

JOANNA KLARA TESKE

LIFE OF PI BY YANN MARTEL:
THE USE OF CONTRADICTIONS IN AN EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL
ON THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL STATUS OF THEISTIC BELIEF

Abstract. The essay discusses Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, focusing on the novel's use of contradictions to present the theme of the theistic, atheistic and agnostic beliefs. The novel seems to defend the thesis that theism is rational (on pragmatic rather than epistemic grounds), atheism in its choice of commitment resembles faith, whereas agnosticism can be identified with dogmatic materialism and a passive attitude towards life. To illustrate this view the novel engages the readers in an experiment, offering them two mutually exclusive versions of Pi's survival story.

Key words: *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel, contradictions, belief, cognition.

The aim of this paper is to examine how contradictions function in a highly experimental novel on epistemology of religion, *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel (2001).

The term "contradiction" is used here with reference to internal relations between various elements of a work of art as well as relations between the work and empirical reality (or, more precisely, the reader's model of this reality) that might be defined as those of contrast, incompatibility, conflict or tension.¹ This broad, "aesthetic," interpretation of contradiction seems to be an extension of its logical meaning: in logic, contradiction is defined as the relation that obtains between two mutually exclusive propositions. This is not to say, however, that translating aesthetic (often non-verbal) contradictions into their logical (propositional) counterparts is always feasible.

Dr. JOANNA KLARA TESKE—John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Institute of English Studies, Department of English Literature and Culture; address for correspondence: Al. Raclawickie 14, PL 20-950 Lublin; e-mail: jteske@kul.pl

¹ By analogy, "coherence" is used with reference to the same relations if they exhibit harmony, organic unity or compatibility.

The novel by Martel deserves close attention in the context of contradictions for two reasons: 1) it abounds in contradictions and many of these lie at the heart of the cognitive experiment that the novel offers to the reader, 2) it provides solutions to many of its contradictions,² apparently restoring the state of coherence.

The major contradictions inherent in the book and their resolutions are as follows:

1. CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN THE FIRST STORY OF PI'S SURVIVAL AND EMPIRICAL REALITY

The bulk of the novel is constituted by a first-person retrospective account of Pi's survival. This account is hard to believe as the 16-year-old boy survives 227 days drifting on the Pacific in a lifeboat alone except for the company of a Bengal tiger. The tiger's name is Richard Parker (this unusual name, as Pi explains, is the result of the shipping clerk's error,³ 175–7). Pi's adventures include among others an accidental meeting of two lifeboats "navigated" by two blind castaways in the middle of the ocean. Finally, to crown the tale's extraordinariness, there is a "predatory" island, made of algae, inhabited only by meerkats and grown with carnivorous trees.

All this sounds incredible but the story is "confirmed" by the words of the "author,"⁴ who did his best to check what he had first heard from Mr Adirubasamy (allegedly the "author" spoke in person also to Mr Patel and Mr Okamoto); the descriptions are rich in detail, which adds to the effect of veracity; frequently the reader's newly revived doubts are dispelled with suitable explanations (e.g. the tiger on the boat survives some time on oceanic water but Pi, at first puzzled himself, remembers that indeed tigers from

² To resolve a contradiction means here either to identify the mutually exclusive propositions that are at stake and establish their logical value so that the false one may be eliminated, or to transform the semantic context, e.g. from factual to fictional, so that the contradiction no longer occurs.

³ Worth noting is also the intertextual character of the name, which is borrowed from Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, as Martel admits ("The Empathetic Imagination" . . ." 26; cf. also David Ketterer).

⁴ By the "author" I refer here to one of the novel's narrators whose note, titled "Author's Note," precedes the text, and who in various ways resembles Yann Martel but should not be identified either with the real or implied author (cf. Ines 26).

the Sundarbans are known to drink saline water, 214); in some passages the tone of the novel comes close to semi-documentary.

