Circles unrounded: sustainability, subject and necessity in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

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Yann Martel's Man Booker Prize-winning *Life of Pi* (2002 [2001]) depicts the story of Pi, a boy who finds himself stranded on a lifeboat in the vast Pacific Ocean with a Bengal tiger. Having grown up in the setting of his family's zoo in Pondicherry, Pi is faced with the loss of his family, who – on their way to a new start in Canada – go down with the ship, along with the remaining zoo animals. The central storyline, located in part 2 of the novel, is that of Pi's lifeboat journey, his struggle for survival and his gradual realisation that the wellbeing of the tiger is tied up with his own. Both Pi and the tiger eventually reach the shores of North America, following an extraordinary journey of extreme physical duress and a series of events bordering mainly on the fantastic. As a tall tale with a magical realist feel, the novel is not – or at least is not directly – about sustainability. Indeed, to view it as such raises difficulties, for example in the way it locates its resolution in the Global North. Nonetheless, *Life of Pi* can be read as replicating and playing out some of sustainability's tensions as a concept with complex implications. As such, it ruminates upon challenges faced as sustainability infiltrates contemporary and popular consciousness, taking shape as a present day concern.

*Life of Pi* has already been discussed in terms of Pi's changing responses to the tiger, unexpectedly named Richard Parker, and the implications of these changes with regard to the nonhuman world and to human–nonhuman dualities (for example, see Huggan and Tiffin 2010; McFarland 2014; Westling 2014). My concern in this chapter is more particularly with the effects of the novel's testing of the human subject horizon – its possibilities and limits – in connection to present-day environmental concerns. This is seen in the way the novel places Pi, as first-person narrator, in juxtaposition with the necessities of a sustainable world, by which, for the purposes of this essay, I mean a world whose ecological capacity to continue to support human life is safeguarded (ecological sustainability). I identify such a world as represented – if figuratively so – in the novel's proleptic account of Pi's eventual establishment of ongoing family life and living in Canada. But this projection of
a future world and its wellbeing raises the question of it being possible to account at all for the real beyond grasp, and not just that of some imagined future. Sustainability assumes, moreover, not just such accounting, but – as delineated in the Brundtland definition of sustainable development – the embedding of such accounting in the actions of the present.¹ That is, the wellbeing of future generations is recognised as relying upon our actions going forward today. It is this aspect of sustainability – its entrance into paradigms of the (collective or individual) subject in the present – that is of particular interest in this essay. What does it mean to align our immanent actions with such ungraspable realities as the needs of external others, human or nonhuman, present or future? How, moreover, do we respond to the interruption imposed by these needs upon present paradigms as might otherwise unfold – and at what cost? In order to illustrate the novel’s explorations of these difficulties, I read *Life of Pi* alongside a parallel tension in contemporary theory between the phenomenological and the speculative real, about which I say more shortly. Accordingly, I read Pi’s personal struggle, conveyed through his first-person narration, as an assertion of the phenomenological, whereby the subject is inescapably positioned within a horizon; and I equate the novel’s depiction of the nonhuman realm and its projection of a sustainable world with speculative realism’s goal of establishing the outside of thought.

Such an approach to the novel draws attention to the poles between which its narrative operates. In performing the tension between the phenomenological and the speculative real, the novel alludes to such tensions in sustainability as those between its global and local dynamics and between its weaker and stronger forms. The need for ecocritics to pay attention to issues of scale, such as that of the local and global, has been stated before (Clark 2011; Heise 2008; Keller 2012; Trexler and Johns-Putra 2011). The novel handles such issues by directly inserting the object (the futural vision) within the frame of the present, bringing disparate poles into provocative proximity. Thus, in part 1 of the novel we encounter both Pi’s account of his childhood in Pondicherry and, interspersed with this, the author’s proleptic account of meeting Pi in Canada, years after the voyage, where Pi is by now raising a family of his own. While Pi’s first-person narration focalises the addressing of his immediate survival needs, the reader is nonetheless informed – even before Pi’s journey at sea begins – that ‘this story has a happy ending’ (Martel 2002: 93). As such, the novel effectively bridges the ‘gap’ (see Kate Rigby’s essay in this collection) between the unsustainable paradigms of the present and the envisaged ideal of a sustainable world. This is in contrast to the post-apocalyptic envisaging in much environmental crisis fiction of the world we have failed to sustain. Yet it does so by enacting a forced closure, the costs of which are either humorously dismissed or
given over to a transcendent notion of change – although they retain a certain, stark presence.

