Review

Life of Pi: Into the Divine, the Hard Way, or: Why the Tiger Didn’t Bite

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This analysis of Yann Martel’s Life of Pi examines extraordinary elements of this famed novel; it examines it as an avant-garde montage, a new fable, a tableau of the weird and fantastic—in other words, a book outside the realm of normal novelistic portrayal and exposition. In one important sense, this novel is a combination of the fictional and the factual, which can be understood as transacting modes in a single paradigm, with fictional and non-fictional assets overlapping onto each other. But there is much more in this work, for the book is as well an essentially unfinished, enigmatic, and deeply spiritual exploration of the godhead and what this means for human existence. It is all a “theology of introspection and experience, beyond human capacity,” as discussed in this analysis. In these ways, this book is much more than simply a fiction, an ordinary novel, and it becomes a new kind of spiritual reading experience. Readers should note that this is an independent philosophical and technical analysis, and the writer makes little effort to cite from and regurgitate other works. This work is a new examination of reality, spirituality and fiction. This is then a sovereign investigation, and unlike typical literary analysis, it will only minimally refer to other writers, theorists and analysts.

Key words: Life of Pi, spirituality, the Godhead, religion, love, the divine.

INTRODUCTION

Reading Yann Martel’s Life of Pi is not a typical novel reading experience in any normal sense. In fact, it is hardly a novelistic reading experience at all, and becomes something of an avant-garde montage, a new fable for human existence, or a Hieronymus Bosch-ian tableau of the weird and fantastic, fraught with terrors not dissimilar to Bosch’s. All the normal contours you might expect to encounter in a novel—realistic narrative contours, dialogic interaction, standard exposition, rational action, character interface and development, and even the conception of plot as plot, with related, sequential elements, recognizable cause and effect, and a move from point A to point B as it were—are either not present in Life of Pi, or their instantiations are so anomalous as to be cryptic congregations of the unexperiencable, the “essentially unfathomable,” (Ma), a surreal not-living and to be sure not-real magical realism, all which leaves readers scratching their heads in wonder.

From the first pages of Life of Pi, we are taken into a simultaneous fictional and “factual” world in which the seemingly genuine author—Yann Martel—tells what is
presumably a “true” story of the author’s prior experience with failed publishing efforts, and then his launching of a new project, which takes him to India (Martel, 2012). There he learns of an interesting tale “that will make you believe in God,” which piques his interest. He goes on to learn about Piscine Molitor Patel (Pi) and his experience of being lost at sea, onboard a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger and other animals, for 227 days, his rehabilitation in Mexico, and then his subsequent life in Canada, where he can be contacted. This the author does, thereby associating an actual author with a fictional character (in one sense not odd, given that authors of novels do indeed encounter and essentially live with their fictional creations; but normally this is done at arms distance, with the one always “real” and the other always “unreal” - that is, fictional; in Life of Pi they instead interact on the same plane, in the same world, but more on this incongruity just below; in this book this is a reverse of a common adoption of fictional methodologies in actual historical narrative, a theoretical subject that has been covered in detail for many years; see Hayden White’s Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe). During this interface, the author (again, presumably real) goes on to thank certain fictional people (as far as we can ascertain, they are fictional), as well as some factual people (such as Moacyr Scliar, [1937-2011], a Brazilian writer and physician who wrote a book with a similar theme as Life of Pi), as well as real institutions (the Canada Council for the Arts) that aided him in his writing. And so with this seemingly factual-but-in-fact-fictional opening (in the Author’s Note, at the beginning of the book, Martel senses the oncoming intersection of the factual and the fictional, and writes of “the spark that brings to life a real story, regardless of whether the history...is right [xi, emphasis added]), we are taken into this narrative, and from there we are always on the edge of our seats wondering exactly where truth ends and this narrative, and from there we are always on the edge of our seats wondering exactly where truth ends and that which is real and that which is not (445). In a similar vein, Professor Hayden White has written that “the fictions of factual representation is the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other” (“The Fictions of Factual Representation” 121; needless to say Yann Martel is not a historian, proper, but as I have examined he does introduce a given historical factuality to his fictional narrative).

