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the CONSTRUCTIVE IMAGINATION

Life of Pi, Historiography, and Psychotherapy

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*And better had they ne'er been born,
Who read to doubt, or read to scorn.*

--Sir Walter Scott

Maybe God's silence is an appeal to get beyond factuality. Maybe God's trick is to call us through the imagination. If you don't have any imagination, you live a diminished life. The overly reasonable life is a shrunk life. So much alienation in Western cultures is due to an excess of reason.

--Yann Martel

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between historiography and psychotherapy through an analysis of Yann Martel's 2001 novel *Life of Pi* using Hayden White's essay "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact." The use of historiography as a psychotherapeutic technique is a fairly recurrent theme in our culture. These two concepts are put together only superficially in Hayden White's essay; this thesis seeks to explore and more clearly define the relationship between these two conceptual terms, particularly with regards to the notion of "truth" in the stories we tell ourselves about our lives. *Life of Pi* offers up storytelling as a means of coping with tragedy, both in the fictitious character Pi Patel's life (and the two stories he offers the reader about what happened to him on his nine-month journey across the Pacific Ocean in a lifeboat with a tiger), but also for Yann Martel himself. The novel employs a variety of techniques to blur the line between truth and fiction, particularly in its narrative framing. Two recurrent motifs of the novel are also explored: the ability of storytelling to be the impetus of political change, and the use of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism to imbue the world with meaning and significance. The final section of the thesis argues that Pi's story of surviving in a lifeboat with a tiger, the "story with animals," was an "overemplotted" account, one that he told himself to avoid thinking about his even more traumatic reality. Ultimately, though, it doesn't matter if the stories we tell ourselves are fictional or true; when faced with the choice, as *Life of Pi* advises us, we should always go with the better story. In this case, we should believe the story with animals not only because it makes Pi feel better, but because it also makes us feel better.

1. Introduction

Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi* was first published by Knopf Canada on September 11, 2001. Although it was written in a pre-9/11 world, it was read in a post-9/11 world, a time when many people experienced feelings of great hopelessness and desolation. This tragedy forever changed the world on a large scale. Its effect on world relations, politics, etc. will be forever felt. But its influence on small individual lives must not be forgotten, even those who were not directly affected by the tragedy. Individual people changed that day too, myself included, in how we view the world and our place in it. For me, it represented my awakening to the "outside world," my political arousing—and to the knowledge that Americans are not admired by everyone. After September 11th, I watched as my parents and teachers grew more and more concerned with the state of the world, and that anxiety and fear became my default.

I first read *Life of Pi* in the spring of 2003 when I was in eighth grade, around the time the United States invaded Iraq. This book (as well as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which I read about a year later) inspired me to become an English major. It is one of my favorite books. In the novel, I found not only a great and engaging story, but a genuine and heartfelt defense of *storytelling* itself. It offers up storytelling as a mechanism for coping with tragedy. In Yann Martel's novella "The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios," from his short story collection of the same name, one of the characters, Paul, is diagnosed with AIDS. The nameless narrator must help Paul deal with his imminent death. "Between the two of us we had to do something constructive," the narrator thinks, "something that will help us make something out of nothing" (Martel, *Facts* 14). In a burst of inspiration, he remembers Boccaccio's *Decameron*: "An isolated villa outside of Florence; the world dying of the Black Death; ten people gathered together hoping to survive; *telling each other stories to pass the time*" (14, italics original). He and Paul

tell each other stories of a fictitious family named the Roccamatios, with each story acquiring its structure from an event from each year in the 20th century. That book, while worthy of its own research¹, will not be the focus of my questions here. But the theme that sustains that book also implicitly drives *Life of Pi*; of imbuing the world with meaning, of making something “constructive” out of seemingly senseless tragedy, as a coping mechanism for making sense of the world and what happens to us. Literature provides the conditions for working through the mourning of loss and trauma.

At the beginning of *Life of Pi*, the reader is promised, “This is a story that will make you believe in God” (Martel viii). The reader assumes this belief in God will result from the grandeur and spectacle of a story that centers on a teenage Indian boy trapped on a lifeboat for nine months. However, the novel is not only about Pi’s journey across the Pacific Ocean from India to North America, but is also the story of Pi’s definition of reality, and simultaneously the story of “Yann Martel” himself. The novel perpetuates the belief that it doesn’t really matter if a story is true or not. History is a subjective art, not an objective science. One can revise history to suit his or her needs in order to deal with a traumatic past.

Life of Pi is very strongly concerned with historiography. Some of the questions it probes are: what divides truth from fiction? How “true” does a story have to be before we consider it nonfiction? How important is “suspension of disbelief” when we consider the supposed “truth” of a story? Some people believe the dichotomy that exists between fiction and nonfiction can never be crossed. Story telling and invention are to remain solely in their own genre, history and truth in another. However, these terms, and many of their derivatives, are not mutually

¹ “‘Yarn-spinning is also highly recommended’: Yann Martel’s framing narratives” by Karen Scherzinger does an excellent job at exploring *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, which consists of the titular novella plus three short stories, all written in Martel’s earlier career.

exclusive. History is more of a continuum of truth and invention than many people are willing to acknowledge. The dichotomy between truth and fiction is played with in the novel.

The book also begs the question of why “true” stories are considered to be intrinsically more valuable than “invented” stories, as evidenced by the recent surge in popularity of the genre of memoir.² The book also questions the idea of whether or not there is such a thing as objective truth, especially when so many frames interfere with objectivity. As inherent storytellers, humans may not be able to tell a story without embellishment (or “emplotment,” as historiographer Hayden White calls it). Readers of *Life of Pi* are actually offered two stories about what happened to Pi on the lifeboat between India and North America. They are forced to make a choice about what to believe, and this choice also reflects the choice between what is *possible* and what is *actual*.³ The book also questions what is the role of fiction and storytelling in society. The answers to these questions represents the conceptual stakes of this project. Storytelling is important because it helps us deal with tragedy; it is a kind of psychotherapy. The relationship between historiography and psychotherapy is touched on in Hayden White’s essay “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” and in this thesis I hope to make the connection more clear.

² When it came to light that pieces of James Frey’s memoir *A Million Little Pieces* actually belonged more in the genre of fiction than nonfiction, people were outraged, and this resulted in a cross-examination on *The Oprah Show* that ended, almost literally, with Frey in tears. If only Frey had had Pi and Yann Martel on his side.

³ This theme is prevalent in a lot of popular culture: the movies *Big Fish* and *Pan’s Labyrinth*, for example, contain two accounts: a “true” account and an “emplotted,” less believable account. Jonathan Safran Foer’s 2002 novel *Everything is Illuminated*, written as Foer’s honors thesis at Princeton under advisor Joyce Carol Oates, was originally intended as a true account of Foer’s grandfather, but after coming up with little concrete data, he created a fictional account instead (Jacobson). The narrator of *Everything is Illuminated* is also named Jonathan Safran Foer, but we are meant to understand that the narrator and the author are distinct persons. This is also true of *Life of Pi*, although that point is not made directly clear at first.

This thesis begins with a summary of Hayden White's essay; following will be a close-reading of *Life of Pi*, as well as some of Yann Martel's other writing and interviews. I will begin by discussing the narrative structure of *Life of Pi*. Much of the book complicates the relationship between the reader and the author and makes the reader reinterpret the supposed "truth" of the novel, and the narrative structure of the novel is particularly adept at doing this. I will also explore two of the recurring motifs in the novel: the political motivations, and anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. Finally, I will explore the existence of parallel stories, both within and outside of the text. Hayden White concerns himself with the relationship of figurative language, like metaphor and metonym, to history; I wish to extend these ideas to the idea of *allegory*, and relate this back to psychotherapy. Storytelling offers us a mechanism for coping with disaster of all kinds. As I will show, it does for Pi; it does for Yann Martel; and it even does for me.

2. Hayden White's "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact"

Historiography is inherently interdisciplinary; it explores and attempts to break down the dichotomy that exists between the study of history and the study of literature. Pi himself is also an inherently interdisciplinary person; the novel *Life of Pi* begins with a description of Pi's life in Canada, where his two majors at the University of Toronto are zoology and Religious Studies. These two are not so different, in Pi's eyes, because they both seek to explain the world; in fact, Pi tells us, "Sometimes I got my majors mixed up" (Martel, *Life* 5). For Hayden White, history and literature are likewise the same because both of them serve as an attempt to illuminate the world, and in both, "We recognize the forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world it seeks to inhabit comfortably" (White 1397). Consciousness is an active entity that is always working to make sense of its

surroundings, and manipulates supposedly objective facts, like those of historical events, in order to make sense of them.

Human beings are pattern-seeking creatures, White tells us. The study of history can be distinguished from the study of literature because in literature, people see patterns intentionally; this idea is made explicit in the study of structuralism, where people like Northrop Frye view fictions to consist only of “sublimates of archetypal myth structures” (White 1385). We can only understand why a particular story ends the way it does after we identify which of the pregeneric plot structures the story is attempting to follow; the plot structures are often an indicator of genre. People feel as if, once they can pin a book into a particular genre (for *Life of Pi*, these genres could include, but are not limited to, Canadian literature, animal literature, postmodern literature, postcolonial literature, magical realism, and shipwreck narrative story), they will be able to understand it “better.” Yann Martel often bemoans this desire for people to pigeonhole his book in a particular genre; *Life of Pi* is a victim of an attempt to oversimplify, he feels. He says, “I must be following some tradition, but it’s for other people to tell me that. I’m Canadian, and Canadian literature has a tradition. I’ve written a story with animals, and there’s a tradition about that. But at one point every artist does his or her own thing” (Sielke 26). However, due to the structured nature of story-telling, once the reader comes to realize the story fits the style of romance, tragedy, comedy, satire, romance, etc. she has not only followed it, she has grasped the *point* of it (White 1388). The reader can only ascertain the point of the story once she determines what genre it falls into. But as Martel indicates, this philosophy has its limits and its caveats. While it is important for authors to pay tribute to what came before them, not all stories fit neatly into these categories. Northrop Frye’s ideas can be applied to much of literature, but at some point these pregeneric plot structures fall apart, and people must consider the story at hand.

Late in Pi's journey, after Pi has gone blind, Pi meets another blind castaway on another lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific. The account is one of the more absurd moments in the text. Pi and the other castaway surrealistically talk to each other, and Pi tells him this story: "Once upon a time there was a banana and it grew. It grew until it was large, firm, yellow and fragrant. Then it fell to the ground and someone came upon it and ate it" (Martel, *Life* 278). Pi is not certain at this point if the other castaway is a real person; he believes him to be a figment of his imagination (it is in fact this word, which contains the word "fig"—a fantasy to the two starving castaways—that spurs the banana conversation in the first place). The other castaway responds, "What a beautiful story," to which Pi says, "I have another element" (278). He continues: "The banana fell to the ground and someone came upon it and ate it—and afterwards that person *felt better*" (278, italics original). With this added element, we see that the banana story has a point. The banana actually caused an effect in another person, and so, the story automatically becomes much more meaningful. In response to this added element, the other castaway responds, "It takes the breath away!" (279). It is only once the other castaway is explicitly told the "point" of the story that it truly has its effect.

The historian, as opposed to the student of literature, supposedly works "inductively," trying to avoid seeing any patterns (White 1385). As White tells us, "No historical event is *intrinsically tragic*; it can only be conceived as such from a particular point of view or from within the context of a structured set of events of which it is an element enjoying a privileged place" (1386, italics original). White gives us the example of two famous differing perspectives on the French Revolution, from the historians Michelet and Toqueville. Michelet and Toqueville use the exact same facts, but for Michelet, the Revolution is "a drama of Romantic transcendence," and for Toqueville, the Revolution is "an ironic Tragedy" (1387). Although

these two men had the same information at their disposal, they had different notions of what kind of story best fitted the facts they knew. “Considered as potential elements of a story, historical events are value-neutral,” White says. “Whether they find their place finally in a story that is tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic—to use Frye’s categories—depends upon the historian’s decision to *configure* them according to the imperatives of one plot structure or mythos rather than another” (1386-7). The historian’s ability to configure history implies, despite the historian’s attempt to be objective and provide a truthful account of history, she cannot help but change details around in order to create a better story out of them. In Frye’s view, if the “fictional elements” or mythic plot structure becomes obviously present, then “it ceases to be history altogether and becomes a bastard genre, product of an unholy, though not unnatural, union between history and poetry” (1386).

