

# Frames, the Fantastic and Allegory: Narrating Trauma in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

By



Colleen Mill

Dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER  
OF ARTS (ENGLISH) in the Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg.

Supervisor: Professor Karen Scherzinger

Date: 30 May 2012

# Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: “Words scratched on a page” – the Paradox of Narrating Trauma	10
Chapter Two: The Bamboozling Narrative of <i>Life of Pi</i>	42
Chapter Three: The Function of the Fantastic in Narrating Traumatic Stories	70
Chapter Four: Allegory in <i>Life of Pi</i>	87
Conclusion	104
Bibliography	115



## Acknowledgments

This dissertation is dedicated to the love of my life, my husband, closest friend and most faithful supporter, Brett, who put me through university and who inspired this essay in 2002 when he gave me a book entitled *Life of Pi*, which he was certain I would love because of the animals on the cover. Thank you for everything.

I did love reading the book and when I met my supervisor, Professor Karen Scherzinger, I learned that she did too. It is because of her expert guidance that this essay has finally been written. During my Honours year her kind encouragement steered me towards Masters and these last few years her drive propelled me to the finish line.

My preoccupation with trauma and how it could or should be represented began long before my studies, engagement with trauma theory and obsession with *Life of Pi*. The seemingly endless, wonderful and painful hours spent with my dear friend and Holocaust survivor David taught me so much about stories of pain. Thank you for sharing your stories and vast knowledge with me.

The comfort and absolutely unwavering support provided by my amazing parents can never be overstated. They nurtured my love of books and for this, and much else, I am grateful. The rest of my dear family members also deserve my gratitude. They tolerated my constant absenteeism with understanding and when I did happen to show up they bore the burden that is Masters with me.

My friends, too, have put up with me as I crawled my way through these last few years and their constant cheerleading got me through some very difficult patches.

Another heartfelt thank you must go to two loyal companions and sanity preservers (who happen to be of the canine persuasion) who devotedly lay at my feet as each and every word of this essay was typed, and re-typed.

## Abstract

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* takes as its focal point a deeply traumatic event that befalls its main protagonist, Pi Patel. One effect of Pi's traumatic experience is that it hinders his ability fully to communicate the scope and detail of his suffering. This dissertation seeks to show how, through a deftly woven, framed narrative, the use of the mode of the fantastic and an ambiguous allegory, the novel works creatively to confront the difficulties inherent in the representation of Pi's trauma. The central tenets of trauma theory offer illuminating perspectives from which to examine the manifestation of trauma in this novel. The framed narrative, when considered within the context of Jacques Derrida's description of the performance of the frame in *The Truth in Painting*, is a performance that suggests possibilities for the figurative representation of Pi's trauma. The framed narrative engenders a profound sense of ambiguity within the text, which is necessary for the fantastic to function. The fantastic, in this novel, resonates with the experience of trauma and displays significant potential in the saying of the unsaid. Ambiguity also permeates the double narrative presented toward the close of the narrative. The double narrative is an allegory, but not a straightforward one and its unorthodox implementation is best understood in the context of the deconstructive possibilities of allegory as delineated by Paul de Man.



## Introduction

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* takes as its focal point a deeply traumatic event that befalls its main protagonist, Pi Patel. One effect of Pi's traumatic experience is that it hinders his ability fully to communicate the scope and detail of his suffering. The novel treads most delicately around the dark shadow that this trauma inevitably casts upon his psyche; the narrative works creatively to confront the difficulties inherent in the representation of Pi's trauma. In his seminal essay on the relationship between literature and trauma, Geoffrey Hartman argues that "the disjunction between experiencing (phenomenal or empirical) and understanding (thoughtful naming, in which words replace things, or their images), is what figurative language expresses or explores" (539). Taking my cue from Hartman, I intend to demonstrate how the framed narrative structure of *Life of Pi*, the incorporation of the mode of the fantastic and the creative use of allegory present the possibility, however provisional, of negotiating the deep chasm between experience and understanding that trauma induces.

Roger Luckhurst's definition of trauma in his essay "Mixing Memory and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Psychology, and Trauma Theory" informs my analysis of how Pi's trauma manifests in the narrative of *Life of Pi*. Luckhurst describes trauma as "something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes". The "unprecedented" and "overwhelming" (2006: 499) qualities of traumatic experiences and how they may be represented in narrative are a central preoccupation in Martel's work. Martel's fictions have at least one aspect in common: They all take as their subject matter profoundly traumatic events. *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, his first collection of short stories, is concerned with themes of terminal illness and death. Martel's first novel, *Self*, chronicles the life of a young, nameless protagonist who experiences the loss of both parents and who also survives a brutally violent rape. In *Beatrice and Virgil*, his most recently-published novel, Martel grapples with arguably one of the most iniquitous traumas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Holocaust. In this novel, Martel develops his controversial opinion that the Holocaust is overly and detrimentally historicised to the point that nobody "really wants to talk

about the Holocaust except out of weary duty". "Considering the staggering magnitude of the event", says Martel, "it is astonishing how little public discourse we hear about it".<sup>1</sup> As in *Life of Pi*, *Beatrice and Virgil* features animals in the narrative. Of his return to animals Martel comments that they "allow [him] to speak indirectly about something that's hard to talk about directly: namely, the Holocaust" (2003).

While all Martel's texts have in common a central traumatic episode around which the narratives are structured, it could be argued that *Life of Pi*, which won the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2002, engages most thoroughly with the question of how trauma may, or may not, be narrated. As the title suggests, *Life of Pi* narrates the story of Pi, a precocious young Indian boy who lives to tell of his dramatic escape from death after a shipwreck (in which his entire family perishes) and a 227-day bout on a lifeboat with a tiger. The traumatic aftermath of the ship's sinking is the novel's main preoccupation; however, the narrative initially focuses on Pi's early life in Pondicherry, India. Pi, the younger of two sons, grows up surrounded by animals that inhabit their family-run zoo. We learn of his deep love for (and extensive knowledge of) animals, as well as his entertainingly eccentric religious affiliations (he considers himself to be, simultaneously, a devout Hindu, Muslim and Christian). Pi's parents make the fateful decision to immigrate to Canada and they embark on a sea voyage along with many of their animals, which are destined for the zoo they intend to run in their new home. When their ship suddenly sinks with "a monstrous metallic burp" (Martel 2002: 303)<sup>2</sup>, the two apparently unrelated aspects of Pi's life that the novel has focused on thus far – religion and animals – are thrust together to become Pi's only, and unexpected, lifelines. Pi finds himself stranded on a lifeboat with a very peculiar combination of animals: A zebra, an orangutan, a hyena, and a magnificent, formidable tiger named Richard Parker.

---

<sup>1</sup> Martel's argument concerning the dearth of creative engagement with the Holocaust in literature has earned him harsh criticism. In a review in the *New York Times*, entitled "From 'Life of Pi' Author, Stuffed-animal Allegory about Holocaust", Michiko Kakutani describes *Beatrice and Virgil* as "misconceived and offensive" (2010). In a similar vein, Ron Charles suggests, in *The Washington Post*, that *Beatrice and Virgil* provides "a convincing example of the perils of Holocaust creativity" (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referenced as (*LP*).

The final section of the novel details how Pi and Richard Parker, on the brink of death, finally reach the shores of Mexico. The last few pages of the novel perform a radical retrospective by introducing an irresolvable riddle, which puts forward an allegorical alternative to the events thus far described. The novel parallels the two stories in the allegory in such a way as to both encourage readers to choose which account to believe, and simultaneously to thwart them from doing so, creating a hermeneutical impasse.

If we are left in a state of suspension and doubt by the end of the novel, of one thing we can be clear; Pi's trauma is considerable and complex. It involves not only the dramatic sinking of the ship, but also the sudden loss of his entire family, the guilt of his own survival, the physical brutality of the elements to which he is mercilessly subjected and the deep psychological impact of floating helplessly in a seemingly endless ocean. Pi also faces the horrifying possibility that he may never be rescued and the added danger of having to survive alongside a ferocious, hungry and capable predator. These traumatic events provide the centre around which the narrative of the novel revolves. An understanding of the effects of trauma and the problematics of its representation is fundamental to an articulation of the ways in which the novel confronts the difficulty of representing Pi's trauma. Trauma theory is interested in "the relationship of words and trauma" (Hartman 537) and for this reason it offers an appropriate theoretical framework within which to consider how *Life of Pi* attempts to put into words Pi's apparently unspeakable traumatic experience.

In *The Trauma Question* Luckhurst undertakes the task of making "sense of the divergent resources that have been knotted into the concept of trauma across its peculiarly disrupted, discontinuous history" (2008: 15). He begins with the origins of the word "trauma" noting that it "derives from the Greek word meaning wound. First used in English in the seventeenth century in medicine, it referred to a bodily injury caused by an external agent". He also draws our attention to early editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, noting how "entries for trauma, traumatic, traumatism and the prefix traumato – cite solely from sources concerning physical wounds" (2008: 2). However, Luckhurst points out how this association of trauma with a physical wound

has shifted quite radically in recent years, so much so that, in more recent editions, the OED's "citations to physical wounds are reduced to three and are substantially outnumbered by those from psychoanalysis and psychiatry". In fact, the "popular connotations of trauma now circle around metaphors of psychic scars and mental wounds" (2008: 3). The term "trauma" has clearly evolved significantly and continues to accrue nuanced meanings. The study of trauma and its effects is evident and ongoing in "deconstruction and post-structuralist philosophy", "sociological theories", studies on "brain physiology", as well as those on "cognitive behavioural therapy" (2008: 4). Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane point out in their essay "The Black Hole of Trauma" that to be subjected to trauma of some kind "is an essential part of being human"; after all, "history is written in blood" (3). They credit the recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the 1980s as a formal diagnosis for facilitating an "organized framework for understanding how people's biology, conceptions of the world, and personalities are inextricably intertwined and shaped by experience". While PTSD "opened a door to the scientific investigations of the nature of human suffering" (4), Anne Whitehead, in *Trauma Fiction*, comments that this development in the field of psychiatry also prompted the emergence of trauma theory in the 1990s which "sought to elaborate on the cultural and ethical implications of trauma" (4).

I am cognisant of the fact that trauma theory develops around actual, historical and documented traumas that have caused, and continue to cause, very real suffering. Yet, as Whitehead points out, trauma theory itself, perhaps inevitably, "has been reflected in contemporary fiction" (3). While Whitehead focuses on these reflections in various fictional examples, I hope to analyse specifically how *Life of Pi* demonstrates the manner in which the inescapable difficulties of representing trauma may be approached and even challenged. To this end I rely on many of the groundbreaking developments in trauma theory that emerged during the 1990s from the Yale scholars who, years earlier, worked alongside Paul de Man and whose ideas inform some of the basic tenets of trauma theory, namely Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth. Hartman's "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies" provides important suggestions regarding the role of literature in representations of trauma. Felman's landmark partnership with Dori Laub in



*Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* is a central trauma text.<sup>3</sup> Luckhurst recognises Felman and Laub's important work as the one which "headed the boom in the transformation of Yale deconstruction into trauma theory which then travelled across literary and cultural studies" (2008: 8). Their collaborative book considers, among other topics, the complex role of the listener and what the implications of listening or bearing witness to trauma may be. Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* also reflects on the complicated and significant position of the listener and how being witness to another person's trauma carries certain responsibilities and even risks. Furthermore, Caruth addresses the inherent complications of memory and the question of authenticity when it comes to remembering a traumatic moment in particular.

Much of Sigmund Freud's work forms the basis of these theorists' positions and in this dissertation, accordingly, I refer to his argument in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" for an understanding of how traumatic events come to haunt victims of trauma in the form of the compulsion repeatedly to re-enact aspects of trauma. For a broader overview of trauma theory I refer, throughout this dissertation, to Luckhurst, whose summary "Mixing Memory and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Psychology, and Trauma Theory" provides useful working definitions of trauma theory and the effects of trauma.<sup>4</sup>

Most trauma theorists agree that trauma "comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation". But, if this is the case, "how then can it be narrativised in fiction?" (Whitehead 3). This question presents a paradox; indeed, for Hartman, traumatic "knowledge, then, would seem to be a contradiction in terms". Yet Hartman also explains that trauma theory "introduces a psychoanalytic skepticism [...] which does not give up on knowledge but suggests the existence of a traumatic kind, one that cannot be made entirely conscious, in the sense of being fully retrieved or communicated without distortion"

---

<sup>3</sup> Laub is a psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor (Laub 1992: 75).

<sup>4</sup> Luckhurst's summary "Mixing Memory and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Psychology, and Trauma Theory" receives more extended elaboration in his full-length study *The Trauma Question*, to which I also refer in this dissertation.

(537). What I intend to explore in this dissertation is how *Life of Pi* takes as its subject that which “resists language or representation” (Whitehead 3) and how – instead of resisting the inevitable consequence of “distortion” (Hartman 537) – the narrative creatively works within that very distortion to gesture obliquely towards Pi’s suffering. Trauma theory provides my central theoretical foundation. In addition, other theoretical preoccupations also inform my discussion, and will be introduced briefly in the following summary of the contents of this dissertation’s chapters.

The first part of the opening chapter focuses on the multifaceted field of study known as “trauma theory”. Trauma theory endeavours to understand the effects of trauma (particularly how trauma provokes the competing needs on the part of the victim both to forget and to remember) and it grapples with the question of how to represent an event that resists cohesive, coherent description. After broadly outlining the development of trauma theory and discussing the particular theorists within this paradigm whose work informs the conception of trauma as it is defined in this dissertation, I return to *Life of Pi* to examine how trauma is represented in this novel. This examination is performed, at least in part, by comparing Pi’s way of representing his trauma with that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. Pi and the Mariner share a similar compulsion to narrate their trauma and a comparison of their attempts at representation reveals uncanny and illuminating similarities. The chapter goes on to discuss how Pi works hard to manage the repetition of his traumatic moment and what the role of the listener in this difficult process may be. The inevitable complications surrounding memory and the repetition of traumas of the past are also referred to in the closing section of the chapter.

