

## NON-HUMAN ANIMALS AND LIMINAL CULTURAL SPACE IN YANN MARTEL'S *LIFE OF PI* AND VICTOR PELEVIN'S *THE LIFE OF INSECTS*

Irene Sywenky  
*University of Alberta*

The “animal turn” in the philosophy of the last half-century constitutes an important part of a dialogue within the post-Enlightenment tradition that interrogates and challenges the historical discourse of humanism and anthropocentric thought. As Donna Haraway contends, “[b]y the late twentieth century...the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached” (151) and, commenting on the emergence of the various animal rights movements, refers to them as “a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture” (152). Beginning with the early human/animal distinction in Western philosophy from Aristotle to Descartes, the discourse of the non-human animal otherness has constituted a powerful tool in the construction and perpetuation of the concept of humanity. Cartesian reduction of animals to “mere physical objects populating a material universe” (Roberts 11) operated within the negative category of absence of the human attributes of speech, reason, and morality, among others, through which animality has been defined. In Derrida’s seminal *L’animal que donc je suis*, the very title posits a dialogue with the Cartesian conceptualization of the animal and, by implication, the historical institution of animal sciences that necessarily engaged with the tradition of the age of reason and its set of ethical and political legacies. Commenting on Derrida’s re-interpretation of the “animal question,” David Wood contends that one of its diagnoses is “the intimate connection between our thinking about animals, and our self-understanding,” “the question of our relationship to ‘animals’... and the question of who ‘I’ am, the truth of my being, the ‘autobiographical question’” (129, 130). The “autobiographical question” of the human animal and the problem of subjectivity that is both challenged and re-imagined through humans’ ambivalent positioning within the nature-culture continuum have come to shape many cultural narratives of postmodernity. The recent attention to the “animal question” in the dis-

381

course of the humanities and the examination of a complex role non-human animals play in our negotiation of the nature/culture boundary tends to oscillate between “philosophical consideration of animal rights and cultural analysis of the representation of animals” (Garrard 136). The rise of a critical inquiry into the question of the animal in contemporary culture (see, for example, Aftandilian; Baker 2000, 2001; Jones; Steiner; Willis 1974, 2004; Wolfe 2003a, 2003b, to name a few) also extends into the literary engagement with the philosophical problem of the animal, which further problematizes language, consciousness and subjectivity. As Derrida argues, “if one defines language in such a way that it is reserved for what we call man, what is there to say? But if one reinscribes language in a network of possibilities that do not merely encompass it but mark it irreducibly from the inside, everything changes”; talking of the trace, of iterability, and *différance*, he maintains that “[t]hese possibilities or necessities, without which there would be no language, are themselves not only human” (1991, 116, emphasis in original). Challenging and disrupting internal workings of language destabilizes the traditional human-animal divide and complicates subjectivity itself as an unproblematic demarcation space between humanity and animality. Commenting on the significance of the literary animal in modern literary discourse (specifically within the project of modernism), Lippit suggests that these literary explorations “pushed the relationship between a revitalized notion of language and animality to a possible limit: the word made animal, *zoon*, may also have exhausted language”; the literary animal is a “hybrid being, a *zoologos*, that forces human language to adapt in order to survive” (161). The limitations and breakdowns of language and linguistic representations foreground the vulnerability of human subjectivity and open up spaces of new communication between the human and non-human animal realms.

The two texts that are the main concern of this essay—Yann Martel’s novel *Life of Pi*, Canadian winner of the 2002 Man Booker Prize, and the prominent contemporary Russian writer Viktor Pelevin’s post-Soviet novel *The Life of Insects* (1993)—posit a number of questions about the limits and extensions of the spaces of humanity and animality in their relation to language, representation, and reality. Arguably, both texts, although very different in their narrative modes and styles, represent an exploration of a relation between human and non-human bioforms as contained within—and by—narrativity, and, more significantly, of implications of this ambivalent relation for a post-historical world. Martel’s and Pelevin’s texts are two narratives of journeying, of crossings, of the historical liminal moments of in-between-ness and suspension, of being on a threshold that is defined by inscriptions of difference, of individual and collective subjectivities at the end of *telos*. As some scholars contend, the postmodern reinterpretation of the human being in the context of the natural world is both a reflection of and a commentary on the shifting values and collapsing boundaries that arguably define the post-Cartesian, post-cognitive *épistème*; this, in its turn, posits a different perspective on the non-human animal as the man’s traditional historical “other”:

So what is a postmodern animal? Consider an animal which is no longer the object/animal of human history but begins to occupy the same place outside history that postmodernism argues humans do, and in which the old hierarchies of meaning begin to break down....it is only in the latter part of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century that a new way of thinking about the human/animal relationship has emerged. Nature has begun to be represented in a nonhistorical, nonhierarchical, nonsymbolic way. (Aftandilian 243)

It is this postmodern positing of the non-human animal that re-conceptualizes the human being first and foremost as a biological species (among other species) through the destabilization of the traditional systems of meaning, reference, and representation.