The novel performs this closure through a series of metaphors. Pi’s lifeboat journey becomes a metaphor for humanity in the face of current challenges, the tiger a metaphor for the nonhuman world that must be somehow accommodated, and the novel’s ‘happy ending’ a metaphor for the temporal goal of a sustainable world – however conceived. Within the world of the novel, this structural juxtaposition places the character Pi under extreme personal duress, since the predetermined outcome relies on his transforming in two distinct ways: by vastly multiplying his resourcefulness, and by acquiring a new conception of ‘other’ – both of which turn out to be necessary to his survival. Through imposing such a dynamic, placing Pi under a fiscal austerity of sorts, the novel explores not just the challenges faced by collective humanity but also the difficulties and costs to which such challenges give rise. Through Pi’s first-person narration, the novel foregrounds the impacts of perspective, the impossibilities of (absolute) knowing, the possibilities of encounter, and the ways in which intention and necessity can put us at odds with ourselves. As the novel progresses, Pi’s subject limitations are gradually overcome, although not so much by choice as by necessity. Pi’s survival and that of the tiger turn out to be inseparable, his battle with the tiger – as friend and foe – to be equally a battle with himself. As the novel explores this subject–world dynamic, it replicates an all-important question of the era: how might humanity accommodate that which exceeds it – in theory, in thought and in actuality?

I begin the chapter with a brief discussion of sustainability before going on to relate sustainability to theoretical tensions between phenomenology and the speculative real. I then turn to considering Life of Pi’s emphasis on a human-centred stance, alongside its apparent recalibrating of the subject horizon as a sustainable world is engendered.

Sustainability and the human project

A number of sustainability’s tensions and paradoxes and their nuances have been teased out across the essays in this collection. This final essay considers sustainability from the perspective of opacity itself. That is, it addresses the issue that sustainability is premised upon projected notions that are variously indistinct or beyond perceptive grasp. These include the very idea of a sustainable world, as well as the endless parts of that which such a world might sustain. In practical terms, of course, sustainability operates at such graspable scales as that of the institution and its policies. Indeed, it (loosely) offers a framework for doing so. Yet it also anchors intentionality to the broader notion of a changed world in which resources
are not depleted, species not lost, and so on. While elements of this vision, such as the safeguarding of a certain species, might be mapped out as discrete aims, sustainability often seems not to give full weight to that which it assumes. It is ultimately a slippery term, fraught – as essays in this collection variously observe – with ambiguity and paradox. Sustainability, one might say, exceeds itself as a concept or sign.

As such, where it has as its goal, even if partially drawn, the ecological health of the planet and its parts, human and nonhuman, sustainability reaches – like other environmentalisms – for that which is beyond grasp. Yet it is also quite specifically calibrated to a concern with human wellbeing, actively implicating the human subject, individual or collective. That is, it adopts a human-centred, or anthropocentric, stance. While the emphasis in contemporary ecocritical and other scholarship is often on overcoming the limitations of human-centred thinking, seen for example in much post-humanist and new materialist thought, sustainability is located firmly within human practice and politics – a feature that might be viewed as its weakness or its strength (or both). Outcomes include, on the one hand, its widespread proliferation across the socio-political scene and, on the other, its tendency to lose sight of the environmental matters with which it is concerned. As Stacy Alaimo puts it, sustainability can evoke ‘an environmentalism without an environment, an ecology devoid of living creatures other than human beings,’ whereby ‘the lively world is reduced to the material for meeting “needs”’ (2012: 562). Alaimo is not pointing here to the loss of other creatures, it seems, but to the kind of instrumental reasoning that perceives them from the subjective limits of human needs-processing.

The tension between sustainability’s embeddedness in the human sphere, and its striving to address that which exceeds it, provides one facet of its slipperiness. This is seen, for example, in distinctions between its weak (reformist) and strong (transformational) forms – neither of which escapes the troublesome issue of anthropocentrism. How much change is required and of what kind? In anthropocentric reformism, our unsustainable practices are not blamed on a failure to embrace the nonhuman world, but on what David Kronlid describes as a ‘specific kind of anthropocentrism; a shortsighted, ecologically greedy, and ecologically uninformed anthropocentrism that does not take into consideration the ineffective use of nature’s resources’ (cited in Kronlid et al. 2003: 643). In other words, it is not that we have not recognised the intrinsic value of the nonhuman (deep ecology), but that we have failed to notice, or stupidly ignored, the damage our practices cause to that upon which our survival relies (shallow ecology). The emphasis going forward becomes one of reforming practices as they are now, rather than on addressing overall planetary wellbeing, which would necessitate the more radical changes of a transformational approach.
Transformational sustainability places greater emphasis on change in relation to the global vision of a sustainable world, even if this change is incrementally conceived (Brand 2016; Clifton 2010). One might consider this in relation to Lynn Keller’s remark that ‘thinking towards sustainability’ requires ‘local practices’ to ‘be reconceptualised within planetary dynamics’ (2012: 584). While weak sustainability also recognises such dynamics, a transformational response involves a ‘fundamental system change’ that is non-linear and does not prioritise any particular temporal or spatial scale (Brand 2016: 24). It therefore enacts a radical shift whereby planetary considerations might unsettle established values and practices (Nalau and Handmer 2015, cited in Brand 2016). That such ‘planetary dynamics’ have an aesthetic dimension points to the value of a literary response to sustainability. Indeed, *Life of Pi* provides a narrative space in which such reconceptualisation is imaginatively explored. It is this that gives rise to the duress placed upon the character Pi within the world of the novel.

