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Article abstract

Rather than the Bengal tiger with whom he shares a lifeboat for 227 days, Pi Patel's true adversary in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* is doubt. Pi and his author-narrator align their conception of God with an idea of the work required to believe in narratives that surpass the limits of possibility. Neither Pi nor his author-narrator makes any distinction between the temporary suspension of disbelief and firm religious faith, between the acceptance of a believable story and the embrasure of an omniscient God. By dramatizing the anthropomorphic impulse, which finds expression primarily in response to doubt or disbelief, *Life of Pi* succeeds in conflating poetic and religious faith.

Believing in Tigers: Anthropomorphism and Incredulity in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

STEWART COLE

WHEN *LIFE OF PI*'S AUTHOR-NARRATOR meets Francis Adirubasamy in a Pondicherry coffee house, the latter tells him, "I have a story that will make you believe in God" (Martel ix). In phrasing his claim in this way, Mr. Adirubasamy assumes that the narrator does not already believe in God, an assumption that the narrator's response, "That's a tall order" (ix), seems to confirm. Thus the impact of Mr. Adirubasamy's story of Pi Patel at least partly depends upon the disbelief of his listener. Though it might seem absurd to infer from this that he would not even bother to tell the story to a listener whose belief in God was already firm, it does raise the question of how the story's appeal might be recast for a religious listener. It is important to note, however, that Mr. Adirubasamy is only the story's initial advocate, not its primary teller. Although he does provide "notes, the elements of the story" (x), it is "in [Pi's] voice and through his eyes" (xi) that the author-narrator tells the story, after meeting with him in Toronto for "nearly a year" (xi). It is after this time, upon receiving a tape and a report from the Japanese Ministry of Transport that, the narrator tells us, "I agreed with Mr. Adirubasamy that this was, indeed, a story to make you believe in God" (ix).

The author-narrator's profession of faith implies that he expects the story to exert a similar effect on his readers. And indeed, Yann Martel, the actual author of *Life of Pi*, is quoted as having described his novel as one "that will make you believe in God" (Wood 1). But a look at the report sent to the narrator by the Japanese Ministry of Transport (Martel 400-01) reveals not a single reference to God, faith, or any other religious matter. Its one revelation of belief comes in its barely apparent acquiescence to the veracity of Pi's ordeal in the lifeboat with the tiger Richard Parker, as it concedes in its final sentence that "very few castaways can

claim to have survived so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger" (401). It is mystifying that this could be the document to convince the narrator of the story's conversionary power. For not only does Mr. Okamoto's report contain no reference to God — much less any admission of belief in Him — it is by no means a categorical expression of belief in the truth of Pi's story. It merely acknowledges the uniqueness among castaways of Pi's "claim." If it concedes anything, it is that Pi's zoological odyssey is, when compared to the alternative tale of cannibalism and brutality he cobbles together to combat his questioners' doubts, "the better story" (398), a fact which the two Japanese interviewers have already admitted in person:

‘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?’

Mr. Okamoto: ‘That’s an interesting question ...’

Mr. Chiba: ‘The story with the animals.’

Mr. Okamoto: ‘Yes. The story with the animals is the better story.’

Pi Patel: ‘Thank you. And so it goes with God.’ (398-99)

This exchange implies a distinction between the unresolvable question of the story's truth and the more subjective question of its aesthetic value. Mr. Chiba and Mr. Okamoto merely concede that the story of Richard Parker is aesthetically preferable, without saying anything about its truth. On the matter of belief they have been previously quite clear, having told Pi “we don’t believe your story” (368), and nothing in the exchange that follows gives any firm indication that their stance has changed. So Pi’s statement that “so it goes with God” can refer only to God’s being “the better story,” not to His being true in any objective sense.