The binary paradigm sketched above is something of an aside in this analysis, though a useful one enabling understanding of the chronological contours of Life of Pi. I will turn in the remainder of this analysis to the substantive inquiry—the montage, fable and tableau referred to above. In these respects, as we proceed we will find that as the tale unfolds readers are treated to a narrative thrill ride across a bizarre and fantastical terrain (mostly oceanic terrain, a “surface” I suppose we would call it), with wild twists of plot, seemingly-realistic (but not quite) disquisitional contrivances, and uncanny turns of being and existence, all leading less to any expected “conclusion,” and more to an essentially incomplete, wholly unfathomable, wondrous and deeply spiritual exploration (though a lofty claim, this novel may indeed lead you toward belief in God). It is all a kind of theology of introspection, psyche and experience, virtually beyond human capacity, and we will find that this is one of the joys of this novel. Well, we readers might say as we catch our breath, “You must take life the way it comes at you and make the best of it” (122), and indeed, we must take what comes our way in this book and turn it to our best cognitive, experiential and ultimately divine advantage.

Part 1: Toronto and Pondicherry

In Part One of the book when we enter Pi’s life and learn of his “strange religious practices” (3), and that he is simultaneously a Christian, a Muslim, and Hindu, we know that we are in for no average story line (“Jesus, Mary, Muhammad and Vishnu” Pi is fond of saying; any anyway, did someone not once say that religions are like several hikers trekking up the same mountain all at different points along the way, but all leading toward the same summit?). Three more divergent belief systems could hardly be imagined (though admittedly there are connected philosophical elements, characterization and reportage among them; this might lead us in a new analytical direction, as we realize that Pi is not in fact as extraordinary and unconventional as he initially seems, and that he simply has a unique way of combining what seems discordant into a greater whole that points to a harmonious outcome (that same walk up that mountain); he does after all tell us that in spite of some of the horrors we are on the verge of witnessing, Pi is “a person who
believes in form, in the harmony of order” [383]). When Pi is a youth and he and his parents meet a priest, an imam, and a pandit (a Hindu scholar), they are also puzzled about Pi’s beliefs, and can only be allayed when Pi tells them that, as Gandhi said, “‘All religions are true,’” and that, “I just want to love god,” which is seconded by his normally irreligious father. And indeed, in this way Piscine Molitor Patel’s religious life is veritably bursting at the seams, the “finite within the infinite, the infinite within the finite” (65) exactly as his ongoing story approaches an infinity (within a given finite bound of finite, “actual” experience), which will erupt in the end beyond the bounds of telling and comprehension.

“Toronto and Pondicherry” first examines Pi’s life around a zoo (which his father owned) which is no doubt a key to this whole book—as Pi not only grew up in zoos, he will end up living in something of a zoo on the life boat on which he survives for 227 days at sea. But just as important is the zoo’s connection to religion, with “Certain illusions about freedom plaguing them both” (25). Pi, an expert with animals, observes that they are never “free” in the true sense, unrestricted and unrestrained, but are in fact forever controlled by “compulsion and necessity” (20), the severe environments in which they live, and rigid animal hierarchies (even when they live in zoos). In turn, we may assume that the religious man or woman is also ensconced within an environment and hierarchy with God at the highest, and all below that enchain toward requirements of worship and devotion, enjoined in a spiritual struggle and defense of what is best in “the small clearing of each heart” (95). This struggle that marks animals in the territory they inhabit in zoos, and humans in the spiritual territory of their hearts and minds, will be played out in the lifeboat that Pi inhabits with his animal companions after the shipwreck of the freighter Tsintsum on July 2, 1977.

We thus encounter a very rough balance between zoos and religion in the first 124 pages of Life of Pi. And this introduces the next main phase of the story, with life in the “zoo” on the lifeboat after the sinking of the Tsintsum, and Pi’s quest for spiritual fulfillment, playing hand in hand (note that this oceanic zoo will include a wounded zebra, a diabolical spotted hyena, an orangutan, and the famed Bengal tiger, Richard Parker).

In spite of the struggle described thus far, we see in this world a paradox, for the restricted nature of life for both animals and humans; notwithstanding, ours (and theirs) is in fact the best of all possible worlds, and at the highest level, “Life is so beautiful” (6-7). At another time, even in the midst of the suffering he is confronting at sea, he notes that “With the very first rays of light it came alive in me: hope. As things emerged in outline and filled with colour, hope increased until it was like a song in my heart. Oh, what it was to bask in it!” (158). Such plaudits and exultation are elemental to Pi’s personality. For example, in his youth he was in constant wonder with the animals in his father’s zoo, and their stunning beauty, their amazing skills and their near-mystical insight and understanding of the world around them—the “highly mannered, manifold expressions of life that grace our planet” (19) and that “stupefy the senses” (19). So extraordinary they are, that it is “Better to picture [animal beauty and dexterity] in your head if you want to feel it” (19). There is an overall irony running beneath this description of life and its beauty, however, as it becomes connected with death and its gruesome manifestations—“The zebra’s broken leg was missing. The hyena had bitten it off and dragged to the stern…A flap of skin hung limply over the raw stump. Blood was still dripping” (158-159), and “A massive paw landed on its shoulders. Richard Parker’s jaws closed on the side of the hyena’s neck. Its glazed eyes widened. There was a noise of organic crunching as windpipe and spinal cord were crushed.” This is all something of a “nightmare tinged with love” (7), which is an example of the “strangeness of the human heart” (7) as it witnesses the horrid and the awesome—a strangeness we will encounter again and again in Life of Pi.

