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Article abstract

The deconstructive project of Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* is to replace the Enlightenment belief in the power of reason to liberate humanity with a belief in the transforming power of story. By employing the techniques of realism in fusing mundane details with an “incredible” story, Martel gives formal expression to the reason-imagination, fact-fiction debate at the centre of the novel. *Life of Pi* attempts not to prove God’s existence, but to justify belief in Him, thereby calling into question the devaluing and displacement of imaginative truth by positivist notions of physical, material truth. That Pi shows little or nothing in the way of personal growth, however, seriously compromises this project, calling attention to the epistemological and political limitations of the postmodernist view of language’s equivocal relation to reality.

“Hollow at the core”: Deconstructing Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*

FLORENCE STRATTON

“I HAVE A STORY that will make you believe in God” (viii). So, now famously, claims one of the characters in Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*, winner of the 2002 Man Booker Prize. Not surprisingly, this claim has been used by the publisher as a promotional hook.¹ It is, nonetheless, a claim to be reckoned with. The Martel-like writer who pops up regularly in the novel in the form of italicized passages endorses it (x), as does Martel himself, who has said that he stands by it, that “it is not a throw-away line” (*HotType*). Even the Booker judges have lent their authority to it: “In *Life of Pi* we have chosen an audacious book in which inventiveness explores belief. It is, as the author says, a novel which makes you believe in God or ask yourself why you don’t,” declared Lisa Jardine, chair of the Booker committee (Higgins A3). To suggest a connection between this Booker Prize winner’s (claimed) religious efficacy and its phenomenal success at the cash register — *Life of Pi* is “the most popular Booker prizewinner ever” (Hartley T2-7) — would, perhaps, be to undermine the novel’s own deconstructive project.

The story in question is one the young man of the title, Piscine (Pi) Molitor Patel, tells about how he survived for 227 days after the Japanese ship carrying him and his family from India to Canada, along with a collection of zoo animals, sank in the Pacific, at which point he found himself sharing a lifeboat with a hyena, a zebra with a broken leg, an orangutan, and an adult male Bengal tiger. However, when he is confronted with the skepticism of one of the officials from the Japanese Ministry of Transport investigating the ship’s sinking, Pi provides an alternative version of his tale of survival, a version that replaces animals with people. Pi then puts a question to the investigators: “So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can’t prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?” When both officials choose the story with animals, Pi replies, “Thank you. And so it goes with God” (352).

Although reviewers of *Life of Pi* are, without exception, warm in their praise of Martel's storytelling abilities, they have found his treatment of religion unpersuasive. As Peter Whittaker succinctly puts it: "This wonderful book did not make me believe in God but it did reinforce my faith in the considerable redemptive powers of fiction" (33).² But this is precisely Martel's point. He is not out to prove the existence of God, but rather to justify a belief in God's existence. Martel's position is a post-modernist one, from the perspective of which God's existence has the same status in relation to truth and reality as Pi's experience of shipwreck. Agnostics, Pi tells us, "lack imagination and miss the better story" (70). God's existence, in other words, is a matter neither of fact nor of faith, but rather is a better story than the one told by those who doubt or deny God's existence.

In complete agreement with Whittaker on the relative merits of Martel's proselytizing and storytelling capabilities, Pankaj Mishra, in his review, is more expansive on what he sees as the problem:

Martel is unable to reveal adequately, after the flurry of colourful religious information in the early pages, the precise nature, or vacillations, of Pi's faith. Clearly, the big questions about life and morality that any discussion of God provokes are as irrelevant to Pi on his lifeboat as they usually are in the animal kingdom. (18)

Indeed, Pi, who loves God so much that he embraces three religions, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, does not spend much time thinking about "the big questions"; he manages to survive his ordeal mainly because he devotes his time to figuring out what to do about the 450-pound Bengal tiger he is left with on the lifeboat after the other animals succumb to Darwinian survival logic. Martel is not, however, basing his claim for religious faith on what Pi makes of the matter of God. Rather, he builds it into the structure of his 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. The extreme poles of this debate are represented in the latter part of the novel by the two officials from the Japanese government.³ Mr. Okamoto, the head of the investigation, exemplifies the positivist view of truth as an objective reality that can be uncovered and verified by the methods of science. Because, for him, the sole criterion of human knowledge is empirical evidence, he dismisses Pi's first story, the story with animals, as "incredible" (328) and "very unlikely" (332): "We [sic] just don't believe there

was a tiger living in your lifeboat” (330). His assistant Mr. Chiba, on the other hand, represents the viewpoint of Romanticism, and, in particular, its emphasis on spontaneity, subjectivity, imaginative creativity, and emotion. “What a story” (324), and (in Japanese) “*What a horrible story*” (345) are, in chronological order, the only comments he makes on Pi’s two stories. Throughout the inquiry, he is repeatedly castigated by his superior officer for not following the rules of a scientific investigation (327-28, 331, 333).