Thus the novel tells an implausible story that is supposed to be true, presenting its readers with a chance to probe their will to believe.⁵ Sooner or later, in spite of themselves, the majority will conclude that the story is “false,” while the claim that it is “true” is part of the author’s game. Alternatively, to resolve the contradiction the readers may choose to trust the implied author and believe the tale, ignoring their common sense.⁶

2. CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN THE TWO VERSIONS OF PI’S SURVIVAL

The story of Pi’s survival fails to satisfy Mr Okamoto and Mr Chiba, who are investigating the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*. Seeing that the officials with their critical rationalist approach remain sceptical, Pi offers them an alternative story.⁷ The original story (“the story with animals”) and the later version (“the story without animals”), both told by the same person, exclude each other. Multiple parallels between the two accounts (e.g. in the former the hyena eats the wounded zebra, in the latter the cook amputates the Chinese sailor’s broken leg to use it as fishing bait and, after the man dies, eats his flesh)⁸ do not change the fact that “the story with animals” shows Pi as a pious man of integrity, who does not falter even when confronted with the most exacting experiences, whereas in “the story without animals” Pi loses his innocence: after the cook has murdered Pi’s mother, Pi murders him and triumphantly eats his heart and liver.

The problem of the conflicting narratives is solved by Pi’s argument that since it is impossible to establish which version is true and neither explains

⁵ One might question this description of the novel’s strategy on the grounds that readers who read fiction suspend their disbelief, i.e. they agree to be taken in, so the experiment cannot work: the novel tests the readers’ suspension of disbelief, not credulity. Yet this objection need not be valid as modern works of art frequently combine fictional and factual elements and readers may well discern between them, hence their willingness to believe, to take fictional for factual, may be tested.

⁶ Apparently some readers take the story as “real” (cf. June Dwyer, 18–9).

⁷ The alternative story sounds more believable but it too contains weird elements (e.g. the cook eats flies the first day after the shipwreck when there is plenty of food, 407) and fails to account for some facts that the original story explains (e.g. the meerkats’ bones in Pi’s boat, 402–3). Ines seems right to call the second version “allegedly more believable” (27).

⁸ Mr Okamoto obliges the reader by noting the parallels one by one (417–8).

the mystery of the ship's sinking one should feel free to believe "the better story." The conflict is solved more definitely by Pi's more radical suggestion that human perception and interpretation of reality as well as human use of language, which all involve an element of invention, transform human life (human knowledge included) into a story (405).⁹

The reader might, however, question this resolution of the contradiction. First of all, even though the two Japanese officials and the reader do not know the truth, Pi does know it,¹⁰ which weakens considerably his argument. Further, the rational response to the situation in which one is presented with two conflicting accounts of equal epistemological status may well consist in concluding that at least one of them is false, though neither needs to be true, and suspending one's judgment. This would be a wise course of action especially in a situation of high emotional pressure. The novel omits to even mention this possibility. Finally, even if it is true that all cognition involves an element of construction, the suggestion that all representations of reality (scientific knowledge included) are fictional and narrative seems highly contentious.

3. CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN THE NOVEL'S CRITERIA OF CHOICE AS REGARDS THE TWO VERSIONS OF PI'S SURVIVAL STORY, APPLICABLE BY EXTENSION WHEN VARIOUS COMPETITIVE ACCOUNTS OF REALITY ARE AVAILABLE, AND THE STANDARD RATIONAL MODEL OF COGNITION¹¹

In the novel Pi names the criteria which encourage Mr Okamoto and Mr Chiba to question the first version of his story: the story's believability¹² and

⁹ Cf. "Doesn't the telling of something always become a story? [. . .] Isn't just looking upon this world already something of an invention? [. . .] The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn't that make life a story?"

¹⁰ The sobriety of Pi's discourse makes the hypothesis of his mental instability and corresponding lack of clarity concerning the true course of events unlikely.

¹¹ The "standard" model is a concept I need to introduce here to be able to continue analyzing the book in terms of contradictions. If the reader finds this notion disagreeable, the following discussion may, I think, be read simply as a critique of the novel's epistemology.