The novel poses big questions about the role of the human in relation to change. As Pi (humanity) is set, metaphorically, within a set of global dynamics, he embodies the subjective position from which change is negotiated or might unfold. From here, he is impacted by the circumstances in which he finds himself. The need to account for the world beyond immediate perception is thus depicted as based on necessity, not ethics, intervening in notions of sustainability as shallow or deep while working from a human starting point. One might therefore view the novel’s explorations of sustainability’s anthropocentric mode, not so much as a means to prioritise human need (although this continues to be addressed), but as a means to frame the problem as a human problem.

The challenges of perception – phenomenology and the speculative real

In playing out the challenges of envisaging change in a contemporary world, Pi demonstrates the difficulties of the partial nature of perception and the limitations of seeing beyond ourselves, especially at the scales and the levels of complexity required. Such limitations are increasingly problematic in the globalised era of environmental crisis. For example, as Timothy Clark – discussing the problems posed in the present to phenomenology – puts it: where, ‘especially in the Anthropocene, does “my environment” end,’ given that ‘[s]omeone living a high-carbon lifestyle in New York or the Scottish Highlands is already lurking as a destructive interloper on the floodplains of Bangladesh?’ (2014: 284–8). But how might such limits be addressed with regard to our human actions and their possible effects?
One advantage of fiction is its capacity to expose the difficulties of envisioning while effectively taking us beyond such limitations. Through opening up disparate spatial and temporal elements fiction can illustrate the partial nature of perception whilst drawing close that which is otherwise inaccessible for interrogation. Such effects appear in specific ways in *Life of Pi*. Its narrative rarely moves away from Pi’s first-person focalising of events but creates a fluctuating effect as he narrates from differing times and locations. However, the juxtaposition of his immediate challenges with his ‘happy ending’ to come sets up a dynamic that clearly exceeds him. This technique of fixing an (externally located) outcome opens up a space by which the challenges of reaching such an outcome are explored. The pressure under which this places the novel’s metaphors (Pi, the tiger, the ‘happy ending’) blurs the borders of reality and fantasy to the extent that the realism the novel largely upholds is rendered precarious, potentially only further emphasising the difficulties of seeing beyond ourselves. Nonetheless, the narrative’s centralising of Pi’s first-person narration, interspersed with his interpellation by the world that exceeds him, amplifies and thus makes available for exploration the challenges of achieving a sustainable world.

In the analysis that follows, I consider the novel’s interrogations of sustainability’s challenges through its narrative techniques alongside a related moment in contemporary theory. Specifically, I refer to a tension discernible between the more established theoretics of phenomenology and emergent ideas in speculative realism – a mode of theorising originating at a symposium at Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2007. Tom Sparrow refers to this tension as ‘the end of phenomenology’ (2014), while Clark remarks: ‘all that is most challenging in the twenty-first century about the environmental crisis – politically, sociologically, and philosophically – can be gauged to the degree to which it challenges or even eludes altogether a phenomenological approach’ (2014: 284). If by phenomenology we mean the study of the experiential mode of the subject, or the ‘structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view’ (Woodruff-Smith 2003, updated 2013), then its ‘end’ might be found in the emergence of the speculative real. The broad aim of speculative realism might be understood as the desire to ‘reconnect philosophy to the “great outside” of the inhuman and ultimately contingent world’ (Padui 2011: 90–1). Accordingly, one of its objectives is to overcome that difficulty of post-Kantian thought, defined by Quentin Meillassoux as ‘correlationism,’ whereby: ‘All we ever engage with is what is given-to-thought, never an entity subsisting by itself’ (2012: 36).

Intriguingly, both Sparrow, who attacks phenomenology from a range of perspectives, and Clark, who notes the weaknesses of its inherited forms, retain some interest in its possible future. For Sparrow, this would mean a return to Hegel’s ‘absolute idealism,’ whereby ‘Phenomenology...
could transform idealism into a new variant of speculative realism, and thereby forge a subterranean portal to the things themselves’ (2014: 189). Clark considers ‘a new ecophenomenology’, referring to the work of David Wood, whose aim is to develop ‘a middle ground between phenomenology and naturalism, between intentionality and causality’ (Wood n.d.: 78).

Wood seeks to elucidate, ‘a model of the whole as something that will inevitably escape our model of it’ (2003: 8; author’s italics). He invokes what he calls the ‘plexity’ of time (n.d.: 3), through which he demonstrates the incompleteness of our grasp of reality within the temporal plane, thereby countering the ‘premature closure’ of phenomenology’s inherited forms (Clark 2014: 288). An example Wood gives is that of a tree outside our window, which we regularly see, and yet, he suggests, the *life* of the tree, or the living (and temporal) tree, of which we ‘glimpse only a limb here, a trunk there’, is effectively invisible to us (Wood n.d.: 5). According to Clark, a new ecophenomenology (such as Wood’s) would recognise both the complexity of phenomena *and* the way such phenomena can so easily be hidden from view (2014: 288). It would remind us that ‘the whole’ is dependent on the continuing coordination of parts that have, albeit residual, individual interests’ (Wood 2003: 226–7, cited in Clark 2014: 288); thus it would deal *both* with the idiosyncratic interior of the experiential subject *and* with its partial relationality with regard to an exterior or whole.