In *Life of Pi*, the central/inner narrative is framed by a story of a first-person narrator, a writer in search of a good novel plot that has a promise of commercial success. As he travels to India, he comes across just such a plot, the remarkable castaway story of the young man Pi Patel, who now lives in Canada. The narrating writer goes to Toronto to meet Patel and acquires a number of supporting documents for his writing project. The resulting embedded first-person narrative (a reconstruction of Pi's story) is based on Pi Patel's diary, audio interviews, newspaper clippings and the writer's notes he took in multiple personal meetings with Patel. Even prior to the reader's engagement in the central story, it is posited as a labyrinth of facts, fictions, retellings, and discursive uncertainties. The outer narrative frame, as well as the concluding section of the novel, thoroughly problematize the veracity of the events as told by Pi, thus retroactively constructing a space of linguistic suspension and continuous deferral of signification.

Pi's narrative is a story of his childhood and formative years, but also of a sixteen-year-old's survival at sea, which becomes a spiritual journey: after the ship that takes Pi and his family from India to a new life in Canada sinks, he spends 227 days in a lifeboat together with four surviving zoo animals that were on board the same ship (a male Bengal tiger among them). The story is both real and unreal, as it is suspended between two different versions of the events. The criticism devoted to the novel has mostly emphasized the story of imagination and faith that is so explicit in the narrative: "*Life of Pi* is organized around a philosophical debate about the modern world's privileging of reason over imagination, science over religion, materialism over idealism, fact over fiction or story" (Stratton 6). This series of binaries, however, overlooks another important opposition, constituted by the precarious division between the human and animal spaces that Pi has to negotiate on an everyday basis as (in one version of the story) he shares the tiny survival space of the boat with the animals and, later, exclusively with an adult tiger. The narrative thus becomes a transformative event that is shaped by the complex negotiation of the species boundaries and by the challenge to the protagonist's humanity and selfhood encountered in the process of this experience.

The novel can be seen as a coming-of-age story, a rite of passage, a continuous

becoming that oscillates between life and death, meaning and non-meaning, humanity and animality, self and other. According to Gregory Stephens, *Life of Pi* is “suffused by a pervasive liminality” (42), complete with a separation (leaving India and the established social order), liminal stage with its challenged identity and subversion of hierarchies (journey at sea) and re-incorporation into society (rescue and arrival in North America). It has been noted that the space of journey at sea may have distanced the protagonist’s struggle from its rootedness in any identifiable social spaces: “Pi’s narrative is located at sea in order to dislocate its themes from national, regional, and local cultural conventions of animal depiction. Extirpated from such soil (indeed, from all soils), the narrative enables readers to voyage outward from their cultural moorings” (Robinson 140). However, before the boy is stranded at sea, his story becomes, in fact, situated along many cultural coordinates and is densely populated with specific geopolitical and socio-historical references that shape both the space of his memory and the physical and symbolic journey at sea. The environment of Pi’s

**384** childhood is marked by multiple divisions, boundaries, and borders (real or imagined); on the one hand, these are the multiple languages and religions of India, the independence and partition of India, and the eventual joining of Pondicherry in the Union of India, in the aftermath of which Pi was growing up; on the other hand, it is the East-West dichotomy persistently present in Pi’s childhood world, which is shaped by the stories of Paris, as well as other parts of Europe, Canada, and America. In this context, from the very beginning, his journey was centrifugally marked away from India, his home by birth (the protagonist’s first name—Piscine Molitor—was the name of a famous Paris swimming pool, “the crowning aquatic glory...of the entire civilized world” [12], the object of a long-term fascination of a family friend who had studied in Paris). In the context of this dichotomized world, Pi’s imagination of his younger years was shaped by the European imperial adventure/survival fiction (Defoe, Stevenson) and publications such as *National Geographic*, where nature has been scrutinized, objectified, and conquered, even if through the camera lens. By the time Pi and his family embark on their ill-fated journey from India to Canada, his home space is already displaced, and his identity is predictably split between his Indian-ness and Western-ness. The journey he shares with the tiger (by the name of Richard Parker), and the many shape-shifting anthro- and zoomorphic games of imagination he engages in, cannot be separated from his search for the elusive spaces of identity and home that become ambivalent already in his childhood. The journey at sea is a further extension of the process of de-territorialization that informs Pi’s sense of selfhood and (un)belonging.