As noted, the “narrative structure” of this book proceeds in an odd way, with the author, Yann Martel, early encountering the main character Pi, in his home in Canada (again a “true” author is conversing with a fictional character). This part of the book continues for a hundred pages or so, with occasional descriptions of Pi and his current life, returning to the telling of the story of his youth, before disappearing completely about page 124, when we become totally involved in the fictional story of survival on the life boat. Part one of the book tells the knitted story outlined above. Within this narrative, we learn of the weird appearance of Pi’s name(s), from his given name Piscine Molitor Patel, which came from a Parisian swimming pool (the Piscine Molitor, an actual swimming pool in Paris, a dash of truth, again linking the fictional and the non-fictional, with this light touch of truth, as noted above, adding to the believability of the fiction). He had adopted “Pi” because his cruel classmates had referred to him as “Pissing” Patel, which reduces him in his ever-religious passion to walk into his classes “wearing my crown of thorns” (White, 1975: 27). He knows that he must make a change, and he begins to plan his escape from his pained existence with a new name, which will be “the beginning of a new time for me” (28). Later, when he adopts the shortened Pi for Piscine he tells his classmates that it is indeed the same name as the mathematical abstraction describing the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter, and he ponders how this name represents a veritable “rebirth” (31) for him, and that he has become something of an irrational number himself in the world. His later experiences will only reinforce such an absurd value in his life.

“This story has a happy ending” (124) we are told at the end of Part One, and in spite of the death and destruction
that awaits us, and to be sure a fairly long reach to find out exactly what was “happy” about the conclusion of this tale (it seems instead incomplete to me, and with a strong touch of discontent), we nonetheless hope to discover exactly this as we turn to Part Two, “The Pacific Ocean.”

Part 2: The Pacific Ocean

If we need any more evidence that Pi Patel has entered a bizarre and disordered existence, an unbelievable netherworld of fantastically dangerous experience, we need turn no further than the first pages of Part Two of the book. Here, during and after the hull of the ship carrying his family is breached and it capsizes (killing his entire family), he finds himself in a world of hurtling rain and pounding waves, the water “like a riotous crowd, raging, frothing and boiling” (135-136), with wild animals from his father’s zoo pounding the decks berserkly around him, others careering through the air and landing with thunderous thuds on the lifeboat below, and some swimming madly toward him in the lifeboat, threatening his life. Above all of this wild activity is “the collective scream of humans and animals” roars, “protesting their oncoming death” (136). The first animal to make its way into his lifeboat is the zebra that plunged from the ship into it, smashing its leg in the fall, and then Richard Parker, the huge, utterly formidable Bengal tiger. Soon a mangy, evil-looking, violence-obsessed hyena will appear in the raft, and later an orangutan will float toward it on its own raft of bananas, which is crawling hellishly with hundreds of black spiders. As “This nightmare” (128) unfolds around him, he tells Richard Parker, “We’re in hell” (129), and he feels he is “vowed to death” (165). One “broken down” (163) night for Pi consists of “weeping and sadness and spiritual pain” (164), and he laments that when darkness comes, “Everything disappeared” (156) and he finds himself “floating in a pure, abstract blackness” (156). Soon more violence descends into Pi’s life, and the hyena depravedly devours the zebra alive in the lifeboat, “pulling out coils of intestines and other viscera” (166) such that “blood poured out like a river” (165), eating the animal from inside out. Strangely though, Pi finds beauty in this chaos (no person is better at finding beauty in madness than Pi Patel), and he notes that, before, the wounded zebra in his boat had been a “lovely animal. Its wet markings glowed brightly white and intensely black,” and “the queer, clean, artistic boldness of its design and the fineness of its head struck me” (143-144). Another day, he views the sea, always a danger, but also “so immense, so breathtakingly immense...settling into a smooth and steady motion, with the waves at heel; the wind was softening to a tuneful breeze; fluffy, radiantly white clouds were beginning to light up in a vast fathomless dome of delicate pale blue. It was the dawn of a beautiful day in the Pacific Ocean” (146). And one glorious sunset is described as “a placid explosion of orange and red, a great chromatic symphony, a colour canvas of supernatural proportions” (164). All of this beauty is ostensibly “wasted on me” (164), but we will find in fact that the opposite is true, and beauty and the beautiful accumulate in Pi during his journey, and he transforms this aesthetic wonder into spiritual solace.