After considering, fairly broadly, the role of fiction in representing trauma in Chapter One, in Chapter Two I examine how this possibility unfolds in the narrative of *Life of Pi*. Here I seek to identify and dissect the densely enmeshed framed narratives that surround Pi’s story and discuss how they may be viewed as a metafictional strategy. I consider the framing narratives in *Life of Pi* within the context of Jacques Derrida’s description in *The Truth in Painting* of the performance of the frame. In doing so, I demonstrate how the narrative frames that structure the novel hesitate to ascribe

origin, test the distinctions between fact and story and in so doing, suggest possibilities for the figurative representation of trauma. While each frame brings a different quality to Pi's story, their combined effect is to present a self-reflexive challenge to the difficulty of representing Pi's trauma.

The first narrative frame in the novel sows confusion from the outset. In the guise of the putative author in the "Author's Note", the narrator seamlessly steps in and commences the narrative of the novel by introducing the mysterious Mr.

Adirubasamy, whose narrative is characterised by suggestions of the spiritual and ephemeral. Mr. Adirubasamy claims that Pi's story is one that "*will make you believe in God*" (LP x) and, in so doing, he introduces into the novel the theme of faith (which is developed in Pi's own belief systems).<sup>5</sup> In this context, I turn once more to Coleridge, this time to his commentary and philosophy on engaging with poetry in *Lyrical Ballads*. The next narrative frame that this chapter unpacks is that of Pi himself. Pi's narrative is inextricably linked with that of the narrator's, whose interjections interrupt Pi's account, at least in its preliminary stages. Pi shares Mr. Adirubasamy's views regarding the importance of faith and his narrative demonstrates the arbitrary nature of representations in general, especially in the instance of Pi's peculiar name. The narrator's frame undergoes a shift whereby he comes to represent the role of the listener – a position that I assess in terms of Laub's work in this respect. The final narrative frame constitutes the double narrative that comes to define the novel as a whole and is discussed in terms of the proposition it poses to readers when it both encourages and precludes a choice between the two stories (the function of this double narrative is taken up again and more thoroughly assessed in the final chapter of the dissertation). The narrative frames in general may be interpreted as not simply the means through which the story is conveyed to the reader, but also as a performance that in itself demonstrates at once the impossibility of unequivocally representing Pi's traumatic tale, whilst providing a cathartic, if oblique, glimpse of it.

---

<sup>5</sup> All italics throughout this dissertation are in the original unless otherwise stated.

The analysis of the framed narratives in Chapter Two, uncovers an ambiguity that informs the novel as a whole. The effect of this sustained ambiguity is that it allows the mode of the fantastic to operate in the narrative. In Chapter Three I provide a brief overview of the fantastic as defined by structuralist Tzvetan Todorov as well as in the work of Rosemary Jackson (whose own theory of the fantastic develops from Todorov's). The function of the fantastic as outlined by both these scholars is then shown to be at work in *Life of Pi*. I begin by tracing how ambiguity is initiated into and then sustained within the narrative. The section in the novel that describes how Pi and Richard Parker come across a floating island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean is viewed as an especially vivid manifestation of the fantastic. One definition of the fantastic is that it "traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" (Jackson 4). Inasmuch as this definition resonates with the experience of trauma, I contend that the fantastic is a narrative mode that has significant potential in the saying of the unsaid.

The ambiguities uncovered in Chapter Two, which are discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Three, are sustained in my discussion of allegory, which is the main preoccupation of the final chapter of this dissertation. One way of understanding Pi's presentation of two stories is to view it as being an uncomplicated allegory. However, in this chapter I argue that, within this seemingly simple allegory, there resides a profound and irresolvable ambiguity that undermines any consistent correlation between the stories. The ambiguous performance of the novel's final allegory is an important strategy in the narrative which has repercussions for how Pi's trauma is represented. The approach in this chapter is first, to identify the precise parameters of the novel's allegory, then to consider two very different definitions of what allegory is and how it works. After establishing how and why M.H. Abrams's well-known definition of allegory fails to account for the manner in which the device is employed in *Life of Pi*, I turn to de Man's account of the deconstructive behaviour of allegory as argued in his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality". Considering the allegory from de Man's position reveals it to function in similar ways to the fantastic in the novel.

Martel's *Life of Pi* considers the possibility of representing trauma in diverse ways. The content of the story and the climax of the plot revolve around Pi's trauma of

being shipwrecked, losing his family, being stranded on a lifeboat with a menagerie of animals and his seemingly paradoxical compulsion to revisit this trauma, as aversive as he may be to do so. Very few scholarly assessments of this novel have been undertaken. Most available material is in the form of book reviews. The paucity of sustained critical attention to *Life of Pi* in itself suggests that a study such as this one may be both original and timely. The aim of analysing Pi's trauma, the novel's framed narrative, the fantastic and the use of a complex allegory is to seek to contribute to considerations of how specific strategies in the imaginative re-telling of traumatic events may come to express, even if only partially, and represent, even if only obliquely, traumatic events that apparently defy representation.



## Chapter One

### “Words scratched on a page” – the Paradox of Narrating Trauma

I kept a diary. 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. I started it a week or so after the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*. Before that I was too busy and scattered. The entries are not dated or numbered. What strikes me now is how time is captured. Several days, several weeks, all on one page. 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.

(LP 208)

Pi's diary is “hard to read” for numerous reasons, the most salient being that it is fraught with contradictions that adumbrate his suffering without precisely capturing it. To begin with, “words scratched on a page” fail to capture the extent of a “reality that overwhelmed” him, as their focus is directed at the “very practical stuff” that forms the diary's contents. Despite this focus on the mundane, Pi claims that in the diary he talks about “how [he] felt”, a comment that seems to suggest an expression of more than the simply “practical”. These diary entries are also neither “dated [n]or numbered”, and the absence of a measure for time not only frustrates and complicates the very notion of a diary as record, but it also deprives it of its temporal anchor. The suggestion that time is something that needs to be “captured” hints, perhaps, that without a temporal anchor time takes on a savage quality making it unpredictable and difficult for Pi to control and gauge. Astonishingly, despite this disconnection from time, he still manages to fit “[s]everal days, several weeks, *all on one page*” (emphasis added), a distillation so dramatic it is scarcely conceivable and even Pi, as an adult, marvels about it in retrospect. Much of Pi's story is absent from the diary because his “busy and scattered” mind is constantly absorbed with survival. Pi's brutal reality seems to preclude the possibility of a comprehensive testimony.

The repeated counterbalance of contradictory notions that characterises this passage suggests a context of representational impossibility for Pi. He has a physical account of his suffering that records, at once, everything and nothing

regarding his experience. This paradoxical description of Pi's diary elucidates, above all, the plethora of problems inherent in representing trauma. He clearly sought to document his experience and despite being necessarily preoccupied with survival, he still, surprisingly, feared that a shortage of paper would render his story unrecorded, and thus unremembered, untold. Ironically, Pi's limited paper documents everything *but* the trauma. Trauma then, the very object he desired to safeguard in the form of a diary, now exists outside of his writing and in his memory only. Memory, frustratingly fraught with pitfalls and bound as it is to the fragility of the human psyche, remains an unreliable and inconsistent source. Steven Rose, contributing writer to *Memory: An Anthology* and scientific researcher of the mechanics of memory, explains that "memory is capricious. Some things come spilling from the memory unwanted, whilst others are forthcoming only after a delay" (55). This would explain why Pi's limited diary, written during his traumatic ordeal, stands in such stark contrast to the more expansive novel, which in its belatedness provides Pi's memory with a platform for expansion that does not require "several days, several weeks" to fit "all on one page" (LP 208). Furthermore, Pi calls attention to the unstable nature of memory when he admits that his memories "come in a jumble" and that he is unsure of whether he can "put them in order" (192). Pi's diary consequently falls short of capturing the extent of his suffering. He paradoxically uses the word "capture" twice in describing the diary that records largely the "practical stuff" of his time on the lifeboat. The first instance refers to capturing reality and the second to time – neither of which he actually records. The use of the word "capture" (208) also suggests that the immeasurable qualities of time and reality are like untamed and untameable beasts. This allusion dramatically emphasises the apparent impossibility and futility of keeping an accurate record of the event.

The example of Pi's diary, in spite of its stated purpose, underscores his powerlessness to document and order his own suffering. Pi's inability to record his ordeal points to a broader concern regarding trauma evident in many modes of representation, both fiction and non-fiction, and it invites the question: If trauma proves to be such a persistently elusive subject, how then can it be represented, and to what extent can one adequately perceive another's traumatic experience through this representation? The complex and apparently futile aspiration to represent

traumatic events has contributed to the development of a field of study known as “trauma theory”. It is to this that I initially turn my attention in the beginning of this chapter. After broadly outlining the development of trauma theory and discussing the particular theorists within this paradigm whose work informs the conception of trauma as it is defined in this dissertation, I return to *Life of Pi* to examine how trauma is represented in this novel. This examination is performed, at least in part, by comparing Pi’s way of representing his trauma with that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. Furthermore, this chapter discusses how Pi manages the repetition of his traumatic moment and what the role of the listener/observer in this process may be. Reference is also made to the difficulty of using memory in the excruciating repetition of past traumas. Finally, in the closing section of the chapter, I look at what role fiction may or may not play in representations of trauma and how *Life of Pi* artfully demonstrates these possibilities.

Discussions of trauma have developed around representations of real trauma suffered by real people. Many trauma theorists, such as Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, take testimonies of the Jewish Holocaust as their subject. Martel’s *Life of Pi* is clearly fictional and while I do not wish to suggest that there is an unproblematic equivalence between real trauma and a traumatic event invented in a novel, it will be the objective of this dissertation to seek to show how the oblique strategies of story-telling enable a telling, however provisional, of the often untellable.

In the discussion that follows, I shall be referring in particular to the work of Roger Luckhurst.<sup>6</sup> Luckhurst, a professor in Modern and Contemporary Literature at

---

<sup>6</sup> Two articles by Luckhurst that are not pertinent to this dissertation, yet nonetheless provide interesting perspectives of trauma and trauma theory are “Traumaculture” (2003) and “Beyond Trauma: Torturous Times” (2010). In “Traumaculture”, Luckhurst suggests that a “new kind of articulation of subjectivity emerged in the 1990s organised around the concept of trauma” through a “conjuncture of discourses across a variety of professional, political and cultural sources that locked a powerful account of selfhood into place in this decade” (2003: 28). In “Beyond Trauma: Torturous Times” he applies trauma theory in an altogether more radical and contemporary manner to consider, among other things, “whether the ‘trauma paradigm’ that has emerged in cultural theory is adequate to examine one of the most urgent political questions of our time: the question of state-sanctioned torture in the wake of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal” (2010: 11).



Birkbeck University of London, has written regularly on trauma theory over the past decade. Luckhurst contributed to Patricia Waugh's *Literary Theory and Criticism* in 2006, a chapter entitled "Mixing Memory and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Psychology, and Trauma Theory" that provides a comprehensive synopsis of the overlapping areas that have converged to form the heterogeneous set of theories now collectively known as "trauma theory". In his chapter, Luckhurst provides useful definitions of trauma and traces the origins of how the theory has evolved. Before outlining the critical paradigm of what has come to be termed "trauma theory", I turn first to a brief discussion of the development of the term "trauma" and how understandings of the term have altered over time.

In "Mixing Memory and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Psychology, and Trauma Theory" Luckhurst traces the evolution of the meaning of "trauma" and as he does so it becomes clear that this trajectory informs the foundations of discussions that take trauma as their subject. The understanding of what "trauma" means has changed as the understanding of psychology has developed. Initially, the term referred primarily to physical injury. The shift in meaning "from the physical to the psychical wound took place over the course of the latter half of the nineteenth century". Luckhurst attributes this development to the emerging mental sciences and "Victorian modernity" (2006: 498). Sigmund Freud's and Joseph Breuer's early writings helped formulate new ways of understanding psychical trauma.<sup>7</sup> In their groundbreaking essay "On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena", written in 1893, they suggest that it is less the traumatic event and more the memory of it that causes traumatic symptoms (2006: 499). According to Luckhurst, their view of psychical trauma is

something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by the usual mental processes. We have, as it were, nowhere to put it, and so it falls out of our conscious memory, yet is still present in the mind like an intruder or ghost.

(2006: 499)

---

<sup>7</sup> I am aware that the adjective "psychical" has strong connotations implied by its root word "psychic", but I use it here in its less common form to mean "connected with the mind rather than the body" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*).

This description of trauma as something that evades assimilation and that is present in the mind, yet not available in “conscious memory”, is an example of how the term, in its journey from signifying the physical to representing a psychological wound, becomes ever more slippery and difficult to define in absolute terms. It seems to follow the behaviour of trauma itself by evading assimilation. While this shift from physical to psychological understandings of trauma was being established, psychological trauma was still linked to physical trauma – the latter was thought of as the origin of the former.

The topic of the supposed physical origin of psychological trauma develops alongside the evolution of the word “trauma” in general. Luckhurst retrospectively groups the development of the understanding of the origin of trauma into two models. The first model expands from Freud’s controversial lecture “The Aetiology of Hysteria”, which severed ties between him and Breuer. In this lecture, Freud speculates as to “what events carried sufficient force to produce psychological trauma”. Freud suggests “that the traumatic responses to other events, later in life and unrelated to the sexual sphere, [are] likely to be the product of a predisposition to be psychologically wounded that ha[s] resulted from sexual events in childhood” (in Luckhurst 2006: 499). The particulars of Freud’s association of psychological trauma with childhood sexual events are not relevant to this dissertation. What they do indicate, however, is that as late as the end of the nineteenth century, psychological trauma was still stubbornly associated with physical origins.

The second model that Luckhurst suggests for the development of the understanding of the origin of trauma moves away from the connection to sexuality and re-evaluates the notion that all psychological traumas always have physical injury as their root. It was not until the early twentieth century that this relationship was challenged. Luckhurst explains that the

precipitating cause for this renewed consideration was World War I, which had forced military and medical authorities to confront a new form of psychological wounding: shell-shock. Notoriously, soldiers without obvious bodily injury yet who broke down were treated by the Army as malingerers or deserters, indicating how ideas of trauma still privileged the physical over the psychological in the 1914-18 War. Yet many doctors began to recognize the profound psychological damage

inflicted by trench conditions. These men not only suffered memory gaps, but also repeatedly re-experienced extreme events in flashbacks, nightmares, and hallucinations months or even years afterwards.