However, for White, this union is not unholy, but inherent to the human experience. We can’t help but tell stories. White refers to the work of the historian R.G. Collingwood, who believed

The historian was above all a storyteller and suggested that historical sensibility was manifested in the capacity to make a plausible story out of a congeries of ‘facts’ which, in their unprocessed form, made no sense at all. In their efforts to make sense of the historical record, which is fragmentary and always incomplete, historians have to make use of what Collingwood calls ‘the constructive imagination,’ which told the historian—as it tells the competent detective—what ‘must have been the case’ given the available evidence and the formal properties it displayed to the consciousness capable of putting the right question to it. (1386)

The “constructive imagination” enables what White calls “emplotment,” which is the encoding of facts with components of specific kinds of plot structures (1386). Emplotment enables the historian to make stories out of chronicles. Historical events do not inherently constitute stories, White believes; rather, the elements are made into a story by the suppression of some elements, the highlighting of others, characterization, variation of tone and point of view; “in short,” White

says, “all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or play” (1386).

Emplotment, according to White, enables us to make sense of events which appear strange, pragmatic, or mysterious (1388). Emplotting these stories, or “fiction-making,” familiarizes the unfamiliar. This is very similar, he feels, to what happens in psychotherapy (1388). In psychotherapy, the events in a patient’s past presumed to be the cause of his distress have been “defamiliarized, rendered strange, mysterious, and threatening and have assumed a meaning that he can neither accept nor effectively reject” (1388). We might say, “according to the theory of psychoanalysis, the patient has overemplotted the events, has charged them with a meaning so intense that, whether real or merely imagined, they continue to shape both his perceptions and his responses to the world long after they should have become ‘past history’” (1389). He can neither successfully reject nor accept the meaning behind the events. The patient has imbued these events with a meaning so powerful he is unable to process and deal with them; his only option is to repress them, to tell himself something *different* happened. But, White says, the therapist’s job is not to hold up the “real story” as opposed to the patient’s fancy. Rather, the therapist must “get the patient to ‘reemplot’ his whole life in such a way as to change the meaning of these events for him and their significance for the economy of the whole set of events that make up his life” (1389). A subject who undergoes traumatic events (such as, for example, an arduous nine-month journey across the Pacific Ocean in a lifeboat) will overemplot the events to make them into a story he can stand telling himself. The therapeutic process is an attempt to refamiliarize and integrate events that have been defamiliarized. White tells us, “I am not interested in forcing the analogy between psychotherapy and historiography; I use the example merely to illustrate a point about the fictive component in historical narratives” (1389).

The parallel between the “emplotment” of historical events and psychotherapy is only touched on in “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” but I hope to make the connection more explicit in the Parallel Stories section of this thesis. Both Pi and Yann Martel are guilty of “overemplotment” in terms resonant of White’s psychotherapeutic analysis.

The last of Hayden White’s ideas that are particularly relevant to my reading of *Life of Pi* is his exploration of the relationship between figurative language and historiography. For White, thinking of historical narratives as “model ships” of the past is a false notion. For model ships, we have the benefit of both the model and the real thing, enabling us to “see...in what respect the model has actually succeeded in reproducing aspects of the original” (1389). But for history, we can never go back and look at the original, and therefore, we can never go back and look at them to see how adequately or accurately the historian has reproduced them in his narrative. “If the historian only did that for us, we should be in the same situation as the patient whose analyst merely told him, on the basis of interviews with his parents, siblings, and childhood friends, what the ‘true facts’ of the patient’s early life were,” White says. “We would have no reason to think that anything at all had been explained to us” (1389). Historiography and psychotherapy’s competing interpretations of truth contradict each other. Psychotherapy assumes there is some “hidden truth,” whereas historiography imagines that “truth” is always to some extent fictionalized and thus does not exist. To deal with this contradiction, psychotherapy’s envisioning of truth needs to be revised. Historical narratives are not exact replicas; they take an entire historical event, as experienced by potentially thousands of people, each with a different perspective, and attempt to distill these experiences into a single, concrete “event.” As with the different accounts of the French Revolution, even when authors do make use of the same incidents, the incidents are rendered in different lights (1391).

As such, according to White, “a historical narrative is not only a reproduction of the events reported in it, but also a complex of symbols which gives us directions for finding an icon of the structure of those events in our literary tradition” (1389). This relationship of historical event to historical narrative may be thought of as an extended metaphor (1391). The historical narrative does not reproduce the events in a same way a model ship reproduces a real ship, but instead, the narrative tells us in what direction to think about the events. Historical narratives endow historical events with meanings and are “emplotted” in such a way as to exploit the metaphorical similarities between real events and structures of our fictions (1392). The relationship of historical narratives to history can be viewed as a part/whole relationship, and figurative language is used to explore this divide. “In our account of the historical world we are dependent, in ways perhaps that we are not in the natural sciences,” White tells us, “on the techniques of *figurative language* both for our *characterization* of the objects of our narrative representations and for the *strategies* by which to constitute narrative accounts of the transformations of those objects in time” (1396, italics original). Human language is inherently figurative, and we rely on these tropes to engage and interact with the world. We use different modes of figurative language to achieve different ends. As White tells us, “If we stress the similarities among the elements, we are working in the mode of metaphor; if we stress the differences among them, we are working in the mode of metonymy” (1394). All historical narratives are not literal; they are inherently figurative, once again stressing the relationship of history to literature.

White also explains that in historical narratives, some events are given “privileged status” (1393). He says in chronicles, events in a series can be emplotted in a number of different ways

without violating chronological arrangement. For example, he tells us, we might have a set of events:

1. a, b, c, d, e.....n

We may “reemplot” the events as such:

2. A, b, c, d, e.....n
3. a, B, c, d, e.....n
4. a, b, C, d, e.....n

The different numbers signify the different accounts; the capitalized letters signify the event in question has been given privileged status (1392-3). If an early event, like “a,” is given privileged status, this creates a deterministic narrative; if a later event, like “e,” is given privileged status, this creates an apocalyptic narrative (1393). When different events are given privileged status, it results in the different types of stories, such as Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, Satire, etc.

Life of Pi tells two different accounts about what happened on the lifeboat: a story with animals and a story without animals. These stories represent two different accounts: a “real” story and an “emplotted” story. Martel’s trick is we do not know the emplotted story has been “emplotted,” and he leaves ambiguous which is the “real” and which the “emplotted” account. I will return to this idea in the Parallel Stories section, where these two stories, and their relationship to psychotherapy, are explored.

3. Narrative Structure: Unspinning the Yarn of *Life of Pi*

Life of Pi begins, as do so many books, with an Author’s Note; however, it does not follow the usual pattern. Typically, Author’s Notes are the place for discussion of inspiration for writing the novel, acknowledgments and thanks, etc. When included, it is sometimes the only

place in a novel where the imaginary wall that exists between author and reader breaks down.

The Author's Note can be the only place where the author acknowledges he is, in fact, writing a novel, because for most of the novel, the author wants readers to suspend their disbelief. He doesn't want to intrude on the reader's engagement with the rest of the novel. *Life of Pi*, however, plays with our traditional expectations of the author's role in the telling of a story. The Author's Note is thus the first part of the complex narrative structure of *Life of Pi* and breaks down the binary opposition between "truth" and "fiction," by leaving the reader confused as to what is fiction and what is reality.

Martel begins the Author's Note with the story of how he came to write *Life of Pi*. He begins with the phrase, "This book was born as I was hungry" (Martel, *Life* v). He is not hungry for food; what he is hungry for, we learn, is some method of explaining his world to himself. He then explains how he went to India, intending to write a novel set in Portugal in 1939, because "a stint in India will beat the restlessness out of any living creature" and "a novel set in Portugal in 1939 may have very little to do with Portugal in 1939" (Martel, *Life* v). He settles into a house by a hill, intending to write his novel, but the novel, in his words, turned out to be "emotionally dead" (Martel, *Life* vii). He gives up on the novel, and sets about exploring the South of India with what little money he has left.

After mailing his notes to a fictitious address in Siberia, he leaves Matheran and finds his way to a tiny town south of Madras called Pondicherry. Here, he meets a "spry, bright-eyed elderly man with great shocks of white hair" (Martel, *Life* viii). Somewhere around this point, the reader begins to question the "truth" of the story, and Martel becomes "Martel," or the Narrator. After the Narrator confesses his profession as a writer, the man tells him, "I have a story that will make you believe in God" (Martel, *Life* viii). The man, whose name is Francis Adirubasamy,

tells the Narrator a story, the elements of which are not revealed just yet. Mr. Adirubasamy also tells him, “You must talk to him [the main character]...I knew him very, very well. He’s a grown man now. You must ask him all the questions you want” (Martel, *Life x*). Later, in Toronto, among the “nine columns of Patels in the phone book,” the Narrator finds “him, the main character” (Martel, *Life x*).

The main character, we come to learn, is named Pi Patel, who now lives in Canada after emigrating from India. However, his journey from India to Canada was not the most pleasant. Pi’s family owned a zoo, and due to difficult financial times in India in the 1970’s, when Pi was a teenager, the Patel family decided to sell the animals and the zoo and move to Winnipeg. The *Tsimtsum*, the cargo ship carrying Pi’s family as well as a variety of animals that had been sold to zoos in the Americas sinks, and Pi is trapped on a lifeboat with a hyena, a zebra, and orang-utan, and a 450-pound adult male Royal Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. Soon the tiger dispatches all the animals but Pi. Pi knows he will not be able to kill Richard Parker, and knows he cannot win a war of attrition against him. He decides the only way for them both to survive their journey is to keep him alive. Pi survives a nine-month journey across the Pacific Ocean in a lifeboat with a tiger. We are meant to understand this is the story Mr. Adirubasamy was referring to, that will inspire a belief in God.

The Narrator hears the story firsthand from Pi in Canada, but he wants more proof. He seeks out a supposedly impartial third party, the company that owned the *Tsimtsum*, to corroborate this incredible story. The Narrator tells us, “After considerable difficulties, I received a tape and a report from the Japanese Ministry of Transport. It was as I listened to that tape that I agreed with Mr. Adirubasamy that this was, indeed, a story to make you believe in God” (Martel, *Life x*).

In the acknowledgments section at the end of the Author's Note, the Narrator makes a point of thanking Mr. Patel, saying, "I hope that my telling of his tale does not disappoint him" (Martel, *Life x*). He also thanks Mr. Adirubasamy, "for getting me started on the story" (Martel, *Life x*). However, we know these are fictional people (or at least, we're pretty sure). Martel plays with our usual expectations of Author's Notes by referencing his characters, as if they were real people, in the place in a novel usually reserved for "truth." Martel is trying to trick the reader into believing the story actually happened. The reader can only assume the rest of the story is true as well. However, an essay called "How I Wrote *Life of Pi*," written by Yann Martel and published on the Portland bookstore Powell's Books website, has the "true" story of how Martel came to write the novel. This essay, and its relationship to the Author's Note, will be discussed in more detail in the Parallel Stories section. However, this essay proves the Author's Note itself is (mostly) a work of fiction. Martel did not really run into Mr. Adirubasamy in India; the actual tale of how Martel came to write *Life of Pi* is much more banal than that. But this is not an average book, and it does not have average expectations of the reader. If a book claims to have the ability to make a reader believe in God, the reader requires something special. Martel structures the Author's Note so we go into the book believing the story really happened, and does not reveal Yann Martel, the author of *Life of Pi*, is different from the Narrator, who writes the Author's Note. The Author's Note is, in fact, where the story started. The relationship between the author and the reader is thus made exceedingly complex from the outset.