The critic James Wood, in an essay on *Life of Pi* for *The London Review of Books* entitled “Credulity,” notes how the novel conflates belief in story with belief in God, cautiously conceding that “it is indeed true that the way we believe in stories is similar to the way we believe in God (though there is an important difference between the idea that believing in God is like believing in a story and the idea that God is *only* a story)” (4). But in equating “the better story” with God, Pi risks distorting and trivializing the idea of an omniscient, omnipotent, infinitely objective Supreme Being by reducing the question of His existence to a matter of aesthetic preference. If God is true, He must be objectively so, or He is not God. So the willingness of the author-narrator to accept Mr. Okamoto’s report as evidence that Pi Patel’s story — and by extension, the

novel *Life of Pi* — will “make you believe in God” is problematic in failing to recognize the difference between believing in a story — that is, acknowledging its aesthetic impact — and believing in God. To conflate these two types of belief is to obliterate the important epistemological distinction between subjective and objective truth, a distinction which, though often derided in other contexts, is still crucial to discussions of religion.

English literature’s most vehement assertions of the truth inherent in aesthetic beauty come from the British Romantics; by the time John Keats’s urn famously proclaimed that “beauty is truth, truth beauty,” such ideas were already well embedded in the poetic rhetoric of the age. Two years before the publication of Keats’s odes, in his 1817 critical testament *Biographia Literaria*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge theorized how truth inheres even in depictions of the impossible. Reflecting on his contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads* jointly published with William Wordsworth in 1798, Coleridge explains that in veering from the strictly believable in his supernaturally inflected poems, he had hoped “to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of the imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” (322). Although generous in its assessment of literature’s affects upon its readers, Coleridge’s carefully worded formulation of “poetic faith” preserves the distinction between subjective and objective truth by acknowledging that only the “semblance of truth” inheres in works that surpass the limits of possibility. Furthermore, the credulity engendered in readers by such works is only “for the moment”; presumably the reader re-places herself within the bounds of the possible once the book is closed, returning to the basal state of “disbelief” from which she has temporarily been “suspended.”

Coleridge’s formulation — particularly the touchstone phrase “suspension of disbelief” — has proved enduring. In interviews with both *Books in Canada* and *Canadian Literature*, Yann Martel employs the phrase to link the operations of a novel to those of religion. “I think religion operates in the exact same way a novel operates,” says Martel: “For a good novel to work, you have to suspend your disbelief. [...] Exactly the same thing happens with religion. A good religion makes you suspend your disbelief” (Steinmetz 2). In both interviews Martel goes on to caution that to compare religion to fiction does not necessarily preclude the truth of either, though his conceptions of truth are opaquely subjective:

To say that religion operates like a novel, like fiction, in no way

means that religion doesn't speak truth. After all, to use truth as a yardstick by which to measure whether we should trust something is very limiting because we do not operate strictly along the lines of factual truth. Things are as we interpret them. Colour, for example, is an interpretation. (Steinmetz 2)

I think it's acceptable to say that God is a fiction, if you understand that this doesn't necessarily mean that this fiction doesn't exist. It just exists in a way that is only accessed through the imagination. (Sielke 25)

Though noble and seemingly sincere, Martel's attempts to recast religion's claim to truth in light of the postmodern era's distrust of objectivity fail to acknowledge that for religion's adherents, God is more than "an interpretation" or a fiction whose truth is "accessed through the imagination." For the devout, God transcends the subjectivity and transience of the reading experience. To say that religious belief involves suspension of disbelief implies a temporariness fundamentally at odds with the nature of faith. For the reader's experience of fiction, on the other hand, such temporariness is crucial. Norman N. Holland, in a recent reassessment of "suspension of disbelief" entitled "The Power(?) of Literature: A Neuropsychological View," notes how the experience of being rapt by fiction — be it film, theatre, or literature — is dependent upon our knowledge that what we are experiencing has no immediate empirical consequences in the world outside the work of art. This is because the parts of our brains responsible for bodily and environmental consciousness — the testing of reality — must be allowed to ignore all extraneous information in order for us to experience the sense of immersion we refer to as "suspension of disbelief." Our ventromesial frontal lobes — the parts of our brains in charge of emotional response — will continue to function as though the fiction were real, but only if we willingly cease to test reality. For fiction to exercise its full effects on us, we must of course find it compelling, but it is equally important that we remain inactive. As Holland puts it: "*Literature can have power over us only if it has no power.* That is, we will fall under the spell of the literary work only if we know we will not have to do something to or about it" (408). Because we can remain inactive only for very limited spans of time, our experience of "suspension of disbelief" while reading literature must thereby be limited. Religious faith, on the other hand, often takes the form of a lifetime commitment whereby disbelief is not only suspended, but entirely dispelled. Furthermore, the ethical imperatives religion places on its adherents demand that belief translate into action, while literature demands the op-

posite; as Holland notes, the reader's full enjoyment depends on feeling no imperative to act.