(2006: 500)

It is the aftermath of World War I and the side effects suffered by soldiers who fought in it that altered the meaning of trauma. Consequently, the understanding of trauma in a more contemporary context is no longer limited to a physical origin. Indeed, for Freud, “the fact that the same symptoms sometimes came about without the intervention of any gross mechanical force seemed at once enlightening and bewildering” (12). Freud’s comment recaptures (for the contemporary reader for whom these ideas might often seem obvious) the profound sense of wonder that accompanied the sudden insight that trauma can exist independent of physical injury – a sobering reminder of how indebted we are to collective knowledge. It is both collective knowledge (such as the symptoms mentioned in the above passage, which we now automatically associate with trauma), as well as that which we still do not know about trauma (its more obscure effects and how best to represent these) that concerns contemporary discussions of trauma.

The broad critical paradigm known as “trauma theory” is an amalgamation of various analyses of the nature of trauma.<sup>8</sup> The term “trauma theory” took foothold the 1990s and it represents investigations that focus on “psychological, philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic questions about the nature and representation of traumatic events”. Jacques Derrida’s practice of deconstruction has been a strong influence “redirect[ing] its concerns with reference, representation and the limits of knowledge to the problem of trauma”. Theorists who take trauma as a subject are also deeply indebted to Feminism and New Historicism. Feminism provides a “model of community for speaking out about forms of physical and sexual abuse”, while New Historicism, “fascinated by the ideological omissions and repressions of historical

---

<sup>8</sup> In “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies”, Hartman provides an extensive bibliographical note, the length of which indicates the varied field that trauma theory was becoming at the time of his writing. He lists the basic texts of trauma theory (including Freud’s and Felman’s) and then goes on to categorise the diverse directions that trauma theory was taking, including developments in literary studies, literary history, legal studies, testimony and even the application of “trauma theory to public health matters” (47).

narrative, develop[s] a mode of dissident or countervailing recovery of what ha[s] been silenced or lost in traditional literary histories” (Luckhurst 2006: 497).

Contemporary scholars, whose texts draw on these broad fields, continue to shape how we understand trauma and analyse how it is represented.<sup>9</sup> They include, among many others, Felman, Laub, Hartman, and Caruth. Beginning with Freud, whose work is a precursor to much of what trauma theorists discuss, I shall review the main concerns of trauma theory. In my movement toward more current contributors, I will expound my own position within this theory in terms of analysing trauma in *Life of Pi*.

In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, Freud posits that in psychoanalysis it is assumed that mental events are strongly influenced by the pleasure principle. In the event of “unpleasurable tension”, the subject “takes a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension – that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure” (7). But this principle does not govern supremely. The reality principle, as the exception to the pleasure principle, is the postponement of satisfaction from pleasure when necessary “as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure” (10).

The pleasure and reality principles account for most decisions that people make; however, they do not account for behaviour that seems to seek discomfort – a digression that defies the logic of the pleasure principle. Freud encountered an example of such a deviation when he witnessed a young boy who repeatedly re-enacted, through play, the unpleasant experience of his mother leaving his

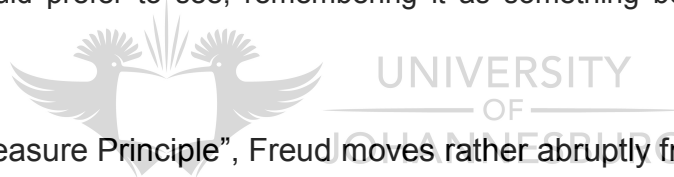
---

<sup>9</sup> PTSD is an important part of trauma studies. For van der Kolk and McFarlane (authors of *Psychological Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*), the “recognition of PTSD as a legitimate psychiatric diagnosis has led to an explosion of scientific studies that have systematically examined many notions and popular prejudices about the effects of trauma” (4). While this area of trauma studies may offer insights into the nature of traumatic experience, I do not wish to go so far as to suggest that Pi suffers from PTSD. PTSD sufferers are characterised by how they “start organizing their lives around the trauma” (6); there is no evidence in the novel to suggest that this is the case for Pi. Pi’s mostly retrospective story deals with his memory of the event and not, primarily, his current experience of dealing with the aftermath of his trauma on a daily basis; there is scant evidence, therefore, to suggest that he suffers from this disorder.

presence. Freud offers several possible reasons for how this seeming desire for displeasure fits in with the pleasure principle. One possibility is that in re-enacting the moment that distressed him, the child moved from a position of passivity and through repeating the event, “unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part”. Yet Freud is still reluctant to define the behaviour as something acting “independently of the pleasure principle [...] because the repetition carried along with it a yield of pleasure of another sort but none the less a direct one” (16). The dominance of the pleasure principle thus remains unchallenged.

Freud analyses the compulsion to repeat in terms of his treatment of neurotics and links this repetition with the unconscious, noting that “the compulsion to repeat must be ascribed to the unconscious repressed” (20). According to Freud, the

patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. [...] He is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past.



(18)

In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, Freud moves rather abruptly from explaining the repetition of an unpleasant experience as a means of taking an active role, to describing repetition as an outlet for unconscious repressed material. A crucial point arises from his concept of the “repressed material” being repeated as “contemporary experience”. In the above passage, the repetition is seen as a *substitute* for incomplete memory and the consequence of this gap in memory is the production of a contemporary experience, rather than exclusively “something belonging to the past”. The repetition, therefore, creates something that is both inextricably linked with the “repressed material” from the past and yet is also, simultaneously, a “contemporary experience”. This complex paradox of the repetition being both historical and contemporary is central to examinations of traumatic representations. If certain aspects of traumatic occurrences are repressed, then a representation of trauma refers to those aspects of the trauma that *are* remembered. The parts of trauma that are repressed are compensated for (even if this compensation is not

entirely satisfactory) in the form of a repetition in the present moment, which inevitably results in a new and separate experience of trauma.

In considering the repetition compulsion in the context of neurotics, Freud concedes that repetition works against the logic of the pleasure principle. While the child who repeated his mother's absence in play still derived pleasure from being active rather than passive, it is clear that much of what is repressed and re-experienced is unpleasant. To this finding Freud exclaims:

But we come now to a new and remarkable fact, namely that the compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never, even long ago, have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since been repressed.

(20)

In concluding "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", Freud describes the compulsion to repeat as "something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides" (23). This description of the repetition compulsion as "primitive" and "instinctual" (20) and as something that overrides the pleasure principle, which was previously thought to be the most influential motivation for the decisions that human beings make, gives it enormous power. That this primal compulsion is used to work through the repressed and unpleasant moments of trauma is an indication of the capacity of trauma to overwhelm and possibly devastate those who experience it. Trauma, therefore, is a phenomenon so potentially destructive that it has the capacity to necessitate the countermand of the usual mental process (the pleasure principle) that governs behaviour and decisions. Both of the contexts in which Freud discusses the compulsion to repeat – repetition as the desire to take an active role and repetition as an outlet for unconscious repressed material – are relevant to examinations of trauma. The re-enactment of traumatic memories is both an expression of a desire to take an active role in retrospect and also an eruption of repressed material, which, whilst harking back to the past, simultaneously creates something new. It would seem that what we now understand about trauma – that it is beyond its victim's understanding, beyond description, beyond representation – is what Freud foregrounds in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle". Because the compulsion to repeat is not explicable in terms of

either the pleasure or the reality principles, it is, like the trauma that triggers its existence, always *beyond*.<sup>10</sup>

Freud raises a crucial point, albeit implicitly, that is central to theories about representations of trauma, and that is the practice of assisting victims of trauma by facilitating the repetition of repressed material. He notes that “[i]t seems probable that the compulsion can only express itself after the work of treatment has gone half-way to meet it and has loosened the repression” (20). While Freud’s term “treatment” refers to the support of a psychiatrist, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* describes the function of a listener.<sup>11</sup>

This key text explores various aspects of trauma and its representation and in it the expertise of Laub, psychiatric educator and psychoanalyst, and Felman, literary critic at Yale University, intersect. While “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” discusses deviance from the pleasure principle, *Testimony* focuses on asking questions that go beyond what people do to deal with trauma and places the issue of trauma within the paradigms of victim, listener and literature by asking: “What is the relation between literature and testimony, between the writer and the witness? What is the relation between the act of witnessing and testifying, and the acts of writing and of reading, particularly in our era?” (Felman and Laub xiii).

The question of what comes *between* is pivotal to discussions surrounding trauma. As indicated in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, the compulsion to repeat induces a gap between the moment of trauma and the present moment by re-creating a new experience altogether. It may be suggested that the between-ness interrogated in *Testimony* echoes from this gap between the moment of trauma itself and the representation of it afterward.

---

<sup>10</sup> In “Beyond Trauma: Torturous Times” Luckhurst discusses his use of the term “beyond” in his article’s title, saying that “there is something in trauma that intrinsically invokes a beyond” (2010: 1). He refers to Caruth’s assessment of the way in which traumatic effects manifest belatedly, or “in a beyond” (1), to make the point that “trauma is already beyond trauma: it must forever exceed itself” (2).

<sup>11</sup> Felman and Laub’s seminal text is hereafter referred to as *Testimony*.

*Testimony* is structured in such a way that the text itself becomes witness to a process of uncovering the mechanics of testimony whilst also reflecting on them. The first chapter deals with Felman's experience when teaching a class on testimonial texts and autobiographical accounts of Holocaust survivors. She notes that "the class, all of a sudden, finds itself entirely at a loss, uprooted and disoriented, and profoundly shaken in its anchoring world views and in its commonly held life-perspectives" (xvi). Felman had not foreseen the upheaval her class was to experience and the way in which "the subject matter was unwittingly *enacted*, set in motion in the class" (7). In Chapter Two of *Testimony*, the role of the listener is developed and Felman addresses the act of witnessing and how the "listener to the narrative of extreme human pain, of massive psychic trauma, faces a unique situation" (57). Chapter Three, in turn, theorises testimony through Laub's view of it as "a ceaseless struggle" (75) from his own position as a Holocaust survivor.

*Testimony* also turns to literature for a different view of the process of providing testimony: "If narrative is basically a verbal act that functions as a historiographical report, history is, parallelly but conversely, the establishment of the facts of the past through their narrativization" (Laub 93). The complex relationship between history and narrativization is explored further in the final chapter of the collection. In this last chapter, Felman analyses Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, a film of testimonies that she describes as "a fragment of reality and as a crossroad between art and history" and as a work that "enfolds what is in history untestifiable and embodies, at the same time, what in art captures reality and *enables* witnessing". It is this role of art (and, for the purposes of this dissertation, literature in particular) and how this explorative text investigates the ways in which art "*enables* witnessing" (282) that makes *Testimony* a crucial resource.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, taking my cue from Felman's explanation that art may capture a reality of sorts (282), I seek to build a case for how fiction may *serve* testimony by providing a cathartic glimpse of that which is repressed by the violence of trauma. Indeed, in *Life of Pi*, it is through the help of a narrator and the construction of a story that the

---

<sup>12</sup> However *Testimony* has come under considerable criticism of late, a development that I discuss in the conclusion to this dissertation.



older Pi reflects on his younger self who sought desperately to “capture a reality that overwhelmed [him]” by means of a diary. But we read that there is “not much to” (LP 208) the diary – it serves as testimony to the practicalities of his survival but, it does not tell the story of his pain and suffering. In the spirit of giving his story a “meaningful shape”, the adult Pi requests that the narrator ensure that the story covers “exactly one hundred chapters, not one more, not one less” (285). This may be understood as Pi’s attempt to take his scant diary, a testimony that cannot embody Pi’s pain, and turn it into a narrative that “enfolds what is in history untestifiable” (Felman 282). The insistence on a hundred chapters ensures that the story he tells will be elaborated and expanded, perhaps the better to address the enormity of his experience that a short account would offend. The very precise instruction of “not one more, not one less” (LP 285) also indicates an endeavour to contain, capture and keep within limits, the enormity of the experience he needs to elaborate upon in the telling of it. By giving this instruction to the narrator Pi perhaps conceives that the story told about his experience will help serve his memory over and above those original testimonial “words scratched on a page” (208).

The relationship between art and reality and what this means for trauma and representation are themes in *Testimony* that echo throughout Caruth’s *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Sections from *Testimony* appear in Caruth’s text, yet she also explores trauma in a different way. A topic that threads through Caruth’s collection of essays is the possibility of the creation of new ways of listening to traumatic stories. According to Caruth, a concern with the potential for error in some memories risks hesitating to believe the authenticity of *any* memories because they “do not appear in easily recognizable forms”. Her response to this danger is to attempt to create “new ways of listening and recognizing the truth of memories that would, under traditional criteria, be considered false” (1995: viii).

Caruth’s work is important in its endeavour to provide a wide variety of approaches to the analysis and understanding of trauma in general. Her study is divided into two parts, and the range of concerns addressed in both is wide in scope. Part One is a collection of essays that seeks “to examine the impact of the experience, and the notion, of trauma on psychoanalytic practice and theory, as well as on other aspects

of culture such as literature and pedagogy, the construction of history in writing and film, and social or political activism” (1995: 4). Part Two is more focussed on post-traumatic stress disorder and how flashbacks of traumatic moments from the past are “not simply an overwhelming experience that has been obstructed by a later repression or amnesia, but an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness”. Here she notes that “trauma thus requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure” (1995: 152).

An important point made in Caruth’s text, a point which is perhaps pre-empted by *Testimony*, is that the belatedness of trauma induces an isolation that requires a listener before it can be solaced. She describes a “wider historical isolation that, in our time, is communicated on the level of our cultures” and suggests that “trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures [...] as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (1995: 11) may be the key to commonality. The concept of trauma as an area of commonality between cultures is at once obvious and profoundly insightful and it is this humane approach to suffering that imbues Caruth’s collection with a hopeful tone.

The suggested links between trauma and literature that reverberate throughout both *Testimony* and *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* are central to the focus of this dissertation. Both these works emphasise the role of the listener as facilitator and this is pivotal to my reading of the function of the narrator in *Life of Pi*. For a source more directed to the role of *literature* in representations of trauma, I turn to Hartman’s “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies”. Hartman proposes that “art struggles to master the pressures of violence” and that “splits and fissures between language and experience [...] expose and partially heal traumatic wounds” (537). He considers Romantic poetry, Freud, Lacan, modern films and even the *Midrash* (an ancient and sacred Jewish text) in his analysis.