¹² Cf. "If you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for? [. . .] Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?" (399–400).

its consistence with one's currently held beliefs,¹³ which might in fact amount to one criterion: believability as consistence with one's currently held beliefs. Pi disapproves of this kind of conservative scepticism. The Japanese officials try to justify their disbelief, arguing that Pi's story contradicts facts, has no support in sensory data, would be disqualified by science, does not comply with the laws of nature and is very unlikely. Pi makes little of these objections: he denies that the story contradicts facts; the testimony of the senses, as he says, is not always available; science has been known to err; one should not presume to know the laws of nature "through and through"; low probability does not prevent people from winning the lottery (395–6, 401).

After presenting the alternative version of his story, Pi himself considers the two versions in terms of three epistemic criteria—contradictoriness to facts, explanatory power and verifiability—to conclude that the criteria are of no use: they do not help differentiate between the two versions (424). So that when Pi urges his listeners to choose "the better story," it is not clear what guidelines they should apply. The "better" might perhaps be identified with the ability to expand one's view of life (dismissing the believability criterion, Pi suggests that a story can make you "see higher or further or differently," 406).¹⁴ It might also refer to richness in meaning or capability of lending meaning to human life, as suggested by Pi's words: "Where we can, we must give things a meaningful shape" (383),¹⁵ though the imperative is not recalled in this context. Charlotte Ines in turn suggests that the criterion implied in the concept of the better story be interpreted in terms of the artistic quality of the tale,¹⁶ which comes close to Martel's own statement: "The theme of this novel can be summarized in three lines. Life is a story. You can choose your story. And a story with an imaginative overlay is the better story" (qtd in Gregory Stephens, 42). Alternatively, one might argue that the absence of a clear indication how to identify "the better story" means that the choice should be made freely, according to one's liking, without reference to any specific criterion.

¹³ Cf. "You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know" (406).

¹⁴ Cf. also Cockeram's interpretation: the novel shows how the ability to expand one's world-view makes a good story and constitutes the reason why the story should be believed.

¹⁵ Cf. Brian Thorpe: "'the better story' [. . .] is not about facts but is, rather, about the role of the power of symbols and human imagination to transcend day-to-day reality and to find meaning and even glimpses of the divine" (51).

¹⁶ Cf. "[. . .] the tiger story is the finer, more thoughtful literary creation and therefore (Martel suggests) has a truth more lasting than the second, more journalistic version [. . .]" (27).

Thus, the novel's epistemic criteria for assessing a belief seem to include the following: correspondence with facts, explanatory power, verifiability and ability to expand one's view of life. These seem to be further supplemented with the ability to give meaning to human life and artistic/imaginative quality—i.e. pragmatic benefits and aesthetic values. Meanwhile the standard model of rational cognition pays much attention to such criteria as consistence with previously held beliefs, assessment of probability, assessment of the strength of supporting evidence (these are mentioned in the book, but their treatment is cursory and dismissive). Statements about things that might theoretically be possible but are extremely improbable¹⁷ and challenge one's view of life cannot rationally be taken as true on the testimony of a single person. The divergence between the novel and the standard rational approach as regards the criteria for choosing one's beliefs remains unresolved. The readers who spot it are left to their own devices.

4. CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN VARIOUS RELIGIONS ILLUSTRATED BY PI'S MULTIPLE RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

“But he can't be a Hindu, a Christian *and* a Muslim. It's impossible,” argue the imam and the priest (92).¹⁸ They believe that the accounts of God given by various religions are mutually exclusive.¹⁹ Pi protests: “‘All religions are true.’ [. . .] I just want to love God” (92).²⁰ The novel's vision of

¹⁷ This impression of implausibility is the standard critical reaction to Pi's tale, cf. William Skidelsky: “Naturally, it is an entirely improbable scenario, but [. . .] the telling is so compelling.”

¹⁸ Ines claims that the novel also contains references to the Jewish Kabbalist tradition in the name of the ship (“Tsimtsum”), Pi's choice of Isaac Luria as the subject of his religious studies and those descriptions of Pi's religious experience which correspond to Luria's thought (cf. Ines' paraphrase of Luria's ideas: “[. . .] God's light contracted from the center of the universe, purging itself of evil elements, leaving an empty space (a circle) in which human life developed. But God also sent down a ray of light [. . .] so that the few remaining divine sparks could reconnect with Him. To achieve this fusion with God [. . .] people must live an ethical life. The original divine contraction is called variously *tzimtzum*, *zimzum* or *simsim*,” 27).