The human/non-human animal dichotomy assumes significance fairly early in the narrative (and Pi’s life), when the boy’s father, a hotel keeper in his earlier occupation, follows his life-long fascination with animals and acquires a commercial zoo, thus immersing his son in a life devoted to and surrounded by animals. The narrator’s comment on “[a] natural transition...from hotelkeeping to zookeeping” (14) has distinct ironic undertones as, in the context of the remark, both sets of profes-

sional skills imply that a knowledge of taking care of people necessarily predicates the same knowledge in regard to animals. The space of the zoo occupies an important place in the novel as it defines early in the narrative the status of animals as cultural commodities and foregrounds marginalization of animals as a non-human species and as an ultimate “other”. The historical zoological garden in Europe—“a public park that displays animals to humans” (Rowlands 152)—has always been a complex tool of imperial cultural politics and its fascination, at least in part, stemmed both from its exotic nature and from the paradoxical combination of the zoo animals’ implicit danger and wildness (which allowed viewers to briefly cross the boundary of safety, even if in their imagination) and their confinement in a secure space that conveniently placed them as objects of contemplation (and consumption), thus perpetuating the European Enlightenment myth of the conquest of nature and the supremacy of civilization:

Zoo animals cross the...boundary [between wildness and domesticity] as feral animals. ...they are the objects of the imperial gaze we turn on wild animals, in which our alienated distance is proportionate to our power. Liberationists claim that zoo confinement is cruel, which may be true in some cases, but an ecocritical perspective is more concerned with the politics of representation implied by the zoo experience. (Garrard 150)

385

It is through this act of consuming a commodified animal—a mere sign, a symbol, a representation—that patrons of zoos were allowed to “experience” the subdued and controlled animal other while remaining in the safety of a “civilized” environment of a spectacle. In *Life of Pi*, the zoological garden in post-colonial India is also ironically a product of the imperial tradition, where displays of exotic animals implicitly carried the message of appropriation and control of respective cultures. The new Pondicherry zoo, owned by Pi’s father, was “designed and run according to the most modern, biologically sound principles” (13); this and other Pi’s extensive comments on the complexities of running a zoo are shaped by the rhetoric of modernity and science of the Western imperial discourse of progress.

Although Pi prides himself in his extensive experience with the zoo culture that had given him an intimate knowledge of animal behaviour, his attitude towards animals and his “reading” of the “signification” of their communication is thoroughly anthropocentric. While the novel may be asking whether non-anthropocentric seeing of non-human animals is at all possible, Pi’s anthropomorphism is often conscious, especially later, as he assumes the position of reasoning and “knowing,” of structuring and ordering his observations of the animals he is sharing the lifeboat with. Although Pi is mostly aware of his own perspective, for him it is not a flawed position, as the human faculty of reason gives him an epistemic advantage and what he conceives of as an insight into the workings of the animal behaviour; however, more importantly, it also gives him an illusion of control, that is superiority, over the animal.

Pi’s rational, scientific “gaze” turned onto the animal is symptomatic of the historical uses of the institutional structures of scientific knowledge that regulated the

social discourses of non-normative humanity or non-humanity. In one of the seminars collected in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida reflects on the field of analogy between the historical institutions of the zoological garden and psychiatric asylum, and in doing so he draws on the concepts of *autopsy* and *curiosity*. Talking about the globalized “autopsic” model of zoological gardens, Derrida emphasizes its main feature of “the objectifying inspection of a knowledge that precisely inspects, sees, looks at the aspect of a *zōon* the life and force of which have been neutralized either by death or by captivity” (395). The twofold “theoretico-theatrical” structure of *autopsia* is manifested through its dual functioning within scientific operations by means of “the autopsic seeing of theoretical knowledge and the autopsic seeing of the theatrical spectacle, . . . inspection and spectacle,” the passage between the two having been “organized and institutionalized” (*ibid.*). To formalize the space of analogy between the animal (in the gardens) and the madman, i.e. between zoological gardens and insane asylums, Derrida draws on the etymology of the word “curiosity” (*ibid.*), which combines the sense of *curiosus*, to have a desire to see, to acquire knowledge, information, but also to take care, to provide care (*cura*), and to care for. The Patels’ zoological garden, a site of both *curiositas* and *cura*, with its sound scientific principles and observational techniques as well as the function of a spectacle, provides a good example of the workings of the theoretico-theatrical structure, which becomes subverted, if not reversed, when Pi is stranded at sea.