For Hartman, trauma theory “introduces a psychoanalytic scepticism [...], which does not give up on knowledge but suggests the existence of a *traumatic* kind, one that cannot be made entirely conscious, in the sense of being fully retrieved or communicated without distortion”. Out of this “psychoanalytic scepticism”, a theory

“emerges focusing on the relationship of words and trauma”, one which helps to “‘read the wound’ with the aid of literature”. Hartman’s core argument in this essay is that trauma cannot be fully known precisely because traumatic events are “registered rather than experienced” (537). He claims that “trauma theory throws a light on figurative or poetic language, and perhaps symbolic process in general, as something other than an enhanced imaging or vicarious repetition of a prior (non)experience” (539). Interestingly, in *Life of Pi*, Pi uses a similar metaphor when he describes figurative language as shining “the light of words upon” (*LP* 162) the fear associated with his traumatic experience.

These critical contributors provide much of the foundation for my discussion of Pi’s trauma. In the rest of this chapter, basing my account on Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, I shall first focus on the problems attached to representing trauma and to Pi’s compulsion to repeat. The importance and manner of managing the repetition of potentially destructive memories will be assessed through the example of Richard Parker. The way in which Pi turns to the narrator, and also the reader, in the task of trying to recapture his story will be contextualized in terms of both Felman’s and Caruth’s description of the role of the listener in recapturing repressed traumatic memories, and representing them in the present moment. The difficulties in this process will be reflected upon in relation to Caruth’s discussion of isolation and in terms of the problematic reliance on memory for representation. Finally, and anticipating the next chapter, which analyses narrative technique, I draw on Hartman’s explanations of the role of figurative representations of trauma to consider the role of fiction and how it may work, or be put to work, to attempt to overcome some of the obstacles in representing trauma.

In the novel, Pi notes that his “feelings can perhaps be imagined, but they can hardly be described” (*LP* 142). Since the overwhelming nature of a traumatic event foils any effort to capture it entirely, it is curious to note the abundance of representations, in general, that take trauma as their subject. Is this persistent attempt to achieve the impossible tantamount to madness, or is it perhaps essential for sanity? The adult Pi appears, on the surface, to have recovered from his ordeal – he has studied extensively, married and had children and leads a seemingly harmonious existence

in Canada (80, 92).<sup>13</sup> Why then, when contacted by the narrator, is he so willing to unearth the pain of a trauma buried in the past and recollect his experiences, even though he admits that they cannot be described? The narrator depicts Pi's immediate co-operation and reaction when he makes first contact:

*'That was a long time ago' he said. Yet he agreed to meet. We met many times. He showed me the diary he kept during the events. He showed me the yellowed newspaper clippings that made him briefly, obscurely famous. He told me his story.*

(LP xi)

Here, Pi reflects upon his reservations concerning the time that has passed since his torment; nevertheless he agrees to meet the narrator and they do so "*many times*". This suggests that Pi, despite the time that has lapsed and the unpleasant nature of this memory, is prepared to share his story and he does so with a stranger on the very first request. Not only is he prepared to tell his story, he also shares with the narrator the "*yellowed newspaper clippings*" that he has kept. Pi's co-operation and willingness to share makes it seem as though he has been waiting in anticipation, or perhaps even preparation, for the day when his opportunity to re-live and represent his story will come. Early on in the novel the narrator describes Pi's demeanor as he recounts his ordeal: "*Expressive face. Speaks quickly, hands flitting about. No small talk. He launches forth*" (LP 8). Here Pi appears almost desperate to release the story that has been inside him all these years. This urgent need to unleash his story is vividly reminiscent of the sailor in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", in which the old man accosts a passerby on his way to a wedding celebration, to obtain the audience he requires for the story he simply must tell:

He holds him with his glittering eye –  
The Wedding Guest stood still,  
And listens like a three years' child:  
The Mariner hath his will

The Wedding Guest sat on a stone:  
He cannot choose but hear;

---

<sup>13</sup> In *Life of Pi* the adult Pi narrates the story of the trauma he suffered as a young man. Where there might be confusion, I will refer to the "adult Pi" and the "young Pi" to differentiate between the two personas in the novel.

And thus spake on that ancient man,  
The bright-eyed Mariner.

(745 ll. 13-20)

The wedding guest in this poem is so mesmerized by the story that he “cannot choose but hear”, in much the same way as the narrator is captivated by the promise that Pi’s story is one to “*to make you believe in God*” (LP xi). The wedding guest’s reaction is telling. He senses the intensity of the desire within the Mariner to tell his tale and so he stands still at first and then sits down as if expecting a lengthy rendition, despite the fact that moments ago he was on his way to a wedding – a point that seems to become immaterial once he becomes captivated by the Mariner’s sad tale. In the tenth stanza, we read of how the “Wedding Guest here beat his breast” (l. 37) and the phrase “he cannot choose but hear” (l. 38) is repeated, emphasizing his powerless position. The powerlessness evident in the listener here is a result of the trauma which overwhelms his senses. Just as victims of trauma cannot assimilate traumatic events as they occur, a listener confronted with a traumatic story is, in certain respects, similarly unable to process it immediately and entirely and the result is a simulation of the initial traumatic event – a vicarious repetition. R.L Brett, in his critique of Coleridge’s poem, observes that the poem’s readers, like the wedding guest,

are never allowed to pause, never allowed to question or examine the plausibility of the story. The lodgement the story makes in our mind opens into a bridgehead, the bridgehead becomes a sector, until finally our whole disbelief has been overrun. We become willing victims of the story and the Mariner has his will.

(103)

Brett’s assessment of the poem could well be used to describe the narrative of *Life of Pi*. In both tales the listener/reader is almost involuntarily drawn into the vortex of the story before judgments of authenticity can be made. Before long, such judgments become extraneous, because we begin to inhabit the role of the listener. That we as readers become “victims of the story” explains how the trauma, which the narrative attempts to represent, comes to be expressed or unleashed in the present moment as a contemporary and derivative experience that resonates in the listener. The wedding guest’s physical reaction suggests the manifestation within him of some of

the pain that the Mariner is narrating. Indeed, Hartman describes Coleridge's poem as "a remarkable externalization of an internal state" (540). The internal state that is the trauma buried within the memory of the Mariner begins to affect his listener and we see the wedding guest's outward display of distress. A similar situation arises in *Life of Pi* in which the narrator, as listener, undergoes a comparable discomfort. We read of how each time the narrator meets with him, Pi prepares him a spicy meal. The narrator confesses his part in the misunderstanding:

I told him I like spicy food. I don't know why I said such a stupid thing. It's a complete lie. I add dollop of yoghurt after dollop of yoghurt. Nothing doing. Each time it's the same: my taste buds shrivel up and die, my skin goes beet red, my eyes swell with tears, my head feels like a house on fire, and my digestive tract starts to twist and groan in agony like a boa constrictor that has swallowed a lawn mower.

(LP 42-43)

The ingestion of the spicy food is symptomatic of the deep effect listening induces in the narrator. Pi's story, like the spicy food, causes the narrator painful disturbances and discomforts. Once again, the idea of the listener as powerless when confronted with a traumatic story arises because the narrator is unable to walk away from the anxiety that threatens to overwhelm him. Just as he attempts to pacify the effects of the spicy food by adding yoghurt, he seeks to quell a deep distress that listening to Pi's story arouses within him. In both *Life of Pi* and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" the narrator and the wedding guest find themselves on the receiving end of a traumatic story and they, in turn, suffer as a result; this physical manifestation is symptomatic of a deep psychological upset. Hartman describes "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as a poem that

tries to make us believe the unbelievable; it demands the acknowledgement of being real, not only imagined. The means for doing so include somatic feelings. We are drawn into a species of belief by the recovery of certain visceral sensations: extremes of heat, cold and thirst, glare of color, horror of the void, loss of speech. Perhaps the only way to overcome a traumatic severance of body and mind is to come back to mind through the body. We recall how voice dries up, and chokes its way out again.

(540)

Hartman's assertion that Coleridge's haunting poem "tries to make us believe the unbelievable" may also be said of *Life of Pi*, as one of the most striking promises

made in the first few pages of the novel is the aforementioned claim that Pi's story is one that "*will make you believe in God*" (LP x). God, like trauma, is difficult to perceive, to represent and to believe in. These texts work to overcome the ineffable nature of such subject matters by using "visceral sensations" in order to bring us to the "horror of the void" (Hartman 540) that is "(non)experience" (539). Both texts, then, insist upon telling a story about trauma in such a way as to impress upon readers or listeners of that story some of the effects of that trauma. It may be suggested that the descriptions of pain suffered by the wedding guest and the narrator in their roles as listeners functions as a narrative vessel through which the reality of the trauma is communicated more forcefully to the reader. The wedding guest and narrator may be understood as primary listeners. Through their bearing witness, the readers of the poem and novel also become listeners or witnesses, albeit on a secondary or deferred level. If these primary listeners, who stand between the victims of trauma and the readers of the poem and the novel, suffer too, then the trauma is brought closer and conveyed more viscerally to the reader. This enables a proximity that demands our attention, demands all the more that we believe the trauma, as the verification of the trauma's ferocity is evident in the primary listener's physical reactions, in their own suffering as a consequence of listening.

Perhaps it is also partly the evocation of physical pain in a listener that enables the teller of a traumatic story to undergo the cathartic re-enactment that they are compelled to experience in the aftermath of trauma. As Freud explains, "the compulsion can only express itself after the work of treatment has gone half-way to meet it and has loosened the repression". In the case of Pi and the Mariner, their "treatment" comes in the form a listener who enables their "repression" to be "loosened" (20) from the depths of the past. While there are significant differences between Pi and the Mariner – the Mariner plays a role in his own fate by killing the albatross, whereas Pi is put to the mercy of the elements through no fault of his own – there are also striking similarities. Both (to state the obvious) are literally and figuratively "at sea". More interestingly for the purposes of this discussion, however, both Pi and the Mariner are impatient to explicate the very graphic detail of their suffering. Pi, once in contact with the narrator, "*launches forth*" (LP 8) without

hesitation, as does the Ancient Mariner with his “captured” audience. The Mariner’s desperation to spell out his traumatic story shows in his “glittering eye” (Coleridge 745 l. 13). He “has approached as near death as any living man can do, and bears the visible stamp of his experience” (Brett 105), which makes his eagerness to tell his story seem peculiar. Similarly, Pi, despite the horror of his story that left him “sad and gloomy” (*LP* 3), nonetheless desires to recreate his ordeal for the narrator. This compulsion on the part of victims of trauma to represent their past experiences in the present is an impulse that fascinated Freud. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, he describes the “fort-da” game played by his young patient, and says of the child that

[a]t the outset he was in a passive situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took an active part. These efforts might be put down to an instinct for mastery that was acting independently of whether the memory was in itself pleasurable or not.  
(16)

It would seem, then, that unpleasant as a traumatic experience may have been, the representation or repeated re-enactment of it in the present affords the victim, at least, the (illusion of) power or control they lacked when the trauma took place in the first instance. Freud explains that “there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind”. This “working over” is perhaps a clue as to how and why we attempt to represent the unrepresentable. “[W]orking over” (17) implies an element of catharsis. Representations of trauma are, to some extent, attempts to bring fragments of the trauma into the here and now and the process affords the victim release (if only partial) from the suffering, “which [...] is still present in the mind like an intruder or ghost” (Luckhurst 2006: 499). As in the example of both the adult Pi and the Ancient Mariner, the release felt by the teller of the traumatic story becomes, if only in part, also manifested in the receiver who bears the burden of listening. Yet Pi does not only try to find solace through telling his story; he seeks to subdue the trauma within him and gain control over it.

The attempt to gain control over traumatic memory (which is like an intruder) by coaxing it out from the past and repeating it in the present, is something Pi describes in his account when he compiles a manual for readers should they ever find



themselves adrift at sea with a wild and unpredictable tiger. In this instance, he is literally speaking of his method of training Richard Parker in order to co-exist with him, but the process also has figurative value in that it is arguably comparable to the exorcising of disturbing memories. The tiger, like a traumatic memory in the mind, is an intruder on the lifeboat that needs to be tamed into submission in order for Pi to survive. Richard Parker, as a symbol of Pi's trauma, is both the reason for his crisis and a testament to his incredible survival. Paradoxically, he is also a sign of misery as well as hope. Living on a boat with a tiger is akin to experiencing an extreme trauma "that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by the usual mental processes". Pi lives with Richard Parker in the confined space on the lifeboat because there is nowhere else either of them can escape to. Similarly, when one lives with a traumatic memory, there is "nowhere to put it". The traumatic memory lurking in the psyche like "an intruder or ghost" (Luckhurst 2006: 499) is as perilous a circumstance as sharing a small boat with a tiger. And so Pi, with nowhere to put Richard Parker, ingeniously trains him instead and, in the process perhaps, teaches himself to live with a reality that is potentially devastating, but nonetheless his.



The detailed manual that Pi provides might be regarded as a symptom of his need to exorcise the memory of his traumatic survival in the present. While no explicit link is made in the novel between taming the tiger and repeating old memories, the similarity between the two is uncanny. Some of the tips Pi provides, for example, are:

1. Choose a day when the waves are small but regular.
2. Stream your sea anchor full out to make your lifeboat as stable and comfortable as possible.
3. Now comes the difficult part: you must provoke the animal that is afflicting you.  
[...]
8. When your animal appears good and sick, you can stop [...] you don't want to overstate your case. When enough is enough, stream the sea anchor, try to give shade to your animal if it has collapsed in direct sunlight, and make sure it has water available when it recovers. [...] Otherwise retreat to your territory and leave your animal in peace.
9. Treatment should be repeated until the association in the animal's mind between the sound of the whistle and the feeling of intense, incapacitating nausea is fixed and totally unambiguous.