¹⁹ Pi seems unaware of the fact, cf. Cockeram: “The specific doctrines of Pi's three faiths make very little difference to him. When comparing these religions to one another, Pi seems to conclude in his innocence that there need not be conflict between them [. . .].”

²⁰ Interestingly, to Pi's confusion, his irreligious father replies that everybody strives to “love God” (93) as if religion were not indispensable for that purpose.

God and man's religious experience focuses on love as an abstract principle,²¹ as God's love of man²² and as man's desire to love God.²³ The God of the novel seems both transcendent and absolute as well as immanent (identical with the human ability to love and the experience of being loved). The contradiction between various religions' images of God and ways of worshipping God might thus be resolved by reducing all religious experience to its essence conceived of as love, with various religions "merely alternative paths to the same destination," as Paul Cockeram puts it.²⁴ The reader may draw this conclusion on the basis of Pi's religious experience. Pi's experience can also be interpreted as a choice of "religious eclecticism, or syncretism," as suggested by Eric Ziolkowski (42).²⁵ But neither concentrating on the fundamental message of love, nor eclectic combining of various devotional practices can solve doctrinal differences between religions. Pi's refusal to choose one religion may have various advantages (tolerance, richness of religious experience, etc.), but it entails embracing contradictions.²⁶

The contradictions lose their significance if religions are interpreted as fictional narratives (if their doctrines are not taken to reveal the truth about God). This indeed seems to be both Pi's and, as it is inscribed in the construction of the whole book, the implied author's approach. When discussing the two versions of his survival, Pi suggests that all man's beliefs are to some extent tales of man's making and that given that two beliefs have equal epistemic status, one should feel free to choose "the better" (which might be interpreted as a recommendation of the story that offers some non-epistemic advantages). Then Pi notes: "And so it goes with God." The analogy might

²¹ Cf. the "author's" reflection that "the founding principle of existence is what we call love" (84-5).

²² Cf. Pi's resolution after the shipwreck: "so long as God is with me, I will not die" (197), or his thoughts when he prepares for death: "And now I leave matters in the hands of God, who is love and whom I love" (326).

²³ Cf. Pi's fear that an atheist's words might "kill God in a man" (37) and Pi's faith regained after a moment of despair: "[. . .] God would remain, a shining point of light in my heart. I would go on loving" (281).

²⁴ Also Thorpe speaks of "this tripartite religious identity defended solely on the basis of love" (54).

²⁵ As he argues, "in lieu of some simpler, more conventional oath consisting of a single word or name, the boy in *The Life of Pi*, whenever startled, exclaims: 'Jesus, Mary, Muhammad and Vishnu!'" (42). The same eclecticism might be spotted in Pi's Canadian house furnished with the Bible, a wooden cross, a picture of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, a photo of Kaaba, a prayer rug, the Koran, and various figures of Ganesha, Shiva and Krishna (*Life of Pi*, 60-2).

²⁶ Cf. also Randy Boyagoda's view of the novel's religious message (70).

be read in two ways: either each survival story corresponds to one religion, or “the story with animals” corresponds to faith, while “the story without animals” stands for agnosticism.²⁷ Either way the analogy implies that religions, like other beliefs, are stories.

To sum up, the novel raises the issue of the variety of religions and their diverse (to some extent contradictory) interpretations of God. It illustrates the problem with Pi’s multiple religious identity and resolves the relevant conflict in two ways. One amounts to identifying God with love as the common denominator and crucial insight of all the religions in question and combining devotional practices developed in each of them. The other consists in interpreting religions as narrative fictions.²⁸ Simultaneously the novel conveys the message that theistic belief is rational, even though it may be chosen for pragmatic or aesthetic rather than epistemic reasons.