Despite its essential tenuousness, Martel's analogy does highlight an important similarity between fiction and religion: disbelief is anathema to both. I have already noted how *Life of Pi*, in claiming to be a story that "will make you believe in God," both presumes and to some extent depends upon the reader's initial disbelief in Him. This readerly disbelief is more explicitly analogized in the initial skepticism of the two Japanese interviewers when faced with the story of Pi's survival for 227 days in a lifeboat with the tiger Richard Parker. In its treatment of the two central motifs of God and animal — Pi's apparently incongruous double majors of religious studies and zoology — the novel dramatizes disbelief in order to suspend it. Central to this tensile movement is the concept of anthropomorphism, 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.¹

Early in the novel, Pi directly addresses the problem of "*Animalus Anthropomorphicus*, the animal as seen through human eyes," noting that in attributing human characteristics to animals "we look at an animal and see a mirror," and going on to bemoan that "the obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything is the bane not only of theologians but also of zoologists" (39). But religious scholar Stewart Elliott Guthrie, in his book-length examination of anthropomorphism entitled *Faces in the Clouds*, claims that rather than being a boon against the adoption of religious faith, anthropomorphism — or, "the obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything" — is the very foundation of religiosity. Guthrie's assertion that "religion may be best understood as systematic anthropomorphism" (1) is bolstered by the fact, widely accepted by psychologists, that human modes of perception arise out of a fundamental perceptual uncertainty which forces us to always be interpreting, rather than simply seeing, the phenomenal world. Beginning from this premise that all perception is interpretive — all seeing is seeing *as* — Guthrie goes on to claim that the attribution of human characteristics to the non-human is an often unconscious strategy by which humans attempt to gain the benefit of whatever significance the world has to offer. He repeatedly returns to the example of the hiker who spots a large shape just off the trail and immediately jumps to the conclusion that it is a bear, only to discover a few seconds later that it is in fact a boulder (45). Given ambiguity, humans will choose to perceive objects as animate until proven otherwise. This instinctual animism — "attributing life to the lifeless" (39) — finds

us not only grasping after every opportunity to engage with our fellow sentient beings, but also performs a survival function: were the hiker to see as a boulder what is in fact a bear, her misperception could prove fatal, while on the other hand, little is lost in briefly hallucinating the bear. Guthrie notes how such a strategy is analogous to Pascal's wager — whether God exists or not, we should believe in Him, for we suffer nothing by our wrong belief if He does not exist, while we gain an infinitude for our faith if He does (Pascal 157) — and claims that anthropomorphism, and thus religion, arise from a similar perceptual bet:

We do find apparent humans, and echoes and copies of humans, both in our immediate environments and in our ultimate conditions. Mailboxes appear as persons, plagues appear as messages, and order appears as design. Anthropomorphism by definition is mistaken, but it also is reasonable and inevitable. Choosing among interpretations of the world, we remain condemned to meaning, and the greatest meaning has a human face. (Guthrie 204)

The jubilation Pi feels upon emerging from the Muslim Mr. Kumar's bakery after an afternoon of prayer nicely exemplifies this link between anthropomorphism and meaning in a religious context. "I suddenly felt I was in heaven," he tells us, marvelling at the richness of his surroundings:

Whereas before the road, the sea, the trees, the air, the sun all spoke differently to me, now they spoke one language of unity. Tree took account of road, which was aware of air, which was mindful of sea, which shared things with sun. Every element lived in harmonious relation with its neighbour, and all was kith and kin. I knelt a mortal; I rose an immortal. I felt like the centre of a small circle coinciding with the centre of a much larger one. Atman met Allah. (78-79)

Pi here invokes "heaven" amidst earthly surroundings, attributes language and kinship to the various elements of those surroundings, and shows a willingness to place himself — prior protestations notwithstanding, and however coincidentally — "at the centre of everything," thus demonstrating that while he may oppose anthropomorphism as it applies to animals, he is willing to indulge in the fallacy as it applies to his surroundings while in the grip of religious exaltation. That this rampantly anthropomorphic passage is one of the book's most convincing evocations of Pi's religious fervour is no accident. The affective power of anthropomorphism in works of literature — as personification or, more cautiously, the pathetic

fallacy — has often been noted, from Coleridge's earnest hope to "transfer from our inward nature a human interest" (322) that would lend even the supernatural an emotive relevance and immediacy, to John Ruskin's initial coining and terse dismissal of "the pathetic fallacy" in poetry as "a falseness in our impressions of external things" (qtd. in Hecht 482), to Paul de Man's lukewarm endorsement of anthropomorphism as "the illusionary resuscitation of the natural breath of language" (247). But 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.