(LP 203-205)

Pi refers to the provocation of Richard Parker as being the “difficult part” of the training and this is comparable to the difficulty of confronting memories of trauma. His memories are as uncontrollable as the tiger – they “come in a jumble” (*LP* 192) and he refers to them as overwhelming – and he feels as strong a need to rein them in as he does to control Richard Parker. He asks the narrator to order his muddled memories into “one hundred chapters” (285), as he believes that imposing this rounded number onto his story, with its illusions of neat completion, will be fitting. He also seeks to “deal with Richard Parker” in a similar way when he states that in order to survive he must “impose [himself]” (202) on the animal. But ordering a memory does not make it go away; it simply becomes – at least momentarily – manageable. Significantly, Richard Parker, despite his training, is not vanquished in the novel. Pi survives living with Richard Parker, which bears testament to his success in imposing himself on the animal, but the tiger survives too. Richard Parker still deeply affects Pi. He describes his personal connection with the tiger: “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” (6). Pi’s mixed feelings toward Richard Parker are never resolved and neither is the fate of the tiger as he vanishes into the jungle when Pi’s lifeboat finally reaches land. Richard Parker and Pi’s memories thus remain elusive in similar ways – both are forced into order for the sake of Pi’s survival and both haunt him despite the control he manages to maintain over them.

The emphasis in this manual on control over “the animal that is afflicting you” (*LP* 203) and the repetition of the exercise described are both reminiscent of the repetition compulsion that Freud observed in his own patients. Yet, crucially, it is not merely repetition and representation that provide the sufferer with the means to take part in her/his own trauma after the fact. The manual also addresses the reader – it anticipates and requires an audience. An essential part of representation is having someone to represent *to*. Indeed, in the novel it is the narrator that acts as the catalyst for Pi’s representation, which remained buried until a listener arrived. The narrator’s description of the sessions during which Pi tells his story and of Pi’s reception of him is telling: “*He’s a sweet man. Every time I visit he prepares a South Indian vegetarian feast*” (42). Pi’s practice of treating the narrator like an honoured

quest implies that he is grateful to be reassured by the presence of an observer who will witness his account of his trauma. Perhaps this is Pi's way of creating an environment conducive to recollection – his way of making his “lifeboat as stable and comfortable as possible” (203). Caruth describes the role of a witness to representations of trauma:

The final import of the psychoanalytic and historical analysis of trauma is to suggest that the inherent departure, within trauma, from the moment of its first occurrence, is also a means of passing out of the isolation imposed by the event: that the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another.

(1995: 10-11)

The listener, then, is perhaps one reason why attempts to narrate trauma proliferate despite evidence that their success is qualified. They facilitate recollection and temporarily usher the sufferer of trauma out of the isolation “imposed by the event”. Felman describes this isolation by explaining that a “testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated or reported by another without thereby losing its function as a testimony”. For Felman, “the burden of the witness [...] is a radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary burden”.<sup>14</sup> She goes on to state that “[b]y virtue of the fact that the testimony is *addressed* to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond* himself” (3). To arrive at this dimension beyond the self, Pi needs a listener to present his story to. Success in attempting to represent trauma in its absolute totality, then, is not necessarily the primary goal; rather, it is the reception of a listener that matters most in the present moment. Laub comments not only on the role of the listener, but also on the effect this position inexorably imposes:

The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time.

By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience the trauma in himself.

(Laub 57)

---

<sup>14</sup> “Witness” here refers to the victim of the trauma, not the listener.

Listening, therefore, comes with a price. Through the telling of his traumatic story, Pi has become “the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond* himself” (Felman 3) and, while this “beyondness” affords him partial relief from being the sole bearer of his trauma, an element of his suffering reverberates in the listener’s reality. This is evident when the narrator, as Pi’s listener in the novel, reflects briefly on how he feels after a session of hearing Pi’s story: “*I am sitting in a downtown café, after, 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*” (LP 63). Here the narrator, as a consequence of listening to Pi’s traumatic experience, reflects this experience onto his own life and in this way Pi’s representation of trauma is “inscribed for the first time” (Laub 57). Listening to Pi’s story sparks introspection in the narrator and he spends time immersed in his thoughts. His introspection then becomes self-criticism as, fatigued by his session with Pi, he becomes “*weary of the glum contentment*” (LP 63) that he feels characterizes his own existence. The narrator, as listener to Pi’s trauma, has come “to partially experience the trauma in himself” (Laub 57) and his melancholic introspection is symptomatic of the effects of listening.

These effects also reverberate in other observers of Pi’s ordeal. In the novel these witnesses (the narrators) each interpret Pi’s story differently and they become narrative frames through which the trauma moves.<sup>15</sup> Mr. Adirubasamy, who introduces the narrator to Pi’s story, sees it as a story that will inspire people to “believe in God” (LP x), but the Japanese officials at the end of the novel refuse to accept the spiritually inclined aspects of the story. For them, rationality prescribes how the story affects them in their capacity as listeners of Pi’s story. For readers, the effects are obviously individual and varied and this results in a re-creation of Pi’s story through each reader’s perspective. To revisit Brett’s observations regarding readers of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and apply them to *Life of Pi*: We as readers “are never allowed to pause, never allowed to question or examine the plausibility of the story”. Brett explains that once “we accept the Mariner we become


---

<sup>15</sup> The narrative frames are an essential key to the manner in which Pi’s story is told. While they are mentioned in passing here, I analyse them in greater detail in the next chapter, which deals with narrative technique.

disposed to believe his story. Not at first, perhaps, but as it builds up from detail to detail, we find ourselves believing it, in spite of ourselves” and this turns us into “willing victims of the story” (103). Fragments of Pi’s trauma thus move through us too. The representation of trauma is, therefore, not only the cathartic re-enactment of the past. Through a listener, it is re-presented as something that is happening for the first time in the present. The therapeutic effect of revisiting a trauma from the past and re-presenting it in the present moment relies upon memory. The memory of a victim of trauma, however, is often marred by the very trauma it reluctantly, yet compulsively, recalls.

The topic of memory is a central concern to discussions regarding trauma because, if trauma is to be represented at all, it depends wholly on recollection. However, the process of remembering poses a host of difficulties as memory is vulnerable and often inconsistent. This is especially true for traumatic memories. Felman speaks of an isolation that traumatic events impose and Mieke Bal, co-editor of *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, relates isolation to traumatic memory.

According to Bal, in



contrast to narrative memory, which is a social construction, traumatic memory is inflexible and invariable. Traumatic (non)memory has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody; it is a solitary event, not even an activity. In contrast, ordinary narrative memory fundamentally serves a social function: it comes about in a cultural context whose frame evokes and enables the memory. It is a context in which, precisely, the past makes sense in the present, to others who can understand it, sympathize with it, or respond with astonishment, surprise, even horror; narrative memory offers some form of feedback that ratifies the memory.

(x)

Several important points arise in this paragraph. First, traumatic memory is differentiated as a type of memory with inimitable dimensions. It is not within the scope of this dissertation to explore the theories of memory, or even traumatic memory, which is a field of its own. However, this explanation of traumatic memory as “(non)memory” and as a kind of memory in contrast to narrative memory (which is acted out in an environment that encourages assimilation of that memory) hints at the added difficulty that a victim of trauma may encounter as a result of lacking the reception that makes remembering bearable. Traumatic “(non)memory” is “inflexible

and invariable”, which is why re-presentations of this kind of memory need, all the more, to be flexible, varied and imaginative in order to compensate for this lack. The isolation imposed by the “solitary event” that trauma invariably is, needs to be exorcised by the presence of a listener who, after the fact, enables the understanding and sympathy that frequently accompanies narrative memory. The social support that attends upon narrative memory may not be available for traumatic memory, but it can possibly be recreated. For Bal, “narrative memory offers feedback that ratifies the memory” and the lack of this function in traumatic memory therefore necessitates a creative simulation of the “(non)memory”. Traumatic “(non)memory [...] is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody; it is a solitary event, not even an activity”, but re-presentations of it most certainly are addressed to an audience. As Caruth explains, it is precisely ‘through the listening of another’ that the “passing out of the isolation” (1995: 11) can occur.

Second, the description of traumatic memory as “inflexible and invariable” (Bal x) alludes to the overwhelming nature of traumatic events. This results in a condition wherein much of what is remembered by victims of trauma is the unwavering and, often irrelevant, “practical stuff” (LP 208) – as seen in the example of Pi’s diary. Also, the “inflexible” (Bal x) characteristic of traumatic memories complicates their representation in the present. These challenges surrounding memory, and in particular traumatic memory, are reflected in Pi’s account of his trauma. It is to an analysis of this manifestation in the text that I now turn.

Hartman explains that trauma theory

holds that the knowledge of trauma, or the knowledge which comes from that source, is composed of two contradictory elements. One is the traumatic event, registered rather than experienced. It seems to have bypassed perception and consciousness, and falls directly into the psyche. The other is a kind of memory of the event, in the form of a perpetual troping of it by the bypassed or severely split (dissociated) psyche.

(537)

He adds that “on the level of poetics, literal and figurative may correspond to these two types of cognition”. The literal cognition, which corresponds to the traumatic event that is “registered rather than experienced”, may also be compared to Bal’s

description of traumatic memories as being “inflexible and invariable” (x). This is because such memories are the mundane and routine facts that the victim has registered to memory. In Pi’s description of what he remembers, there is evidence of how contextual details of trauma are recorded in his memory, while the trauma itself is not recalled:

I did not count the days or the weeks or the months. Time is an illusion that only makes us pant. I survived because I forgot even the very notion of time.

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. The smell of spent hand-flare shells, and prayers at dawn, and the killing of turtles, and the biology of algae, for example. And many more. But I don’t know if I can put them in order for you. My memories come in a jumble.

(*LP* 192)

The way Pi describes the illusion of time corresponds to the way in which he could not experience the magnitude of his trauma at the time that it took place; the traumatic experience “bypassed perception” (Hartman 537) and is therefore not chronicled in time for Pi. The “ocean of time” signals the irreducible excess of experience for Pi and he cannot grasp it all. As a result, all that is left are the literal “encounters and routines, markers” (*LP* 192) – those “invariable” (Bal x) facts as described by Bal, that, if anything, are cruel and mocking reminders of what is not remembered. Furthermore, the mention of various arbitrary and incongruous associations, such as the smell of “spent hand-flare shells, and prayers at dawn” (*LP* 192) are examples of the contextual aspects of the event that are registered in his memory, while the experience of the trauma itself “falls directly into the psyche” (Hartman 537). Hartman’s description of trauma falling, as it were, into the victim’s psyche, alludes to the unexpected, abrupt and terrifying nature of such experiences. Pi ascribes them a similarly frightening power when he describes the associative details as “imprinting themselves on [his] memory”, and he emphasizes his own doubt as to whether he can even “put them in order” (*LP* 192). Both of these instances imply a lack of meaningful agency on his part, a suggestion that casts uncertainty on Pi’s ability to remember his own trauma. This doubt, as explained by Hartman, does not necessarily preclude the possibility of knowing trauma altogether. According to Hartman,

trauma theory introduces a psychoanalytic skepticism as well, which does not give up on knowledge but suggests the existence of a *traumatic* kind, one that cannot be made entirely conscious, in the sense of being fully retrieved or communicated without distortion.

(537)

The description of traumatic knowledge as being distorted is important. Pi admits that his “memories come in a jumble” (*LP* 192) yet, despite this confusion, he seeks to make sense of the trauma that is not fully accessible to him in the present, as is made evident in the following passage:

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? I’ll tell you, that’s one thing I hate about my nickname, the way that number runs forever. It’s important in life to conclude things properly. Only then can you let go. Otherwise you are left with words you should have said but never did, and your heart is heavy with remorse.

(*LP* 285)

Pi clearly seeks to make sense of his ordeal, to reduce “distortion” (Hartman 537) through ordering his memory, yet the complications surrounding both representation and memory make this difficult for him. Requesting that his story be presented in “exactly one hundred chapters” (*LP* 285) seems to offer him the illusion of coherence. Pi’s memory of his trauma is dislocated from time and imprisoned *within* the literal monotony of his everyday existence during his ordeal. These seemingly inconsequential memories do not adequately convey the suffering that bypassed his perception, the suffering that nevertheless still lingers in his psyche. Though literal they may be, they can only gesture obliquely toward the unspeakable horror of Pi’s trauma, which is the figurative aspect of his traumatic memory that remains elusive. These memories, like his name which “denotes a mathematical principle (the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its radius) a dimension traversing either across or around a void” (Scherzinger 11), circle the trauma “in the form of a perpetual troping of it” (Hartman 537) without ever allowing him direct and satisfactory access to it. Pi detests the way his name symbolizes infinity and he does not want the story of his trauma to suffer the same fate of perpetual open-endedness. He needs the inadequate memories and the perpetual troping to resolve into some sort of cohesive meaning and for this he turns to the narrator whom he hopes will give his representation a “meaningful shape”. This structure, he feels, will “conclude things



properly". Once again, the role of the witness becomes paramount as Pi solicits the narrator in his quest to take the account of his traumatic past and give it some meaning for him in the present. Yet the narrator, as we read in the "Author's Note", is a storyteller – and arch-tropist by definition. Pi is well aware of this and his request for a "meaningful shape" (LP 285) is an appeal for the narrator to take his story and format it into chapters. Experience is not divided into chapters – it is the retrospective ordering of events that makes them meaningful. For Pi, it is in the narrative structure and storytelling technique of the narrator that he places his hopes for some sort of resolution.

The precarious business of recalling traumatic memory troubles Pi. The memories he does have repeatedly circle the enormity of his trauma without giving a proper shape to his experience. The narrator describes an instance of Pi's difficulty in representing his story:

*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 its 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.*

(LP 42)

This quotation contrasts with Pi's recollection of everyday practicalities, in which memory is comprised of "markers that emerged here and there" (LP 192). Instead, it is described as immeasurably deep and vast and concealing as the ocean, which is a richly figurative and tropic description. In using the ocean metaphor – comparing memory to the very setting where Pi's trauma played out – the narrator alludes to the overwhelming task of victims of trauma in bearing witness to their own suffering. Pi "bobs on the surface" (LP 42) of a memory that he endeavors to reign in and represent and this clearly overwhelms him. The ocean, like the mathematical principle to which his name alludes, is seemingly endless. It is this that terrifies Pi. He needs to try to chart the vast waters of his traumatic experience with the help of a listener, so that he can connect with the horror he was unable to synthesize at the time of its occurrence. Pi attempts to communicate his desire for his trauma to be articulated through simile and metaphor:

The matter is difficult to put into words. For fear, real fear, such as shakes you to your foundation, such as you feel when you are brought face to face with your mortal end, nestles in your memory like a gangrene: it seeks to rot everything, even the words with which to speak of it. So you must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it. Because if you don't, if your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks of fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you.