5. CONTRADICTION BETWEEN THE STANDARD MEANING AND THE NOVEL’S USAGE OF THE TERMS “ATHEIST” AND “AGNOSTIC”

The novel’s interpretation of the two attitudes is presented mainly in two passages. In the first one, Pi notes the irrational commitment entailed in the atheist attitude and, disregarding the content of atheistic belief, finds it close to theism (both are faiths), whereas he disapproves of agnosticism interpreted as the choice of doubt that prevents action.²⁹ In the other passage, the attitudes are illustrated with the imaginary scenes of the atheist’s and agnostic’s deaths. The former meets death with the words: “White, white! L-L-Love! My God!”, which should be interpreted as “the deathbed leap of faith.” Thus, the atheist is the person who may at first be sceptical but

²⁷ In the light of the former interpretation, Pi’s refusal to choose one religion appears inconsistent. After all he implores the Japanese officials to choose one story of his survival, he does not expect them to hold both mutually exclusive accounts as true. Other reasons for preferring the latter interpretation are presented further in the paper.

²⁸ Cf. Martel’s words: “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,” (“The Empathetic Imagination,” 24–5).

²⁹ Cf. Pi’s words: “atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith, and every word they speak speaks of faith. [. . .] It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics. [. . .] To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation” (37–8).

eventually admits God's existence. By contrast, the agnostic, "if he stays true to his reasonable self," will explain "the warm light bathing him" in terms of "[p]ossibly a f-f-failing oxygenation of the b-b-brain." As the narrator explains, he "lack[s] imagination and miss[es] the better story" (85).³⁰ In other words, the agnostic is deficient in imagination and stubborn in his/her desire to find natural explanations to all mysteries.

Meanwhile the standard meaning of "atheist" is "[o]ne who denies or disbelieves the existence of God" ("Atheist"), whereas "agnostic" means "[o]ne who holds that the existence of anything beyond and behind material phenomena is unknown and (so far as can be judged) unknowable, and especially that a First Cause and an unseen world are subjects of which we know nothing" ("Agnostic").³¹ Thus, the atheist is not normally taken to have a strong (irrational) belief ("faith") that there is no God and the agnostic is not normally taken to be a passive, unimaginative materialist.

By re-interpreting and deprecating agnosticism (and atheism) the novel seems to express its disapproval of rational scepticism in the matters of religion, but doing so, the book contradicts the standard usage of the terms. Also this contradiction is not resolved in the book.

6. THE THEMATIC INCONGRUITY:
THE THEME OF GOD AND THE THEME OF NATURAL LIFE,
WHICH IMPLY THE TENSION BETWEEN THE RELIGIOUS
AND NATURALIST VIEWS OF LIFE OR,
AS STEPHENS PUTS IT, BETWEEN RELIGION AND SCIENCE³²

The thematic duality, or incongruity, in itself does not deserve the term "contradiction," but the two themes imply two views of life, which are often

³⁰ Pi's words that the agnostic "miss[es] the better story" provide additional evidence in favour of reading theism (possibly also atheism) as "the better story" and neglecting the distinctions between religions.

³¹ More common definitions of the agnostic do not include the materialistic implication of the OED definition, stating only that the agnostic on the assumption that no rational judgment can be made as regards God's existence or non-existence for lack of relevant conclusive evidence, suspends his/her judgment (cf. e.g. Alvin Plantinga 223).

³² Cf. also Cockeram's interpretation of this conflict: "This tension between reason, logic, and argument, on one hand, and simple religious faith and the desire to love God, on the other hand, lies at the novel's core. The human capacity for reason is contrasted to religious faith repeatedly [. . .]."

considered contrastive. The novel is partly about God and matters of religion (cf. Pi's religious experience) and partly about natural life (cf. the zoo, the shipwreck, and the island episodes).³³ This apparent incongruity is resolved by means of 1) scenes which are related to both themes, 2) analogies between certain religious and naturalistic aspects of life implied in the text or indicated by the narrator, 3) the novel's use of symbols uniting both themes, 4) the novel's use of natural life as allegory for religious experience. Thus, the two themes (God and natural life) meet, for example, in the scene in which Pi's biology teacher comes to the zoo and tells the boy that there is no God. The passage on zoomorphism can serve as an example of a relevant analogy: Pi explains that some animals (vipers in the zoo) may treat another animal (a mouse) as one of their own kind because their needs of companionship and care are stronger than the bare fact that the animal does not resemble their own species; they can choose to act upon a fiction when this fiction makes their life easier (112–4). Their behaviour may be interpreted as analogous to the behaviour of religious people since in terms of the novel religion, as suggested above, has the status of fiction.³⁴ This analogy is not explicit; others are less discreet.³⁵ The novel's symbols indicating the possibility of a reconciliation of faith and science include: Pi's name,³⁶ his mind-set reflected in his choice of studies,³⁷ or his encounter with the two Mr Kumars, who teach Pi biology and Islam.³⁸ As regards the novel's use of allegory, it lies at the centre of the novel: the two versions of Pi's story may