Ecophenomenology, it appears, makes room for, while not accounting (*as such*) for, the real beyond the phenomenological subject. Such a ‘real’ is the theoretical goal of speculative realism. Levi Bryant, for example, develops a variant of object ontology by ‘bracketing’ our preoccupation with access to beings or reality (correlationism) in order to focus instead on ‘difference’ as ‘a matter of the “things themselves”, not our relation to them’ (2011: 262, 267). ‘If something makes a difference’, he states, ‘then it is, full stop’ (Byrant 2011: 268). His emphasis, here, is on differences that make a difference, regardless of whether that difference impacts on us. Nonetheless, this idea usefully theorises the way circumstances press upon Pi by bracketing (temporarily) his first-person narration. As such, it provides a means to explicate the way the novel on the one hand says very little about the real it designates beyond Pi’s grasp, yet, on the other, *makes* it make a difference to Pi through structural amplification, generated by the use of narrative juxtapositions.

Pi’s first-person narration effectively sets up an (eco)phenomenological exploration of the challenges he faces. He operates from the central point of the correlation, his narration describing the world through his access to it; yet he appears not just limited but enabled through his intentional interrelations with the phenomenal world, which is demonstrated to enact difference. My interest, ultimately, is in the novel’s seeming insistence, nonetheless, on the correlation at a time when the
challenge of environmental crisis is precisely that of our subject limitations. Why emphasise the human perspective at all when our harms to the world are a result of our failure to see beyond immediate needs? And what does this say about sustainability and its human-centric modes?

*Life of Pi: circles and horizons*

Turning to Martel's novel, the first thing to remark upon is its title, with its metaphorical use of the mathematical symbol, \( \pi \). Important to this is the idea, simply, of a circle, by which the novel denotes the horizon of human perspective – or, indeed, that of any sentient being. In referring to the ratio of a circle's circumference and diameter, \( \pi \) also has the curious quality of being constant, whatever circle it is applied to. One might extend this to say that any subject (human or nonhuman) is subject to the limitations of its own horizon – whatever the scope of that horizon. \( \pi \) is also an irrational number (it is not expressible precisely as a common fraction) and a transcendent number (meaning that one cannot square a circle). If the novel makes mathematical use of these, I have not deduced it, but it might be said to incorporate 'irrationality' and 'transcendence' as aspects of the human subject. Finally there is the question of the title's meaning in reversal: 'circle of life', which points to the conception of life as cyclical, or the cycle of life and death. Along with these meanings, each of which is only partially drawn, the novel's use of a circle metaphor is also intensified within the narrative itself, through the technique of a telling that is more inclined to be circular than linear. Events are narrated from starting points anywhere on a circumference, or unfold temporarily in reverse spirals, starting with effects and working back through causes. While these strategies at times make circles and spirals of the plot, they also generate a security in reception, since it is through this that we know of Pi's future wellbeing – although not yet that of the tiger – while reading of his near-starvation at sea.

The novel uses various means to present Pi as bounded within a horizon of knowing, and for much of the novel – throughout Pi's recounting, in part 1, of his childhood in Pondicherry, and in the earlier stages of his lifeboat experiences in part 2 – his capacity to account for others seems, accordingly, limited. This is conveyed through the novel's layering of Pi's narrative voice, juxtaposing the viewpoints of his earlier and later selves. An example of this is the scene in which Pi gives a defence of zoos. Based on his experiences, Pi's reflections are well-meaning and include several judicious points with regard to creaturely needs, encouraging the animal-savvy reader to credit Pi with insight. As a boy, Pi is already open-minded enough to profess to being Hindu, Christian and Muslim.
all at once. Yet he also tends towards extreme conclusions. He observes, quite aptly, that we tend to romanticise wilderness: ‘People think animals in the wild are “happy” because they are “free”’ he remarks, describing this as ‘nonsense’ (Martel 2002: 15). However, his view that nondomestic animals ‘live lives of compulsion and necessity’ (16) characterised by high levels of fear and hunger, constant territorial challenge and torment by parasites, overlooks, among other matters, the fact that suffering might occur in wild or domestic situations. Pi’s conclusion, that zoos answer survival challenges for animals as houses do for humans, based on the observation that a good zoo provides for a creature’s needs, again is partially drawn. As Westling notes, zoos may well play a role in safeguarding individuals or species whose habitats are lost (2014: 129). But Pi takes this further, claiming that animals would choose zoos if given the choice. His position is in the end undermined, not just in the face of bad zoos but in the ironic contextualisation of his own analeptic observation in the same section: that Pondicherry Zoo no longer exists. Pi’s father closes the zoo when he becomes unnerved by the political climate of New India. Although some animals are rehomed, most end up interned on the ill-fated ship. Thus, what is ultimately emphasised as far as captive animals are concerned – and still through Pi’s first-person narration – is their vulnerability, like that of humans, to the realm of human socio-political instabilities.