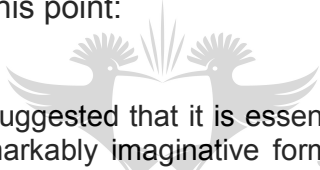
(LP 162)

The concept of words features prominently in Pi's philosophical description of narrating trauma. The matter Pi describes is "difficult to put into words". But while words are at risk from the "gangrene" that "seeks to rot" the memory of his trauma, they are also the solution (even if they are inadequate) in the form of a shining light. The notion that words are both at risk and also the solution captures the paradox inherent in the attempt to represent trauma. Representation is necessary, yet almost impossible. And the suggested consequence of ignoring the memory is a "gangrene" of fear that festers in a "wordless darkness that you avoid". The reference to "fear, real fear, such as shakes you to your foundation" is reminiscent of Richard Parker and the terrifying ordeal that Pi faces when he needs to train the tiger in order to survive (to avoid this would have resulted in "further attacks of fear"). These images of fear, disease and despair are contrasted with the task that Pi has assigned the narrator (a task that mirrors the one Pi assigns himself when training Richard Parker). The narrator's job is one that involves shining "the light of words" and these words must begin to re-present a past for which there is no complete and satisfactory memory. Memory, then, as an unsatisfactory link with traumas locked in history, needs the aid of representations such as testimony and fiction to give it relevance (for victims) in the present. Yet aids present yet more difficulties, difficulties that I suggest fiction may assist in dealing with.

A common discourse for traumatic recollection is testimony. However, testimony as a servant to memory is arguably subject to the vulnerabilities and gaps inherent in any recollection of the past, not least of all traumatic recollections. The paradox that arises here is that (as is the case with traumatic memory) the person "cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it" (Freud 18). Hartman notes that "[t]raumatic knowledge, then, would seem to be a contradiction in terms" (537) as the trauma is

left untold and is, therefore, unknown. This statement does not preclude the desire or need to represent trauma. Owing to its inability to ever fully be known, trauma provokes, all the more, the need to know it, if not fully, then at the very least on a more oblique or approximate level. Pi's incomplete and haphazard account of his experience demonstrates how the endeavor to represent trauma is a minefield of obscurity. What the narrative of *Life of Pi* seems to privilege in, terms of Pi's traumatic representation, is an imaginative re-presentation that seeks to reclaim the "essential part" (Freud 18) of traumatic knowledge that memory fails fully to salvage, knowing all the while that this re-presentation is both figurative and approximative. This imaginative re-presentation is an instrument of fiction in *Life of Pi* that orders Pi's account to some degree and the narrator represents the role of fiction in collaborating with testimony (as he works with Pi) to compensate for the gaps in memory.

Stevan Weine, in *Testimony After Catastrophe: Narrating the Traumas of Political Violence*, makes this point:



Karl Popper suggested that it is essential to turn to the imagination. In literature there are remarkably imaginative forms of testimony. In novels, poetry, plays, short stories, and essays far too numerous to name, there is a dexterity with the linguistic and narrative aspects of testimony that strict memoirists or "objective" observers from the clinical and social sciences often fail to capture. In literature, evocations of the psychological, the ethical, or the historical are less dependent upon ideology or theory and in that way are perhaps closer to life.

(xx)

The victim of trauma has been surrounded with images of suffering and death and, by definition, trauma creates a "gap between impact and experience" (Luckhurst 2008: 79). Weine's claim that literature is a means to bring "aspects of testimony [...] closer to life" (xx) underscores the important role that literature may play in working with testimony to re-present trauma, to bring it into the present from a past that it haunts and to help negotiate that inevitable "gap between impact and experience (Luckhurst 2008: 79). Bringing their traumatic stories of the past "closer to life" (Popper xx) is an aim that both Pi and the Ancient Mariner seek to achieve in narrating their traumas. By imbuing their stories with narrative with the help of a listener, they seek to take the traumatic events that they have "registered rather than

experienced” (Hartman 537) and bring them back to life for others, and indeed, themselves.

Hartman argues that the

disjunction between experiencing (phenomenal or empirical) and understanding (thoughtful naming, in which words replace things, or their images), is what figurative language expresses or explores. The literary construction of memory is obviously not a literal retrieval but a statement of a different sort. It relates to the negative moment in experience, to what in experience has not been, or cannot be, adequately experienced. That moment is now expressed, or made known, in its negativity; the artistic representation modifies that part of our desire for knowledge (epistemophilia) which is driven by images (scopophilia). Trauma theory throws a light on figurative or poetic language, and perhaps symbolic process in general, as something other than an enhanced imaging or vicarious repetition of a prior (non)experience.

(539)

The temporal and psychic disjunction between traumatic experiences and an understanding of them after the fact is an unavoidable circumstance faced by those who seek to represent the moment of trauma. In his diary, Pi tries to capture his traumatic experience. The result is a diary that “is hard to read” precisely because it attempts to “capture a reality that overwhelmed” him. The fact that Pi’s diary captures “several weeks, all on one page” (*LP* 208) is a clear indication that his construction of his own memory is “not a literal retrieval”. Pi’s “moment is now expressed, or made known, in its negativity”; everything that the diary failed to capture is the trauma that he desires to represent. Pi, therefore, turns to the narrator to recuperate his “(non)experience” (Hartman 539). Caruth warns that the

difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story, is a problem that remains central to the task of therapists, literary critics, neurobiologists, and filmmakers alike.

(1995: vii)

Recuperation of this “(non)experience” (Hartman 539), therefore, carries a risk and a responsibility. The risk is the reduction of the story into a cliché, while the responsibility is to re-present trauma in a way that approximates the negative moment. In the next chapter, taking my cue from Hartman, I intend to show how the

structure of *Life of Pi* and its framed narratives serve to bridge the chasm between experience and understanding by means of a “perpetual troping of” (537) Pi’s traumatic memory and how this is achieved without losing the impact of Pi’s horror, or turning it into a cliché.



## Chapter Two

### The Bamboozling Narrative of *Life of Pi*

*I had been to India before, in the north, for five months. On that first trip I had come to the subcontinent completely unprepared. Actually, I had a preparation of one word. When I told a friend who knew the country well of my travel plans, he said casually, "They speak funny English in India. They like words like bamboozle." I remembered his words as my plane started its descent towards Delhi, so the word bamboozle was my one preparation for the rich, noisy, functioning madness of India.*

(LP vii)

bam·boo·zle / bæm'bu:zl/ verb [VN] (*informal*) to confuse sb, especially by tricking them (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*).

Early on in the "Author's Note" that introduces *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel describes how the "[...] word *bamboozle* was [his] one preparation for the rich, noisy, functioning madness of India". Likewise, the term "bamboozle" may prepare the reader of *Life of Pi*. It provides a warning of sorts, as it aptly describes the disorienting oscillation between author and narrator, fact and fiction that germinates in the "Author's Note" and finds fruition in a text that turns readers into co-creators. To "bamboozle", then, is a resounding dictum in *Life of Pi* and nowhere is this more evident than in the complex set of narrative frames through which Pi's story filters. There are several narrative voices in the novel that fulfil the function of transmitting Pi's story. However, these narrative voices do more than simply act as vehicles through which Pi's story is brought to readers. Each narrative voice may be understood as a narrative frame that encapsulates or surrounds Pi's story. These narrative frames influence one another and Pi's story; and they are also influenced by the story that they convey. There are five narrative voices, or frames, belonging to Martel himself, an unnamed narrator, Mr. Adirubasamy, the adult Pi and the Japanese officials.

In this chapter I begin by briefly discussing the way in which the framed narrative of *Life of Pi* may be considered a metafictional strategy. Next I analyse the perplexing "Author's Note" and how it fuses the voices of the author and the narrator. The

“Author’s Note” introduces four of the five narrative frames and it also lays the groundwork for many of the themes that the novel explores, such as the concept of origin and the distinction between fact and fiction. I then draw on the notions of framing in Derrida’s *The Truth in Painting* to demonstrate how the frames hesitate to ascribe origin, test the distinctions between fact and story and in so doing, suggest possibilities for the figurative representation of trauma. I do not wish, however, to propose that any figurative representation of trauma succeeds where other types of representation such as testimony may have difficulty. What this chapter does is show how *Life of Pi* seems to suggest that storytelling is possibly one way to work with the difficulties inherent in any representation and, in the case of Pi particularly, representations that have traumatic content.

The frame of Mr. Adirubasamy is then assessed in terms of how the spiritual quality that he brings to the novel serves to resist undiluted rationality and to advocate the use of imagination in storytelling. I briefly return to Coleridge once more: This time for his remarks on “the suspension of disbelief” (169) in *Lyrical Ballads*, to elucidate what the narrative seems to be suggesting about faith. The subject of faith that is initially introduced through the frame of Mr. Adirubasamy is also discussed in terms of how it develops in the novel and how it also manifests in Pi’s peculiar religious affiliations. The contrasting effect that Mr. Adirubasamy’s frame produces within the “Author’s Note” is analysed and this narrative frame’s unique position within the novel is compared with Derrida’s explanation of the *passe-partout*. From there I focus on the narrative of Pi himself, which is inextricably linked with that of the narrator. Like Mr. Adirubasamy, Pi strongly defends the power of the imagination. He refers to how he overcomes the frustratingly irrelevant association of his identity with his name by creatively manipulating how his name is perceived in relation to who he is. Pi’s narrative also borders (and mingles with) the voice of the narrator, whose narrative position I discuss next and whose approach is radically different to the other narrators, as he initially adopts an apparently factual approach to the telling of Pi’s story. Yet in the novel we see how the narrator undergoes a shift in his own perspective on Pi’s traumatic story and how it should best be represented. Lastly, I examine the short yet dramatic and defining narrative frame presented by the Japanese officials, which occurs at the very end of the novel. This is analysed in

terms of how it presents readers with a double narrative, which effectively casts a retrospective effect across the account that precedes it and this puts readers in a position of having to revisit the story they have read and decide which parts of it they will consider to be “*the better story*” (LP 63). The framing narratives thus problematise the very nature of representation and, in so doing, ask questions about how best these difficulties of representing trauma may, or may not, be dealt with.

The narrative frames are the instrument through which Pi’s story is conveyed and they function self-reflexively, especially in the way in which the narrator meticulously accounts for how he came to discover and narrate Pi’s story. The focus in the novel on the art of storytelling is evident right from the start when, in the “Author’s Note”, the reader is promised “*a story that will make you believe in God*” (LP x). This early emphasis on faith intimates the impending stylistic inclination towards imaginative storytelling – one that is developed throughout the chapters that follow and which reaches a crescendo in the final section of the novel. This self-reflexive proclivity in the novel as a whole supports the suggestion that *Life of Pi* is a metafictional text.

Mark Currie, editor of *Metafiction*, problematises the definition of the term “metafiction” as simply denoting fiction that is self-conscious by pointing out that this constricted view does not adequately address the complexity of metafictional texts (1). Instead, Currie argues, metafiction could be better described as

a borderline discourse, as a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes that border as its subject. Far from being some marginal no-man’s-land, this definition gives metafiction a central importance in the projects of literary modernity, postmodernity and theory which have taken this borderline as a primary source of energy. The borderline between fiction and criticism has been a point of convergence where fiction and criticism have assimilated each other’s insights, producing a self-conscious energy on both sides.

(2)

Metafiction as a “borderline discourse” that incorporates both fiction and criticism is a description that has particular application to the narrative of *Life of Pi*. This fictional story takes trauma as its subject; it therefore inevitably “places itself on the border between fiction and criticism” because it questions the very process of traumatic representation, which is where it begins to spill into the realm of critical enquiry. The



novel balances on the border of fiction and criticism by examining Pi's trauma – an examination that reflects on how literature comes to represent any reality, but especially those realities fraught with the extreme emotional stresses associated with trauma. Currie's reference to "the borderline as a primary source of energy" is important for this chapter's discussion, since Martel's text problematises borders in another way – that is through its narrative frames, which function as borders that merge and warp in ways that defy the possibility of differentiating clearly between them. The manner in which the narrative challenges easy distinctions generates an energy that propels the story in exciting ways from one narrative frame to the next, beginning with the ambiguous "Author's Note".

The narrative voice in the "Author's Note" is not entirely or discernibly that of the author; instead it is a curious (and somewhat bamboozling) mixture of both author and narrator. The "Author's Note" also encases other narrative voices – those of Mr. Adirubasamy and Pi himself. These multiple narrative perspectives may be regarded as frames that perform the function of continually deferring the origin of Pi's story. The insistent preoccupation with origin here is typical of metafictional texts. Patricia Waugh, in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, explains that "metafictional novels often begin with an explicit discussion of the arbitrary nature of beginnings, of boundaries [...]" (1984:29). The desire for origin is denied, as the overlapping narrative voices defer ever outward toward the subsequent frame and the periphery of the story becomes, paradoxically, as "central" as the story itself. The ever-elusive origin (and truth, by connotation) of Pi's story compounds the novel's resistance to a privileging of content over form. The result is a story as much about storytelling as it is about Pi's life and trauma. When considered within the context of Jacques Derrida's concept of the parergon, the framing narratives in *Life of Pi* may be interpreted as not simply the means through which the story is conveyed to the reader, but also as a performance in itself that demonstrates at once the impossibility of unequivocally representing Pi's traumatic tale, whilst providing a cathartic, if oblique, glimpse of it.

The novel's title, *Life of Pi*, implies a life story of some sort and it is the first instance of the autobiographical and biographical style that Martel uses in various sections of

the narrative. Just as the apparent simplicity of this title belies the text's complex preoccupations, so too does the "Author's Note" with its conventional, matter-of-fact tone achieved through the mention of specific dates and places, mask the entrance of the narrator. Typed in italics, it lures the eye and the first two sentences are the tantalising hook on the line that Martel casts from the outset of his novel: "*This book was born as I was hungry. Let me explain*" (LP vii). The ensuing explanation is a weave of fact and fiction narrated by this "me". The first-person narration, in this clearly labelled "Author's Note", leads readers to believe that these are obviously Martel's own words. And so, with the narrative supposedly yet to begin, readers take this part of the novel to be fact, and, unsuspecting that it may actually be the beginning of the novel, read on.