To deconstruct this reason/imagination binary hierarchy is the project of Martel’s narrative. By demonstrating the deficiencies of their respective epistemological methods, Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba do some of the work themselves: Mr. Okamoto by displaying a lack of affective capacity and Mr. Chiba by manifesting an incapacity for rational analysis. But Martel’s main instrument of deconstruction is Pi, who, as his name might suggest, combines in his character the capacity for both cognitive and affective approaches to knowledge. Named after the famous art-deco swimming pool built in Paris in 1929, the Piscine Molitor, Pi has been caused much grief by his birth name because of its homonymic resemblance to “pissing.” And so he undertakes to rename himself Pi, “that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe” (27). In his exchanges with Mr. Okamoto, Pi challenges positivist claims about the objectivity of truth and rationality. Thus, for example, in responding to Mr. Okamoto’s suggestion that, in sticking to the story with animals, he is being unreasonable, Pi repudiates the claim that reason is the sole arbiter of truth or reality, though he does affirm its importance as a practical capacity: “Reason is excellent for getting food, clothing and shelter. Reason is the very best tool kit. Nothing beats reason for keeping tigers away. But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater” (330-31). Pi also employs poststructuralist arguments about the arbitrariness of language and the constructedness of all knowledge to counter Mr. Okamoto’s positivist understanding of language as corresponding faithfully to external reality: “Isn’t telling about something — using words, English or Japanese — already something of an invention? Isn’t just looking upon this world already something of an invention?” (335).

The resolution of this debate marks the climax of Martel’s narrative, which occurs when Mr. Chiba and Mr. Okamoto answer Pi’s question about “the better story.” In contrast to Mr. Chiba, who responds at once to Pi’s question, Mr. Okamoto takes time to consider his answer (352). As Pi states, “Neither [story] explains the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*,” and,

as Mr. Okamoto ultimately concedes, science cannot, on the basis of the available evidence, explain it either. Nor is it possible to prove which of Pi's two stories of survival "is true and which is not" (351-52). Still, Mr. Okamoto makes a selection, choosing, like Mr. Chiba, the story with animals as "the better story." What his considered choice would seem to indicate is that he has undergone a transformation: a development of his imaginative capacity. The reason/imagination binary having been deconstructed, Pi is then able to draw his analogy: "And so it goes with God."

So what makes one of Pi's two stories "better" (or worse) than the other? Putting a tiger in your tale does not automatically make it a "better story." Is "better" only an aesthetic category, as Mishra and others indicate?⁴ What criteria do Mr. Chiba and Mr. Okamoto use for adjudicating the two stories? To what standards of literary evaluation does Martel explicitly or implicitly subscribe in his narrative? Metafictional commentary addressing such questions of literary assessment runs throughout Martel's narrative, starting with the Author's Note which constitutes the opening frame of the novel. In the Note, the Martel-like writer recounts how he had to abandon a novel he was writing about Portugal because, although it had all the requisite technical attributes of a first-class novel — a striking theme, a superior style, a well-crafted plot — it lacked the one quality that really matters when it comes to distinguishing "great" from mediocre or inferior fiction: "*that spark that brings to life a real story*" (vi-vii). Later in the Note, the Author acknowledges the Brazilian writer Moacyr Scliar, the only person who is "real" in the Note, for providing him with "the spark of life" for his current novel (x). That "spark" ignited an international controversy, complete with accusations of plagiarism, about the (claimed) close resemblance of *Life of Pi* to Scliar's *Max and the Cats*, first published in English translation in 1990.⁵ While Martel was quickly cleared of charges of improper borrowing (his acknowledgement of Scliar had been overlooked in the first instance, and critics who had read both novels found the similarities to be superficial⁶), the one major sign of influence — the concept of a shipwrecked young man in a lifeboat with a ferocious and voracious member of the cat family — needs to be examined, not to raise again the issue of undue influence, but for the light it throws on the question: what makes one of Pi's two stories "better" than the other?