This already begins to demonstrate the novel’s subtle use of Pi’s first-person narration to explore issues of anthropocentrism. Given that the novel goes on – as Sarah E. McFarland (2014: 160–2) observes – to variously ‘challenge’ Pi’s pro-zoo stance, it seems too straightforward to say that this instance is illustrative of an overall anthropocentrism in the novel, as suggested in Phillip Armstrong’s reading (2008: 178). The novel does, I would suggest, sustain a certain anthropocentrism beyond this episode; indeed my argument is based on it. However, rather than view this as evidence for some lack in the novel, I see it as a device by which the novel explores, testing the limits and possibilities of, a human-centred perspective. Presented through Pi’s first-person narration and complicated by the juxtaposition of his childhood and later hindsight views, this reflection on zoos both demonstrates the premature closure enacted by the phenomenological subject and opens the narrative up to the ways in which our perspectives can shift over space and time. The novel’s combining of disparate temporal reference points replicates Wood’s claim that we only glimpse moments of the real, never the real in itself. Thus, although he attempts to do so, Pi fails to say what nonhuman animals need, perhaps reflecting that what nonhumans need is in an important sense unknowable to us.

Another example of the novel’s setting up and undermining of Pi’s phenomenological position – or his horizon of knowing – is through his
occasional transition to unreliable narrator. Such slippage is apparent already in Pi’s recounting of his memories of Pondicherry, but is seen again, with increasing effect, as the novel goes on. It is largely diminished during his initial time at sea although the novel continues to remind us that, much as Pi is rational, observant and well-adjusted, he is capable of mistakes and misjudgements. For example, having described the tiger climbing aboard the lifeboat, he recounts three days at sea in which no tiger features, other than as the figure of his anxiety. He thinks he must have imagined the tiger, but it turns out to be lying low, suffering from sea-sickness under a tarpaulin. This depicts, not so much a failure on Pi’s part, but the limitations of perception, especially under trying circumstances. While it seems unlikely that one could spend three days on a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger and not be sure of its presence, it is not beyond the realms of possibility.

As the novel goes on, its use of the unreliable narrator intensifies. Thus, having spent many months at sea, Pi recounts an encounter with a floating carnivorous island, populated by nothing but meerkats. Later still, weakened by exhaustion, he recounts going temporarily blind and entering into a discussion – he thinks – with the tiger, which on regaining his sight turns out to have been an old man in another lifeboat, now eaten by the tiger. In these episodes, a blurring of the boundaries of reality occurs, yet the novel maintains sufficient sense of the real that the reader – rather than drift into fantasy – becomes conscious of her own limitations. We are reminded that the world is not always as we perceive it to be, that we are susceptible to imperception, irrationality and even hallucination. This use of the unreliable narrator to render fallible the human subject is finally driven home in the third section of the novel, when, having reached North America, Pi is questioned by officials who do not believe his story. Obligingly, he offers a different story in which the passengers on the lifeboat were really his mother, the ship’s cook and a sailor, and he asks the officials to choose whichever story they prefer. This has the dramatic effect of leaving the reader with no way of telling which story is supposed to be the real one. The novel clearly intends no resolution here, and so the reader, as subject, finds themselves in the last instance to be fully undermined.

In its representations of the subject as caught in its own horizon of knowing, the novel demonstrates two of Clark’s points with regard to Wood’s ecophenomenology. Firstly, it demonstrates the subject’s partial relationality with regard to the whole; thus Pi, as with the view of a tree outside a window, responds to life’s realities as they appear before him, even as his access to them is always in glimpses. Secondly, it takes account of the idiosyncrasies of the experiential subject. This is important in that achieving a sustainable world inescapably depends upon people – whether those in power or the general populace; yet people, including those who
prioritise sustainability, are not necessarily dependable. This difficulty is usefully theorised in Adeline Johns-Putra’s new materialist critique of environmental care ethics, in which she suggests that care, rather than being the means by which agency occurs, is ‘itself agential’; thus, she argues, ‘the agency of caring is contingent on the level and quality of caring; and caring is in turn ‘always contextualised’ (2013: 126, 133). One might want humanity to care (for the planet and its creatures), and want this care to be effectively deployed, but care is always to an extent governed by (often conflicting) experiences and by responses to these experiences.