Apparently factual references in the "Author's Note" ensure an authoritative tone that lends credibility to the belief that at this stage it is the author, Martel, whose voice and opinion are being represented. An example is the reference to Mr. Moacyr Scliar whose novel, Martel admits, provided *Life of Pi* with its "spark of life" (LP xii). The evidence of this source was not lost on critics of the novel and, in the wake of the success of *Life of Pi*, there were accusations of plagiarism levelled at Martel (Blackstock). In an interview with Tasha Robinson in 2007, Martel maintains that he fulfilled his responsibility to acknowledge Scliar in the "Author's Note" of *Life of Pi*. He also mentions in the interview that, interestingly, the success of his own novel resulted in the reprinting of Scliar's novel with a blurb reading "The book that inspired *Life of Pi*". And so the question of origin in the "Author's Note", which Martel's novel problematises, spills over into the relationship between these two texts as they both refer back to the other for their "spark of life" (LP xii). The circularity created in the passing back and forth of origin in the "Author's Note" also occurs in the body of the novel when the narrators that frame the story refer to one another as the origin of Pi's story. This acknowledgment of indebtedness between Martel and Scliar, however, like many aspects of the "Author's Note", remains problematic, because as we read on it becomes difficult to discern whether the voice in the "Author's Note" is Martel's after all.

In this “Author’s Note”, mention is also made of Martel’s previous commercially and critically unsuccessful novel, which is presumably *Self*.<sup>16</sup> Yet, in-between these factual references the narrator silently steps in. This outermost frame of the layered narrative is impossible to ascribe to either author or narrator because, although there are obvious references to Martel himself, the fiction has also certainly begun and the moment when it does so is invisible. In this seamless transition, where the author and narrator (hereafter referred to as author/narrator owing to the impossibility of differentiation at this stage) are difficult to distinguish from one another, the origin of the story becomes suspended in the indiscernible space between them and a shift in emphasis occurs in the narrative. This shift signals less and less emphasis on the “facts” of how “*this book was born*” (LP vii) and heralds, instead, the problematisation of distinctions between fact and fiction. Our first intimation that the “Author’s Note” has moved away from explicit facts comes in a reference to the author/narrator’s previous novel – one to do with Portugal. The author/narrator explains that whilst writing this novel he became restless and decided to take a trip to India to finish his book. The obvious question here concerns why he chose to go to India and not Portugal, considering that Portugal, after all, is the setting of his novel. He explains that

*a novel set in Portugal in 1939 may have very little to do with Portugal in 1939.  
[...]*

*Thus, set up, pen in hand, for the sake of greater truth, I would turn Portugal into a fiction. That’s what fiction is about isn’t it, the selective transforming of reality? The twisting of it to bring out its essence? What need did I have to go to Portugal?*

(LP vii-viii)

What “*greater truth*” is the author/narrator referring to? The answer seems to be that Portugal is better off as a fiction because in the fictional mode the author/narrator may have licence to twist rather than recount factual details and the result will, nevertheless, capture Portugal’s “*essence*”. The mention of the Portuguese novel in the “Author’s Note” is significant as it gestures towards the narrative’s preoccupation

---

<sup>16</sup> Like Scliar’s novel *Max and the Cats*, Martel’s *Self* has also been republished since the massive success of *Life of Pi* and it too refers to its more critically and commercially successful counterpart (Martel 2007).

with the view that *how* a story is presented is as important as the story itself. The fate of this novel, however, is particularly interesting, as the author/narrator, judging that the story is “*emotionally dead*”, mails the manuscript “*to a fictitious address in Siberia, with a return address, equally fictitious, in Bolivia*” (ix) – a detail that destabilises not only origin, but destination too. The repeated suggestion here that origin and destination are both fabricated is yet a further example of the move within the narrative, despite its autobiographical mode, away from providing facts and toward a “*greater truth*” (viii), which is only accessible through the use of fiction and imagination. It would therefore seem that the author/narrator, “*glum and disheartened*” (ix), sought some sort of refuge in sending his failing fiction to nowhere traceable in the world. The origin of Pi’s story is therefore complicated and deferred and the questions and uncertainties raised in the author/narrator frame remain frustratingly unresolved. As a result, readers are confronted by a frame that does not simply outline the story as it were; it raises within itself profound disturbances between the distinction of fact and fiction and it transfers these to the story it presents.

One way in which to appreciate the work that the frames perform in *Life of Pi* is to turn to Derrida’s observations about artwork and frames in *The Truth in Painting*. He explains that the “parergon” (the frame) is

neither work (ergon) nor outside the work [hors d’oeuvre], neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it gives rise to the work. It is no longer merely around the work. That which it puts in place – the instances of the frame, the title, the signature, the legend, etc. – does not stop disturbing the internal order of the discourse [...].

(9)

Later, he remarks:

A parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the ergon, the work done [...], the fact [...], the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside. Like an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border, on board [...].

(54)

Derrida rejects the idea that a frame simply encases a work of art; instead, he depicts it as something far more complex that “disconcerts” the work and “cooperates” with and within it. The frame is accorded, then, an influential agency. With this definition of what the parergon is and is not, however, lies a subtle and telling contradiction concerning origin. The assertion that the parergon “comes against, beside, and in addition to the ergon” implies that the ergon is primary and the frame secondary; indeed, Derrida describes it as an “accessory” to what is presumably the main feature. Yet his description of the frame being an “accessory” is then destabilised when the parergon is also ascribed the position of giving “rise to the work”, a statement that credits the frame as source, not an addition after the fact. This paradox – the frame is both supplemental and originary – demonstrates the complicated relationship (between what is presented and how, between content and form) that is manifest in the dynamics of frames and art, and which also pertains to narrative agency and story content. Emphasis and origin in this dynamic symbiosis seem, impossibly, to belong to both the frame and that which it frames. Origin is made equally fluid in *Life of Pi* as the impetus driving Pi’s story spills from one narrative frame into the next. The functions Derrida ascribes to frames are certainly performed by the narrative frames encasing Pi’s story.

The narrators in Martel’s novel are not indifferent conduits, outside, presenting the story inside their ambit; instead they affect the “internal order of the discourse” (Derrida 9) continually. The narration focuses simultaneously on conveying Pi’s experiences and on reflecting on itself as a process. The author/narrator frame introduced in the “Author’s Note”, “touches and cooperates within” (54) its own representation of Pi’s account, influencing it by adding a sense of mistrust of easy distinctions between fact and fiction. It also bleeds into the next narrative frame without resolving the doubts it has raised about when the narrative began. This leaves readers suspended in a profound, yet subtly influential, state of ambiguity – not knowing if what they are reading is fact or biography. The author/narrator frame also indeterminately defers the origin that it promised to uncover with the words “*let me explain*” (LP vii) and instead of providing the anticipated explanation, promises “*a story that will make you believe in God*” (x) – a promise which hardly qualifies as an explanation, since it reads more like an enigmatic riddle. These uncertainties, and

the reluctance to resolve them, draw attention away from the desire for rational facts, laying an unstable platform in the novel that prepares (or bamboozles) readers for a story that makes a case for a more liberal and imaginative rendering of Pi's trauma.

The ergon in this novel is Pi's story about survival and at the heart of this story is a traumatic event that remains inaccessible. Hartman's description of the memory of trauma as "a perpetual troping" (537), might well be applied to how the narrative frames circle Pi's story, passing it from one narrator to the next, deferring its origin continually and, by doing so, mimicking the dynamic that exists between the trauma victim and the moment of trauma. Because trauma bypasses "the usual mental processes" (Luckhurst 2006: 499), its origin, the moment of its happening, is never available to the victim. The narrative of *Life of Pi* therefore necessarily defers the origin of Pi's story because there is no source; all that remains is Pi's traumatised memory – an imperfect simulacrum without an original.

Yet despite its lack of unequivocal origin, the novel seems to be unrelentingly obsessed with pondering beginnings. Just as the victims of trauma unwittingly and compulsively return to that moment, a moment that overwhelms their capacity for perception, so too does the narrative treat the origin of Pi's story as its own traumatic episode that must be returned to, however averse it is to such a return. The narrative simulates the compulsions of victims of trauma and is therefore not only a trauma narrative, but a traumatic one.

*Life of Pi* is, in many ways, a metafictional text, and if it is considered in the context of the functions ascribed to frames by Derrida, then it may be interpreted as a narrative that considers the very possibility (or perhaps impossibility) of fiction representing trauma. This examination of *how* trauma is represented is one way in which the novel takes the borderline of fiction and criticism as "its primary source of energy" (Curry 2). The narrators in the text defer origin from one frame to the next and these frames act as permeable and influential borders between the reader and the story, and between fiction and criticism, in their self-reflexive problematisation of how to represent trauma. The frames circle Pi's traumatic story in such a way that they begin to "give rise to" (Derrida 9) an approximation of his experience. The way

the frames seem to encircle or surround Pi's story generates an energy that works and reworks the story, as each narrative frame adds another rich layer of interpretation to it. Origin and resolution are never established, however; there is only, frustratingly, a "perpetual troping". This troping underscores the impossibility of retrieving the traumatic moment, whilst paradoxically attempting to traverse the vast chasm induced by Pi's trauma that for him, (and, arguably, any victim of trauma) remains "registered rather than experienced" (Hartman 537).

The author/narrator's early anecdote – in which he relates how the word "bamboozle" was his "one preparation for the rich, noisy, functioning madness of India" (Martel 2002: vii) – certainly describes how the novel progresses from that point. As a metafictional text, *Life of Pi* functions as a "borderline discourse" (Currie 1) because it is a fictional text that engages with the literary techniques expected of fiction, but it also self-reflexively questions the process of representing Pi's trauma. The metafictional preoccupation with origin that begins in the "Author's Note" permeates the entire novel. The different narrative frames, some of which become evident in the "Author's Note", influence the story that they convey in interesting ways – especially when considered in the context of Derrida's description of the functions of frames. The particular and peculiar frame of Mr. Adirubasamy is another case in point.

Mr. Adirubasamy as a narrative voice embedded within the "Author's Note" is a frame that encourages faith in storytelling – a theme on which the rest of the narrative hinges in many ways. Emphasis on an imaginative rendering of Pi's story is especially pronounced when the author/narrator, after discarding his Portuguese novel, describes how he met Mr. Adirubasamy. Whilst having coffee with "*a spry, bright-eyed elderly man with great shocks of pure white hair*", the author/narrator happens to mention that he is a writer. The man responds by saying "*I have a story that will make you believe in God*". Both the description of Mr. Adirubasamy and the latter's claim, hint at the spiritual preoccupations of the novel as a whole. The author/narrator, suspicious of being evangelised, replies "*[t]hat's a tall order*", to which Mr. Adirubasamy retorts, "*[n]ot so tall that you can't reach*" (LP x). The mention of belief in God and the allusion to the necessity of having to "reach" before

belief can be attained marks a significant shift in the narrative. From this point onward, the text emphasises the difference between the imaginative (that which requires reaching and faith, rather than knowledge) and the rational.

The subject of faith that the author/narrator introduces in the “Author’s Note”, through Mr. Adirubasamy, is an important concern in the narrative because faith functions as a metaphor for storytelling. The connotations of faith, such as belief and devotion, are analogous with the process to which readers commit when they engage with fictional stories – they must undertake to believe (even if for a transient moment). The language used by Coleridge in his famous description of engaging with poetry echoes with sentiments of faith and storytelling. Speaking of the *Lyrical Ballads*, he describes that his plan for them was that

endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.

(168-169)

The reference here to “poetic faith” has strong religious undertones. And the “semblance of truth” that allows for a “willing suspension of disbelief” is what Mr. Adirubasamy is referring to when he asks the author/narrator to “*reach*” for that “*tall order*” in this story, which he claims will persuade him to “*believe in God*” (LP x). Yet this mystical narrator in *Life of Pi* gives the “suspension of disbelief” a far more forceful, positive value than the somewhat tentative temporal suspension that Coleridge suggests. In *Life of Pi*, as with Coleridge, empirical truth is not all-important and a mere “semblance” (Coleridge 169) of such truth is enough to awaken the imagination. The suggestion in the novel is not that fiction is being simplistically, reductively exchanged for truth, or masquerading as truth, but rather that the opposition between truth and non-truth is not Manichean.

The religious tone and emphasis on faith introduced through the narrative frame of Mr. Adirubasamy also develops within Pi himself, who is a devout Muslim, Hindu and Christian. This multiple belief system that Pi follows appears to be a minefield of



irresolvable contradictions. Yet, the fact that Pi manages to maintain his belief in all three religions throughout his traumatic ordeal and after, stresses the point that it is the very act of believing that has value for him. In the novel, then, faith is aligned with fiction, as both are enabled by a “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge 169) – suspension, as it were, being a process, rather than an endgame. Charlotte Innes, in her review of the novel, describes the role of religion in *Life of Pi* as

[o]nly one element of the book’s exploration of faith. Martel is also interested in the faith of his readers. He wants them to believe his story. He has his narrator pose a larger, Keatsian “beauty is truth” argument against the glorification of reason, “that fool’s gold for the bright.” It’s as if he were suggesting that storytelling is a kind of religious experience because it helps us understand the world in a more profound way than a just-the-facts approach [...].

(26)

The point Innes makes here usefully draws our attention to the novel’s suggestions regarding how faith and imagination can bring great depth to experience, including traumatic experience – storytelling can profoundly affect our insight into trauma and how we may best approach any attempt to represent it. Faith is demonstrated in the novel both through Pi’s devotion to his three religions and through storytelling. Faith becomes a synonym for imagination and storytelling, which are the tools that Pi uses to make sense of his trauma. Just as Pi’s belief is a religious experience for him, the narrators present Pi’s story as a profound and spiritual journey for readers, as readers, too, get to choose which story to believe in. In an interview with Martel, Sabine Sielke comments that “it seems though, that the story [Martel’s] book presents makes one believe not so much in religion, but in fiction” (2003). Martel himself responds:

In a sense religion operates like fiction. A good novel works by making you suspend your disbelief [...]. A good novel – even though there are robots and flying dinosaurs – just takes us in. Religion works the same way – it makes you suspend your disbelief so that factual truth becomes irrelevant. It’s not because the facts are ignored. It’s more how you interpret the facts and how much you value facts that affect the totality of your sense experience. So to say that the book will make you believe in fiction, to me, isn’t very far from saying it’ll make you believe in God. 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.