Seymour Chatman's Communications Model, described in his book *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, defines the various levels that can exist between the author and the reader, and *Life of Pi* makes use of many different levels. First comes the *Author*, Yann Martel; then the *Implied Author*, "Yann Martel," who might be different, for example, for

Life of Pi than he is for *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*. It is the Implied Author, according to Chatman, that makes the unreliable narrator possible, for it is the Implied Author who establishes the norms of the narrative (150). The third layer is the *Narrator*, the part of the novel told from Pi's perspective. Then comes the *Narratee*, a role filled in *Life of Pi* by the Narrator/"Martel"/Implied Author hearing Pi's story; it would also filled, for example, by the person listening to Charlie Marlow telling the story in *Heart of Darkness*. The Narratee is the device by which the Implied Author tells the real reader how to perform as the Implied Reader. The *Implied Reader*, the counterpart to the Implied Author, is the audience presupposed by the narrative itself. As Chatman says, "The 'you' or 'dear reader' who is addressed by the narrator of *Tom Jones* is no more Seymour Chatman than is the narrator Tom Fielding" (150). Finally comes us, the *Reader*. The narrative structure of *Life of Pi* is summarized below:

<p>Real Author [Martel] → Implied Author ["Martel"] → Narrator [Pi, through "Martel"] → Narratee ["Martel," hearing Pi's story firsthand] → Implied Reader → [The "you" that an author speaks to, or "Us"] → Real Reader [Us] (Chatman 151)</p>

The fact that the Author and the Implied Author of *Life of Pi* are different is never explicitly stated, and the function of the Author's Note serves to make us question this fact. The other interesting part of this model is the function of Chatman's Narrator; Martel complicates the layers here, because the person whose narrative voice we recognize as Pi in the book is really "Martel"/the Implied Author (who I've been calling the Narrator). We are also privy to "Martel's" real-time reactions to Pi's story in the role of the Narratee, written in ten italicized chapters dispersed throughout the book; this represents almost a reversal of the relationship between Pi and "Martel" embodied by Chatman's Narrator role. Martel gets us to believe in the story by himself playing the Narratee, who tells the Implied Reader how to behave. He pretends

to be the “disbelieving listener” to the tale, before finally being convinced in the end, which is what he wants us to be, too.⁴

The book is divided into three sections (not including the Author’s Note): Part I is “Toronto and Pondicherry,” and takes up about one hundred pages; Part II is “The Pacific Ocean,” the longest part, about two hundred pages; Part III is “Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomátlan, Mexico,” and is the shortest section, at about thirty pages. Three is obviously a very significant number for a variety of reasons, particularly in religion. Chief among them is the Holy Trinity, a significant aspect of Pi’s religion of Christianity. In addition to Christianity, Pi also practices Islam and Hinduism, bringing his tally of practicing religions to three. The story is told in the first person from Pi’s perspective because, as the Narrator explains, “It seemed natural that Mr. Patel’s story should be told mostly in the first person, in his voice and through his eyes. But any inaccuracies or mistakes are mine” (Martel, *Life x*). The reader is also meant to understand the text represents an intimate conversation between Pi and the reader. When he discusses the carnivorous island he happens upon, he says, “I made an exceptional botanical discovery. But there will be many who disbelieve the following episode. Still, I give it to you now because it’s part of the story and it happened to me” (284). Pi is going to hold nothing back from us. However, the “me” holds three levels: Pi, the Narrator, and Martel. Who exactly is not holding back?

⁴ Another famous survival narrative, *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, follows this exact same narrative structure. Perhaps there is some inherent quality in the fantastical castaway story that requires an additional layer between the author and the reader, establishing a creative space. It’s just hard to believe a story about a man on the ocean for an extended period of time. Martel must realize how implausible this is, too. He is playing off something that is clearly unbelievable as believable, and the way he does that is through the framing technique of himself, as the skeptical Narratee.

Occasionally in the book, the reader will come across a chapter written entirely in italics. These italicized chapters (there are ten total interspersed throughout the book) relate the Narrator's experience of meeting with Pi Patel in Canada, where the Narrator becomes Chatman's Narratee, as described above. The chapters told from the Narrator's perspective occur most frequently at the beginning of the novel. Eight of the ten chapters occur in Part I of the novel, none occur in Part II, and two occur in Part III. These meetings between Pi and the Narrator are sometimes very trying and emotional for them both. As the Narrator tells us, "At times he gets agitated. It's nothing I say (I say very little). It's his own story that does it. Memory is an ocean and he bobs on the surface. I worry that he'll want to stop. But he wants to tell me his story. He goes on. After all these years, Richard Parker still preys on his mind" (Martel, *Life* 46). Martel practically begs us to believe the story really happened, and he puts a lot of effort into getting us to believe these are real people. Additionally, Martel is trying to build a close relationship between the reader and Pi, since we get to know him from both the first and second perspective, or both *as* the narrator (not Narrator) and *from* the perspective of the Narratee. Part II contains the "bulk" of the story, and here both the Narrator and Martel conform to the standards of "novel writing." The reader is left alone with Pi, without intrusion of an author, making it far easier to suspend our disbelief.

In addition, we see a further complication in the layer of the story-tellers and the story: Pi reveals he kept a diary during the events, a diary the Narrator tells us in the Author's Note he has the privilege of seeing (Martel, *Life* x). Pi held onto the diary after the events, though for what purpose is unclear. When Pi receives the call from the Narrator at the beginning of the novel, the Narrator tells us his reaction was mostly surprise; "'That was a long time ago,' he said" (Martel, *Life* x). Pi was not anticipating having to retell the story to anyone. About the diary, Pi says, "It's

hard to read. I wrote as small as I could. I was afraid I would run out of paper. There's not much to it. Words scratched on a page trying to capture a reality that overwhelmed me" (Martel, *Life* 230-231). Pi wrote a version of the story himself without knowing how it was going to end, and without having an Implied Reader in mind, except perhaps himself (as most diaries do). Pi tells us, "I talked about what you might expect: about things that happened and how I felt, about what I caught and what I didn't, about seas and weather, about problems and solutions, about Richard Parker. All very practical stuff" (231). The diary exists as a precursor for the book, something that allegedly proved invaluable for the Narrator when Pi told him the story. Pi mostly records practical stuff, which manifests itself in the structure of the novel, leading the novel to occasionally read more like a survival manual (a particularly interesting idea in light of White's ideas of literature's therapeutic mission). The "realist" writing style of the novel will be discussed more in the Parallel Stories section.

The reader is also privileged with a direct transcription of the last pages of his diary. His last entry reads, "It's no use. Today I die. I will die today. I die" (266). Clearly, as we know, Pi did not die. Pi reflects on this fact, ending with one of the more ambiguous moments in this text that is otherwise firmly grounded in reality: "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). Even after the "telling" of the story stopped in the diary, Pi still continues living; the story goes on, even after the telling stops. The novel covers only certain time periods in Pi's life, making the book's title somewhat presumptuous, but in the same way also appropriate. Did not this experience influence Pi's entire life, even after the story

ended?⁵ The puzzling reference to the “invisible spirals” seems to refer to the spirals that appear on a page when a pen has run out of ink. However, they appear on the margin of ‘the page’; we assume the spirals only appeared on the diary, but Pi seems to be saying they are on the pages of *Life of Pi*, the book we hold in our hands, as well. The book the Narrator is writing is, in essence, *his* diary, though maybe it’s been cleaned and put into the format of a “real” story. As Hayden White would say, the diary has been “emplotted,” and Pi needed the Narrator to do so for him.⁶ We need people to create novels and literature and art for us; we need artists, who have the extraordinary ability to imbue things that may be ugly and painful, with beauty and meaning.

The book also contains exactly one hundred chapters. The reader is told this in the 94th chapter, when Pi says, “Where we can, we must give things a meaningful shape. For example—I wonder—could you tell my jumbled story in exactly one hundred chapters, not one more, not one less?” (Martel, *Life* 316). This could be viewed almost as a challenge to the Narrator. Can he do it successfully, we wonder? This number is one of the most rational numbers in existence because of our numerical system of ten, and is in sharp contrast to Pi’s nickname, “that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe” (27). Pi has a keen desire to impose order on his life in whatever way possible, and he does so by way of this story. He confides in us, “That’s the one thing I hate about my nickname, the way that number runs on forever. It’s important in life to conclude things properly” (316-317). Pi’s desire to have control

⁵ One can see distressing evidence of the effect of Pi’s experiences on his grown self throughout the novel. Pi is “sad and gloomy,” with a “shattered self” that is soothed only by studying the sloth (Martel, *Life* 3). In a photograph of his student days, the Narrator notes he has “a smile every time, but his eyes tell another story” (95). He has begun to hoard food in the Mexican infirmary, and when the Narrator visits him as an adult, he has “a reserve of food to last the siege of Leningrad” (27). The hoarding of food helps repress his disturbing memory of its opposite: starvation.

⁶ The film *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006) does an excellent job at exploring this theme.

over his own story becomes extremely evident in Part III, in the infirmary in Mexico, something that will be explored in more depth in the Parallel Stories section. Pi may not be able to control a lot, but he can control his story.

Life of Pi, despite its title, is not a chronicle, which is described by White as “if the series were simply recorded in the order in which the events originally occurred, under the assumption that the ordering of the events in their temporal sequence itself provided a kind of explanation of why they occurred when and where they did” (1392). The stories on the front page of a newspaper, for example, have nothing in common besides the date at the top of the page. This type of storytelling is more “naïve” in that “the categories of time and space alone served as the informing interpretive principles” (White 1392). *Life of Pi* does not conform to these standards, because the one hundred chapters are not necessarily arranged chronologically. They are instead arranged by theme or subject, with the more traumatic themes or subjects occurring at the end of the novel. This tendency, of more traumatic experiences appearing at the end, might reflect the difficulty of Pi’s experiences of telling the Narrator the story. He might have wanted to save his worst experiences for last, to avoid thinking about them. The novel is written in such a way that the end almost comes as a shock, because the reader did not feel the passage of linear time, which ceased to be important for Pi. As he says, “I did not count the days or the weeks or the months...What I remember are events and encounters and routines, markers that emerged here and there from the ocean of time and imprinted themselves on my memory...I don’t know if I can put them in order for you” (Martel, *Life* 212). As such, one chapter might be devoted to descriptions of fishing; another later chapter might be devoted to the carnivorous algae island Pi and Richard Parker come upon. Again, we see evidence here that “order” is important for Pi. He wishes to have control in the telling of his story, though the order is not a traditional one.

We also see evidence of Pi (or rather, Pi through the Narrator) becoming slightly confused in the telling of his story. On occasion, he loses the thread of what he's talking about. Pi tells us, "I remember the smell of the spent hand-flare shells. By some freak of chemistry they smelled exactly like cumin" (221). Later, he says, "I don't remember any smells. Or only the smell of the spent hand-flare shells. They smelled like cumin, did I mention that?" (265). He also tells us, "You can get used to anything—haven't I already said that? Isn't that what all survivors say?" (247). The Narrator, in re-telling the story, is mimicking the confusion Pi felt on his journey as he began to lose his mental facilities and concentration, another technique of getting us to believe in the reality of the story.

The narrative frame shifts in Part I back and forth between the Narrator and Pi's experiences. Yann Martel supposedly distinguished chapters 21 and 22 of *Life of Pi* as being particularly essential to the book.⁷ Chapter 21 is told from the perspective of the Narrator. After one of the meetings between Pi and the Narrator, the Narrator says, "I am sitting in a downtown café, thinking. I have just spent most of an afternoon with him. Our encounters always leave me weary of the glum contentment that characterizes my life. What were those words he used that struck me? Ah yes: 'dry, yeastless factuality,' 'the better story'" (69-70). Chapter 22 is told from the perspective of Pi, who says:

I can well imagine an atheist's last words: 'White, white! L-L-Love! My God!'—and the deathbed leap of faith. Whereas the agnostic, if he stays true to his reasonable self, if he stays beholden to dry, yeastless factuality, might try to explain the warm light bathing him by saying, 'Possibly a f-f-failing oxygenation of the b-b-brain,' and, to the very end, lack imagination and miss the better story. (70)

⁷ I've found this statement in many online study guides for *Life of Pi* (example: <http://www.gradesaver.com/life-of-pi/study-guide/essay-questions/>) and also in the Reader's Guide that appears in some editions (pg. 323 of the edition published in the United States by Harcourt) but I was unable to find an original quote.