As a zookeeper, Pi’s father is a go-between, a mediator between those in his care and the public visiting the garden. Being very conscious of the divide between animals and people and of the risks of anthropomorphism, he warns Pi that the most dangerous animal is “the animal as seen through human eyes,” that is the humanized animal that emerges when “we look at an animal and see a mirror” (Martel 34). Even though Pi acknowledges “the obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything” (*ibid.*), the anthropomorphic construction of the tiger, who became central to Pi’s story, starts with the very name that was given to the animal—Richard Parker. The first few references to Richard Parker, deliberately ambivalent, are utterly misleading to the reader. Eventually Pi explains that the name was given to the animal through a clerical error—it was the name of the hunter who found the cub (Martel 146); the narrator, however, does not see the irony of his own observation, which is constituted by the fact that the assigning of a name to an animal and the very act of naming is already profoundly human and anthropomorphic, the name itself not being of much consequence.

With the passing of months alone at sea with the tiger, Pi’s multiple deterritorializations—linguistic, religious, geopolitical—reach the crucial limit of humanity itself. Pi deems his concerted attempts to control the animal successful as he observes with satisfaction that “the lifeboat was resembling a zoo enclosure more and more” (Martel 209), thus referring to Richard Parker’s part of the lifeboat’s “territory” and the structured nature of the space that was allotted to the animal. Maintenance of territorial limits is essential to any definition of a zoological enclosure, and in his

examination of the art of caring/locking up Derrida questions whether taking care (or providing *cura*) is possible without providing/surrounding with limits, without “inventing limits, installing limits,” which is “both an art and a technique, perhaps *tekhnē* itself” (2009, 398). This art of installing limits, in which Pi is so skilled, becomes ambivalent in the open of the ocean. In his isolation with Richard Parker, Pi is as much in the tiger’s “zoo enclosure” as the animal is in his; he is as much an object of the tiger’s gaze and observation, as the tiger is of his. Although the narrator does not readily admit the reversal of the zoo hierarchy (human/animal, subject/object), he is forced to take heed of it by ensuring his own protection and creating a mutually negotiable space.

Pi’s ambivalent self-positioning along the continuum of human/non-human animality often betrays his anthropocentric perspective, especially when he starts to question (and thus acknowledge) his own humanity. As he attempts to eat the tiger’s feces in order to suppress hunger, he begins to feel that “no doubt [he] will be considered to have abandoned the last vestiges of humanness by those who do not understand the degree of [his] suffering” (237). It is then that Pi “must acknowledge the biological and ecological realities of Richard Parker’s identity” (Mason 118), which begins to manifest itself in an increasingly obvious resort to animal mimicry and zoomorphic self-positioning. Pi’s negotiation of the precarious demarcation line between his humanness and animality is evident in his desperate attempt to secure his own safety in the space he shares with Richard Parker by utilizing the significance of feces in animal communication. With anything related to human (or animal) excrement being outside of the socially acceptable discourse of human “civilization,” it is his use of feces (both as a sign/symbol and a material substance) that places him in the context of animality, but also becomes one of the shared languages between the animal and the narrator:

...the first time Richard Parker relieved himself in the lifeboat, I noticed that he tried to hide the result. The significance of this was not lost on me. To display his feces openly, to flaunt the smell of them, would have been the sign of social dominance. Conversely, to hide them, or to try to, was a sign of deference—of deference to *me*.

...I proceeded with exceptional alertness and deliberation, not only to preserve my life but also to give him the right signal. The right signal was that when I had his feces in my hand, I rolled them about for some seconds, brought them close to my nose and sniffed them loudly, and swung my gaze his way a few times in a showy manner, glaring at him wide-eyed...long enough to give him the willies, but not so long as to provoke him. (233-34, emphasis in original)

Although Pi continues to analyze Richard Parker rationally, he, at the same time, is forced to start thinking like an animal and participating in a social behaviour similar to animals sharing the same space/territory. In the context of his struggle for survival, Pi’s zoomorphism is more than a mimetic gesture; it reveals and acknowledges a realm of signification that is more basic and universal than human language and reason, thus shifting the power away from the human species to the common animal

inter-species space shared by both Pi and the tiger.