Scliar's *Max and the Cats* is an allegory of Naziism. Written in the style or mode of magic realism, it tells the story of Max Schmidt, the son of a Berlin furrier, who, starting from early childhood, has encounters

with felines (and Nazis). As a young man, he is forced to flee Germany because the Nazis are after him. So he boards a freighter bound for Brazil, which includes among its cargo a menagerie of zoo animals. When the ship sinks in the middle of the Atlantic, Max finds himself in a dinghy with a ravenous jaguar. After Max settles in Brazil, he continues to have encounters with Nazis, but following a violent confrontation, he is finally able to live in tranquillity, spending his last days raising a special breed of Angora cats.

Max and the Cats has very clearly left its mark on Pi's "better story." There are, however, evident and important differences between Scliar's and Martel's treatment of the notion of a man and a ferocious cat together in a lifeboat. For one thing, Martel devotes much more narrative space to the concept (211 pages out of 354) than does Scliar (17 pages out of 99). In a not unrelated move, Martel also opts for realism as his main (though not sole) narrative mode, amassing detail upon detail in the story with animals. Thus, for example, the physical features of the lifeboat — material make-up, design, inner and outer dimensions, colour, texture — are catalogued in great detail (152-53), as are the contents of the boat's supply locker, each of which is individually itemized: "192 tablets of anti-seasickness medicine," "124 tin cans of fresh water," "16 wool blankets," "12 solar stills," "2 fishing kits with hooks, lines and sinkers" (160-62). Pi's activities are also elaborately documented. The steps he follows in building a raft (165-66), erecting a canopy (192), operating solar stills (191), butchering a turtle (222-23), and taming a tiger (224-30) are described in such detail that the narrative takes on the aspect of a "how to" manual.

Martel also draws upon the conventions of realism in his elaboration of plot and character, constructing them in accordance with the rules of causal explanation (Morris 3). Thus Pi's survival for 227 days in a lifeboat with a tiger is explicable in terms of such factors as his skill as a swimmer (in *Life of Pi* name is destiny, which in this case means swimming lessons from the age of seven); his knowledge of wild animals (his father, who, along with the other members of his family, perished when the *Tsimtsum* sank, was a zoo-keeper); his possession of that essential piece of tiger-training equipment, a whistle (whistles are also an essential part of life-saving equipment and usually come attached to life jackets); and his ability to use the laws of physics to assert his authority over the tiger in his lifeboat (187-88, 224-28).

Realism would seem to be very well suited to Martel's deconstructive purposes. The detailed documentation demanded by realism helps to

make Pi's "better story" substantial or robust in its imaginative constitution or makeup. Furthermore, by fusing mundane ordinary details with an "incredible" story, Martel is able to give formal expression to the reason-imagination, fact-fiction debate which is at the centre of his novel. Combined with the strain of romanticism or idealism that runs through the story, the accumulated detail is also the source of much of the force and meaning of Pi's "better story": the heroic struggle of a religiously devout man to overcome the impediments of material reality.

Martel's tiger, named Richard Parker as a result of "a clerical error" (146), is also represented in a realist manner, with his physical appearance and habitual behaviour — sleeping, eating, defecating, growling — being described in considerable detail. But Richard Parker, "the spark of life" of Martel's novel, is also, like Scliar's jaguar, rich in symbolic meaning, though in this case the representation seems to owe more to Blake's "Tyger" than it does to Scliar's novel. "What art, what might," Pi exclaims when Richard Parker first shows himself to full advantage on the lifeboat:

His presence was overwhelming, yet equally evident was the lithe-some grace of it. He was incredibly muscular, yet his haunches were thin and his glossy coat hung loosely on his frame. His body, bright brownish orange streaked with black vertical stripes, was incomparably beautiful, matched with a tailor's eye for harmony by his pure white chest and underside and the black rings of his long tail.... Wavy dabs of black circled the face in a pattern that was striking yet subtle, for it brought less attention to itself than it did to the one part of the face left untouched by it, the bridge, whose rufous lustre shone nearly with a radiance. (167-68)

The dazzling display of colours and patterns suggests that Richard Parker's primary signification is the incantatory or transcendent power of art: the imaginative truths or realities that great art encompasses. That art has redemptive or transformative power is also suggested in the passage, both by the references to Richard Parker's "might" and by the near-radiant quality of his appearance. It is a notion of art which is further stressed by Pi's repeated assertion that "without Richard Parker, I wouldn't be alive today to tell you my story" (182).⁷ With the attention paid to formal patterning and the synthesizing of disparate elements into a formal unity, the description of Richard Parker also defines what is, in essence, a New Critical or formalist aesthetic. As an aesthetic object, Richard Parker stands in direct contrast to the hyena also residing (temporarily) on Pi's

lifeboat, an animal that, with its mismatched colours, ill-proportioned body, and shambling gait is, as Pi puts it, “ugly beyond redemption” (128). Also lacking any redeeming qualities of character, the hyena gruesomely kills the zebra, first chewing off its broken leg and then slowly eating it alive from the inside, and brings the orangutan to a grisly death by strangulation and beheading before being itself dispatched, quickly and cleanly, by Richard Parker.