Here, we see evidence of the writing process, something most authors don't include in their completed novels. The Narrator remembers key words from his conversation with Pi, and they later appear in the "actual" text of the novel. Chapter 22 espouses what many feel is the "point" of the novel, that theism and atheism are the same, and they are all different versions of the same story; however, Martel said *both* chapters 21 and 22 are essential to the book. The significance of the process of writing, engaging with another person's story and making it one's own, creating art, is also vitally important to the understanding of the novel. This book is not only about Pi coming to terms with his story, but the Narrator coming to terms with what the telling of the story means to him.

Ultimately, the complexity of the narrative structure complicates the relationship between the author and the reader by influencing our evaluation of the novel's "truth." Something traditionally defined as "truth," such as an Author's Note, can be fictional. But that does not make it any less valuable. Describing what happened during a traumatic journey across the Pacific Ocean, Pi believes, can *never* be entirely factual, due to the limitations of language. Language can never perfectly reproduce an experience. In part III, two men from the Japanese Ministry of Transportation come to question Pi in the Mexican infirmary to find out why the *Tsimtsum* sank. Pi deals with these questions of truth and fiction in a way that suggests that for him, "truth" is irrelevant. Mr. Okamoto, one of the men, says, "We don't want any invention. We want the 'straight facts,' as you say in English" (335). But as Pi tells them, "Isn't telling about something—using words, English or Japanese—already something of an invention? Isn't just looking upon this world something of an invention?...Doesn't that make life a story?" (335). Pi may very well be quoting from Hayden White, who tells us, "As a symbolic structure, the historical narrative does not *reproduce* the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to

think about the events and changes our thought about the events with different emotional valences. The historical narrative does not *image* the things it indicates; it *calls to mind* images of the things it indicates” (1391). It is impossible for one’s past to be perfectly reproduced through language. Pi cannot give Mr. Okamoto what he wants. There is no real “truth,” which is what *allows* Martel to create the Narrator, who meets Pi, who tells the story. The best he can do is tell Mr. Okamoto the story that best fits the facts he has at his disposal.

The last sentence of the Author’s Note reads, “If we, citizens, do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams” (Martel, *Life* xi). The irony at the heart of all art is that art is valueless in its literal manifestation (for example, words on a page), but invaluable in its intrinsic worth. The artist creates a “nothing,” a “dream,” which is not the “crude reality” we experience everyday; but it is also something that has no substance in time or space. The artist invites us to somehow discover in that dream-story a capacity for belief within our disbelief and an ability to convert our “worthless dreams” into a story of enduring value we recognize as possessing a *kind* of truth (though not the truth Mr. Okamoto is after). Rather, stories and literature offer illumination about the world we share with the author, how “consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world it seeks to inhabit comfortably” (White 1397). The narrative structure of *Life of Pi* serves to break down the binary opposition that traditionally exists between “truth” and “fiction.” Truth and fiction, history and literature, do not fit into separate, neat categories, but rather can blend together. Even things traditionally viewed as “truth,” like an Author’s Note, do not *have* to be entirely truthful, because the creation of art gives people license to lie, but in lying they get closer to reality. As Picasso famously said, “Art is a lie which makes us realize truth.”

4. Motif #1: Politics

Pi's life begins in the 1970's in Tamil Nadu. On December 26, 2005, Tamil Nadu was one of the regions affected by the deadly and devastating tsunami. This coincidence, as well as the coincidence of the book being published on September 11, 2001, drives home the idea inherent in this book specifically, and all literature in general, that art is connected to and reflects politics and current events. The novel explores the boundary between art and politics. Art and literature is important for society because it enables us to get another's perspective, a particularly important concept in light of the recent proliferation of wars, fighting, and terrorist attacks. One of Martel's goals in his writing is to lead readers away from their preconceived notions about the world. He desires them to open their minds to accept "new ways of thinking about animals, religion, ecology, and the ways humans relate to each other and the world around them" (Nilsen 115). This is enabled by literature, by storytelling, which enables us to get inside another person's head in an intimate setting that is not possible with many other mediums.

India's political climate during the 1970's was very divided. The perceived opposition between Old and New India served as the impetus for Pi's parents leaving India. Part I of the book, "Toronto and Pondicherry," draws on many historical events taking place in India at that time. Indira Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru's daughter, was Prime Minister (Walsh 218). In 1971, the issue of independence of East Pakistan from Pakistan finally came to a head in the Indo-Pakistani War. India helped defeat Pakistan, which resulted in the independence of East Pakistan, renamed Bangladesh, from Pakistani control (221). Additionally, at this time, there were many economic and social problems, as well as allegations of corruption in the government caused increasing political unrest across India. Her political opponents accused Mrs. Gandhi of dictatorship, culminating in leading strikes across India that paralyzed its economy and

administration (222). Pi's own parents express mistrust of Mrs. Gandhi. His mother says, "If Mrs. Gandhi is what being modern and advanced is about, I'm not sure I like it." His father responds, "Mrs. Gandhi and her foolishness will pass. The New India will come" (Martel, *Life* 83). They leave India, the reader assumes, because of this political unrest, the economic climate, and their dissatisfaction with their quality of life.

The change from Old India to New India represents the change from spiritual to secular. Pi's father is a proponent of the New India. As Pi reflects, "Father saw himself as part of the New India—rich, modern, and secular as ice cream. He didn't have a religious bone in his body...Spiritual worry was alien to him; it was financial worry that rocked his being" (72). This suggests there is a binary opposition that exists between being religious and being modern. His father believes progress is unstoppable; technology will spread (83). People who resist this change are condemning themselves to being stuck in the past.

The sinking of the *Tsimtsum*, the cargo ship carrying Pi, his family, and the animals, is also a major political event. Pi's story was only investigated in the first place for political reasons, and he only felt the need to tell the second story because of the disbelief of the two men from the Japanese Department of Ministry, Mr. Chiba and Mr. Okamoto. They initially come merely to investigate the sinking of a cargo ship, and end up becoming entrenched in a deeply philosophical argument about the nature of storytelling. At one point, Mr. Okamoto says, "We are losing sight of the point of this investigation...We are only trying to determine why and how the *Tsimtsum* sank" (331). In Pi's opinion, the reason he was never rescued was because the ship and its cargo (both people and animals) was not deemed worthy enough to save. He tells Mr. Chiba and Mr. Okamoto, "In my experience, when a dingy, third-rate rust bucket sinks, unless it has the luck of carrying oil, lots of it, enough to kill entire ecosystems, no one cares about it and

no one hears about it” (347). The ship’s position in the political world resulted in Pi’s tragedy being prolonged, when it could have been cut so much shorter.

Additionally, Mr. Okamoto blatantly contradicts Pi’s words from the verbatim transcript in his final report. Pi disparages the efficacy of the boat, and adds, “While we’re on the subject, the ship wasn’t the only thing that was third-rate. The crew were a sullen, unfriendly lot, hard at work when officers were around but doing nothing when they weren’t. They didn’t speak a word of English and they were of no help to us. Some stank of alcohol by mid-afternoon” (347). When questioned about the officers, Pi says, “Do you think we had tea with them every day? They spoke English, but they were no better than the crew. They made us feel unwelcome in the common room and hardly said a word to us during meals. They went on in Japanese, as if we weren’t there. We were just a lowly Indian family with a bothersome cargo” (348). However, in his formal report, Mr. Okamoto writes, “Survivor casts doubt on fitness of crew but had nothing to say about the officers” (354). This obvious contradiction highlights how the politics of the situation influenced how Pi must tell his story. As Dina Georgis writes, “The investigators omit significant details from Pi’s rendition of his story because they most likely cannot imagine the relevance of a racist crew to the sinking of a ship” (169). They are unable to consider how this fact might be relevant with regards to the overall story Pi is telling. They decide to leave it out, because it does not fit with their notion of how the story must be told, or what aspects of the story are important enough to be emplotted.

As stated in the Introduction, this book was *written* in a pre-9/11 world, but *read* in a post-9/11 world; that date might significantly change how we interpret the book. This is especially interesting considering the book’s portrayal of Muslims. Pi says, when witnessing a Muslim baker pray, “Islam had a reputation worse than Christianity’s—fewer gods, greater

violence, and I had never heard anyone say good things about Muslim schools” (Martel, *Life* 64). When Pi’s parents come face-to-face with Pi’s three religious leaders, all at once, the pandit tries to convince Pi to give up Islam, saying, “With their one god Muslims are always causing troubles and provoking riots. The proof of how bad Islam is, is how uncivilized Muslims are” (75). Muslims have always had an undeservedly poor reputation, which only intensified after September 11th. People view Muslims as an *Other*, something that must be feared. However, the book maintains the idea that all religions are different versions of the same story. Pi himself practices Christianity and Islam, as well as his native Hinduism, something quite significant in light of the religious justification for the recent onslaught of terrorist attacks and wars. If they are all the same, as Pi believes, then why do we keep fighting?

Martel, upon being asked in an interview in Berlin in 2003 by Sabine Sielke, “Does fiction or the imagination thus propose a solution for our current clashes of cultures and religions?” responded with, “Yes, an emphatic YES” (25). He then explains, “If you are an Israeli, you should imagine yourself a Palestinian. Then you will understand why the Palestinians are angry. If you’re a Palestinian, you should make the effort of imagining yourself an Israeli, then you will understand why the Israelis are unafraid” (25). Storytelling is an important way Martel encourages others to explore another person’s perspective. It enables us to experience another’s alterity. Storytelling has the potential to shape historical events and affect change. “Narrative and art are significant resources for those interested in learning how to hear the expelled voices of women, queers, transsexuals, raced subjects, and the subaltern because,” Dina Georgis writes, “unlike dominant histories, which pursue impartiality, narrated stories of struggle and loss privilege perception. In doing so, they sustain the tension between fact and fantasy”

(170). Narrative enables us to feel what others may feel. Art is necessary for leading us to think about unthought spaces.ⁱ

5. Motif #2: Anthropomorphism and Zoomorphism

Additional tropes Martel employs are anthropomorphism, imbuing animals with human characteristics, as well as its counterpart, zoomorphism, imbuing humans with animal characteristics. Pi learns early on in his life from his zookeeper father that humans are the most dangerous animals at the zoo, but also there “was another animal even more dangerous than us, and one that was extremely common, too, found on every continent, in every habitat: the redoubtable species *Animalus anthropomorphicus*, the animal as seen through human eyes” (Martel, *Life* 34). Pi employs the technique of turning the animals around him, especially the tiger, into something resembling a human in order to better deal with his tragedy, to not feel alone. Likewise, he begins to imagine himself as an animal, too, to deal with his own actions. Anthropomorphism and zoomorphism are two ways Pi imbues the world surrounding him with meaning.

Many of the creatures Pi encounters on his journey are anthropomorphized. In particular Pi likens these animals to religious imagery. In two separate instances, he equates animals with meditating yogis. When discussing the sloths, which were the topic of his Zoology thesis at the University of Toronto, he recalls, “Many a time during that month in Brazil, looking up at sloths in repose, I felt I was in the presence of upside-down yogis deep in meditation or hermits deep in prayer, wise beings whose intense imaginative lives were beyond the reach of my scientific probing” (5). Later, when Richard Parker is battling a school of flying fish who make the mistake of leaping over their boat, he describes his awe, saying, “It was not so much the speed

that was impressive as the pure animal confidence, the total absorption in the moment. Such a mix of ease and concentration, such a being-in-the-present, would be the envy of the highest yogis” (201). By likening animals to meditating yogis, Pi expounds the belief that animals may be more in touch with the world than we are. Whereas humans have to spend hours of meditation and years of work attempting to get to a level of transcendence, transcendence is the natural state of being for the sloth and the tiger. Pi also separately and explicitly imagines Orange Juice the orang-utan to be like both the Virgin Mary⁸ and Christ on the Cross⁹. The overwhelming religious imagery seems to imply animals are inherently holy creatures. One might say, since they never Fell, they are still in the Garden of Eden. Animals are sacred, and are inherently more connected with God than we are.