With the passage of time, Pi enters a timeless, ahistorical, asocial space of nature, of pure physical, biological being, with no point of reference but his ever more fluid and receding memory. As Pi enters the space of animality, he abandons the realm of *logos* and steps into the shared space of “becoming-animal.” In the words of Deleuze and Guattari, “[a] becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between, the border or line of flight or descent running perpendicular to both.... it constitutes a zone of proximity and indiscernibility, a no-man’s land, a nonlocalizable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points, carrying one into the proximity of the other” (2004, 94). Becoming-animal involves deterritorialization of both entities, a mutual extension into the space of the other; “[b]ecoming produces nothing other than itself....the becoming-animal of the human being is real, even if the animal the human being becomes is not” (2004, 87). Pi’s symbiotic life-sharing with the tiger becomes a passage from a forced *inter*-species co-existence to an *intra*-species relation: “we were two emaciated mammals, parched and starving” (265).

388

Pi’s confidence in the rational justification of the opposition of humanity and animality gradually diminishes until such a distinction becomes increasingly more blurry (although, in a self-reflexive way, it is of course always maintained at the level of the narrator’s discourse). Pi’s journal entries (and the very process of writing) serve as an act of self-assurance in his own humanity and, thus, in his difference from the animal he shares his space with; it is significant that the last words he writes are also becoming part of the process of “dying”: “*It’s no use. Today I die. / I will die today. / I die.* This was my last entry. I went on from there, endured, but without noting it. Do you see these invisible spirals on the margins of the page? I thought I would run out of paper. It was the pens that ran out” (266, emphasis in original). Pi’s “death” as the narrating subject of his journal entries coincides with his physical inability to continue writing in a twofold sense: the absence of a necessary tool, but also his abandonment of the realm of *logos*. Although Pi refers to the actual materiality of pens as a tool of writing (written speech being one of the key manifestations of what is conceived of as human faculty of reason), the reference to pens also becomes metaphorical: the expiration of the last pen (his ability to write) is a symbolic expiration of his humanity. Talking about the post-historical, (post)modern man, Agamben suggests that “the only task that still seems to retain some seriousness is the assumption of the burden...of the biological life, that is of the very animality of man” (77). It is this burden of the biological life that Pi is forced to face both through ensuring his survival by whatever means possible and by embracing the value and priority of the natural needs of the human being as opposed to the other necessities (for example, emotional and spiritual).

Pi maintains (or wants to believe he maintains) his control over the tiger even when he feels he is at the brink of death. Although his primary motivation is empathy for the animal, he is also motivated by the desire to maintain his status as the human, i.e. superior, species: “I came to the sad conclusion that I could no longer take care

of Richard Parker. *I had failed as a zookeeper...broken down and wasted away as I was, I could do no more for him*" (268, emphasis mine). Continuing to "take care" of Richard Parker is essential for Pi in order to reassure himself of his own humanness (that is non-animal-ness). His fear of failing as a zookeeper, as someone who continually reinforces his power and superiority over the object of his care, arguably constitutes his most human impetus throughout the entire narrative. As much as Pi wants to appropriate Richard Parker as an object of his care (and also to be gratified for this laudable deed), he has to relinquish his control over the animal when at the end the tiger does not display any attachment to his keeper and merely disappears into the forest.

I was weeping because Richard Parker left me so unceremoniously. What a terrible thing it is to botch a farewell. I am a person who believes in form, in the harmony of order. Where we can, we must give things a meaningful shape. (316)

With his return to civilization, Pi regains his infallible anthropocentric stance as he re-inscribes Parker into the language of normative structures; "the harmony of order" can be understood here to imply the order where animals acknowledge their (zoo)keepers and the hierarchy functions according to the preferences of the human world. Pi's journey from India to Canada, however, is profoundly conditioned by his experience at sea with Richard Parker. Pi's essential "un-homeliness" was mirrored primarily in his species displacement as he was continuously oscillating between his own humanity and animality. Pi's liminal journey is defined by the continuous act of "deciding every time between man and animal," where "[t]he total humanization of the animal coincides with a total animalization of man" (Agamben 77).

Although quite different in form, style, and cultural context, Viktor Pelevin's novel displays very similar concerns about the dynamics of the human/non-human relation. *The Life of Insects* is difficult to define in terms of genre. Formally a collection of short prose, it, nonetheless, is cohesive and unified enough to be read as a fragmented, non-linear, disjointed postmodern novel. In part, the continuity is created by the presence of common characters that reappear in a number of stories/sketches. Written in 1993 and embracing the first transitional years of the post-Soviet era, *The Life of Insects* provides a scathing critique of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet society. Creating a broad panorama of the new social reality with its emerging strata of the marginal groups that used to be hidden and invisible in the Soviet society (such as drug addicts, prostitutes, mystics, black market and mafia workers), the writer at the same time posits more universal questions, one of them concerning profound human anxiety about its own species at the end of historical *telos*; this anxiety is articulated specifically in relation to the non-human forms of life that, while appearing fundamentally different, bear remarkable social and organizational skills that threaten the historically constructed perception of human superiority. All the main characters, placed in recognizable social situations, are posited as a variety of different insect species (mosquitoes, ants, flies, fireflies, beetles, cicada); alongside with what appears

to be anthropomorphized insects (human-insects or insect-humans), there are also human beings, as well as actual insects that do not appear to possess human characteristics. This gradation of biological forms creates an interesting social as well as biological hierarchy that allows for a self-reflexive discourse of species where they engage in mutual “contemplation” of themselves and each other.