Given the prevalence of anthropomorphism as a strategy for combating perceptual uncertainty, disbelief or doubt, Pi's tendency to humanize the animals that surround him — despite the zoological knowledge that affords him insight into the drawbacks of such a tendency — takes on a special significance, especially in light of his apparently incongruous and excessive engagement with religion. Although he attempts to excuse having humanized the pheasants, baboons and other animals of the zoo "till they spoke fluent English" by claiming that "the fancy was always conscious" (42), Pi never entirely loses his youthful tendency to anthropomorphize. This is most obvious in his attitude to Richard Parker, the tiger with a human name, an anthropomorphic trope writ large. Though it might seem strange that a novel whose only direct comments on anthropomorphism are condemnatory should depend so heavily on it — to the extent of granting a tiger an honorary humanity to allow both narrator and reader a more convincing engagement with him — a careful reading reveals a much more fraught and ambiguous narrative relationship with the concept than Pi's vehement positioning suggests.

The first time we hear of Richard Parker, Pi laments: "I still cannot understand how he could abandon me so unceremoniously, without any sort of goodbye, without looking back even once" (7), an anthropomorphic misunderstanding that jars quite strikingly with Pi's aforementioned oration on the dangers of "*Animalus Anthropomorphicus*," which occurs only a little further on in the novel. But although Pi presumably sees quite clearly the fallacy in daring to attribute fellow feeling to a tiger, the reader is not explicitly told that Richard Parker is a tiger until much later, on

page 124, and so would not recognize the contradiction on first reading. Besides, the rhetorical importance of the passage far outweighs the logical contradiction it embodies, as the narrative impact of Richard Parker's appearance in the lifeboat as "a wet, trembling, half-drowned, heaving and coughing three-year-old adult Bengal tiger" (124) entirely depends on the reader having naturally assumed that Richard Parker is human. Or, put another way, given ambiguity, we assume Richard Parker is human because that is the most meaningful thing he could be; because, as Guthrie notes of our anthropomorphic impulse, "we look first for what matters most" (90). This is not to say that the revelation of Richard Parker's tiger-ness strips him of meaning. Not at all. Because by the time his biological status is clarified, he has already been sufficiently humanized for the reader to have placed him on a continuum with the novel's human characters. Although the believability of Pi's story depends on his detailed engagement with Richard Parker's tiger-ness — his account of how he kept him fed, watered, and obedient without getting killed — and although such passages convey a realism only meticulous zoological research can account for, much of Richard Parker's charm as a character subsists in his consistent humanization, a function his name subtly fulfills at every mention. And although Pi resists directly anthropomorphizing Richard Parker for most of the lifeboat journey, qualifying his statements with the verb *to seem* so as not to claim possession of an inaccessible knowledge — as in "Where's my treat?" his face seemed to inquire" (228) — he cannot avoid using human analogies to imbue Richard Parker with significance: in the space of a few pages, the tiger sports "formidable sideburns" and "a stylish goatee" (190); reveals his massive canine "coyly" (191); catches the rat in his maw "like a baseball into a catcher's mitt" (193); and settles in after feeding "the way you or I would look out from a restaurant table after a good meal, when the time has come for conversation and people-watching" (204-05). Pi's avoidance of unqualified anthropomorphisms through most of the long lifeboat section might convince us that he has, as he claims, learned from the tiger "the lesson that an animal is an animal, essentially and practically removed from us" (39). But at the end of the novel, while recounting their sad final parting, he takes up once again his anthropomorphic lament: "I was weeping because Richard Parker left me so unceremoniously. What a terrible thing it is to botch a farewell. I am a person who believes in form, in the harmony of order. Where we can, we must give things a meaningful shape" (360). Further on, Pi admits that "that bungled goodbye hurts me to this day" (360), an indication that though he may be