Pi imbues the animals with religious significance, which can be related to anthropomorphism. Stewart Cole’s article “Believing in Tigers: Anthropomorphism and Incredulity in Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*” explores the relationship between religion and anthropomorphism.¹⁰ As Cole describes, the concept of anthropomorphism is “often used in both theological and zoological contexts to indicate—as the OED has it—the ‘ascription of a human attribute or personality’ to either God or animals” (26). Anthropomorphism is yet another manner of psychotherapy where we see the greatest meaning possible, or “an often unconscious strategy by which humans attempt to gain the benefit of whatever significance the world has to

⁸ “She came floating on an island of bananas in a halo of light, as lovely as the Virgin Mary. The rising sun was behind her. Her flaming hair looked stunning” (Martel, *Life* 123).

⁹ “Orange Juice lay next to [the hyena], against the dead zebra. Her arms were spread wide open and her short legs were folded together and slightly turned to one side. She looked like Christ on the Cross” (Martel, *Life* 146).

¹⁰ Cole suggests readers interested in this subject look up Stewart Elliott Guthrie’s book *Faces in the Clouds*. While his article focuses exclusively on *Life of Pi*, this book deals more generally with the relationship of religion to anthropomorphism.

offer” (26). Cole’s envisioning of anthropomorphism is a type of White’s emplotment. Wouldn’t we rather believe an animal feels, thinks, hopes, dreams in the same way we do? Doesn’t that make for a better, more meaningful reality? As Cole writes,

The most important aspect of the anthropomorphic impulse, implicit in all the above accounts, is that it finds expression primarily in response to doubt or disbelief, the perceptual uncertainty into which we are all born and with which, consciously or not, our minds constantly grapple: Is that a ship on the horizon, or a trick of the sunlight? A fierce wind, or the angry breath of God? In the face of the unknowable—whether God, animal, or any other aspect of our surroundings—we will see humanity wherever possible. (28)

Anthropomorphism is a perceptual strategy by which humans attempt to garner the greatest meaning from the world around us. Pi is a meaning-generator who emplots the world around him (sometimes in drastic ways, as we will see in the Parallel Stories section), and one of the key ways he accomplishes this is through anthropomorphizing those around him. By imparting the world with human qualities, he attempts to perceive its greatest possible significance. He is emphasizing the similarities (or imagined similarities) between humans and animals for the purpose of understanding.

One of the biggest shocks of *Life of Pi* comes on page 110, when the reader learns Richard Parker is not a person but is a tiger. This is completely at odds with what we thought we knew up to that point. Very early on in the novel, Pi recalls:

Richard Parker has stayed with me. I’ve never forgotten him. Dare I say I miss him? I do. I miss him. I still see him in my dreams. They are nightmares mostly, but nightmares tinged with love. Such is the strangeness of the human heart. I still cannot understand how he could abandon me so unceremoniously, without any sort of good-bye, without looking back even once. That pain is like an axe that chops at my heart. (Martel, *Life* 7)

He references the “human heart” right after he mentions Richard Parker’s name, leading us to believe that he is a human. During one of their meetings, the Narrator looks at old photos with Pi. Pi taps one photo, saying, “That’s Richard Parker,” and the Narrator is amazed; he says, “I

look closely, trying to extract personality from appearance. Unfortunately, it's black and white again and a little out of focus. A photo taken in better days, casually. Richard Parker is looking away. He doesn't even realize that his picture is being taken" (96). The Narrator knows that Richard Parker is a tiger, but does not reveal that information to us. Photography, especially the kind of photo one would keep in an album, is a medium limited mostly to people, not tigers. What other creature would want to look back and reminisce? Additionally, a tiger, no matter how intelligent, would never be able to recognize that his picture is being taken. Martel tricks the reader into believing Richard Parker is a person the same way he tricks the reader into believing the story actually happened. He knows if he admitted the premise of the novel early on—that this will be a story about a boy trapped on a lifeboat with a tiger—many readers would not be able to suspend their disbelief to the degree the story requires. Instead, he gets the reader emotionally involved with the story before dropping his bombshell. It comes as such a shock that Richard Parker is a tiger because he did have a momentous influence on Pi's conceptualization of his journey, and we would imagine only another human could have that sort of effect on a person.

The biggest ruse Martel employs is, of course, Richard Parker's nameⁱⁱ; he is a tiger with a human name. Naming animals is one way we have of imbuing them with human characteristics. The only other animals in the text to be named are Orange Juice the orang-utan (whom Pi associates extremely strongly with his mother and who, as an ape, is one of our clearest mirrors in the animal kingdom) and the whales Pi encounters, which he imagines already have names, like Bamphoo, Pimphoo, Stomphoo, etc. (Martel, *Life* 255). The other major key animal players—the zebra, the hyena, the meerkats—are nameless, and are referred to only by their species. Orange Juice was given her name because of her tendency to drool; her name is sappy and sickly sweet, therefore highlighting her distance from us and making her seem more

like a pet. In the case of the whales, their names are foreign; they are not “pet names,” nor are they human names, making them a distinct “other.” This likely reflects the belief most people hold about creatures like whales and dolphins, that while they are intelligent creatures, they are intelligent in an exotic and alien way. Richard Parker’s name fits into neither of these categories because he has the name of a human. The hunter who caught him, Richard Parker, intended to name him “Thirsty” (a name that fulfills the same role that Orange Juice’s name does), but filled out the paperwork wrong (148). His name, rather than highlighting our differences, attempts to bridge the distance. We would think of Pi’s voyage with his companion extremely differently if his name was “Thirsty”—not the least because it would be ironic (thirst is the main opponent that Pi and Richard Parker must battle), but also because we would think of him more as an animal, and therefore would be more detached from him. At every mention of Richard Parker’s name we are reminded of his humanity, much like with every mention of Pi’s name we are reminded of the irrational number π ⁱⁱⁱ. We remember he is suffering along with Pi, and we empathize with him as much as with Pi. His human name makes it easier for Pi, and us, to imagine the distance between him and Pi is much less than it is.

However, it is also his name, and the human characteristics we associate with it, that enables the true tragedy of the text. When Pi finally reaches land, Richard Parker jumps over him and, without a backward glance, goes into the jungle. Pi recalls:

At the edge of the jungle, he stopped. I was certain he would turn my way. He would look at me. He would flatten his ears. He would growl. In some such way, he would conclude our relationship. He did nothing of the sort. He only looked fixedly into the jungle. Then Richard Parker, companion of my torment, awful, fierce thing that kept me alive, moved forward and disappeared forever from my life. (Martel, *Life* 316)

In the end, Pi is guilty of thinking of him too much like a human, and “this ending is suggestive of the trouble that arises from not considering the other’s alterity” (Georgis 168). His human

name has worked too well; Pi does not realize that the months they spent together in the lifeboat would bring them anything but spatial closeness. He has been imagining Richard Parker as a person, who shares his same anguish, his same pains, but his abandonment of Pi reflects the undeniable fact that Richard Parker is a tiger, and cannot feel emotions in the same way people do. Pi expects Richard Parker to view their experience as meaningful in the same way that he does. As Pi tells us, "It was Richard Parker who calmed me down. It is the irony of this story that the one who scared me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even wholeness" (Martel, *Life* 179). He expects this animal to have changed from this experience in the same way that he has, and to desire closure. But Richard Parker, as soon as they reach land, drops every shred of humanity that Pi has imbued him with. He abandons Pi unceremoniously, and it is that fact which truly torments Pi. In this case, Richard Parker lacks the agency to empathize that Pi has. At one point, a ship passes by the lifeboat; Pi attempts to get its attention by setting off a hand flare, but the ship passes them by unacknowledged. Pi recalls,

When I turned away, Richard Parker was still looking in its direction. After a few seconds he turned away too and our gazes briefly met. My eyes expressed longing, hurt, anguish, loneliness. All he was aware of was that something stressful and momentous had happened, something beyond the outer limits of his understanding. He did not see that it was salvation barely missed. He only saw that the alpha there, this odd, unpredictable tiger, had been very excited. (262).

Pi's anthropomorphizing of Richard Parker implies a mental dominance because the exchange is not mutual. Richard Parker is unable to empathize with Pi in the same way that Pi does with him (or that the two Japanese men at the end do with Pi, and after Richard Parker abandons Pi without a backward glance, Pi is cruelly reminded of this reality, and Richard Parker becomes an animal once more.

It is not only Richard Parker that sheds his humanity, but also Pi himself. Many times in the text is Pi described as being like an animal, which could be a psychotherapeutic technique Pi

uses on himself to explain his behavior. Pi undergoes an ordeal very few humans have undergone before: surviving at sea for 227 days in the company of a tiger. He is away from human kind for months upon months under horrible circumstances, and at times during his voyage, he behaves in a very un-human, and sometimes inhumane, way. Pi becomes more primitive as he becomes more and more removed from society. Pi becomes like an animal, in that he's "rummaging for food in the automatic way of monkeys" (236). He notices one day, "with a pinching of the heart, that I ate like an animal, that this noisy, frantic, unchewing wolfing-down of mine was exactly the way Richard Parker ate" (250). One day, when he's literally starving, he notices Richard Parker making the motions that indicate he's going to defecate; both of them have become constipated over the course of the voyage, so this was a rare occurrence. Rather than have to clean the lifeboat later Pi thinks that he'll catch the feces in a cup and dump it over the side of the boat immediately. "It fell into my cup with a clink," he says, "and no doubt I will be considered to have abandoned the last vestiges of humanness by those who do not understand the degree of my suffering when I say that it sounded to my ears like the music of a five-rupee coin dropped into a beggar's cup" (237). Pi has been away from humanity for so long, and has experienced such dire circumstances, that he has abandoned the last indication of his humanness. His obsession with food has caused him to behave like an animal. He imagines himself as an animal in order to avoid thinking about how his behavior indicates his lack of humanity.

One of the most morally reprehensible things Pi does is cannibalize. By sheer chance and coincidence, Pi meets another castaway in another lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific, as described in the Hayden White section. The other castaway, a Frenchman, attempts to kill Pi with the intent to cannibalize him, but before he can, he is killed by Richard Parker. Richard Parker sups on his body, and Pi admits to us, "I caught one of his arms with the gaff and used his

flesh as bait. I will further confess that, driven by the extremity of my need and the madness to which it pushed me, I ate some of his flesh. I mean small pieces, little strips that I meant for the gaff's hook that, when dried by the sun, looked like ordinary animal flesh. They slipped into my mouth nearly unnoticed" (284). Anticipating our revulsion, he says, "You must understand, my suffering was unrelenting and he was already dead. I stopped as soon as I caught a fish. I pray for his soul everyday" (284). Pi was not able to process this act, and conceived of himself as an animal in order to deal with it in a way that was possible. Pi, recalling these events for the Narrator, says, "Lord, to think that I'm a strict vegetarian. To think that when I was a child I often shuddered when I snapped open a banana because it sounded to me like the breaking of an animal's neck. I descended to a level of savagery I never imagined possible" (218). The next section posits a theory about the novel, which the theorist Florence Stratton proposed in her essay "Hollow at the Core: Deconstructing Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*," which is that the story with animals didn't happen, but was zoomorphism on a grand scale.