There is little doubt that Pelevin consciously plays with the cultural implications of the human conception of insects, the most common associative responses to insects being those of disgust and, possibly, insignificance. As it has been noted elsewhere, insects are “the definitive organisms of *différance*” (Sleigh 281); they imply “distance, reduced or negligible importance, absolute difference” (Hollingsworth 8). Pelevin’s insect-human world is significant in its simultaneous familiarity and alien-ness, in its uncanny quality and, hence, its sense of unease coming from the play of the familiar and unfamiliar. The figurative structures involved in our perception of non-human species—structures of proximity and distance—also necessarily precondition

**390** our discourses about them:

The distinctive peculiarity of animals is that, being at once close to man and strange to him, both akin to him and unalterably not-man, they are able to alternate, as objects of human thought, between the contiguity of the metonymic mode and the distanced, analogical mode of the metaphor. (Willis 1974, 128)

Another level of engagement with these figurative cultural constructs is in the very title of Pelevin’s novel: a complex palimpsest of multiple intertexts, the novel’s most obvious intertextuality is implied in the title itself, which immediately connects it to such modern canonical “insect texts” as Karel and Josef Čapek’s play *From the Life of Insects* as well as Franz Kafka’s “Metamorphosis,” to name just a few. The Čapek brothers commented on the concept of their play: “[w]e intend to write not a drama but a mystery play in an archaic naïve manner. Just as Avarice, Egoism or Virtue appeared personified in medieval mystery plays, in our plays certain moral categories are embodied in insects for the purpose of being more visible...We did not write about people or about insects but about vices” (qtd. in Genis 301-02). The defamiliarizing use of insects for making certain human vices more “visible” is enabled by the very difference implicit in the non-human form that allows for a displaced (and therefore safe) mechanism of recognition. If the Čapeks’ satirical use of insects is primarily tropological, Kafka’s case, as was famously argued by Deleuze and Guattari, is more complex as he “deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification, no less than all designation. Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor. There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states” (1986, 22). Samsa’s insect metamorphosis is a refiguration of modernist alienation, a “line of escape” that renders him unreachable for those around him and ultimately provides a permanent escape (his death).

Pelevin’s rethinking of the insect difference follows neither the Čapek brothers’ allegorical figures nor Kafka’s individualist anxieties. The non-human form of

Pelevin's insect-human characters is significant not in its tropological potential (the metaphor mechanism itself becomes an object of parody here through the creation of a chain of species that associate through the figurations of language); rather, notwithstanding its superficial human traits and human concerns, his insect-human is fascinating in its complete abandonment of humanity. It is this equalization of the human and non-human that arguably constitutes the postmodern rethinking of the human species as it is facing its other, where the final confrontation is both an opposition of radical difference and its simultaneous collapse through non-opposition or sameness in an increasingly more complex and challenging environment of both social and natural disintegration:

Both subjects [human and animal] are at risk—literally, ecologically—and both participate finally in the same potential victimization or agency. Both are also at risk as images, as subjects, and both are equally available to reinterpretation. In a poststructuralist, postmodern, post-Cartesian world, the animal/man hierarchy slips—boundaries dissolve and become meaningless. (Aftandilian 244)

391

Pelevin is concerned not with the examination of specific human flaws or capitalist alienation, but with a collective condition generated by a society that finds itself at the end of history, such as post-Soviet Russia, post-totalitarian Eastern Europe, or, perhaps more generally, human civilization. Revisiting Agamben's theorizing of the post-historical condition of today's human animal, it is apt to draw on his confluence of depoliticization and animalization: "man has now reached his historical telos and, for a humanity that has become animal again, there is nothing left but the depoliticization of human societies by means of the unconditioned unfolding of the *oikonomia*, or the taking on of biological life itself as the supreme political (or rather impolitical) task" (76). It is the exhaustion of the historical *telos* that is symptomatic of the societies of today's post-socialist Europe in their search for new epistemological, cultural, political and social paradigms. The loss of established values and epistemic constructs in Russia after the collapse of the imperial ideological, economic and other social structures created an epistemic void that replaced the dominant political metanarrative with a proliferation of a multiplicity of micro-discourses, so aptly utilized in *The Life of Insects*. The novel seems to have a specific socio-political context, but, at the same time, is profoundly impolitical. Although orientation towards the West had always been part of the unrealized desire in the Soviet mass consciousness, it became especially prominent in the early post-Soviet years. The abundance of geopolitical references and the notable presence of the East/West dichotomy in Pelevin's novel, where the West is posited as a desirable topos of abundance, mass consumption, and intellectual freedom, define the broader cultural context of the novel. At the same time, however, the space of the West is presented as a locus of utopian desire rather than a socio-political model having real potential for emancipating post-Soviet Russia. Thus, one of the stories entitled "Paradise" (the original title is in English) is strongly critical of American society; the main character (a cicada that also transforms into a cockroach along the way), unsatisfied with his