intellectually resolved to the unbridgeable distance between himself and Richard Parker — a distance so vast that not even 227 days in a lifeboat together could bring them to anything more than spatial closeness — the fact still stings him emotionally. Also worth noting is Pi's shift to the present tense: he "*believes* in form," and that "*we must* give things a meaningful shape," thus evincing that however his experiences with Richard Parker may have disabused him of any faith in the truth of anthropomorphism, he still implicitly acknowledges its necessity. Anthropomorphism, as characterized by Guthrie and others, is a perceptual strategy by which we attempt to glean the greatest meaning from the world around us. Though by definition mistaken, it is reasonable and often unavoidable. So Pi's appeal to meaning in the above passage is not surprising; Richard Parker's presence during his lifeboat ordeal provides him with another proximate being to infuse with significance, a fellow mammal with whom to share the months of endless horizon. Like all humans, Pi remains "condemned to meaning," is a meaning generator, so Richard Parker's presence allows Pi to exercise a fundamental aspect of his humanity. Conversely, it is difficult to imagine the animal characters in *Life of Pi* conveying much of anything if stripped of their imposed humanness.

I have so far noted that while Pi generally avoids directly anthropomorphizing Richard Parker during their lifeboat ordeal, he tends to indulge in the fallacy more openly at places in the narrative set explicitly before or after their odyssey. This is in the interest of realism; the meticulously detailed lifeboat section would suffer in believability were the narrator's more wildly fallacious anthropomorphisms to emerge too often. Gone therefore are such elaborate comparisons as that of three-toed sloths to "upside-down yogis deep in meditation or hermits deep in prayer" (5); or that of zoos to hotels with guests "either terribly repressed and subject to explosions of frenzied lasciviousness or openly depraved" (17); or that of the orangutan Orange Juice to the Virgin Mary, and the spiders that crawl around her to "malevolent worshippers" (139-40). Except for the comment that Richard Parker's "mix of ease and concentration" while swatting and swallowing flying fish out of the air "would be the envy of the highest yogis" (230), Pi's early proclivity for improbable comparisons is noticeably muted in the novel's long second part, with Richard Parker's name and a slew of indirectly humanizing analogies sufficing to carry the anthropomorphic conceit through to its re-emergence at the coda. That four of the five comparisons cited above have religious overtones also calls to notice how the religious content too is muted in the lifeboat section. Despite regular invocations of "Jesus, Mary, Mohammed and

Vishnu,” “God,” or “Allah,” and a single of the lifeboat’s 57 chapters devoted to religious rituals on board (chapter 74), references to Pi’s well-established religious fervour come mainly in passing. So remarkably slight is Pi’s engagement with religion during this section that when he claims, just before striking land, that “it was natural that, bereft and desperate as I was, in the throes of unremitting suffering, I should turn to God” (358), his piety rings a little false. At this point he has made no reference to God for thirty pages, none at all since first landing on the carnivorous island. James Wood points out that during the lifeboat section “we are not privy to any theological anguish or questioning,” and notes that in the “bland closure” of the above-cited passage, “it is not Pi’s theological conclusion — his religious fidelity — that puzzles so much as his oddly formulaic, empty method of reaching it” (4). But given Pi’s persistent conflation of aesthetic and religious belief, the absence of religious questioning during the lifeboat ordeal seems consistent. Neither Pi nor his author-narrator make any distinction between the temporary suspension of disbelief and firm religious faith, between the acceptance of a believable story and the embrasure of an omniscient God. From such a vantage point, the subjective aesthetic value of the lifeboat section — how it manages an intricate realism within an utterly implausible framework — effectively supplants objective religious truth. According to the worldview embodied in the novel, the religious aspects of the narrative do not simply fade to the background in part two, they are enacted: if we believe the story of Pi’s ordeal, we believe in God, however temporarily.

