



MARTEL, Yann. *The High Mountains of Portugal*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2016. 332p

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Yann Martel (1963-), Canadian author born in Spain to Quebecois parents, has been known for experimenting with form to varying degrees and effects since his writerly beginnings. His first book, *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* (1993), exhibits four short stories, of which two are highly experimental in nature.

The one entitled *The Vita Aeterna Mirror Company: Mirrors to Last till Kingdom Come*, for instance, has its pages split in two columns to the effect that the reader has simultaneous access to both the narrative flow and the ongoing train of thoughts of one of the characters. *Self* (1996), his first novel, has a somewhat unconventional structure as well. Two chapters make up the whole novel, the second one coming right at the end in only one page, which feels like an addendum of sorts to the main narrative of the first chapter and invites the reader to ponder on the meaning of a seemingly unnecessary addition. The several blank pages that come afterwards also beg to be interpreted in light of the novel's overall content and form. Some pages are divided into two columns as well, with some excerpts in both English and French and some other languages, hinting at the Canadian bilingualism and multiculturalism of the leading character.

His most renowned and awarded work, *Life of Pi* (2001), is no exception to Martel's literary formal vision. It is composed of three parts which markedly display varying stylistic features totalling precisely a hundred chapters. The *Author's Note*, which comes before the first part,

frames the subsequent narrative and challenges the reader's interpretation of the whole story. *Beatrice and Virgil* (2010) follows suit and presents the reader with a section at the end entitled 'Games for Gustav', which is not a feature commonly chanced upon while reading a novel. Throughout the text one can also find various passages of drama excerpts interspersed with the overall prose. In this particular book, Martel manages to add metafictional observations concerning a writer who is at loggerheads with his editors over the format of the novel he has been planning to publish, which is that of a flip book, half fiction and half non-fiction.

All these remarks go to show that *The High Mountains of Portugal* (2016), Martel's most recently published novel and object of this review, is no exception to what I shall call his creatively deviant metafictional project. By flouting macro-textual generic conventions, Martel manages to defamiliarise the usual literary textual organisation which readers might take for granted when picking up a book to read. The corollary of foregrounding the fictionality of his stories is that he lays bare both the foundation and the tools of fiction making. He makes the readers keenly

aware that what they are reading is fiction. Martel's meddling with form serves varying aesthetic and stylistic purposes, which owing to the scope of this review shall not be dwelled upon here. Suffice it to say that metafictional features, both in form and in subject matter, seem to be lurking around the pages of his works, and that is when not explicitly talked about. In other words, notwithstanding inherent differences in the plot of each novel, his books turn out to be stories about storytelling with incontrovertible metafictional turns, which is a feature commonly associated with postmodern fiction.

The novel at hand, *The High Mountains of Portugal*, seems to capitalise on both the themes and success of *Life of Pi*, in that it brings to the fore the now all too familiar relationship amongst faith, animals, fiction and reality. Indeed, the blurb makes it clear by stating that "the author of the bestselling *Life of Pi* returns to the storytelling power and luminous wisdom of his master novel." This time, nevertheless, Martel relies on three different stories distributed in three distinct sections thus entitled, 'Homeless', 'Homeward', and 'Home'. Each story is firmly set in time and place. The main setting to the three of

them is Portugal, though in different years of the 20th century, 1904, 1939, 1989. Interestingly enough, in the *Author's Note to Life of Pi*, Martel as the author, intratextually speaking, mentions that he had intended to write a novel set in Portugal in 1939 which was forgone when he was told Pi's story. It seems that now the time was ripe for him to finally set down the story he so wished for.

The three tales are spun in vivid and realistic details that make for the grounding of the more uncommon events which come to pass. In the first one, a grieving museum curator decides to walk backwards in an act of objection to God. He goes on a quest in a borrowed newfangled car, one of the firsts of its kind, to find a crucifix, which might be hidden in the whereabouts of the supposedly High Mountains of Portugal, and said religious artefact might shake the very core of Christianity. As he declares, "with this object I'll give God His comeuppance for what He did to the ones I love" (MARTEL, 2016, p. 84). The events that take place from his departure to the finding of the object of his quest unfold over far too many pages for the weary reader and verge on the farcical. Eventually, the character hits upon a

revelation which is at odds with the history of human origins as recorded in the Holy Scriptures. As it is remarked, "we are risen apes, not fallen angels" (MARTEL, 2016, p. 131). The reader shall find out what leads him to make such a statement.