6. Parallel Stories

As discussed in the first section, Hayden White's "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" explores how metaphor and other modes of figurative language influence how we tell histories. Certain events can be emplotted with the unconscious goal of creating a *better story*. One key trope of figurative language White fails to explore is that of allegory. Stories are sometimes not emplotted subtly; sometimes, they are changed in large, meaningful ways that render them almost unrecognizable as the initial, "pure" story (number 1 on 15). For the purposes of analyzing *Life of Pi* and the different parallel stories, I would like to propose that, rather than a shift in emphasis, or the change from "a" to "A" being the major tropic change, that

“a” *stands* for something; some broad, overall idea, or concept, which is realized metaphorically in one story. Rather than merely giving this event greater emphasis, the story gives it trade in value; in the emplotted story, it becomes “a1.” As such, the two different stories may be described as such:

1. a, b, c, d, e.....n
5. a1, b1, c1, d1, e1.....n

Story 1 may be some kind of account or historical narrative; story 5 is an allegory of this account. In each, there are parallel events (signified by the same letter), but the inclusion of numbers in story 5 signifies that the events have been changed in some way. The change is not merely a change of emphasis, as signified by White’s use of capital letters, but a significant substitution (for example, exchanging a human for an animal). The above stories, 1 and 5, can share any number of elements and blend together, as such:

6. a, b1, c, d, e.....n

The allegorical model is still consistent of White’s idea of emplotment. The stories may also be deterministic, for example:

7. A1, b1, c1, d1, e1.....n

But, as we shall see, the determinism of certain events does not always translate across allegorical readings. This model allows for countless variation. Allegorical stories may blend elements of truth and elements of fiction in different ways, may emplot different things; in short, a world of meanings can be contained by one concept of a story. If we return simply to a comparison of stories 1 and 5, we recognize that “a” and “a1” are similar, that they share similar meanings, but they are manifested in different ways.

This can be related to historical accounts in the same way, for example, that George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is an allegory for 20th century Russia. Orwell created this allegory to speak to the dangers of totalitarianism and the inherent and oppressive evil of such governmental systems. He explored this topic using animals because the use of animals provided a degree of separation and defamiliarization between the reader and the story. Much as humans do not want to accept something like the Holocaust is possible, they do not want to admit to human greed and evil; allegory provides the emotional buffer that enables people to look at themselves through the lens of another. Accepting these traits, even in a fictional character, might also mean accepting it within themselves. To circumvent this tendency, Orwell used animals, which enabled the reader to truly internalize the story in a way that would be impossible if the story were about people. The two dimensions of allegory are that of a system of substitutions, and of a screen from reality; the substitutions often enables the screen. The re-encoding of historical events as "a1" gives us the means to safely and meaningfully discourse about them in a way that might not be possible with "a." Orwell's imagining of the story of twentieth century Russia using the animals of *Animal Farm* and the real story of twentieth century Russia are parallel stories; they have many events in common, although, of course, one story is about animals, the other is about people. Martel employs the same technique of using animals to explore truths about human nature that people might be slightly unwilling to accept.

6.1 The Story With Animals and the Story Without Animals

After nine months at sea, Pi finally reaches land, the shores of Mexico. Richard Parker abandons him, and Pi is found by one of his own kind. While he is recovering in the hospital, the two men from the Japanese Ministry of Transport come to question Pi, the sole survivor of the *Tsimtsum*, to determine why the ship sank. They tell him, "Now, Mr. Patel, we were wondering

if you could tell us what happened to you, with as much detail as possible,” to which Pi responds, “Yes, I’d be happy to” (Martel, *Life* 323). The entire text of the next chapter, chapter 97, reads, “The story,” and in chapter 98, Mr. Okamoto says to Mr. Chiba in Japanese, “He thinks we’re fools” (324). The fantastic nature of the story—in particular, Pi’s claim that he shared such close quarters with a tiger—overwhelms them, and they are unable to even consider it might be true. Mr. Okamoto also says, “I’m sorry to say it so bluntly, we don’t mean to hurt your feelings, but you don’t really expect us to believe you, do you? Carnivorous trees? A fish-eating algae that produces fresh water? Tree-dwelling aquatic rodents?^{iv} These things don’t exist” (326). Pi defends his story, saying, “If you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for? Isn’t love hard to believe?...Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?” (330).

The far-fetched nature of the story does not permit the Japanese men to acknowledge that, although the story is *possible*, it is not *actual*. It is too implausible. Pi then realizes, “I know what you want. 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. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless factuality¹¹” (336).

He then tells them another story, one that takes up approximately nine pages. A brief summary of this story is required so that we may compare it to the story with animals. In this story, all the animal characters we were introduced to—Orange Juice the orang-utan, the hyena, the zebra, and Richard Parker—have been replaced by human characters. Pi is trapped on a

¹¹ We have seen this phrase before, in chapter 21, when the Narrator is writing the story and trying to recall what words Pi used (Martel, *Life* 70); see 25.

lifeboat with his mother, the ship's cook, and one of the Taiwanese crewmen. "Though it lacks the bulk of the first story, it has its own depth and complexity," writes Florence Stratton.

"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 trust. Told from a position of disillusionment and skeptical irony, it projects a view of life that emphasizes greed, cruelty, corruption, and futility" (12). In the second story, the cook kills the Taiwanese sailor with a broken leg, and subsequently cannibalizes him and uses his flesh as fishing bait. Due to necessity and a desire for survival, he, Pi, and Pi's mother establish an uneasy peace, until one day, due to Pi's hunger-induced weakness, they lose a turtle, a rare source of nutrients. As Pi says, "He hit me. Mother hit him. He hit her back... They were fighting. I did nothing but watch" (Martel, *Life* 343). Pi watches, horror-struck, as his mother fights an adult man: "He was mean and muscular. He caught her by the wrist and twisted it. She shrieked and fell. The knife appeared. He raised it in the air. It came down. Next it was up—it was red. It went up and down repeatedly" (343). The cook murders Pi's mother and beheads her, leading Pi to recall one of the more disturbing images the book offers us: "He hurled something my way. No whip could have inflicted a more painful lash. I held my mother's head in my hands. I let it go. It sank in a cloud of blood, her tress trailing like a tail" (344). The cook knows he has gone too far, "even by his bestial standards," and permits himself to be killed by Pi (344). Pi, alone now, survives his journey, and arrives on the shores of Mexico, to be interviewed by these two men who treat him with cynicism.

In response to this second story, Mr. Chiba says in Japanese, "What a horrible story" (345). His meaning of "horrible" in this sense is not the sense implied by quality, but rather horrible in its portrayal of the evilness of human nature. This story, if it is true, implies that

mankind cares nothing for its fellow members. It brutalizes human nature and trivializes the bond we share with our fellow living creatures. It implies people will do anything—murder, cannibalize—to attain selfish survival.

Mr. Okamoto then notices something unusual: this second story is not completely independent from the first. Rather, there are many parallels between the stories (345). Each of the characters in the story with animals seems to have an analogous character in the story without animals: the zebra is like the Taiwanese sailor; the hyena is like the cook; the orang-utan is like Pi's mother; and Pi himself fills the role of Richard Parker. The equivalents between the zebra and the Taiwanese sailor are easy to infer. Both are foreign (the Taiwanese sailor speaks nothing but Chinese and so is unable to communicate with the others), and both have a broken leg. The cook removes the sailor's leg just as the hyena bites off the zebra's leg. About the sailor, Pi says, "I couldn't believe a human could survive so much pain, so much butchery" (339), and he makes almost the same observation about the zebra (142). The parallels between the other characters are sometimes a bit more subtle.

Orange Juice and Pi's mother are very clear mirrors of each other. Both Orange Juice and Pi's mother have two boys, and each pair of two boys is three years apart. Pi tells us he entered the world as "a last, welcome addition to my family, three years after Ravi" (13), and that Orange Juice had "given birth at the zoo to two young ones, strapping males five and eight years old that were her—and our—pride" (138). Both make it to the lifeboat by holding onto floating bananas. In Pi's mother's case, she "held onto some bananas and made it to the lifeboat. The cook was already aboard, as was the sailor" (337), which is mirrored in the story with animals when Pi sees Orange Juice "floating on an island of bananas in a halo of light, as lovely as the Virgin Mary" (123). In this instance, Martel uses the pronoun "she" without giving us an

antecedent, and the reader might be tricked, on a much smaller scale (for only a couple of lines) than the trick perpetrated against us about Richard Parker, into thinking the “she” might be Pi’s mother. After the hyena bites off the zebra’s leg and makes the move to attack Orange Juice, she hits him; as Pi describes, “She thumped the beast on the head. It was something shocking. It made my heart melt with love and admiration and fear” (142). This moment is paralleled in the story without animals where Pi’s mother hits the cook. The cook cuts up the sailor’s leg, Pi tells us, and:

The next time the cook was close by, Mother slapped him in the face, a full hard slap that punctuated the air with a sharp crack. It was something shocking coming from my mother. And it was heroic. It was an act of outrage and pity and grief and bravery. It was done in memory of that poor sailor. It was to salvage his dignity. I was stunned. So was the cook. He stood without moving or saying a word as Mother looked him straight in the face. I noticed how he did not meet her eyes. (342)

In both instances Pi expresses shock at their outright aggression. He thought he knew them well, but he only ever knew a part of them. Orange Juice’s aggression toward the hyena leads her to be beheaded by him, just as the cook beheads Pi’s mother. However, the key difference between them is their motivation; while Orange Juice hits the hyena to stop him from attacking her, Pi’s mother hits the cook to salvage the dignity of the sailor. Regardless of this difference, Orange Juice is one of the most anthropomorphized animals in the text, suggesting Pi was not as adept at shielding his feelings about his mother from his shattered psyche as he was for the cook and the Taiwanese sailor. Orange Juice embodies many maternal characteristics, as when Pi describes her behavior during their first few hours on the boat: “It was unmistakably [her two boys] she had on her mind as she searched over the water, unintentionally mimicking what I had been doing these last thirty-six hours” (138). As with the whales, apes are held in somewhat higher esteem than other creatures. The loss of Orange Juice—the creature on the lifeboat Pi could most

closely relate to, as evidenced by his frequent anthropomorphizing of her—hurts him deeply. The dishonorable deaths of Orange Juice and Pi's mother did not befit their lives.

The hyena and the cook are both extremely offensive, atrocious characters. In the story with animals, Pi describes how there are flies in those first few hours on the lifeboat, but “they all disappeared within two days. The hyena, from behind the zebra, snapped at them and ate a number” (130-131). Likewise, in the story without animals, Pi notes with disgust, “He ate the flies. The cook, that is. 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). This eating of the flies is a particularly repugnant act, and is not warranted by the circumstances at the time. The hyena bites off the zebra's leg, and the cook cuts off the Taiwanese sailor's broken leg. The cook tells Pi and Pi's mother the leg should be removed to prevent gangrene. As Pi makes the move to throw the disembodied leg off the side of the lifeboat, and the cook stops him, saying, “Don't be an idiot. We'll use it as bait. That was the whole point” (339). His motivations for amputating the leg are thus revealed to be selfish to a disgusting degree. He puts the sailor through needless torment before his death in order to get fishing bait. In the case of the hyena, the behavior of biting off the leg is excusable, because the hyena is only acting instinctively. A zebra is a hyena's natural prey, so Pi does not think too much about the politics of the situation. In the cook's case, however, he behaves toward the Taiwanese sailor in a way that is not respectful of his life. And finally, in the story with animals, Richard Parker finally kills the hyena, just as Pi kills the cook in the story without animals.

Mr. Chiba points out only a few of these similarities. Countless more exist in the text. He sums it up, saying, “So the Taiwanese sailor is the zebra, his mother is the orang-utan, the cook

is...the hyena—which means he’s the tiger!” (346, ellipses original). This last realization comes as somewhat of a shock, as the two Japanese men try to discern what this could mean. The key similarity between Pi and Richard Parker, as noted above, is that Richard Parker kills the hyena, just as Pi kills the cook. In the story with animals, after avenging his mother, Pi cannibalizes the cook¹²; he describes, “His blood soothed my chapped hands. 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). His eating of the cook’s heart is more a sign of social dominance than hunger, although hunger was probably also a motivating factor. Pi ends the story without animals by saying, “He was such an evil man. Worse, he met evil in me—selfishness, anger, ruthlessness. I must live with that. Solitude began. I turned to God. I survived” (345).