monotonous and meaningless life in Russia, quite literally digs his way to America only to find out that there he gets stuck in the same meaningless routine that offers him no fulfilment.

The gaze of the “other” in *The Life of Insects* is represented by multiple perspectives that are constructed on different levels—from the various groups of insect-humans that hold different hierarchical status to actual insects; differentiation of insect species and their mutual gaze turned onto each other, however, is separate from the representation of the geopolitical East and West, which is also part of the broad range of perspectives and voices in the novel. Thus, for example, one of the main characters is a foreigner, an American by the name of Sam, who is in a transient intimate relationship with a young Russian woman, Natasha. While both of them are insect-humans, their opposition is defined primarily geopolitically, from the position of Sam’s power and Natasha’s desire to escape Russia. Sam’s and Natasha’s discussion of what Sam refers to as “geopolitical reality” (75)—that is the first, second, and third world structures and Sam’s qualifying post-Soviet Russia’s status as a third-world country – also echoes in many other stories of the novel. On the other hand, there are inter-species hierarchies that are defined along the economic axis (e.g., flies and ants). On yet another level, it is important to note that all insects form a fairly uniform group in opposition to humans (whose existence is evident in the novel) and their appeal for “insect rights” (for instance, in Natasha’s passionate plea against the use of pesticides) may be read on various levels: from the rights of marginalized social groups in our society to actual non-human animal rights. Both Martel’s and Pelevin’s propositions offer a possibility of a postcolonial reading, thus enabling the still “seldom-acknowledged theoretical arc between postcolonialism and ecocriticism” (Mason 108). At the same time, Pelevin’s novel neutralizes its own political impetus: *both* Russian and American characters here are *insects* and thus the geopolitical power discourse is ultimately subordinated to the *species* discourse as, notwithstanding different socio-economic conditions, all insects are equally vulnerable and equally threatened.

Pelevin’s insect-humans are not a stable biological form within the fictional world of the novel; they are in a state of continuous shape-shifting and morphing, both along the ambivalent human-insect continuum and between various insect species. These metamorphoses, becomings, and trans-species flickering destabilize both human and non-human spaces, rendering the demarcation line between the two fundamentally tenuous. Self-reflexive engagement of some of the characters with the problem of identity, with the autobiographical question of “who am I?”, further challenges the stability of the human/non-human opposition. In his dream, the philosophizing and meaning-searching character of Mitia (who is a human-moth) observes a scene that he finds strangely disturbing and almost nightmarish:

Below there was a continuous stream of insects that were hurrying toward the tree stump; they pushed those that had crawled down the same path before them and trampled them down like a live multicoloured carpet that was compressing and folding up. The insects were jumping onto the stump and most of them were falling down,

getting under the legs, horns and thorns of the next wave that was creeping up from all directions, but some managed to get to the top... (160-61, my translation)

Mitia surveys the scene from above (since he can fly), but the distance is both physical and symbolic in his simultaneous belonging and non-belonging with the live carpet of insects. He is struck by the collective homogeneity and insignificance of the life teaming below him. It is, however, his belonging and his being one of them that becomes so unsettling to him. The autobiographical question pondered by Mitia is also the autobiographical question of the human animal. Contemplation of their own biological selfhood betrays the fundamental (human) species anxiety, which, in this context, is prompted by the uncanny closeness to insects. As E.L. Bouvier observed in his 1918 *La vie psychique des insectes*, “[there is a] profound inquietude inspired by these creatures so incomparably better armed, better equipped than ourselves...our rivals in these latter hours and perhaps our successors. [Insects] are never so widely separated from us as when they appear to resemble us the most” (*The Psychic Life of Insects*, qtd. in Coutts 298). Commenting on the art of Liz Arnold and photography of Mark Fairington (both arguably being examples of self-reflexive meditations on the state and status of human species), Coutts contends that these artists interrogate the assumption about “the longevity of human dominance over the environment and explore the possibility...that insects will survive and succeed us” (315). Pelevin’s species anxiety is also accentuated through the examination of the failings of human language. His intertextual project situates “his characters’ misguided attempts at self-definition in the context of countless others’ narratives” (Livers 20); articulations of identity/ies become impossible outside of borrowed and re-cycled texts. Auto-referentiality of language in *The Life of Insects*, with its proliferation of signifiers that have no relation to anything outside themselves, subverts the possibility of both the historical discourse of humanism and the quest for the species’ self-identification more generally.