As we learn from the first part of the novel, a section which deals with the circumstances of Pi’s life both before and after the 227 days he spends as the castaway of a shipwreck, there is also a sense in which Richard Parker represents Pi’s fate or destiny. One of Pi’s most vivid memories of his childhood in Pondicherry, India, is of the day his zookeeper father made him and his elder brother, Ravi, watch one of the zoo’s tigers devour a live goat in order to teach them a lesson about anthropomorphizing wild animals. Partly because he has a guilty conscience, and also because his father’s summonses have previously always been for disciplinary reasons, Pi assumes, when his father calls him to the living room, that he is about to be punished for some misdeed he has forgotten committing. And so, in order to shift the blame, he accuses Ravi of the crime: “I’m innocent! I burst out. ‘It’s Ravi’s fault, whatever it is. He did it!’” (35). Ravi never lets Pi forget this act of cowardice and slander, terrorizing Pi in subsequent years with the whispered words, “*You’re the next goat*” (43), a threat (or promise) that Pi recollects when Richard Parker climbs aboard the lifeboat (110). Thus, in order to survive, Pi must tame or master Richard Parker.

The meaning of “Richard Parker” is further complicated by an essay Martel has posted on the internet which makes evident that, while “clerical error” may be the official intratextual explanation for the name Richard Parker, there is another history of the name’s origin. A cabin boy of the same name is murdered and eaten by his lifeboat companions in Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Martel informs us. There are also two historical Richard Parkers who were victims of shipwreck and cannibalism in the nineteenth century. In the later 1884 case, the crew, when they returned to England, “were tried for murder, a first. Up till then, murder committed under duress, because of severe necessity, was informally accepted as justifiable.” The case went all the way to the highest court, which set a legal precedent by finding the captain guilty. “To this day, the only excuse for murder remains self-defence.... Murder committed in extreme circumstances for the sake of sustaining life remains illegal” (“How Richard Parker” 1-2).

While quite fascinating, this information about shipwrecked, murdered, and cannibalized Richard Parkers is not really helpful in terms of enhancing our understanding or appreciation of “the better story,” unless it is considered in conjunction with an intertextual reading of Pi’s two stories of survival. Indeed, it makes no sense at all outside of this context, not even in relation to the one explicit reference to cannibalism in the story with animals: Pi’s admission to eating a few “small pieces, little strips” of the flesh of a blind French castaway he meets near the end of his journey, a man who tries to murder Pi, who has also become blind, so that he can eat his organs, but who is instead killed and (mainly) eaten by Richard Parker (283-84).

Pi’s second story, the story without animals, comprises less than ten pages of the novel. Though it lacks the bulk of the first story, it has its own depth and complexity. Dispensing with the techniques of realism, it is written in a prose of concentrated direction that makes its sparse material serve symbolic ends. Unlike the first story, it is also anti-romantic and anti-idealist in its thrust. Told from a position of disillusionment and skeptical irony, it projects a view of life that emphasizes greed, cruelty, corruption, and futility. As Mr. Chiba says, it is a horrible story.

In this version of events, there are four survivors of the shipwreck: Pi, his mother, a Taiwanese sailor with a broken leg, and a French cook. A man with an insatiable appetite, the cook devours flies even when the boat’s food supplies are plentiful: “We hadn’t been in the lifeboat a full day; we had food and water to last us for weeks; we had fishing gear and solar stills; we had no reason to believe that we wouldn’t be rescued soon. Yet there he was, swinging his arms and catching flies and eating them greedily” (337). The cook also eats a rat and plunders the lifeboat’s provisions of food and water. Succumbing almost immediately to the cook’s corrupting influence, Pi, too, consumes more than his share of the rations. The cook then kills the Taiwanese sailor by amputating his broken leg, using his flesh for fishing bait and eating strips of it. He also kills Pi’s mother by repeatedly stabbing her and cutting off her head, which he tosses to Pi before starting to eat her body. Shortly after, he catches a turtle and gives Pi the blood and the best parts of the meat. Then he and Pi fight. Pi kills the cook and eats his flesh and vital organs. “His heart was a struggle — all those tubes that connected it. I managed to get it out. It tasted delicious, far better than turtle” (345).