In the story without animals, Pi had to witness things that were killing to his spirit. He watched a man butcher another man’s leg for fishing bait, and the same man behead his mother. Pi cannibalizes this man, letting loose something perhaps evil within Pi himself. While many would say he was avenging his mother, and doing what he needed to survive, some would consider Pi’s behavior in the story without animals morally reprehensible. And perhaps Pi was not able to deal with that knowledge. Perhaps he was unable to process what happened to him, what he witnessed and what he did as a result. Maybe Pi zoomorphized the Taiwanese sailor, the cook, Pi’s mother, and, most importantly, himself, in order to deal with his disturbing reality. Rather than view his fellow castaways and himself as people with agency who are morally responsible for their actions, he viewed them and himself as animals, who live by instinct rather than a moral code. The impossible representation of himself as someone who is capable of

¹² It is important to note that this is not the first instance of Pi cannibalizing; in the story with animals, Pi eats some pieces of flesh of the French castaway in the other lifeboat (Martel, *Life* 284).

cannibalism is covered over by a possible one: there was a tiger on board who committed the acts he cannot admit to himself he performed. As Stratton suggested, “Perhaps this explains the purpose of Pi’s first story: to provide a means of coping with trauma, to offer a defense against traumatic reality” (Stratton 17). Stratton suggests that the book’s twist ending is that the story with animals never happened. Rather, the story without animals is what actually happened, and this account was emplotted by Pi to such a degree that it became an entirely new story, the story with animals.

Hayden White describes the emplotment of certain historical events to be “not unlike what happens, or is supposed to happen, in psychotherapy” (1388). In psychotherapy, events in the patient’s past that are presumed cause of his distress have been “defamiliarized, rendered strange, mysterious, and threatening and have assumed a meaning that he can neither accept nor effectively reject” (White 1388). The patient knows the facts of his trauma all too well; otherwise he would not be able to repress them:

He knows them so well, in fact, that he lives with them constantly and in such a way as to make it impossible for him to see any other facts except through the coloration that the set of events in question gives to his perception of the world. We might say that, according to the theory of psychoanalysis, the patient has overemplotted the events, has charged them with a meaning so intense that, whether real or merely imagined, they continue to shape both his perceptions and his responses to the world long after they should have become ‘past history.’ (1388)

Pi, in order to deal with his cruel reality, imposes another one over it, one he can process.

Allegory, particularly animal allegory, enables us to discourse about stories and events that might be too painful and impossible to process when people are the main characters. Did Pi have to think of himself as being an “animal” before accepting that he would kill and cannibalize another sentient being, even one that had perpetrated evil against him? Pi’s story with animals is the manifestation of the use of historiography as psychotherapy.

This idea is supported, as Florence Stratton points out, by the fact that elsewhere in the novel, we've seen Pi attempting to displace blame from himself. As Stratton puts it, Pi has "a bit of a history of 'telling stories' in order to make himself look innocent" (17). In Part I of the novel, Pi recalls how one day when he was eight, his father calls him and his brother over, and "his tone of voice set off a small alarm bell in my head. I quickly reviewed my conscience. It was clear. Ravi must be in trouble again" (Martel, *Life* 34-35). Rather than accusing the boys of a crime, their father has a lesson for them. However, Pi misunderstands his father's tone and thinks he is in trouble. He blurts out, "I'm innocent!...It's Ravi's fault, whatever it is. He did it!" (35). Pi's father Santosh, worried about having his children grow up in a dangerous environment like a zoo, wants to teach Pi and Ravi to never, ever touch the animals. He takes them around the zoo, teaching them that even seemingly tame creatures, like ostriches, are extremely dangerous. For the finale, he has the boys watch a hungry tiger eat a live goat (35-29). The lesson worked; as Pi recalls, "Life goes on and you don't touch tigers. Except that now, for having accused Ravi of an unspecified crime he hadn't committed, I was as good as dead. In years subsequent, when he was in the mood to terrorize me, he would whisper to me, 'Just wait till we're alone. *You're the next goat!*'" (42-43). As a young child, Pi attempted to direct blame away from himself and onto another. This is just like Pi blaming Richard Parker for the death of the hyena/cook, rather than himself (it is important to remember that Richard Parker, in the story with animals, kills the blind cannibal Frenchmen on the other lifeboat. I will return to this point in a moment). Stratton continues, "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" (17)ⁱⁱⁱ. Pi has a history of shunting the blame from himself onto others, making the leap from blaming Ravi to blaming Richard Parker plausible.

Even with this evidence, the writing style of the story with animals alters the method in ways that potentially change their meaning. The story with animals is told in an extremely realist mode, and Martel pours detail upon detail into the story with animals. Martel admitted to this in an interview with Andrew Steinmetz, saying, “For it to be reasonable, I have to have enough details to make you suspend your disbelief. I didn’t write in a fable-like language. My story is very realistic and all the little details are not only true to life, they are absolutely true. Details about how to butcher a turtle, or the fact that turtle blood is salt free and therefore you can also drink it—all those details are absolutely true” (2). Pi provides us with a description of the lifeboat, including its dimensions (Martel, *Life* 152), gives us a list of exactly what’s on the boat (160-162), provides us with a description of fishing (215), lays out a program for the training of Richard Parker (224), and describes the carnivorous island he and Richard Parker come upon (289-294), all with meticulous detail. As Stratton points out, “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?” (17). The story with animals is written with detail upon painstaking detail, with the goal of getting the reader to believe.

One section of the story with animals does not follow the realist mode of the rest of the story, suggesting a blending of the two stories, as in story 6 on 39. This is the moment where Pi meets the other blind French castaway in another lifeboat. This section can be found in chapter 90, from pages 267-283. Martel himself describes this section as “Beckett in the Pacific” (Martel, “How”). This is the most non-realist part of the text, and it is also the part that most closely toes the line between the story with animals and the story without animals. A brief summary of the exchange is required for further textual analysis. Pi notices Richard Parker has gone blind, likely due to their poor diet, and a few days later Pi goes blind as well. A blind

castaway is essentially a dead castaway, and so Pi prepares for the end. Out loud, he bids his family and Richard Parker farewell, and at the end of his good-bye, he hears the words, “Is someone there?” (Martel, *Life* 269). Pi concludes that he has gone mad, and he decides to play along. He says, “Of course someone’s there... There’s always some *one* there. Who would be asking the question otherwise?” (269). He and the disembodied voice begin to talk about food. Pi dreams of vegetarian Indian food, and the disembodied voice can think only of meat. It slowly dawns on Pi, “I wasn’t hearing voices. I hadn’t gone mad. It was Richard Parker who was speaking to me! The carnivorous rascal. All this time together and he had chosen an hour before we were to die to pipe up. I was elated to be on speaking terms with a tiger. Immediately I was filled with a vulgar curiosity, the sort that movie stars suffer from at the hands of their fans” (273). Going ahead with this conclusion, he asks the voice, “I’m curious, tell me—have you ever killed a man?” (273). The voice hems and haws for a while, but finally answers in the affirmative; Pi asks, “How many?” (273), to which the voice responds, “Two” (274). The voice admits to killing a man and a woman, and he killed the man first, the woman second. Pi asks if they tasted good, to which the voice responds, “No, they didn’t taste good” (274). Pi asks if he regretted the killing, and the voice responds, “It was them or me... It was the doing of a moment. It was circumstance” (274). During this conversation, Pi notices something weird about the voice, which he still presumes to be Richard Parker; it is speaking with a French accent. He thinks to himself, “It was utterly incongruous. Richard Parker was born in Bangladesh and raised in Tamil Nadu, so why should he have a French accent?” (275). He falls asleep, and then, “I woke up with a gasp. Someone was there! This voice coming to my ears was neither a wind with an accent nor an animal speaking up. It was someone *else*!” (275-276, italics original). It is here where Pi tells him the story about the bananas, as described in the Hayden White section (see

10). He and the other castaway decide to be together in one boat, to “feast on each other’s company” (282). They move their boats so they are next to each other, and Pi tells him, “My heart is with you,” to which the voice responds, “You’re damn right your heart is with me!...And your liver and your flesh!” (282). However, before the owner of the French voice can make good on his threat, he is attacked and killed by Richard Parker. Pi laments, “This was the terrible cost of Richard Parker. He gave me a life, my own, but at the expense of taking one. He ripped the flesh off the man’s frame and cracked his bones. The smell of blood filled my nose. Something in me died then that has never come back to life” (283).

When he tells the story with animals to Mr. Chiba and Mr. Okamoto, this is the part of the story that truly makes them disbelieve the story. Mr. Okamoto says, “What about this Frenchman?...Two blind people in two separate lifeboats meeting up in the Pacific—the coincidence seems a little far-fetched, no?” (332). Mr. Okamoto then tells Pi something rather astonishing, that offers up yet another connection between the story with animals and the story without animals: “The cook on the *Tsimtsum* was a Frenchman...Maybe the Frenchman you met was the cook” (332). Recall that the Frenchmen in the story with animals admitted to killing two people: a man first, and a woman second. In the story without animals, the cook kills the Taiwanese sailor, followed by Pi’s mother. Additionally, in the story with animals, after Pi tells the Frenchmen the banana story, the voice cries out, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for all I’ve said and done. I’m a worthless person” (282). This implies the Frenchmen committed unspeakable actions he now regrets. Might these actions be the killing and dismembering of the sailor and Pi’s mother? Richard Parker kills the hyena and cook in the story with animals; Pi kills the cook in the story without animals. This person from the story without animals appears in the story with animals. This section, this “Beckett in the Pacific,” represents the moment where the two stories

briefly converge. The narrative function of that convergence is to promote the idea that neither story is absolutely true, and the truth lies somewhere in between.

Martel uses extremely technical language in the story with animals, except in this section, where he describes a scene that is extremely open to interpretation, because it is so minimalist. This is the one section of the book, apart from the transcript of Pi's conversation with Mr. Chiba and Mr. Okamoto, where dialogue is prevalent. As Hayden White writes, "[Sets of relations] are immanent in the very language which the historian must use to describe events prior to a scientific analysis of them or a fictional emplotment of them. For if the historian's aim is to familiarize us with the unfamiliar, he must use figurative, rather than technical, language" (1394). Martel uses this minimalist, rather than technical language in the part of the story that is most unbelievable, most unfamiliar, most detaching, and most alienating. He uses this same minimalist style when Pi tells the story without animals. He does this in order to highlight the similarities between them, and to suggest the narrative lines of the parallel stories are not exclusive.

A competing interpretation of the parallel stories in *Life of Pi* is that the story without animals is, in fact, the fiction, and Pi only conceived of it to satisfy the investigator's assumptions. This implies the story with the animals is the "true story," despite its fantastical elements. This would explain Pi's lucid ability to toggle back and forth between the two versions. This may enable us to reject displacement as the hypothesis, or alternatively, would require a possible amendment of White's ideas, because Pi is deliberately using historiography as a form of psychotherapy, whereas White believes it occurs subconsciously.

6.2 The Narrator and Martel

In addition to the technique of emplotment using animals, Martel also emplots his own past history in order to garner greater meaning from it. *Life of Pi* actually contains another set of parallel stories, one of which can be found in the Author's Note. As discussed in the Narrative Structure section, this can be looked at in tandem with the online essay written by Martel, "How I Wrote *Life of Pi*." Because, in fact, the Author's Note is a fiction. It is an emplotted account of the "true" story of how Martel came to write the novel, which is told in the online essay.