Amidst this commotion, the always ambivalent Pi reflects how animals can evince human qualities (called zoomorphism). He has already spoken directly to Richard Parker, and later the dying zebra “appeal[s] to heaven,” while the battling orangutan’s eyes express “fear in such a humanlike way” (173) (but Pi will never see humanity in the fiendish hyena). Richard Parker, sleek, huge, with incredible, razor-sharp weapons at his disposal, makes not a move to harm the others on the raft, a trait we will see that marks him during this entire journey (though he kills and eats the hated hyena). Indeed, early on Pi finds that “the great beast was not behaving like a great beast” (181). This puzzling behavior will become a central theme in the book, the greatest enigma in this book of enigmas. Pi’s ultimate survival, with a ferocious man-eater living by his side, will become an encompassing moral lesson in Life of Pi, indicating how life is not automatically and ultimately fatal, which is in fact exactly what Pi is faced with on a daily basis. At one point Pi comments how the smallest details can “become lifesavers” (187) but in the end it is not so much these details—the well-placed lid of a survival box, an oarlock here, a small cleat there—that save him, but Richard Parker himself. Pi comments on this, thinking “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” (216). And again he thinks “A part of me did not want Richard Parker to die at all, because if he died I would be left alone with despair...If I still had the will to live it was because of Richard Parker...I am grateful. It’s the plain truth: without Richard Parker, I wouldn’t be alive today to tell you my story” (219). Yes, this attachment, this love, this commitment is the essence of the purpose that infuses Pi’s life and tale, a purpose that extends from the basically animalistic (if I may view Richard Parker, who in all ways performs in a virtuous, veritably regal way), through the human, upward to the godhead. Pi’s early plans to eliminate Parker are quickly discarded, and ultimately he crafts his Plan Number Seven: Keep Him Alive (221). And note here that to be sure Richard Parker never lays a paw on Pi, outside of one brisk blow with his paw when he appears annoyed that Pi is protecting himself with a turtle shell, perhaps offending Parker, who has not tried to harm him. Yes, Parker and Pi on the whole get along famously throughout their voyage. Once Pi even notes the tiger emitting “prusten,” a kind of cat’s purring indicating contentment, and ultimately Pi finds himself expressing love for the feline titan: “Truly I do. I
love you Richard Parker” (317). This is a story that will “make you believe in God” indeed, and we see here how its fantastical, mystical and of course God-fearing elements lead us toward just such a rendezvous with the eternal.

In spite of what is said above, Pi realizes he must establish a firm relationship with Parker based on respect, an alpha-omega association in which, strangely enough, Pi will be at the apex. He engages in this by leaving his own markings around the lifeboat, sniffing Parker’s droppings, maintaining rigid boundaries above and below the tarpaulin that stretches across the top of the boat, and blowing piercing TREEEEEes on a whistle. Though Pi establishes a rough status boundary between himself and Parker in this way, readers always have the feeling that in fact the tiger is simply biding his time, and though he may play the game of submission to Pi in the boat, in fact he is always his natural self, a dominant creature with virtually no enemies, and certainly not threatened by a skinny, weak, emaciated boy (who is a vegetarian to boot).

In addition to the cordial relationship I have sketched here, and in addition to the small miracles that Pi says saved his life on numerous occasions, one element of his life at sea seems to genuinely encourage Pi and gives him a measure of joy—this is the natural beauty that surrounds him. And oh what breathtaking beauty it is. We have already noted some flashes of magnificence that Pi observed, and he continues to note the beauty of animal life, with sharks graced with rich ultramarine backs and snow-white stomachs, others that “sparkled with surprising brilliance” (293) and others of an indigo blue that “shimmered beautifully in the sun” (294). When Pi kills a dorado fish, he watches as it “began to flash all kinds of colours in rapid succession. Blue, green, red, gold and violet flickered and shimmered neon-like on its surface as it struggled” (248).