As Mr. Okamoto observes, there are a number of correspondences between Pi’s two stories. “*Both the zebra and the Taiwanese sailor broke a leg,*” he remarks in Japanese to Mr. Chiba so that Pi can’t hear him. “*And*

the hyena bit off the zebra's leg just as the cook cut off the sailor's," he says, astonishing Mr. Chiba with his perspicacity (345). Based on his intertextual analysis, he and Mr. Chiba are soon able to conclude that *"the Taiwanese sailor is the zebra, his mother is the orang-utan, the cook is . . . the hyena — which means he's the tiger"* (346). But, despite Mr. Okamoto's analytic capacity, he overlooks some of the more subtle intra- and intertextual aspects of Pi's two stories. To be fair, it should be noted that Mr. Okamoto is at a comparative disadvantage as (unlike me) he does not have access to all parts of Martel's novel or to other sources of information, such as internet sites, but only to Pi's two stories. It is, no doubt, for this very reason that he takes no notice of one of the more obvious deficiencies of his allegorical reading of Pi's first story: its failure to explain why the tiger in the lifeboat is called Richard Parker.

Mr. Okamoto also misses the lack of correspondence between the way the flies and the rat, which appear in both stories, are assigned to characters and the human-animal identifications he and Mr. Chiba come up with. In the first story, the hyena eats the flies while Richard Parker gets the rat, which is tossed to him by Pi as a way of forestalling an attack on himself. In the second story, the cook eats the flies as well as the rat — except for a "small piece, very small" (337) that Pi takes for himself. This is just one of a number of instances in which there is an inter-story scrambling of the identities of Pi and the cook.⁸

This blurring and blending of identities also occurs within each of Pi's two stories. In the first, it takes place in the section that deals with Pi's meeting with the blind castaway who, not incidentally, is, as Mr. Okamoto points out, like the cook, a Frenchman (332). Read without reference to Pi's second story, this episode is quite incomprehensible. It is also the only part of the first story that is not written in the realist mode. Exploiting, instead, the techniques of absurdist theatre, it highlights the fundamental absurdity of human existence by narrating the chance meeting of two blind castaways in the middle of the Pacific Ocean by using a dialogue that is repetitive and seemingly pointless, and by delineating the fluidity of identity. "Is someone there?" the Frenchman asks à la Beckett. "Of course someone's there," Pi responds. "There's always some *one* there. Who would be asking the question otherwise?" (269). For most of the conversation, Pi and the Frenchman talk about food, exchanging recipes for their favourite dishes (270-72). In his knowledge of the culinary arts, Pi, it turns out, is as much of a cook as the cook, an identification that is also made in the first part of the novel.

In Pi's second story the question of identity is handled more in the

manner of Conrad, through the technique of doubling.⁹ As Kurtz is to Marlow, so the cook is to Pi: his alter ego or hidden or repressed self. In telling this story, Pi expresses his horror at the cook's actions. "He was a disgusting man," Pi states. "He was a brute. He dominated us" (337-38). But he also acknowledges an irresistible attraction, "the fascination of the abomination," as Conrad calls it (20): "At ... times I looked at him with — yes — tenderness. With love. I imagined that we were fast friends" (Martel 343). However, unlike Marlow, who, though he is led to the very brink of savagery, stops short, Pi, like Kurtz, penetrates into the very heart of darkness. "He was such an evil man," Pi tells us. "Worse still, he met evil in me — selfishness, anger, ruthlessness. I must live with that" (345).

It would seem, then, that the cook is a "figment" — to use a word that occurs more than once in the conversation between Pi and the Frenchman (269-70) — of Pi's imagination. Like Conrad's Kurtz, he epitomizes savage or base human impulses or instincts: "'The horror! The horror!,'" as Kurtz expresses it in his deathbed recognition of his own greed and ruthlessness (112). Does Martel also owe Conrad a debt of gratitude for providing him with "the spark of life" for Pi's second story? Certainly *Heart of Darkness* has, like *Max and the Cats*, left its imprint on Martel's novel. Like Conrad, too, Martel uses cannibalism as a primary signifier of savagery. However, whereas Conrad represents cannibalism in social Darwinian terms, as part of a binary system that identifies it with primitivism, Martel characterizes it in philosophical terms, associating cannibalism with secular materialism, a doctrine that finds its philosophical roots in logical positivism.