The two different versions of the story are very similar. In both, Martel describes how the novel-writing process was meant to save him. He goes to India and, as he tells us in his online essay:

I felt terribly lonely. One night I sat on my bed and wept, muffling the sounds so that my neighbours would not hear me through the thin walls. Where was my life going? Nothing about it seemed to have started or added up to much. I had written two paltry books that had sold about a thousand copies each¹³. I had neither family nor career to show for my 33 years on Earth. I felt dry and indifferent. Emotions were a bother. My mind was turning into a wall. (Martel, "How")

His despair seems bottomless, and the image of his mind as a wall is particularly heart-breaking, especially for an author. And, if that weren't bad enough, he says, "The novel I had planned to write while in India had died. Every writer knows the feeling. A story is born in your mind and it thrills you...But at one point, you look at it and you feel nothing" (Martel, "How"). This sentiment is paralleled almost exactly in the Author's Note, where we are told of the death of the story he intended to write: "Unfortunately, the novel spluttered, coughed, and died" (Martel, Life vi). As Martel realized of this novel, "An element is missing, that spark that brings to life a real story, regardless of whether the history or the food is right. Your story is emotionally dead, that's

¹³ One of them is *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, and the other is a gender-bending book called *Self* about a man who turns into a woman on his/her 18th birthday.

the crux of it. The discovery is something soul-destroying, I tell you. It leaves you with an aching hunger” (Martel, *Life* vi). Although the novel failed, it awoke in Martel a hunger to find a story that could help alleviate the despair he was feeling.

Then, as he tells us in the online essay, all of a sudden, the ideas that became *Life of Pi* came to him. He reflects, “In jubilant minutes whole portions of the novel emerged fully formed: the lifeboats, the animals, the intermingling of the religious and the zoological, the parallel stories” (Martel, “How”). He questions himself about how he came up with the ideas, but the only answer he can come up with is, “In truth I don’t know. It just happened” (Martel, “How”). In all honesty, this does not make for a very interesting story. The modern prevalence of DVD commentaries, making-of documentaries, and interest in author biography reflects the desire for a good story *behind* the story. Not only do we desire to enjoy the novel, movie, etc. itself, but we also want to believe it came about in a meaningful way for its creators. As Hayden White would say, we are natural emplotters. In order for a story to truly affect meaning, it must have a point. And we desire there to be a point not only *in* the story, but *because* of it as well, by those who create it. Maybe Martel needed there to be a “better story” (the novel’s key words) behind the story. As he admits, “I was in need of a story. More than that, I needed a Story” (Martel, “How”).¹⁴ The sheer desolation he felt while in India and his subsequent hunger for meaning led to *Life of Pi*, a book which Martel says has changed how he views the world. He tells us writing the novel came “with deep gratifying pleasure, with a knowledge that no matter now the novel would fare, I would be happy with it, that it helped me understand my world a bit better”

¹⁴ The change to capitalization mirrors the moment in *Life of Pi* where Pi describes how he converted to Christianity. He wanders inside a church while on holiday with his family in Munnar and meets a priest, who “served me tea and biscuits in a tea set that tinkled and rattled at every touch; he treated me like a grown-up; and he told me a story. Or rather, since Christians are so fond of capital letters, a Story” (Martel, *Life* 58).

(Martel, “How”). The creation of this story warranted a more meaningful explanation than simply, “I don’t know how it happened.”

And so: Martel creates Mr. Adirubasamy. He imagines meeting Pi Patel in Canada. He imagines the story actually happened, and, using the Author’s Note, he gets the reader to believe, too. *Life of Pi* encourages its readers to have faith, even in the fantastic. The Author’s Note makes it easy to do just that. The Author’s Note and “How I Wrote *Life of Pi*,” side by side, are almost like the parallel stories in *Life of Pi*. Martel didn’t have to write “How I Wrote *Life of Pi*,” just as Pi didn’t have to tell the story without animals. He had the option of letting *Life of Pi* and his Author’s Note stand alone. But he wanted to give the reader two different stories of how the story itself came into existence, just as Pi gives the same choice to Mr. Chiba and Mr. Okamoto. One of them, fairly conventional; an author travels to a foreign country and finds inspiration. The other, a little bit more unbelievable. An author travels to a foreign country, hears about a fantastical story from a native, returns to his home country and finds the “main character,” meets with him many times, and writes the story based on his account. Which one do we want to believe, and which one happened? The point of *Life of Pi* is that it doesn’t matter which one actually happened, but given the choice, we should always go with “the better story.” We, and Martel, can believe that *Life of Pi*’s origins are as fantastic as the story it tells. Where we can, we must give things a meaningful shape.

7. Conclusion

The story without the animals is evidence of the barbarism of human nature; it is, truly, a horrible story. Much of the criticism of Hayden White’s essay comes from those who believe it provides justification for Holocaust deniers, because emplotment seemingly permits them to self-

deceive and rewrite history to suit their own beliefs about human nature. Do we really want to believe human beings are capable of perpetrating so much evil? Of course not. Accepting that in other people would also mean accepting it within ourselves. Wouldn't it be better to believe the Holocaust hadn't occurred? And, similarly, wouldn't it be better if September 11th hadn't happened? What if we told ourselves a different story about that day, and every day since then?

At the end of his long interview with Mr. Chiba and Mr. Okamoto, Pi says,

I told you two stories that account for the 227 days...Neither explains the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*...Neither makes a factual difference to you...You can't prove which story is true and which is not. You must take my word for it...In both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer...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? (Martel, *Life* 351-352)

Both men agree the story with the animals is the better story. To this, Pi responds, "Thank you. And so it goes with God" (352). Pi forces Mr. Chiba and Mr. Okamoto, and through them, us, to make a choice about what to believe. They pick the story that has been imbued with meaning and significance, rather than the simple, brutal story.

But, for Pi, the truth-value of the story with animals is not an issue. All he is concerned with is which is "better," more aesthetically pleasing. Regardless of whether it's an invention or the truth, it allowed Pi to see higher and further and differently; in contrast, as he believes, to the story without animals (336). The novel tries to get us to understand the necessary place of both stories within the overall narrative. The two stories provide us with both a problem in narrative and in ethics. The competing choices play to the needs and desires of the reader. There is great beauty and hope in the world, but that does not mean that it is not also ugly. However, the fact that people are capable of acting so horribly does not mean they are not also capable of creating miracles. We can also make a choice about how to deal with this knowledge of the brutality of

human nature, as evidenced by September 11th. We can lose hope and believe human nature is inherently like the cook's behavior in the story without animals; there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that it is. Or, we can choose to believe that human nature can embody beauty and goodness. This is the better story.

ENDNOTES:

ⁱ Martel is also concerned with why art and literature are important to society and the government's role in supporting it. Martel takes this personal philosophy to new levels with his website, *What is Stephen Harper Reading?* (<http://www.whatisstephenharperreading.ca>). The premise of the webpage is that every two weeks, mailed on a Monday, Martel will send Stephen Harper, the current Prime Minister of Canada, a book, inscribed by him, as well as a letter he will have written. On the "About" page, Martel writes, "I was thinking that to have a bare-bones approach to arts funding, as the present Conservative government has, to think of the arts as mere entertainment to be indulged in after the serious business of life" (Martel, "Story"). On the contrary, Martel believes, art, and the stillness and contemplation it inspires, are the purpose of life. Art is what gives meaning to something that would otherwise have no pattern, as White would believe. Martel says, "To read a book, one must be still... Life, it seems, favours moments of stillness to appear on the edges of our perception... Then we become busy and the stillness vanishes, yet we hardly notice because we fall so easily for the delusion of busyness, whereby what keeps us busy must be important, and the busier we are with it, the more important it must be" (Martel, "Story"). Martel thinks, about Stephen Harper, "He must have moments of stillness. And so this is what I propose to do: not to educate—that would be arrogant, less than that—to make suggestions to his stillness" (Martel, "Story"). He suggests book for Harper to read in his downtime, during his moments of silence and quiet reflection. Martel started this project in April 2007 and it is still going strong. To date, he has sent him over seventy books. The books have ranged from poetry to kids' books to novellas to plays. Through the act of sending the Prime Minister of Canada these books, he is trying to affect change; change not only in how the Canadian government views funding for the arts, but perhaps how Harper interacts with others on the world stage, and how Harper posits himself and Canada in the world. Having a world leader who actively engages in self-reflection (which reading novels lends itself nicely to) could change how he behaves politically.

ⁱⁱ Florence Stratton offers a very interesting argument about why Martel specifically chose the name Richard Parker. Martel wrote another online essay called "How Richard Parker Came to Get His Name," this time published on Amazon's website, which describes how Richard Parker's name is the result of a "triple coincidence": there was a cabin boy named Richard Parker who was cannibalized aboard a ship called the *Mignonette* in 1884; in the Edgar Allan Poe story written in 1837, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Pym and his friend cannibalize a man named Richard Parker; and finally, aboard a ship called the *Francis Speight*, which foundered in 1846, there was deaths and cannibalism aboard, and one of the victims was named Richard Parker. As Martel says, "So many victimized Richard Parkers had to mean something. My tiger found his name. He's a victim, too—or is he?" (Martel, "How Richard"). Stratton, reflecting on these ideas, says, "The tiger in Pi's lifeboat, like the historical and literary Richard Parkers Martel refers to in his online essay, is 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" (Stratton 16). Richard Parker is a victim of not being believed in.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pi's given name is Piscine Molitor Patel, but after being taunted with the nickname "Pissing" for years, he rechristens himself "Pi" the first day of a new school. His rebirth works, and his classmates do not taunt him anymore. "In that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe," Pi says, "I found refuge" (Martel, *Life* 27). This irrational number is used to attempt to glean meaning from the spatial patterns of the universe. It goes on and on forever with no discernible pattern itself. Within Pi's name is combined "the capacity for both cognitive and affective approaches to knowledge" (Stratton 7). This number that we do not quite understand ourselves is used so that we may come to an understanding about the universe. As Yann Martel said, "I think the same thing is going on in religion. Mystery does that to us. If we constantly seek to understand everything we get lost, whereas as we allow a degree of mystery into our lives suddenly things become clear" (Steinmetz 2-3). The number *pi* is in sharp contrast to the novel itself, a story that has been emplotted to give it purpose and meaning. Rather than go on forever without a discernible pattern, pieces have been chosen with purpose and intent to contribute to the story as a whole. Recall that Pi asks, "Could you tell my jumbled story in exactly one hundred chapters, not one more, not one less? I tell you, that's the one thing I hate about my nickname, the way that number runs on forever. It's important in life to conclude things properly. Only then can you let go" (Martel, *Life* 316-317). The Narrator emplots Pi's life so that it is told in the most rational number of pieces possible.

^{iv} This section is the very last major episode, and directly follows Pi's description of the French cannibal. Here, Pi describes how he and Richard Parker made "an exceptional botanical discovery" (Martel, *Life* 284). The island, which Pi estimates to be about a mile in diameter, has no soil and consists of trees growing out of pure vegetation. Its only inhabitants are millions of meerkats. The island, he comes to learn, is carnivorous; it attracts fish to its underwater depths (likely drawn to the edible algae), and as Pi deduces, "At night, by some chemical process unknown to me but obviously inhibited by sunlight, the predatory algae turned highly acidic and the ponds became vats of acid that digested the fish" (312). The acid also renders the salt water as freshwater. The meerkats sleep in trees at night to avoid the acid, and Richard Parker faithfully returns to the safety of the lifeboat each night. This episode is likely described last because it is one of Pi's most traumatic experiences. Pi finds, in one of the trees, a complete set of human teeth, each tooth wrapped in leaves, which proves itself as the impetus for his departure. He figures the trees must be mildly acidic, and "some poor lost soul had arrived on these terrible shores before me. How much time had he—or was it she?—spent here? Weeks? Months? Years?...How much hope come to nothing? How much stored-up conversation that died unsaid? How much loneliness endured? How much hopelessness taken on? And after all that, what of it? What to show for it?" (312-313). Pi ultimately leaves the island, which provides him with both edible algae and fresh water, because to stay would be akin to spiritual death. As he says, "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 island could perhaps be conceived to be a symbolic embodiment of a place devoid of any spiritual understanding of reality. Likewise, the island could alternatively be viewed as the same sort of revelation Pi must come to about himself, that concealed within the exterior of a vegetable paradise (Pi, as a Hindu, is a vegetarian) lies a carnivore.

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