But no doubt, as we have seen, it is the sky and sea that are the zenith of beauty in Pi’s life. Fortunately for him in its way, Pi’s suffering “was taking place in a grand setting” (237), he finds that “There were many skies” and “many seas” (289), and “there were all the nights and all the moons” (290). Pi views “a number of starry nights, where with just two colours and the simplest of styles nature draws the grandest of pictures, and I felt the feelings of wonder and smallness that we all feel, and got a clear sense of direction from the spectacle, most definitely, but I mean that in a spiritual sense” (259). Another time Pi views a stunning blast of lightning striking the sea, and “a white splinter came crashing down from the sky, puncturing the water….The water was shot through with what looked like white roots, briefly, a great celestial tree stood in the ocean….The flash of light was incredibly vivid” (312-313). With this, Pi finds himself reveling in “a state of exalted wonder,” and he wonders whether “This is an outbreak of divinity” (314). Pi even creates his own sort of artificial wonderment and visionary experience, when he cancels the passage of time in his mind, drapes a sea-water dipped piece of cloth over his face (a “dream rag” he calls it [318]), and lies back languorously, to be visited by “the most extraordinary dreams, trances, visions, thoughts, sensations, remembrances” (318). His ultimate aim, in the midst of what is mostly a dreary and endlessly monotonous voyage, is to find “the feeling that things were different, that the present moment was different from the previous present moment” (318).

More of the almost cryptic but bracing sorts of experiential indeterminacies that are found in Pi’s new life are, as we have seen, his shifts from dark gloom and grim grief to heights of ecstasy and wonderment, often counterpoised in startling combinations—“You reach a point where you are at the bottom of hell, yet you have your arm crossed and a smile on your face and you feel you’re the luckiest person on earth” (292), he says. It is these contrasting elements that begin to take up the second half of the book (though as well much of this second half is almost tedious, with long accounts of the small details of baiting hooks, setting out lines and sea anchors, his various daily rituals, his encounter with a floating pile of trash in the sea, the disintegration of his clothing and most everything else on the raft, the gathering of water with a variety of tools, his tinkering with the raft, various aches and pains he feels, lists of locker contents, survival tips, animal advice, etc.). Pi has lost his entire family, and danger lurks everywhere. Loneliness and desolation are a constant threat: “Despair was a heavy blackness that let no light in or out. It was a hell beyond expression” (281), and fear “is life’s only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life” (214). “I have so many bad nights to choose from” Pi says, “that I’ve made none the champion” (163). But he finds also that gifts from heaven seem to be common, and his continuing effort is to reduce the one and discover the other. Three days after he finds himself on the lifeboat, he is near death from starvation and thirst, but then he discovers a goldmine of nourishment in the lifeboat’s emergency rations locker (which also provides him with many other life-saving materials, even containing “1 God,” though we may assume this was Pi’s imagination). After downing two liters of cherished water found in cans in the locker, “Everything in me, right down to the pores of my skin, was expressing joy” (190). His first taste of emergency ration, a dry baked-wheat biscuit is just as good: “They were savoury and delicate to the palate…They broke up under the teeth with a delightful crunching sound…Mixed with saliva, they made a granular paste that was enchantment to the tongue and mouth…And when I swallowed, my stomach had only one thing to say:

Hallelujah!” (191-192) (and this in spite of his concern
that, as a vegetarian, the biscuit contained animal fat). Pi finds many more such joys ("Now I will turn miracle into routine" he says [197]), though they are always interspersed with despairing low points, and horrific life-threatening situations. Indeed, in spite of his luck with the emergency rations, and with fishing and gathering water, for which the most part keeps him and Richard Parker healthy, at another point he notes that,

The storm came on slowly one afternoon. The clouds looked as if they were stumbling along before the wind, frightened. The sea took its cue. It started rising and falling in a manner that made my heart sink.

Soon, the ocean swells on this day were "truly mountains," and there were "thousands of tons of water hovering above us" (304). And then, "the boat was swamped" and "I felt death was upon us" (304). "For the rest of that day and into the night, we went up and down, up and down, up and down, until terror became monotonous and was replaced by numbness and a complete giving-up" (306). Experience like this is surely not for the faint of heart, though lucky for Pi the worst moments and storms are always followed by peaceful seas, and he finds his hope returning, as often as not to be expressed in his religious devotion and love of god. He practices religious rituals multiple times every day (not surprising, given his triple commitment), and no less than includes the dead zebra and a flying fish he killed in his prayers (to this day!). In one despairing moment when he feels he may lose his faith, he reaches to the highest high in his dedication and proclaims:

At such moments I tried to elevate myself. I would touch the turban I had made with the remnants of my shirt and would say aloud, "THIS IS GOD'S HAT!"

I would put my pat my pants and say aloud, "THIS IS GOD'S ATTIRE!"
I would point to the lifeboat and say aloud, "THIS IS GOD'S ARK!"
I would spread my hands wide and say aloud, "THIS ARE GOD'S WIDE ACRES!"
I would point at the sky and say aloud, "THIS IS GOD'S EAR!" (281).