Martel makes this connection by naming the ship that Pi and his family take on their voyage to Canada "*Tsimtsum*," which is also the name of a concept developed by Isaac Luria, a sixteenth-century Jewish mystic who, not coincidentally, is the subject of Pi's religious studies thesis at the University of Toronto, where he does a bachelor's degree (with a double major in religion and biology) after finally arriving in Canada (3). The problem Luria addresses is a cosmogonical paradox: if God is infinite and omnipresent, how could the world have been created? *Tsimtsum* is Luria's answer to this question, a Hebrew word which means God's contraction or withdrawal into self in order to make room for the physical universe. Having first created a space where God was not, God then tried to fill the space with emanations of divine energy, but the material vessels of the world were not strong enough to hold them and they shattered. According to Luria, the major task of humanity from the time of creation has

been to work to repair the broken vessels and overcome the separation between divinity and materiality.¹⁰

In the first story, Pi takes up this assignment. For although, as stated earlier, Pi does not spend much time reflecting on religion, he does make God the object of frequent and heartfelt exhortations and expressions of gratitude. "Vishnu preserve me, Allah protect me, Christ save me," he cries out shortly after he finds himself in the lifeboat (108).¹¹ God, it would seem, responds to Pi's efforts to mend the rift, signalling his presence by sending Lurianic emanations of divine energy in the form of bolts of lightning: "For two, perhaps three seconds, a gigantic, blinding white shard of glass from a broken cosmic window danced in the sky, insubstantial yet overwhelmingly powerful." Pi calls it "an outbreak of divinity" (258-59). In Pi's second story, on the other hand, God is notably absent throughout the events narrated, leaving human beings alone in the material universe, living in a state of exile from divinity. None of the castaways makes any attempt to overcome the separation. Pi turns to God only at the very end of the story, after he has feasted on human flesh and organs (345).

Martel also suggests a link between cannibalism and secular materialism in the first story, in the section dealing with Pi's visit to the toxic algae island inhabited by hundreds of thousands of meerkats. Like Pi's meeting with the French castaway, this episode is quite incomprehensible unless it is read retrospectively, with reference to Pi's second story. From this perspective, it seems to be taking direct aim at consumer capitalism as the most secular and materialist form of human existence. The society portrayed is one in which freedom and individuality have been eliminated. The meerkats (mere cats?) never act singly but always collectively, "like one man," as Pi puts it (298). They are also eternal consumers, spending all their days nibbling at the algae or staring into the island's ponds, waiting for the fresh (dead) fish delivery. Nothing, not even hurricanes and marauding tigers, distract the meerkats from the business of "pond staring and algae nibbling" (298). In their mass consumerism and conforming mass order, the meerkats are, as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno describe human beings living under late capitalism, completely conventionalized in their modes of behaviour (28).

The algae island itself is, like the cook, insatiable in its appetite, consuming, through a process of acid digestion, everything that comes near it. "I never saw such a stripped-down ecology," Pi states:

The air of the place carried no flies, no butterflies, no bees, no insects of any kind. The trees sheltered no birds. The plains hid no rodents,

no shrubs, no worms, no snakes, no scorpions; they gave rise to no other trees, no shrubs, no grasses, no flowers. . . . With the single, notable exception of the meerkats, there was not the least foreign matter on the island, organic or inorganic. (301)

Omnivorous, the island even ingests humans, as Pi discovers when he investigates what he had taken to be the fruit of one of the trees and finds all that remains of an earlier visitor to the island: a set of human teeth. Though he adapts quickly and easily to the island's consumer culture and experiences physical well-being, Pi decides he must leave once he comes to understand the insipidity or vacuousness of life on the island: "I preferred to set off and perish in search of my own kind than to live a lonely half-life of physical comfort and spiritual death on this murderous island" (313).

The riddle of the name "Richard Parker" has now been solved. The tiger in Pi's lifeboat is, like the historical and literary Richard Parkers Martel refers to in his internet essay, also a victim of cannibalism. This is the case in the sense that imaginative truth, the primary signification of the Richard Parker of Martel's novel, has been devalued or displaced in the modern world by the truth of the material physical world, what cannibalism stands for. The main question, however, has not yet been answered: what makes the story with animals "the better story"? First, considering "better" as an aesthetic valuation: Does the first story display a unity of form and content — what might be called a "tiger aesthetic" — that is lacking in the second story? Such a comparative assessment is difficult to make when considerable chunks of the first story depend on the second for their meaning. This lack of formal integrity might even constitute the basis for a claim that the first story falls into the same aesthetic category as the hyena. However, as I hope my reading of the novel has indicated, *Life of Pi*, as a whole, does lend itself to a New Critical reading. But in his implicit, as well as explicit, endorsement of New Critical principles, Martel undermines the logic of his own deconstructive project. For New Criticism's conception of the study of literature is a positivist one: the New Critical conviction that literary studies needs to attain the objective status of science.