Despite their essential dissimilarity, God and story do share doubt as an adversary, and this commonality lies at the heart of Pi’s conflation of aesthetic and religious truth. Pi’s friendship with the biology teacher Mr. Kumar, “the first avowed atheist I ever met” (32), provides the occasion for Pi’s first musings on doubt. When Mr. Kumar characterizes the zoo as his “temple” (32), one might think such a devoutly religious lad as Pi would see heresy, but he makes no remark. Further on, when Mr. Kumar tells Pi that “religion is darkness” (34), rather than express his strongly felt disagreement, Pi tells us he “was more afraid that with a few words thrown out he [Mr. Kumar] might destroy something I loved” (35). Pi’s unconcern with openly defending or promoting his religious impulse, while understandable in the context of his relationship with a figure of authority like Mr. Kumar, still indicates a certain tenuousness in his faith, a fear of doubt’s virulence: “What if his words had the effect of polio on me? What a terrible disease it must be to kill God in a man” (35). His subsequent reflections on Mr. Kumar’s atheism reveal even

more strongly that doubt — not heathenry or heresy or godlessness — is Pi's true adversary:

It was my first clue that atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith, and every word they speak speaks of faith. Like me, they go as far as the legs of reason will carry them — and then they leap. I'll be honest about it. It's not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics. Doubt is useful for a while ... But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation. (35-36)

It seems strange that a person as religious as Pi, whose faith is rooted, we are later told, in a simple desire "to love God" (87), would favour atheists, who categorically deny the possibility of God's existence — as love or any other object — over agnostics, who simply admit that they cannot know. After all, an adherence to doubt — the positing that certain forms of knowledge are and will remain inaccessible to us — involves as much faith as the affirmation or denial of God's existence, since if humanity were to obtain knowledge formerly posited by the agnostic as inaccessible, her doubt could be proven misguided. But although Pi seems to see atheism as included in the statement he quotes from Gandhi that "all religions are true" (87), he does not accord agnosticism the same status. This hostility to doubt over even flat-out denial might be seen as evidence of what the novelist Pankaj Mishra characterizes as the "somewhat born again-ish theology" of Pi and his author: "It is as though God exists mostly in order to help, rather than complicate, the individual's lonely pursuit of happiness" (18). In other words, Pi sees faith in God primarily as armour against doubt, a viewpoint facilitated by his dual role as both religious believer and teller of fantastical tales. His second comparison of atheism and agnosticism makes it clear that Pi sees no distinction between the agnostic's doubt and the incredulity of the resistant reader:

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. (81)

Besides being a blatant misrepresentation of the atheist and agnostic positions — it is the atheist who tends to justify her faith through reason, while the agnostic's doubt is rooted in an acknowledgement of rationali-

ty's limitations — the above passage makes explicit Pi's persistent fallacious conflation of literary belief and religious faith. Again invoking God as "the better story," Pi trivializes religion by appealing to its aesthetic value without regard for its objective truth. For a person to "lack imagination" might very well make it difficult for her to embrace God, but not necessarily; many people, Pi included, come to religion as an inheritance, for which birth at a certain time and place is the only prerequisite. Imagination has little to do with it. The reader, on the other hand, with the help of the skilful author, must allow imagination to surmount her incredulity for at least as long as the book is open before her.

The potential inability of the reader to perform such an imaginative exertion — or her unwillingness to suspend her disbelief — is most explicitly dramatized in part three of the novel, as Mr. Chiba and Mr. Okamoto, the two interviewers sent by the Japanese government to investigate the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*, flatly tell Pi "we don't believe your story" (368). After enumerating the various aspects of Pi's story that they find "hard to believe" (377), they tell him that although they "liked" his story "very much," they would "like to know what really happened" (379-80). Significant here is the distinction between liking and believing a story, which Pi attempts to explode in the dialogue that follows:

'Doesn't the telling of something always become a story?'

'Uhh ... perhaps in English. In Japanese a story would have an element of *invention* in it. We don't want any invention. We want 'the straight facts,' as you say in English.'