Pi’s journey

Pi’s subjecthood, accordingly, is not static throughout the novel. Circumstances press upon him and change him as he is cast adrift in the Pacific Ocean. This ‘pressing upon’ is reminiscent of evolving ideas in the present era, in which unquestioned trajectories of human progress are ‘interrupted’ by the advent of an external crisis of environment. Pi’s journey of survival begins with the sinking of the ship, aboard which are his family and many of the zoo animals. This episode sets up certain metaphors by which we might read the novel’s treatment of sustainability. The sinking of the ship might denote the fall of the social world – a collapse commonly depicted in environmental crisis fiction, based on society’s failure to enact the changes required. (For discussions on societal collapse, see Dana Phillips’ essay in this book.) For Pi, the sinking of the ship is ‘as unbelievable as the moon catching fire’ (Martel 2002: 103), perhaps reminding us of the difficulty of imagining a world without capitalism (Jameson 2003). Pi sees his life as entrusted to ‘the officers of our destiny’ (Martel 2002: 104), the ship’s crew whom he remains convinced have a handle on the situation (even as the ship fills with water and lists to one side), and whom he believes will respond accordingly. But, perhaps in keeping with leadership issues of today’s world, the officers instead display an irresponsible denial of the situation, unceremoniously throwing Pi into a lifeboat occupied by a hyena. Only later does Pi suspect their intention to have been to free up the lifeboat for themselves.

Having dispensed with the social order – a process to which Pi’s own family and the many interned zoo animals are tragically sacrificed – the novel transfers Pi’s journey (to a sustainable world) from the domain of the ship to that of the lifeboat. Here, the lifeboat, as Westling remarks, becomes an ‘elegant material pun on what earth is for us’ (2014: 126). We might understand this as conjuring up a previously un-grasped external real (in this case the Earth, the environment or nonhuman world) within the orbit of Pi’s perception. In depicting the lifeboat, the novel also alludes,
as noted by Huggan and Tiffin, to survival narratives such as Robinson Crusoe (2010: 174). One might also view the lifeboat in relation to Garrett Hardin’s (1974) ‘lifeboat ethics’, disturbingly subtitled ‘the case against helping the poor’, in which he argues that the planet can only support so many lives. Each of these allusions pertains to resources: to our various uses of them, our actions in the face of their finiteness, and so on, thus evoking a sustainability theme. In dealing directly with the situation, Pi must contend with both the situational limitations and his own – a process that significantly challenges his sense of being and his views on life. In metaphorical terms, he is forced to confront the gap between sustainability as local project and sustainability in the overarching sense of a sustainable world.

There are two notable aspects to Pi’s changing responses at sea. One is the shift in his relations with the tiger, the other his growing awareness of the physical world, as represented by lifeboat and ocean. Each of these in some way alters his perspective. At first, Pi’s responses to the tiger are, quite understandably, dramatic and extreme. Urging him to swim to the safety of the lifeboat, Pi suddenly realises the implications. As the tiger clambers aboard, Pi jumps off into the sea, unable to imagine their mutual survival. For some time after that, he gives witness to the battle that rumbles on between the various nonhuman occupants of the lifeboat: the hyena, a zebra with a broken leg, an orangutan and the tiger. The battle is physical, since the hyena kills the zebra and the orangutan, only to be killed by the tiger; and it is psychological, since the terrified Pi must use his mental resources to generate physical resources, building a raft upon which to drift some distance from the lifeboat with its resident tiger. Pi battles too with his own sensibilities: as a vegetarian and a pacifist, he must negotiate his horror at the task of dispatching sealife to survive. Yet each of these battles – headed by his fear of the tiger – is overshadowed by his most basic need: for water. ‘With a tiger on board,’ he remarks, ‘my life was over. That being settled, why not do something about my parched throat?’ (Martel 2002: 135). Necessity is thus distilled to ultimate necessity.

The gradual changes in Pi’s responses to the tiger have been variously observed. Huggan and Tiffin, referring to Pi’s various dominance displays, note that he learns to control the tiger ‘by acknowledging and re-inhabiting his own animality, not by divesting himself of it’ (2010: 172). This is illustrative of the novel’s gradual blurring of human–nonhuman boundaries. Importantly, an agential reversal is also at work; thus, as McFarland notes, ‘although Pi coaches Richard Parker to respect his territory on the lifeboat, Richard Parker also trains Pi to read his signals’ (2014: 158). A key instance of this occurs when Pi recognises the tiger to be communicating with him in a certain way. ‘Prusten,’ Pi explains, is ‘the quietest of tiger calls, a puff through the nose to express friendliness and harmless intentions’
(Martel 2002: 163). It is following this that Pi concludes: 'it was not a question of him or me, but of him and me. We were,' he states, 'literally and figuratively, in the same boat' (164). Consequently, of his list of seven ways to deal with the tiger, most of which involve the tiger's necessary death, Pi decides on the seventh, which is ‘Keep Him Alive’ (166). This is a crucial moment in the novel, since it signals the recognition that human survival (that of Pi) is ensured, not through the instrumental reasoning of destruction, but through co-existence with the nonhuman realm (represented by the tiger). This transition is verified in Pi's subsequent recognition that the tiger, literally, has kept him alive. His eventual affection for him is most poignantly portrayed when they reach North America and the tiger jumps ashore, heading into the trees without looking back. Devastated that the tiger does not somehow ‘conclude’ their ‘relationship’ (284), Pi wishes he had found some way to thank him. Instead, he is forced to accept that his care for the tiger must remain unacknowledged. Here, human accommodation of the nonhuman appears as based on necessity, not attachment, and accordingly is beyond conditionality.