As the middle section of the book draws on, and we are engaged in all of the wonder, despair and danger described above, Pi finds ominously at one time that "Everything suffered," and "We perished away" (320-321). One morning he indeed feels that he is on the verge of perishing, and when he loses his sight, and finds himself clinging to life, his body wasting away, he abandons all hope. In a final grasp at salvation, he envisions first Richard Parker (never one to follow ordinary prescriptions, Pi): "Goodbye Richard Parker. I'm sorry for having failed you," (326) and then his lost family:

"Dear Father, dear Mother, dear Ravi [his brother], greetings. Your loving son and brother is coming to meet you" (326). In a final deliverance, he thanks God—and then something astonishing—and as always in Life of Pi, a typical and unanticipated—happens to Pi, and in "the blackness of [his] dying mind" (326)—he meets a ghost—"Is someone there?" it asks. Or does he? For first he imagines the voice he speaks with is none other than Richard Parker—he guesses as much when the voice talks of his enjoyment of eating bleeding meat dishes of every kind. Following this, the voice fades in and out, shrieks and cries, and transforms into another vision of a "brother" (apparently not his actual brother) adrift in another boat, who continues to converse with him about food, until the vision again transforms into a combination of another person and Richard Parker, who Richard Parker himself ultimately kills, and "something in [Pi] died then that has never come back to life" (342). Pi finds some dead fish on his “brother’s” nearby boat, regains his vision, and then sees the man’s remains, consumed by Parker, at the bottom of his own boat. He is even reduced to ingesting some of the body, such that, as always with Pi, he will be forced to “pray for his soul every day” (343).

Later, Pi will indeed clean up the remains of this dead body, but this does not change the fact that it all appears to have been a hallucination.

A miraculous interlude we have here—but we never know whether this vision actually happened or not, just as we can ascertain little for certain in all of this phantasmagorical book. And more phantasmagoria are right around the corner, for it is then that Pi comes across an island—"Richard Parker! Land! Land! We are saved!" he cries—but this is no ordinary island, and though he initially cheers the discovery, Pi's overall reaction is rather blasé. He finds this island a bit hard to believe, in fact “deluded” (344), with weird trees with pale bark and brilliant emerald leaves that emerge not from soil or even water, but from a thick vegetative undergrowth. An island with no soil? Well this could only be a “chimera, a play of waves seem to move away from the island (364); and a generalized and mysterious increasing and loosening of the island’s topography, with varying height and density (362-363). As well, the island appears wholly desolate, with almost no animate life forms on it—except for,

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1 And indeed, this observation about his vegetarianism, and the death of several fish that Pi eats, points to a theme that is important in Life of Pi: the protagonist’s requirement to abandon his lifelong and deeply-committed vegetarianism in order to survive. Pi will find that “It is simple and brutal: a person can get used to anything, even to killing” (248), a realization utterly impossible in his prior life. Readers can probably see how just this would have been necessary in a situation like this, but the psychological pressure exerted on Pi is enormous.
strangest of all, the millions of *meerkats* Pi encounters—this normally a small rodent found in the deserts of South Africa (where Pi is definitely not). Indeed, these very meerkats appear to be a strangely-evolved sub-species, very likely not an animal of this earth at all. These animals, which in the wild rarely encounter water, are fond of swimming in the island’s freshwater ponds, and no less than capturing large, *already deceased saltwater fish* from the depths of the ponds. And there is more to this, for we find that these very ponds become no less than *carnivorous*, attracting the saltwater fish into their depths below the island and asphyxiating them one by one, so that they float to the surface in masses ever night, and then becoming acidic so as to digest the fish, which disappear each night; as well, Pi will discover that at certain times, apparently because of this acidity, the island veritably attacks anyone that sets foot on it—which we learn more of, when, after many weeks on the island, Pi discovers a mystery of mysteries, and its terrifying outcome. One day he climbs a tree in which he had espiied some large round fruits hanging in nests of branches. “And oh how I wish that moment had never been!” he will later exclaim to the author to whom he is telling his story. For Pi peels this “fruit,” and in the center of each he finds…a human tooth. Pi surmises that the teeth were taken from a prior castaway on the island, who had lived there for some time, but was ultimately murdered by the island, and then digested until only his or her teeth remained, encased in some of the island’s homicidal algae. With this discovery Pi’s way is clear: He must cast off from this island, this bizarre fever-dream, and leave its evil environs behind forever. And so he does, moving from one uncanny and hostile world to the next, and all along the way experiencing the unexperiencable.