'Isn't telling about something — using words, English or Japanese — already something of an invention? Isn't just looking upon this world already something of an invention?' (380)

Pi's appeal to the inventive aspect of all perception colludes nicely with Guthrie's assertion, via Wittgenstein and others, that all seeing is seeing *as* (Guthrie 42). That Guthrie uses the interpretive nature of perception as the foundation for his theory of religion as anthropomorphism can be related to Pi's story in a number of ways. First, given Guthrie's claim that religion arises from a perceptual strategy by which we contrive to alleviate our perpetual uncertainty — or doubt, or disbelief — by imparting the world with human qualities in order to perceive in it the greatest possible significance, both Pi's occasional anthropomorphizing of the animals that surround him and the subtle anthropomorphic trope of Richard Parker's name can be seen as strategies to impart these figures with the greatest possible meaning. Second, since anthropomorphic

thinking finds expression primarily in response to the unknowable — i.e., we attribute human characteristics to Gods, animals, and landscapes because, having no access to any subjectivity beyond our own, we have no other terms under which to give them meaning — there is a sense in which all our perceptions are fictional, because necessarily inventive, and so Pi's persistent conflation of religious and poetic faith is not so fallacious after all. In his essay "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense," Friedrich Nietzsche endorses such an extreme view of human perception. Because truth cannot but be expressed in language, and language is at its essence reductive and incapable of encapsulating the thing-in-itself, it follows that truth itself is, at best, aptly figurative: "What is truth? a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms" (250). For Nietzsche, all language and indeed all human thought are inherently anthropomorphic; in merely speaking of animals, in naming them, we impose a fraction of our humanity:

If I define the mammal and then after examining a camel declare, 'See, a mammal,' a truth is brought to light, but it is of limited value. I mean, it is anthropomorphic through and through and contains not a single point that would be 'true in itself,' real, and universally valid apart from man. The investigator into such truths is basically seeking just the metamorphosis of the world into man. (251)

Presumably the same would hold for God; our conceptions of Him are inherently anthropomorphic and therefore, to a certain extent, inherently subjective. So though it seems absurd to attempt to explain the religious outlook of a story that claims it "will make you believe in God" in light of the epistemological theories of a thinker most famous for declaring His death, Pi's peculiar faith seems to demand just such an approach. The alternative story he tells Mr. Chiba and Mr. Okamoto seems to acknowledge the anthropomorphic nature of truth in that its primary movement is to literally humanize the animal characters of his previous story. To counter the disbelief of his listeners, Pi emphasizes what Coleridge would call the "human interest" of the story, in the perhaps ironic hope of making it more meaningful to them. But when Mr. Chiba notices the correspondences between the animal characters of the original story and the human characters of the revised one — "And the hyena bit off the zebra's leg just as the cook cut off the sailor's" (392) — the obviousness of the anthropomorphic transferrals thus highlighted ultimately render the human story unbelievable. Mr. Chiba's reaction, "What a horrible story" (391), can be seen as both a visceral repulsion from the story's brutal violence and an aesthetic

judgement condemning its relative underdevelopment. In any case, it is clear that the story which includes Richard Parker is preferable not because it is necessarily true, but because it is, as Mr. Okamoto pronounces, “the better story” (398). It makes its appeal to human truth less overtly — though, as I have shown in my discussion of anthropomorphism above, no less rigorously — by inviting disbelief with fantastic premises so as to grant the imagination the pleasure of suspending it.

In his monumental study of the psychology of religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James emphasizes the essential subjectivity of religious faith in his characterization of religion as “a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism” (480). According to James, because the appeal of religion rests in the feeling that our personal concerns can be divinely met, each of us adapts God to suit our individual needs. Pi and his author-narrator show themselves to be no exception, rooting their conception of God in a defiance of doubt made all the more vehement by their roles as storytellers. *Life of Pi* demonstrates — by dramatizing and employing anthropomorphisms, and by refusing to distinguish poetic from religious faith — how the human thirst for meaning demands that we see ourselves everywhere. Denying God His objectivity, the novel engages with belief by constantly battling with its opposite, finally concluding that because we faithful are temporary, the objects of our faith cannot be permanent. Like the storyteller, God will survive only as long as we see ourselves in Him; when the story ceases to feature us, He will disappear.

NOTE

¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary* marks the first usage of the word “anthropomorphism” as having occurred in 1753 in reference to “ascription of a human form and attributes to the Deity.” It was not until 1858 that usage expanded to include the “ascription of a human attribute of personality to anything impersonal or irrational,” most commonly in discussing the animal kingdom. The first instance of this expanded usage referred to the anthropomorphism of ascribing ‘vision’ to molluscs.

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