³³ The shipwreck story as such and the theme of religiosity are closely related if one reads Pi's experience as a test of his piety (like the biblical Job, Pi is exposed to extreme suffering), cf. Ines (25–6).

³⁴ Cf. Pi's comment: "I'm sure even the adult viper, as it swallowed the mouse, must have felt somewhere in its undeveloped mind a twinge of regret, a feeling that something greater was just missed, an imaginative leap away from the lonely, crude reality of a reptile" (114). Pi uses here the words "leap" and "miss", which he also uses when discussing the attitude of the atheist and the agnostic (37, 85). The agnostic who "lack[s] imagination" cannot make "the leap of faith" and thus "miss[es] the better story," all he has is "dry, yeastless factuality" (85), comparable perhaps to the "crude reality of a reptile."

³⁵ Cf. "I have heard nearly as much nonsense about zoos as I have about God and religion" (19), or "[...] zoos are no longer in people's good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both" (25).

³⁶ Cf. Pi's belief that his name combines science with irrationality (32).

³⁷ Pi's majors were religious studies and zoology: "the cosmogony theory of Isaac Luria, the great sixteenth-century Kabbalist" and "a functional analysis of the thyroid gland of the three-toed sloth" (3; cf. Stephens, 44, 48; Stephens quotes in this context a passage in which Pi ironically compares God to a sloth, 50).

³⁸ Cf. Stephens (48). The critic argues that the ship called "Tsimtsum" is yet another element connecting in the novel science with religion (50).

be taken to represent either different beliefs about God, or faith and agnosticism. The apparent incongruity in the novel's thematic content gets resolved; indeed, it turns out to be part of the book's intricate design.

Whether this solves the tension between the religious and naturalistic views of life seems doubtful.³⁹ The novel clearly defends the view that theistic belief is rational, which weakens the opposition in question, but at the same time it tendentiously presents the factual, sceptical approach of science as inferior to the imaginative, meaningful and uplifting faith.⁴⁰

7. CONTRADICTION BETWEEN THE FICTIONAL, QUASI-FACTUAL AND METAFICTIONAL MODES OF PRESENTATION

The novel is formally incoherent as it incorporates semi-documentary, openly fictional (at times almost fantastic⁴¹) and metafictional passages. The semi-documentary character of the novel is created by the "Author's Note," in which the "author" explains how he has come to know the story of Pi Patel, by the "author's" words of gratitude directed among others at Mr Patel and the Canada Council for the Arts (a real institution which lends the fictional character an air of reality); by the words of gratitude spoken by Pi at the end of his story, and by the attached semi-documents: the transcript of the conversation and the report. By contrast, the title, *Life of Pi: A Novel*, the usual generic features of the novel (e.g. the style, division into chapters) as well as the story itself make it clear that the book is a work of fiction. Finally, the metafictional elements include the discussion of fiction (x),⁴² the round number of chapters together with Pi's reflection upon it (383, as a character in the story Pi should be unaware of such issues), Pi's theory that all knowledge (all representation of reality) is to some extent fictional and narrative in character, or the intertextual names of the ship and the tiger.

³⁹ Cf. Stephens, who argues that the book tries to reconcile the domains of science and religion (both are valuable, partly narrative and complementary to each other), yet in their place recommends imaginative narrative, also as a way to faith and redemption.

⁴⁰ Cf. Werner Wolf's belief that the novel contrasts the religious with the secular and rationalist view of life to recommend the former (qtd in Maria Stefanescu 55–8).

⁴¹ Jerry Coyne describes the book as a "fantasy tale" and a "powerful piece of magic realism" (575).