And then? Soon thereafter Pi finds himself ashore on Mexico, saved at last. His story is at an end. Or is it? No, for in this unending story that runs along everlasting lines like Pi’s own name, Pi’s story can never quite end. For even here in Mexico, he experiences the ultimate disaffection and lack of ending for him—he loses his best friend Richard Parker without so much as a good-bye. Parker leaps to the shore and dashes off for the jungle’s edge. There he pauses, but without even a glance back at Pi, he “disappeared forever from my life” (383) into the dense foliage. And this virtually breaks Pi’s heart, to say nothing of violating his deep sense of order in the universe. First, he weeps “because Richard Parker had left me so unceremoniously” (383). “That bungled goodbye haunts me to this day” continues Pi (384), and then he adds, I wish so much that I’d had one last look at him in the lifeboat….I wish I had said “Richard Parker, it’s over. We have survived. Can you believe it? I owe you more gratitude then I can express. I couldn’t have done it without you. I would like to say it formally Richard Parker, thank you.” (384) Then Pi turns to his love of perfect order (a reflection of his name; is anything more perfect than the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter?), and his commitment to constancy and stability in life—stories with beginnings, middles and ends. “Where we can, we must give things a meaningful shape” (383) he says, “Its important in life to conclude things properly” (384). But in fact that is exactly what this story does not do. For at the “end” of the story, we find…that it has not ended at all, and will in fact start all over again, in what appear to be endless revolutions that take us right back to the beginning of the book—where the story had ostensibly “started,” but which was in fact more of a retelling of a retelling. Pi’s story goes on forever, in infinitude of at once hopeless despair and enlightening gratitude and love of life. There can be no “end” to this story, it must be lived again and again and again, to teach and tell us what life can be, and what we must make of it. The final result, Pi hopes, is that we will be made to believe in God, the best and most important story of all.

Yes, as Pi is taken to a hospital in Mexico and cared for by generous and kind people, his story starts all over again—this time twice told, with yet more impossible occurrence and outcome. His story is told to two men from the Japanese Ministry of Transport (actual? fictional? All I can say is that Japan has a Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism), who are examining the loss of Pi’s *Tsintsum* vessel in the Pacific, with all on board killed.

A first “story” is told to the two investigators, word for word as it had been presented in the first 385 pages of the book. But they don’t believe that an orangutan could have floated on a ton of bananas, that there is anything like an algae island floating in the Pacific, and not least that Pi could have survived at sea over 200 days with a Bengal tiger only yards from him. Then, something strange follows, and we learn that that story may not have been the story at all. For then Pi tells a second story, doctored to meet the investigators’ expectations—a story “That won’t make you see higher or farther or differently…a flat story. An immobile story” (406). Although no doubt this is exactly what Pi would never want, having lived the greatest story of all, his interlocutors do in fact find that they like this story more than the first (not realizing that choosing to doubt Pi as they do, “is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation” [38]).

And if we have any trouble believing either of Pi’s stories, we should probably note that we will always find that life is not at all what we think it is, that no story will ever fit our expectations and be quite what we think it is, and that all stories have two (or many more) sides to them. To illustrate this, Pi tells us that right now a veritable zoo of wild animals is living in close proximity to people in virtually any city in the world. Do you doubt this? Pi tells us:
If you took the city of Tokyo and turned it upside down and shook it, you'd be amazed at all the animals that would fall out: badgers, wolves, boa constrictors, Komodo dragons, crocodiles, ostriches, baboons, capybaras [a large South American rodent], wild boars, leopards, manatees, ruminants in untold numbers (399).