Both Martel’s and Pelevin’s discourses operate within the narratives of liminality and epistemic frameworks of uncertain historical *telos*, where the construct of humanity is critically challenged and the animality of the man becomes the only modern (im)political imperative. While the novels are different in many ways, they engage in a similar proposition on the problem of the species, which echoes Agamben’s words: “*Homo* is a constitutively ‘anthropomorphous’ animal (that is, ‘resembling man’, according to the term that Linnaeus constantly uses...), who must recognize himself in a non-man in order to be human” (27). It is this paradoxical self-recognition in non-human in order to be actualized as human that defines both Martel’s and Pelevin’s species ethics while engaging their works with the discourse of post-humanism.

## WORKS CITED

- Aftandilian, Dave, ed. *What Are the Animals to Us?: Approaches from Science, Religion, Folklore, Literature and Art*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2007.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004.
- Baker, Steve. *The Postmodern Animal*. London: Reaktion Books, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2001.
- Brown, Eric C. *Insect Poetics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006.
- Coutts, Nicky. "Portraits of the Nonhuman: Visualizations of the Malevolent Insect." Brown 298-318.
- 394** Deleuze, Gilles et Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Becoming-Animal." Calarco and Atterton 87-100.
- Derrida, Jacques. "'Eating Well,' or The Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida." *Who Comes after the Subject?* Ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy. Trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell. New York: Routledge: 1991. 96-119.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Animal that (therefore) I am." Trans. David Wills. *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Winter 2002): 369-418.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *L'animal que donc je suis*. Paris: Galilée, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Beast and the Sovereign*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. Vol. 1. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009.
- Fiamengo, Janice, ed. *Other Selves: Animals in the Canadian Literary Imagination*. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 2007.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Genis, Alexander. "Borders and Metamorphoses: Viktor Pelevin in the Context of Post-Soviet Literature." *Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*. Ed. Karen L. Ryan. London: Macmillan, 2003. 294-306.
- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Free Association Book, 1991.
- Hollingsworth, Christopher. *Poetics of the Hive: The Insect Metaphor in Literature*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2001.
- Jones, Muffet. "Snakes and Bunnies: The Postmodern Animal in the Art of Ray Johnson." Aftandilian 241-58.
- Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*. Minneapolis:

U of Minnesota P, 2000.

Livers, Keith. "Bugs in the Body Politic: The Search for Self in Viktor Pelevin's *The Life of Insects*." *Slavic and East European Journal* 46.1 (2002): 1-28.

Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi*. Toronto: Vintage, 2002.

Mason, Travis V. "Lick Me, Bite Me, Hear Me, Write Me: Tracking Animals between Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism." *Fiamengo* 100-24.

Pelevin, Victor. *Zhyzn' nasekomykh [The Life of Insects]*. Moscow: Vagrius, 2003.

Roberts, Mark S. *The Mark of the Beast. Animality and Human Oppression*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 2008.

Robinson, Jack. "Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*: Back in the World, Or 'The Story with Animals is the Better Story.'" *Fiamengo* 125-42.

Rowlands, Mark. *Animals Like Us*. London: Verso, 2002.

Sleigh, Charlotte. "Inside Out: The Unsettling Nature of Insects." *Brown* 281-97.

395

Steiner, Gary. *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2005.

Stephens, Gregory. "Feeding Tiger, Finding God: Science, Religion, and 'the Better Story' in *Life of Pi*." *Intertexts* 14.1 (2010): 41-59.

Stratton, Florence. "'Hollow at the core': Deconstructing Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 29.2 (2004): 5-21.

Willis, R. *Man and Beast*. London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1974.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Signifying Animals: Human Meaning in the Natural World*. [1995]. London: Taylor & Francis, 2004.

Wolfe, Cary. *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2003a.

Wolfe, Cary, ed. *Zoontologies*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003b.

Wood, David. "Thinking with Cats." *Animal Philosophy*. Ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton. London and New York: Continuum, 2004. 129-44.