Pi’s journey at sea also involves his response to the physical world. This has two aspects: Pi's physical survival and the changing dimensions of his mental landscape. An example of this is his belated discovery of the boat’s stores and his learning to use its resources while accounting both for his needs and those of the tiger. The stores contain any number of useful items from fishing gear to solar stills (which turn seawater into drinking water), as well as sufficient food and water for ninety-three days. As he grows in resourcefulness, Pi learns to make full use not just of the boat’s stores but of anything available, enabling him to sustain himself and the tiger when rations run out. This involves his constant discovery of what is already before him. Describing the physical features of the boat, he remarks:

I did not grasp all these details – and many more – right away. They came to my notice with time and as a result of necessity. I would be in the direst of dire straits, facing a bleak future, when some small thing, some detail, would transform itself and appear in my mind in a new light. (Martel 2002: 139)

Possible solutions are already present, the novel suggests; it is the recognition of necessity that brings them forward into view; what limits us is a failure to grasp necessity.

Although Pi's circumstances are minimal and dire, the intensity of his hunger also brings to life his visual imagination. He discovers awe in simple things, such as the tiger’s agility in dispatching a flying fish, or the drama of a storm. Increasingly, Pi's 'noticing' involves the world as it goes on about him, the lives of others also striving to survive. Hearing noises below the boat, he realises that, 'The battle for life was taking place there
too’ (119). Looking overboard, he remarks, ‘With just one glance I discovered that the sea is a city. Just below me, all around, unsuspected by me, were highways, boulevards, streets and roundabouts bustling with submarine traffic’ (175). Even the underside of the lifeboat becomes a ‘host to a multitude of sea life’ (197). But for all his new appreciation, and despite his evolving attention to improvements of the boat and survival arrangements, Pi feels he has descended ‘to a level of savagery’ he ‘never imagined possible’ (197). After some time at sea he is able to dispatch a turtle, drink its blood while still warm, and make use of every atom of it as resource without flinching. If, as Huggan and Tiffin (2010: 172) note, he reinhabits his own animality, this animality is also normalised as a mode of being; thus sentiment, as a guide for living, is again overruled by necessity.

Perspectives: subject and world

Despite undermining it at times, the novel’s emphasis on the phenomenological is more or less sustained, allowing the reader to witness Pi’s sense of what is before him and his responses to the ways in which circumstance press upon him. Late on in part 2, this emphasis is given a direct voice. Pi relates:

To be a castaway is to be a point perpetually at the centre of a circle. However much things may appear to change – the sea may shift from whisper to rage, the sky might go from fresh blue to blinding white to darkest black – the geometry never changes. Your gaze is always a radius. The circumference is ever great. (Martel 2002: 216)

This reference to the novel’s metaphorical use of Pi ($\pi$) is complemented here with the point that life is not constant. This is developed in Pi’s (preceding) proclamation: ‘There were many skies’, he states, continuing: ‘The sky was a featureless milky haze. The sky was a density of dark and blustery rainclouds that passed by without delivering rain. The sky was painted with a small number of flat clouds’, and so on, for over half a page (215). Next, Pi observes: ‘there were many seas’; thus: ‘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 your pockets’, and so on. There were also ‘all the winds’ and ‘all the nights and all the moons’ (215). In other words, located perpetually within a horizon, we cannot grasp the world in any singular sense; it brings itself anew from moment to moment, even as language categorises its parts (‘the sky’, ‘the sea’, ‘the wind’). In Wood’s terms, we encounter it in glimpses.

Similarly, the challenge of sustaining is always immediate, always idiosyncratic to circumstance, to location, to the moment, to the person.
'Sustainability', viewed at close hand, exceeds itself as a concept or sign. Yet, Pi’s personal quest for survival is distilled, intense and singular, arising in the inexorable power of hunger and thirst. It is brought to actuality, nonetheless, through his acknowledgement of his partial relationality with regard to the world beyond him. Late on in Pi’s lifeboat journey, he juxtaposes these conflicting points, emphasising them: ‘I noticed … that my suffering was taking place in a grand setting. I saw my suffering for what it was, finite and insignificant, and I was still’; next he follows this with the parenthesised, ‘(No! No! No! My suffering does matter. I want to live … Life is a peephole, a single tiny entry onto vastness – how can I not dwell on this brief, cramped view I have of things? This peephole is all I’ve got!’ (177). Pi’s inner battle replicates the internal conflicts of sustainability with which humanity must somehow contend. While this might mean that in dealing with immediate circumstance the larger picture must be accommodated, the novel seems to suggest more strongly that accommodating the larger picture is itself the means by which immediate circumstance must be tackled – at least to be effective in global terms.