⁴² The "author" suggests there that fiction should be taken as "selective transforming of reality" that aims to bring out its essence.

This formal incongruity (fictional, factual and metafictional passages) when translated into propositions takes the shape of contradiction: “the story of Pi’s life is fiction” (p) and “the story of Pi’s life is not fiction” (\sim p). The conflict between fictional and factual narratives seems annulled by Pi’s contention that all that we take as non-fiction is in fact partly fiction. As regards metafiction, it aims, according to Patricia Waugh, to question the notions of reality and fiction (2); one might therefore argue that it is used in the novel to emphasize the theme of the partial fictionality of all representations of reality. The discord present on the level of techniques may be said to be resolved on the thematic level, where the fictional, factual and metafictional elements work together to subvert the traditional distinction between facts and fiction.⁴³

8. FRAGMENTATION OF THE NOVEL AND THE CONSEQUENT SENSE OF INCONGRUITY

The novel not only employs various narrative modes, but is also fragmented in its construction. It consists of a dedication (“*à mes parents et à mon frère*,” which sounds like Pi addressing the family that he has lost), the “Author’s Note,” three parts and 100 chapters. In part one two narrative situations are intertwined: the story of Pi’s childhood and shipwreck is printed in the standard font, while the story of the “author’s” present-day encounter with Pi is italicised. To make matters more confusing Pi’s identity is not explicitly revealed in these passages so that only with time does the reader realize that the aging man living with his family in Canada is Pi. Part two tells the story of the shipwreck. Part three opens with an italicized comment on the remaining contents of the book: a transcript of a tape-recorded conversation and a report of the investigation of the sunken ship. This construction is worth noting, even though it exemplifies a lack of integrity, not contradiction, because it demands of the reader the use of the coherence principle. The reader who assumes that the text is intelligible has to collect all the elements, decide on their priority and mutual relations. Eventually all these elements make sense: they are related to Pi’s life and contribute to the novel’s religious-epistemological theme.

⁴³ Also, since metafiction undermines the reader’s suspension of disbelief, the metafictional element in the book contributes to the novel’s experimental testing of the reader’s willingness to believe (like the overtly fantastic elements, metafiction discourages the reader from believing the story).

CONCLUSION

As regards epistemology, the novel indicates that it is rational to assume that all beliefs contain fictional and narrative elements, as well as that unverifiable beliefs which do not contradict facts, even if they do not explain much, in the absence of epistemically more satisfactory beliefs, may rationally be accepted if this brings practical benefits. The novel then applies this theory to religious experience to suggest that in the absence of conclusive evidence proving or disproving God's existence, theism is the advisable choice. Faith demands some imagination and effort of will, but it rewards the believer with the ability to love and a sense of being loved. The choice of faith is not irrational even if it is made on pragmatic rather than epistemic grounds.⁴⁴ The novel offers both an experiment and arguments to convey this message.⁴⁵

Even so, the message seems open to questioning, as I have already suggested while discussing the novel's account of human knowledge, epistemic criteria, agnosticism and the relation between science and faith. Without repeating the details, one may note in conclusion that epistemic scepticism is comprehensible with reference to Transcendence but much less so when empirical reality is involved – the novel does not seem to note the difference. Further, the praise of the richness of imaginative life and benefits of stories that promote love, associated with religion,⁴⁶ goes in the novel together with a disapproval of the poverty of scepticism and cognitive backwardness, associated with science—this view of science seems biased.

The novel's method is not beyond criticism either. The aesthetic experience offered by *Life of Pi* can be analyzed in terms of experiment and

⁴⁴ Cf. also Thorpe (51). It is worth noting that Pi insists that he is "reasonable"; he only objects to being "excessively reasonable" as this may impoverish life (400). Pi also respects facts (cf. the experiment with the bananas in the sink filled with water, 393–5).

⁴⁵ Cf. also Martel's statement: "Religion [. . .] makes you suspend your disbelief so that factual truth becomes irrelevant. It's not because facts are ignored. It's more how you interpret the facts [. . .]" (24). Martel explains further that faith does not dispense with reason, but interpreting facts, takes advantage of imagination; it is a mistake to overestimate reason ("The Empathetic Imagination" 25–7).