Realism, too, has a historical association with modern rational scientific models of knowledge. As Darcy Kirkham points out, "the foundational assumption within realism . . . is that fiction can . . . move toward an objective description of reality" (5). Pi, as we know, challenges the view that linguistic constructs can provide an accurate reflection of reality: "The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no?" he says to Mr. Okamoto (335). What, then, is the motive underlying the

realism of Pi's first story? Kirkham argues that much contemporary realist fiction does not conform to the theoretical assumptions of realism, that rather than attempting "to move toward the Real," it strives "to keep the Real at bay" (6). One of the reasons Kirkham offers for this reversal in the direction realist texts move is the traumatic nature of reality which makes it "something to be hidden from or escaped" (7). Like the fiction Kirkham examines, *Life of Pi* deals with traumatic events. Perhaps this explains the purpose of Pi's first story: to provide a means of coping with trauma, to offer a defence against traumatic reality.

Perhaps the traumatic nature of his experience also explains why the first story is the story Pi tells the Martel-like author who tracks him down in Toronto. The Author only learns of the second story when he himself contacts the Japanese Ministry of Transport, presumably in order to verify Pi's story (x). More problematically, Pi tells his second story to the Japanese officials only after he has received assurance from Mr. Okamoto that he will not be subject to criminal charges (331). Does Pi, too, know about the precedent-setting 1884 court case in England involving one Richard Parker? In other words, might the purpose of the first story's realism, of all that accumulation of detail, be to trick the listener/reader into believing that Pi's words correspond with reality? Pi does, after all, have a bit of a history of "telling stories" in order to make himself look innocent: "It's Ravi's fault, whatever it is. He did it!" Rebranding his image also seems to be one of Pi's specialties, if his changing of his name from "pissing" to "Pi" is anything to go by.

"You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently," Pi accuses Mr. Okamoto when he complains that the story with animals lacks verisimilitude (336). What this metafictional commentary would seem to suggest is that the ethical lens Mishra and others find missing in *Life of Pi* is, in fact, encoded or embedded in "the better story." Pi's first story is, for the most part, a very conventional (one might even say "typically Canadian"¹²) story of male courage, endurance, and survival. Pi's second story, on the other hand, seems to have the potential to expand our knowledge of human nature and to interrogate established habits of thinking and feeling. It is a narrative of self-discovery, one that tells us that the most religious and idealistic of men can be led into savagery and brutality by the allure of power, that such men can be found to be "hollow at the core" (Conrad 95).

Is the story with animals "better" because it is a feel-good, rather than a horrible, story?

There is another story with animals in *Life of Pi*, a story that is told by the Author about Pi's life in Toronto fifteen or twenty years after the shipwreck, at the time he is interviewed by the Author for his story of survival. Like Pi's first story, this story, too, would seem to bear the imprint of Scliar's *Max and the Cats*. For like Max, who, as we will recall, spends his last days raising Angora cats, Pi also, after his earlier adventures with wild animals, lives quite happily with their domesticated relations: in his case, a mongrel dog called Tata and an orange cat named Moccasin. What do these animals and their names signify? Although, as he knows, hyenas and dogs do not belong to the same family of animals, Pi is at pains in the first story with animals to connect them (122, 128, 150). As well as being the name of a tea factory Pi visits with his family during his childhood in India (55), "Tata" is a colloquial English expression for "Goodbye." Is the implication that Pi, now he is in Canada, has said "Goodbye" to the indecent behaviour and all-consuming greed the hyena represents? Rather ominously, Pi, who also has a wife and two children, seems to spend much of his time cooking, preparing tasty but often too spicy dishes for the Author: "*Each time it's the same: my taste buds shrivel up and die, my skin goes beet red, my eyes well up with tears, my head feels like a house on fire, and my digestive tract starts to twist and groan in agony like a boa constrictor that has swallowed a lawn mower*" (47). Might there be an element of sadism in Pi's culinary activities? Pi also does not seem to have overcome what Fredric Jameson would call his "commodity lust" (200). In the words of the Author: "*his cupboards are jam-packed. Behind every door, on every shelf, stand mountains of neatly stacked cans and packages*" (27).

