure black shadow. The light did not seem to illuminate so much as to penetrate. I was dazed, thunderstruck – nearly in the true sense of the word. But not afraid. "Praise be to Allah, Lord of All Worlds, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Ruler of Judgment Day! I muttered. To Richard Parker I shouted, 'Stop your trembling! This is a miracle. This is an outbreak of divinity. This is ... this is ...' I could not find what it was, this thing so vast and fantastic."²²

The next instance of convergence between Conrad and Martel's perspectives concerns another occasion on which sea and water topoi correspond. Martel makes use of several highly productive hermeneutic techniques of highlighting water and water areas. The first of them problematises the name of the protagonist Pi. As becomes evident from the account of his life, his name replicates that of the well-known French swimming pool Piscine Molitor Patel and is the inspired invention of his teacher Mamaji, who is a lover of swimming and swimming pools. Mamaji appears to be an amphibian human being who is endowed with an oversized chest and the need to be constantly immersed in water. The name *Piscine* becomes an object of ridicule because its English pronunciation suggests "pissing", but Pi comes up with another, more positive interpretation of his name as a version of the endless irrational number π . In this way, the name expands its scope of significance from the enclosed space of the swimming pool into the boundless expanse of the irrational mathematical number. This self-initiated transformation both pampers and bothers the protagonist:

"I'll tell you, that's one thing I hate about my nickname, the way that number runs on forever. It's important in life to conclude things properly. Only then can you let go."²³

The boundless expanse of the mathematical number is imaginatively transposed into the immensity of the Pacific Ocean that embraces Pi's boat. Conrad believes that

²² *Life of Pi*. Chapter 85.

²³ *Ibid.* Chapter 94.

the ocean is the sea proper that stretches away from continental shores, beyond the Pillars of Hercules (where, according to the myths of ancient Greece, the human world was supposed to end). Thus, for him the Mediterranean Sea is merely the nursery room of sea craft.

Here the problem of space needs to be stated more clearly. If limited space in Conrad and Martel's work dominates the experiences of the animal and the human being, then what, may we ask, does boundless expanse refer to? *Life of Pi* (both novel and film) defends the idea that this boundless expanse is God's unlimited, transcendental realm of activity. At the very beginning of the book, Pi warns the listening author that his story may convert him to faith in God. These biblical allusions are amplified by the episode of the flying fish that shower onto the boat and remind us of the miraculous provision of manna in the desert.

However, at the end of the book Pi's story bifurcates into two versions. The second, which excludes God's presence from its plot, is specially designed to meet the expectations of the Japanese company agents who investigate the shipwreck and who are skeptical about the veracity of the first version. This second version replaces each of the animals that jump onto the boat with a person. Good-natured orang-utan Orange Juice is Pi's mother, the hyena is the abominable cook who eats human flesh and Pi himself appears to stand for the tiger.

In his novel, Martel manages to depict the symbiotic unity of diverse religions through Pi's initial experience of each of them. Apart from the family religion of Hinduism, he adopts Christianity as well as Islam – purely out of spiritual necessity and without taking account of any antagonism that exists between them. Just as Conrad sees the ship's crew as a culturally and ethnically diverse group of people, Martel elaborates his own mosaic-like network of religions. What links them is the principle of empathic imagination. Martel suggests that God's silence and withdrawal may mean that He habitually communicates His will to Man by stirring his imagination.²⁴ Conrad's religious paradigm is thus implicitly introduced in Martel's creative perception of transcendental reality and its operation in the mightiness of the sea. Conrad is not fond of conventional religious statements. For him, the sea is the space of God's concealed presence behind winds and gales, where divine might manifests itself in the majesty of these trials. The transcendental reality of maritime space generates eye-blinding beauty and inflicts powerful blows on those who dare enter it, making them rejoice in its beauty and teaching them by demonstrations of its overwhelming might and audacity how to preserve their dignity. When the sea takes on the role of the enemy, it forces Man to fight back and resist it.

Conrad and Martel seem like-minded in yet another conceptional area – they insist that the meaning of human life amounts to a theatrical performance. According to Conrad's moral and skeptical perspective, the course of the world does not aim at morality – rather, it stages a cosmic and human play whose plot focuses on a “big mystery” and imposes moral obligations on the human subject. This is how he expounds on this reasoning in *a Personal Record*:

²⁴ S. Sielke. “The Empathic Imagination...”, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

The ethical view of the universe involves us at last in so many cruel and absurd contradictions, where the last vestiges of faith, hope, charity, and even of reason itself, seem ready to perish, that I have come to suspect that the aim of creation cannot be ethical at all. I would fondly believe that its object is purely spectacular: a spectacle for awe, love, adoration, or hate, if you like, but in this view – and in this view alone – never for despair! Those visions, delicious or poignant, are a moral end in themselves. The rest is our affair – the laughter, the tears, the tenderness, the indignation, the high tranquillity of a steeled heart, the detached curiosity of a subtle mind – that's our affair! And the unwearied self-forgetful attention to every phase of the living universe reflected in our consciousness may be our appointed task on this earth [...].²⁵

Jacques Berthoud pays special attention to Conrad's theatrical vision of the world, claiming that this perspective is crucial to our understanding of some of his seemingly paradoxical statements. One of them is Conrad's contention that discarding the "ethical world" and opting for a "spectacular world" is a prerequisite for moral activity.²⁶ The concept of *theatrum mundi* represents a major concern in Conrad's ethical and aesthetic pursuits. This concept likewise operates as a geographical metaphor for the world and Conrad appears to have borrowed it from the cartographic tradition. He revisits the latter in his essay "Geography and Some Explorers", where he calls the geographic space of the earth a "stage" upon which human curiosity performs its play of spectacular adventures.

In Martel, the theatrical significance of life is part of the mystery of existence and this aspect becomes evident in the above-discussed storm scene. Another instance of this perspective is the scene of Pi's makeshift circus show on the boat, sailing in the middle of the watery boundlessness of the Pacific Ocean.

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As becomes evident from the sequence of parallels we have drawn, Conrad and Martel can be juxtaposed productively. The cinematic interpretation of *Life of Pi* corresponds nicely with Conrad's articulations of the sea and with the specular metaphor ("the mirror of the sea") through which he formulates these articulations. One of the most impressive scenes in the cinematic version of *Life of Pi* seems to revive Conrad's metaphoric vision of the sea. It exposes us to glimpses of the even, calm, mirror-like surface of sea water whose gloss holds reflections of the golden sky and seems to place the protagonist and his boat at the centre of the universe and at the heart of the magical sea mirror. *Life of Pi*'s cinematic and textual mirror reflects Conrad's universal maritime philosophy.

Translated by Petya Tsoneva

²⁵ J. Conrad. *The Mirror of the Sea & A Personal Record*, Ed. Keith Carabine. Ware: Wordsworth, 2008, pp. 272-273.

²⁶ See B. Jacques. *Joseph Conrad. The Major Phase*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 9.

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