⁴⁶ *Nota bene*, recommending theistic belief on pragmatic grounds, the novel fails to consider possible unintended side-effects of this belief. It may help people live, but it may also prove dangerous (cf. religious persecutions, fanatical suicides, etc). Even if the risk may be minimized in the kind of pragmatic, rational religiosity recommended by the novel, it still seems worth considering.

manipulation. The readers are offered an opportunity to see how much they can believe if a vision of a morally/emotionally acceptable world is at stake. They are also challenged to reconsider the criteria which help them choose one version of the story out of the two conflicting possibilities. Finally, they are encouraged to think to what extent their conclusions might apply to other spheres of life, other beliefs they hold, in particular, those related to their religious experience. I shall call this the *experimental* aspect of the book; it seems precious and uncontroversial.

The other aspect, constituted by the implied author's interpretation of the experiment, seems more problematic as the readers may feel manipulated into accepting this interpretation.⁴⁷ The novel first stages the fictional reality, appeals to the readers' emotions, engages them in an experiment and asks important questions. Then, making use of allegory, with much authority (Pi and the "author" both seem to act as the implied author's mouthpieces) the novel offers its own interpretation of the experiment. I have argued above that this interpretation seems in certain respects mistaken or biased, but even critical and attentive readers at this stage may welcome it with relief. They have been told a long and tragic story, their credulity has been tested, now at last everything makes sense and they can enjoy a happy ending (choose the "story with animals"), provided that they accept the novel's allegedly rational epistemology. The author seems confident that the reader should be satisfied.⁴⁸ The pressure may be hard to resist.

Some risk seems part of all aesthetic experience. If readers decline to suspend their disbelief and get involved, they lose a chance to gain new insights. To minimize the risk of manipulation contemporary art often lays bare its own artefactual character, proclaims the artist's lack of authority. Even though it employs metafiction, *Life of Pi* seems unaware of the risk, or perhaps implying that life is a story, the novel cannot issue the relevant warning without contradicting itself.

As regards contradictions, it appears that the novel 1) offers the readers a chance to test their willingness to ignore contradictions, 2) explicitly problematizes the theme of contradictions and their role in cognition (e.g.

⁴⁷ Cf. Stefanescu's analysis of the novel's strategy of persuasion (57).

⁴⁸ Cf. Boyagoda's description of the authorial message: "Of course Martel wants us to believe in Pi's original version [. . .]. In his view, to do so is a leap of faith, which in turn is a leap towards God: the God brought into existence by the novel itself, a strange mishmash of religious notions and figures that together comprise the deity that Pi creates and celebrates. In short, a God of fiction" (71).

questioning the value of the criterion of believability based on consistence of beliefs), 3) for full appreciation demands that the reader be attentive both to textual contradictions (trying to integrate various conflicting elements of the text in the name of the principle of coherence) and, sometimes deceptive, coherences (in need of the reader's critical examination).

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ŻYCIE PI YANNA MARTELA —
 UŻYCIE SPRZECZNOŚCI W EKSPERYMENTALNEJ POWIEŚCI
 NA TEMAT EPISTEMOLOGICZNEGO STATUSU WIARY W BOGA

Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia *Życie Pi* Yanna Martela, koncentrując się na sposobach, w jaki powieść wykorzystuje sprzeczności, by poruszyć temat teistycznych, ateistycznych i agnostycznych przekonań. Powieść zdaje się bronić tezy, że teizm jest racjonalny (ze względu raczej na pragma-

tyczne niż epistemiczne racje), ateizm swym zaangażowaniem przypomina wiarę, podczas gdy agnostycyzm można utożsamić z dogmatycznym materializmem i biernym podejściem do życia. By zilustrować ten punkt widzenia, powieść proponuje czytelnikowi eksperyment, przedstawiając mu dwie wzajemnie sprzeczne wersje historii ocalenia Pi.

Streściła Joanna Klara Teske

Słowa kluczowe: *Życie Pi*, Yann Martel, sprzeczności, wiara, poznanie.