The orange cat called Moccasin is another matter. Since "moccasin" is an Algonquian word, that is, a word that is indigenous to North America, the presence of this pussy-cat version of Richard Parker in Pi's place of residence would seem to indicate that the transcendental values Richard Parker symbolizes are also very much present. That Pi's house is crammed full of religious icons, including three Ganeshas, two crucifixes, two Virgin Marys, two Krishnas, a Shiva, a conch shell, sticks of incense, a prayer rug, and a silver handbell (49-51), might be seen to support this interpretation. On the other hand, this accumulation of articles of religious devotion might be seen as another sign of commodity lust. This is not to mention Pi's appropriation of First Nations culture in the naming of the cat "Moccasin." In any case, in the view of the Author "This story has a happy ending" (103). Does that make it a "better" story?

The deconstructive project of *Life of Pi* is to replace the Enlighten-

ment belief in the power of reason to liberate humanity with a belief in the transforming power of story. That Pi shows little or nothing in the way of personal growth or development over the course of the narrative seriously compromises this project. Perhaps the problem lies in Pi's postmodernist view of discourse — language, narrative — as he expresses it in his exchange with Mr. Okamoto: "Doesn't the telling of something always become a story?" (335). As Satya Mohanty points out in his groundbreaking study, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, this postmodernist contention that narration is by its very nature subversive of knowledge is epistemologically as well as politically inadequate (10-15). Such skepticism, he suggests, might even lead to the conclusion that stories are irrelevant to personal development (205).

As Mohanty explains, the postmodernist conception of language is based on a rejection of the positivist notion of reference as a guarantee of objective meaning — in other words, a rejection of the idea upheld by Mr. Okamoto of words as corresponding directly to reality. Taking up the question of reference, Mohanty, like Pi, repudiates reductive positivist notions of the relation between language and the world. But, unlike Pi, who is equivocal about truth and reality, Mohanty is also critical of the postmodernist view of language as having no literal referent. "Language," in this view, he says, citing Paul de Man, "is mere structure because it is hollow at the core" (37).¹³

NOTES

¹ The blurb on the back of the British Canongate edition says it is "a tale that will ... make you believe in God." My Vintage Canada edition more cautiously uses "may."

² See also Morra 164, Laughlin 4-5, and Kaveney 25, as well as Mishra 18, as cited below.

³ In the first part of the novel, these same roles are played by the two Mr. Kumars, one an atheist and a biology teacher, the other a Sufi Muslim and a baker.

⁴ See also Ferguson R1 and Laughlin 5.

⁵ See, for example, Rohter E1+ and Martin A1.

⁶ See, for example, Mishra 17, Martin R4, and Sandiford 1.

⁷ See also 262 and 317.

⁸ Whereas, in the first story, Pi saves Richard Parker from drowning, in the second, the cook saves Pi. Also, the raft Pi builds in the first story is built by the cook in the second.

⁹ Conrad has been a major influence on Martel's writing. Specific references to Conrad appear in the title story of *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamotios* (91-93), and Martel's first novel *Self* (211, 220, 279-280, 320). In a recent interview, Martel cites Conrad as among the writers "who have influenced me, who have formed my sensibility" ("Emphatic" 30).

¹⁰ See Armstrong 1-3 and "Luria, Isaac" 54-55.

¹¹ See also 133, 155, 166, 204, 246, 259, 287. Pi also includes God on the list of items making up the supplies provided for shipwrecked castaways (162).

¹² Rick Groen's characterization of the film version of Farley Mowat's short story "The Snow Walker" applies aptly to Pi's first story: "*The Snow Walker* is a vintage slice of Canadiana. Its story is the one that has dominated our culture since the outset — your basic tale of survival, man against the elements, human nature at its strongest versus Mother Nature at her harshest" (R-1).

¹³ Taking issue with the de Manian claim that reference is an extralinguistic category, Mohanty argues that reference is essential to meaning and that it is "culturally and historically determined" (19). Although it is resistant to it, *Life of Pi* can, of course, be read from the perspective of Mohanty's understanding of reference. Such a reading might, for example, place Martel's narrative in the context of Canadian history and culture, and then examine its deployment of the tropes of Canadian nationhood: that of orphanhood, for instance, or of immigration. It is an essay waiting to be written.

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