It is just this strange contiguity of the wild and the domestic that marks all life, and in a sense marks the "life" in this novel. And yet again this is religiosity, for it is such an at-once closeness and also distance that marks man's relation with God. Overall, in these ways, "If you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for?" (399). Pi has already questioned the very existence of reason (hence in a sense his name), which is "excellent for getting food" (400) and other such pragmatic aims, but within such excessive rationality, "you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater" (400). And in this sense, and leading to the second of his tales, "Isn't telling about something—using words...already something of an invention? Isn't just looking upon this world already something of an invention?" (405; Pi is either commenting toward Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, or voicing narrative theory not dissimilar to Hayden White's) As the story unfolds with Pi's retellings, he is introducing a dose of doubt into the life he has lived, a transformation and reimagining, which is for him the essence of the life lived in God's presence (even Jesus doubted on the cross). And from here, his doubt, his reimagining, his invention, will take flight into a new world and new life—one that readers will never truly know whether it was "actually" (or in turn fictionally) lived or not. It's Piscine (Pi) Molitor Patel all over again. And thus he sets out on the second of his stories: "Here's another story" he tells the investigators (406). And what a story it is. Instead of animals swimming toward and boarding the lifeboat at the sinking of the Tsintsum, a group of four people does: Pi, a villainous cook, Pi's mother, and another sailor, who broke his leg in the accident. From there the hated cook makes nothing but trouble for all on board the lifeboat, finally amputating the sailor's leg and leaving him to die. He then kills Pi's mother, and ultimately Pi kills him. At this point the two investigators note parallels in the two stories: the cook as hyena, the zebra as zebra, Pi's mother as orangutan, and Pi himself as Richard Parker, who had killed the hyena. At their growing doubt, Pi asks them "since it makes no factual difference to you and you can't prove the question either way, which story do you prefer?" (424). When they make their selection (the second story) then, simply enough for Pi, "...so it goes with God" (424). After a few more incidental (true, fictional) details from the investigator's report, Life of Pi ends.

Conclusion
I've read Dickens. I've read Hemingway. I've read Faulkner. I've read Tolstoy. I've read McEwan. I have learned much from these authors, I have been moved, I have been amazed. But none that I know ever quite made me "believe in God." And as no less than Barack Obama wrote of such a possibility in a letter to Yann Martel, Life of Pi is no less than "an elegant proof of God" (Ma). It is in just this way that Life of Pi is different from other novels. We may indeed in this novel, discover "the meaning of man" (Ma)—for the book is indeed a kaleidoscopic look into the interior of human consciousness and spirit. But Life of Pi is much more. Though the final passages of Life of Pi convey quite a lot of what seems like straightforward factual detail about the sinking of a large transport ship, and the forthright interaction between Pi and the two investigators (the factual side of the fictional enterprise), this is in fact less a realistic narrative proper than a philosophical and spiritual opus, an Aesop's fables—complete with animals, writ large, on an abstract canvas—Picasso's Jouer de Flute et Gazelle or Mes Dessins D'Antibes (both which portray human-animal interaction) come to mind—or as noted, a Bosch-ian crusade of death and bizarre, threatening incidence. Or could the lifeboat, with animals and humans aboard, be a kind of ark, with saviors of all life aboard? Perhaps a stretch of the imagination, though we could say that indeed Pi's aim was to save humanity, and to reintroduce God into human life. We have witnessed the most abject misery in this book—terrors, hunger, illness, decay and peril. And yet, something more has been at work, for "High calls low and low calls high....The lower you are, the higher your mind will want to soar" (381), and here we see a glimpse of that inherent happiness that Pi feels throughout all of his life. In these ways, as Moses Ma has it, the book is "about how you can find spirituality and the meaning of life in the throes of all that is horrible and terrible in the world." The next step is probably obvious to readers, and "It was natural that, bereft and desperate as I was, in the throes of unremitting suffering, I should turn to God" (Ma, 2012: 381). It is obvious that Pi hopes his readers will also do exactly this. In Pi's reach upward to greatest passion and deity, this is a story of love, though as always, unorthodox love. This is a love across oppositions, a linking of variance and contradiction, a combining of the anthropoid and the bestial, an amalgamation of the factual and the fictional. All of these essentials are in their way ideational, as portrayed in this book non representational, and at the highest level nearly subversive in their push toward that which is unknown and unexperiancable in life. But as well it is very, very ebullient, very, very vital and very, very purposeful—forever that feral zoo at large in our seemingly sheltered existence, a living God head inhabiting what we thought was nothing more than our routine lives of "dry, yeastless factuality" (406). "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" (406). That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently," says Pi at one point in the narrative, but oh far he took us from that possibility.

In the very finest sense, one moving passage in the book sums up all Pi has learned (even more than his simple moving claim that "I turned to God. I survived" [417]). Long after his trip his over, he finds that he feels "a quickening of the moral sense, which strikes one as more important than an intellectual understanding of things; an alignment in the universe along moral lines, not intellectual ones; a realization that the founding principle of existence is what we call love, which works itself out sometimes not clearly, not cleanly, not immediately, nonetheless ineluctably" (85). Ah Pi, a teacher you are, of the highest order. And though you are lonely, heartbroken, abandoned by friends, subject to most grievous harm and hurt—wondrous, devout and hopeful you are as well. For providing guidance as you have provided, after crossing a topography of suffering which most of us would have simply given up hope on, we offer our heartfelt thanks. Andin light of the love you have constantly expressed through thick and thin in this narrative, we love you too, Pi.

REFERENCES