The novel also undermines Pi’s phenomenological positioning, at moments of his unreliability as narrator, and especially in the final chapter as his story is detached from its phenomenological moorings. (Which story is ‘real’?) This does not altogether dislodge Pi from his first-person view of his circumstances, but rather makes absolute its incompleteness.

Sparrow, amid his lengthy discussions on the end of phenomenology and the advent of the speculative real, at one point makes an intriguing remark:

To escape correlationism … it is not necessary to position oneself at some objective vantage point outside the correlation, which is impossible.

It is also not necessary to pass through the correlation, as does Meillasoux. What is necessary is to record the “genetic” movement of and on this world, unconditionally. (Sparrow 2014: 151)

Sparrow’s remark, here, perhaps provides the closest indicator of the difficulty the novel tackles as it evokes the tension between phenomenology and the speculative real. If we always, inescapably, operate from within our own vantage point, how can we – or, indeed, can we, in literature or in our discursive lives – account for that which exceeds us? But what is meant, exactly, by this unconditional ‘recording’ of a “genetic” movement of and on this world; and can it have any literary bearing?

Sparrow’s point appears to reflect the pivotal distinction between Wood’s ecophenomenology and Byrant’s realism – a distinction constantly at work in Martel’s novel. On the one hand, Pi is at no point removed from the correlation. On the other, the novel intersperses his first-person narration with situational effects, many of which function as figments of the
real that ‘make a difference’ (in Byrant’s sense) to him, made possible through the novel’s extensive use of metaphor. At the same time, the temporally fractured nature of Pi’s first-person narration, such that at times he conveys the immediate and at times speaks from hindsight, can be understood in terms of Wood’s ‘plexity of time’. Pi encounters the world incompletely, through momentary glimpses, which the novel also juxtaposes to demonstrate his changing responses (Wood n.d.: 3–4). While Pi’s position within the correlation is clearly sustained, the incompleteness of this positioning is also rendered absolute.

What, then, are we to make of Life of Pi’s explorations of subject and world? As far as the distinction between the phenomenological and the real is concerned, the novel seems to make quite plain its incapacity to represent such a real, while insisting that the real is nonetheless in some unconditional sense, there. It therefore challenges its readers by positioning us in dialogue with the unconditionality of that which exceeds us, although not with that which exceeds us per se. With regard to what this says about sustainability, the novel establishes the real world as existing, while insisting on our inability to grasp it in full. Such a world becomes both the subject of our ethical response and the substance of necessity. Thus, Pi’s (humanity’s) survival relies on his accommodating the tiger (the nonhuman world), but also on his dispatching of sealife. If the first of these engages his ethical response, the second disengages it, drawing attention to sustainability’s difficulties. What are sustainability’s ethics? We must be clear, the novel suggests: they are based on the will to survive.

Life of Pi does carry problematic undertones in terms of what it says about sustainability. Written by a (male) French-speaking, white Canadian, it elects as its protagonist an Indian boy who hails from a once-French colonial settlement in India, whose life falls apart, who overcomes all odds, and whose ‘happy ending’ materialises in North America. Pi’s journey is at the cost of appalling loss – his parents and brother, his nonhuman companions, his home – and he undergoes near-starvation at sea. These events are structurally linked to the novel’s global outcome, which Pi’s traumatic transformation achieves. Events read from this perspective depict the novel as evoking a so-called First-World assertion of sustainability’s demands.

Yet the novel might also be read as playing out and exploring some of sustainability’s conflicting elements. As it negotiates the local in terms of planetary dynamics, it reflects on the competing paradigms of contemporary reality. Pi’s exposition of many winds and many oceans alludes to life’s many stories and many realities, and to the ways these become tangible in glimpses, if at all. At the same time, the novel insists that, in the face of reality, something must give. As such, Pi’s suffering within the frame of his transformation symbolises the necessity of a radical response, yet also foregrounds its costs. While these ought to be the indulgent
lifestyles of those who can afford them, or the political systems that privilege corporate interest over environmental concerns, they might well be the lives/wellbeing of those whose interests slip out of view. Ultimately, in framing sustainability as a human problem, *Life of Pi* renders it tangible as a question that demands a response – the dynamics of which are in constant negotiation.

Notes

1 I refer here to Gro Harlem Brundtland’s definition of ‘sustainable development’, which refers to development that ‘meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission 1987: 43).

2 Object ontology – which originates in the work of Graham Harman – is, according to Sparrow, a ‘fully committed realist metaphysics’ that focuses on objects rather than on the human (2014: 114).

3 All references to *Life of Pi* are to this edition.

References

Alaimo, Stacy 2012. ‘Sustainable This, Sustainable That: New Materialisms, Posthumanism and Unknown Futures’, *PMLA* 127 (3): 558–64.