In the second one, a bereaved pathologist carries out an autopsy and finds out unlikely elements inside a corpse which is delivered to the doctor inside a suitcase. Despite the gruesome details of the surgical intervention, there is a subtle and poignant beauty to it all, especially when the wife of the deceased is sewn up inside him. The autopsy becomes all the more interesting when his wife insists that she wants to know how her husband lived rather than the more usual question of how he died. The drift being that death often approaches us under the guise of life and the human body is a book from which to glean our memories and stories. This shift in perspective as well as the magical realist features of the passage renders the medical procedures all the more symbolic. Therein the readers shall get their metafictional share when one of the characters draws a reflection on the relation among storytelling, truth and faith raising questions and comments such as: "why would Jesus speak in parables? Why

would he both tell stories and let himself be presented through stories? *Why would Truth use the tools of fiction?*” (MARTEL, 2016, p. 152). Indeed, this last question actually seems to underlie every Martel’s novel in the manner of a leitmotif. “We must abandon this reductionist quest for the historical Jesus” (MARTEL, 2016, p. 155), avers one character. “He won’t be found, because that’s not where – that’s not *how* – he chose to make his mark. Jesus told stories and lived through stories. Our faith is faith in his story, and there is very little beyond that story-faith” (MARTEL, 2016, p. 155). This extract suggests that faith is based on literary interpretation rather than on historical facts.

The last tale revolves around a man and his friendship with a chimpanzee. After his wife’s demise, he leaves his family and job as a senator in Canada to live in a village by the name of Tuizelo in Portugal with a chimp brought from Oklahoma. Stripped-down from the comforts of family and urban life, he goes in search for the story of his ancestors, and in the process finds himself not only in his own life story but also in his animal companion. There are moments of great beauty and subtlety between them as the narrator poses

questions such as “Does it bother him that the ape is essentially unknowable?” (MARTEL, 2016, p. 288), which affirms the gap between humans and animals, and equates the latter with a source of mystery. The tale closes on a mystical note with the encounter of an allegedly extinct Iberian rhinoceros, a powerful symbol which resonates through the three stories.

Ultimately, the journeys of the main characters of each tale turn out to be personal and inner experiences of grief-stricken men, of how each one of them attempts to overcome their sense of loss and loneliness in the world. Throughout all that ripples the overarching existentialist issue of how humans choose to live their lives in the face of adversity and what they choose to believe. The connection among the stories is in no way made explicit, with only some clues scattered here and there. Therefore, it should be for the reader to decide what ultimate golden thread runs through the three of them. One thing is certain, though. Throughout the book Martel comes up with interesting insights that make up for the passages wherein the plot stretches credulity to the limit, such as the comparison a character makes between Agatha Christie’s novels and the Gospels.

But, of course, it somewhat serves the point Martel is trying to make. At times, one might also feel that Martel is more concerned with conveying ideas rather than weaving a narrative. Overall, it is a readable book that should not be overlooked by those interested in Martel's oeuvre, in the representation of animals in literature, in the power of fiction to shed light on our humanity, and in the storytelling power in making sense of human life. It is a subtle yet powerful addition to the creatively diverse realm of Canadian Literature.

Before drawing this review to a close, it should be duly noted that *The High Mountains of Portugal* has been translated into Brazilian Portuguese by Marcelo Pen and published this year by Tordesilhas, an imprint of Alaúde Editorial, as *As Altas Montanhas de Portugal*. Translations for *Life of Pi*, *Beatrice and Virgil* and a non-fiction book are also available in Brazil. However, it begs the question: why were his other books, prior to *Life of Pi*, deemed unworthy of being translated in our country? I also take this opportunity to mention that *Life of Pi* was translated in 2004 under the title *A Vida de Pi*, by Alda Porto and published by Rocco. In 2010, the book was retranslated as *A Vida de Pi* by

Maria Helena Rouanet and published by Nova Fronteira. A new edition, commonly referred to as tie-in edition, was released in 2012 under the title *As Aventuras de Pi* with the same translation by Rouanet. The different title is probably due to the intentional connection to be made between the novel and the title of the film adaptation released in Brazil. *Beatrice and Virgil* was also translated by Rouanet and published by Nova Fronteira as *Beatriz e Virgílio* in 2011. There is also a translation of his non-fiction book *101 Letters to a Prime Minister* under the title *101 cartas para um grande líder: os livros fundamentais para inspirar e formar o líder dentro de você* with translation by Marília Garcia and publication by Nova Fronteira in 2014.

By way of conclusion, it should be said that in order to fully appreciate Martel's works careful attention should be paid to the interplay between form and content, which carry equal weights in his narrative constructions. One ought to be regarded in the light of the other. Martel, in all his fiction, leaves the questions to be answered and connections to be made by the reader without ever providing easy answers. There is quirkiness and mystery in his writing which ought not to put his readers

off, after all, as he himself declares in an altogether different context “there’s reward in the mystery, an enduring amazement” (MARTEL, 2016, p. 288). Simply put, *The High Mountains of Portugal* should not be merely read but quietly contemplated, if anything – like gazing at Iberian rhinoceros roaming in the wild.

Notes

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