(2003)

Martel's use of Coleridge's phrase in this excerpt points to his preoccupation with convincing readers to consider more than rationality in their interpretation of the novel. Indeed, the narrative of *Life of Pi* is consistent in its effort to convince the reader that a suspension of disbelief does not entail discounting facts, but rather that all facts are open to interpretation, that reality is inevitably vulnerable to invention and that the key to understanding ourselves, others, life and, I would argue, trauma, lies in an "empathetic imagination" (Martel 2003). Innes states that the "book poses the question: can faith survive in the face of doubt and suffering?" (25). This is a question that Pi himself confronts when he struggles with his own philosophical examination of the relationship between faith and reason. In the novel Pi asks – using appropriately nautical metaphors – "what is the purpose of reason [...]. Why can we throw a question further than we can pull in an answer? Why such a vast net if there's so little fish to catch?" (LP 98). There are no easy answers to these profound questions, as the narrative refuses to answer questions and provide closure in much the same way as it avoids ascribing origin in the "Author's Note". Innes also maintains that

the answer to all the questions in this novel is both yes and no [...]. And that, of course, is the nature of faith. One can't argue it through, one just believes. Faith in God (as the younger Pi sees it) "is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love." It's also "hard to love," Pi adds, when faced with adversity. The same might be true of a good novel, as readers are taken to the edge of their understanding by something new. If the reader lets go of preconceptions, the experience can be liberating and exciting. Martel may be sowing seeds of uncertainty about God, but there's no doubt that he restores one's faith in literature.

(25)

Belief and faith do not necessarily replace reason; they work together to create our realities, for the "mechanism of faith uses imagination *and* reason" (Martel 2003). When Pi is in the depths of grief he uses faith (which, for him, manifests in his belief in God) to interpret his desperate situation and find a way to survive. Pi describes his turn to faith: "It was natural that, bereft and desperate as I was, in the throes of unremitting suffering, I should turn to God" (LP 283-284).<sup>17</sup> Reason without the

---

<sup>17</sup> The way Pi expresses his belief in God in the novel is through religion, but he does not restrict himself to one religion. His resistance to such a limitation echoes his opposition to restricting his interpretation or experience of reality to one story. The idea of God is a recurring one in the novel, yet

intervention of faith and imagination would have resulted in Pi losing his will to live. For example, at one stage during his ordeal he comments: “[h]ad I considered my prospects in the light of reason, I surely would have given up and let go [...]” (107). Fact without faith would literally have resulted in Pi’s demise: His tale is a metaphor – or a parable perhaps – for the value of faith in the imaginative interpretation of our realities. The narrative presented by Mr. Adirubasamy serves as an attempt to restore faith in fiction as a means of representing realities that evade description, such as the one that Pi is faced with – a traumatic one. But this narrative frame is more than simply an agent imbuing the story in general with the spiritual. Its strategic position between the narrative frames of the author/narrator and Pi allows it to influence both in unique ways.

To reflect briefly once more on the “Author’s Note”, the narrative frames of the author/narrator and Mr. Adirubasamy are juxtaposed and the interaction that transpires between them presents Pi’s story in contrasting terms. On the one hand, Mr. Adirubasamy begins his narration with the introduction: “*Once upon a time*”. This opening line is characteristic of fairy-tales – a convention that pointedly draws attention to fictionality. In the same vein, the author/narrator also refers to Pi as the “*main character*”. On the other hand, these fairy-tale conventions are disjunctive with the realistic details that provide the reader with that “semblance of truth” (Coleridge 169). For example, ostensibly documentary evidence is provided, which serves the function of verifying Pi’s account of his experience. In addition, the author/narrator actually meets with the adult Pi after finding his name in the phone book and views both the diary that Pi kept while at sea and the “*newspaper clippings that made him briefly, obscurely famous*” (LP xi).

Despite the reference to newspaper clippings and other inferences to the authenticity of Pi’s story presented by the author/narrator, the fairy-tale-like narrative style of Mr. Adirubasamy buffers the outer frame of the author/narrator and provides the enchanted backdrop upon which Pi’s story appears. The author/narrator’s matter-of-fact approach and his narrative’s dramatic contrast with the style of Mr. Adirubasamy

---

her/his role is not that of creator or omniscient ruler, but perhaps may be thought of as a metaphor for belief, and hence a metaphor for storytelling, imagination and fiction.

makes the former's narrative frame seem reliable and believable despite the self-reflexive focus on fictionality.

The manner in which Mr. Adirubasamy's narrative is placed in-between the author/narrator's matter-of-fact account and the story of Pi's ordeal may be interpreted in terms of Derrida's description of the *passe-partout*, which is neither

inside nor outside, [...]. It situates between the visible edging and the phantom in the center, from which we *fascinate* [...]. *Between* the outside and the inside, between the external and the internal edge-line, the framer and the framed, the figure and the ground, form and content, signifier and signified [...]. [B]ut although it lets something appear, it does not form a frame in the strict sense, rather a frame within a frame.

(11-12)

Derrida's use of the term "*fascinate*" might be understood to refer to our continual and creative interpretation as readers. His description of what occurs on this border between "framer and the framed" is strikingly akin to Currie's explanation that metafictional texts are those that straddle a "borderline between fiction and criticism" and which take that "borderline as a primary source of energy" (2). Occupying a position between the outermost narrative frame and the story itself, the voice of Mr. Adirubasamy functions as the *passe-partout*, a frame within a frame. This *passe-partout* generates a subtle yet distinct influence over that space "from which we *fascinate*". In terms of Pi's traumatic story, what we "*fascinate*" about his horror is pivotal, because Pi's trauma can only be imagined and never unequivocally represented. Without the *parergon* and *passe-partout* generating that space which facilitates the imaginative approximation of the traumatic moment, Pi's trauma will remain that "phantom" (Derrida 12), that "intruder or ghost" (Luckhurst 2006: 499) that never finds imaginative expression.

Derrida's use of the term "*fascinate*" (12) has other interesting implications. In the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* the term "*fascinate*" is shown to derive from the Latin "*fascinare*", the meaning of which translates as "to affect by witchcraft; to enchant, lay under a spell". Derrida uses this word to describe what the *passe-partout* facilitates, and understanding this in terms of its correlation to the act of enchantment, forcefully underscores the function of Mr. Adirubasamy's narrative

frame and its influence on the reader's reception of Pi's story. That we are enchanted, or possibly put "under a spell" (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*) by this narrative frame, suggests that we are, to some degree, victims of the narrative (as is the author/narrator in his role as parergon), drawn in to bear witness to the traumatic story that Pi needs to, and must compulsively share. Indeed, another definition of "fascinate" offered by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* is to "cast a spell over by a look [...]; to render unable to move or resist" and to "attract and hold the attention of by an irresistible influence". Once again, this almost forceful capturing of a reader or listener is reminiscent of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*; indeed, the dictionary definition coincidentally makes reference to him, explaining that an example of the use of the term "fascinate" is how the "eye of the Ancient Mariner fascinated the wedding guest". Readers are thus enchanted and manipulated by the "irresistible influence" (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*) that obliges an audience to become a participant. The bamboozlement created by the fascinating influence of Mr. Adirubasamy, delivers readers into an indeterminate space in which to be confronted with the horrific story that Pi begins to tell. The passe-partout operates on two fronts in the novel. On the one hand, Mr. Adirubasamy's fanciful tone and evangelical reference to God make the author/narrator seem trustworthy and rational by contrast. In this case the passe-partout influences our perception of the parergon. On the other hand, Mr. Adirubasamy's account introduces the tone of the fantastical, which influences our reception of Pi's story. Readers are thus caught in an interpretative space, just as the voice of Mr. Adirubasamy is suspended between the framer and framed, between contrasting voices of reason and fabulation. The line between them is unclear. With the parergon and passe-partout ambivalently established as outside and simultaneously part of the narrative, the work begins to form, or "*fascinate*" (Derrida 12) in the space between the narrative voices. Yet the space in which the story begins to formulate is itself problematised, because the very borders that form around it are always ambivalent and permeable.

In-between the differing perspectives of the author/narrator and Mr. Adirubasamy, Pi's voice seamlessly emerges and it is to Pi's narrative position that this discussion now turns. Filtered through the narrator, the adult Pi tells his story long after his

traumatic ordeal.<sup>18</sup> The narrative frames of the narrator and Pi contrast in much the same way as the accounts of the narrator and Mr. Adirubasamy in the “Author’s Note”. Once again, the parergon (the narrator’s frame) becomes intricately involved with the ergon (Pi’s representation of his trauma and survival). Indeed, throughout the first part of Pi’s narrative there are interjections by the narrator. Typed in italics, like the “Author’s Note”, these interruptions appear at irregular intervals, abruptly drawing the reader out of Pi’s captivating narrative and into the narrator’s personal experience of working with Pi and providing documentary-like descriptions of Pi’s life after the ordeal. This presents an important disjunction in the text. On the one hand, Pi is narrating the events of his survival; on the other, the narrator is reflecting on his own process of witnessing and conveying Pi’s story. This self-reflexivity on the part of the narrator gives a biographical quality to the narrative as a whole. The effect is that Pi’s account is presented alongside the experience of the narrator, who displays all the signs of being a thorough biographer. These narrative interjections may be understood as agents of that “semblance of truth” that enables the “suspension of disbelief (Coleridge 169). The narrator repeatedly grounds the reader through his reflections of his own narrative process and he represents, at least at this stage of the novel, that “just-the-facts approach” (Innes 26) that differs quite sharply from the narrative of the adult Pi and certainly the enchanting Mr. Adirubasamy.

An example of the narrative disjunction between Pi and the narrator is evident in Pi’s first few passages, which are characterised by a philosophical tone that is interrupted by the narrator’s factual and succinct interjections. Pi begins at the end of his story by initially summarising his post-trauma suffering and slow recovery. He consistently seeks out the spiritual aspect of everything he mentions – even his academic areas of study, which are religion and zoology. For instance, his colleagues in the religious studies class are agnostics who remind him of the three-toed sloths that he studies in zoology, and the sloths, in turn, remind him of God (*LP* 5). The narrator’s first interjection, by contrast, is abrupt, presenting apparently observable facts only: *“He lives in Scarborough. He’s a small, slim man – no more than five foot five. Dark hair, dark eyes. Hair greying at the temples. Can’t be older than forty. Pleasing coffee-*

<sup>18</sup> I switch here from author/narrator to narrator because in the transition from the “Author’s Note” to the chapters of the novel there are no further obvious references to Martel.

*coloured complexion*" (7). The difference here is dramatic. Pi's focus is always on perception and the interpretation of facts, with an emphasis on either God or spirituality in general. The narrator, on the other hand seems, at first, purely documentary, an impression enhanced by the lack of complete sentences and note-like style. However, later in the narrative a change occurs in the narrator's self-appointed position as biographer and he begins to echo some sentiments characteristic of both Pi and Mr. Adirubasamy. Before this change transpires, however, Pi provides a lengthy explanation of his unusual name and in so doing prepares readers for his story.

When Pi begins telling the narrator his epic tale, he describes the origin of his strange name, an anecdote which serves to reinforce, ironically, the arbitrary nature of origins, the obscurity of representations in general and the need for creative interpretation and re-presentation. Pi recalls how he "was named after a swimming pool" (LP 8). Pi's full name is Piscine Molitor Patel – he is named after the Piscine Molitor, a pool "the gods would have delighted to swim in" (11) because a close family friend, who was a competitive swimmer, thought that it was the best pool in the world. Throughout his life, Pi struggles with his name, or rather with the way in which it causes others to perceive him. Some think his name is "P. Singh", and that he must be a Sikh and they wonder where his turban is. The constant confusion surrounding his name and the resultant need to spell it out prompts Pi to try something. As a teenager, one night while ordering pizza with friends in Montreal, Pi decides that he just can't "bear to have yet another French speaker guffawing at [his] name, so when the man on the phone" asks for Pi's name he says "'I am who I am.' Half an hour later two pizzas arrived for 'Ian Hoolihan.'" (20). Pi's philosophical and Christ-like response is met with a rather humorous misinterpretation and this serves to emphasise the impact that perspective and perception have on what is true and for whom. Pi is who he is, but how others perceive him depends on their own perspective. Pi realises this and he sets out compellingly to create an identity for himself; a fiction that will portray him in a way that will encourage others to gain a new and different perspective of him – a truer perspective than his real name has thus far proven capable of providing.

As a young child in school Pi was teased by mean-spirited children who called him “*Pissing Patel*” (LP 20). But when he moves schools he finds an opportunity to alter the way in which people perceive him. On the first day in his new school he is required to introduce himself, but instead of calling out his name as expected, Pi does something different. When it is his turn to call out his name, he “hurrie[s] to the blackboard” (22) and writes down his full name as Piscine Molitor Patel, but adds that he is “known to all as Pi Patel. For good measure [he] add[s]  $\pi = 3.14$ ” (22-23). Pi creates for himself a “new beginning” (23). What is significant about the transformation of Pi’s name is that, through “*the selective transforming of reality*” (viii), Pi fashions a new name for himself, thus altering how others perceive him and in turn how he views himself. This act even inspires the other boys in his class and before long many of them create nicknames of their own choice.

Through creating an alternative story about his name and what it means, Pi actively participates in forming his own unique sense of self, and so “in that Greek letter that looks like a shack with a corrugated tin roof, in that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, [he finds] refuge” (LP 24). Pi finds sanctuary from the “altar of crude reality” (xii) in his new name, just as he finds some sort of solace in creating and telling his traumatic story. The fact that Pi corresponds with  $\pi$  – the mathematical symbol that denotes irrationality – is symbolic of the way in which the novel calls for the use of fiction and imagination, instead of only that which is considered rational, reasonable and factual in our interpretation of what is presented to us. By contrast, the narrator is initially interested in recording the physical, factual details pertaining to Pi’s appearance. For example he explains that Pi is a “small, slim man” (7) and this pared-down material description clashes with Pi’s representation of himself through the spiritual and philosophical lenses that come to define reality for him. These two very different views come to characterise two dissimilar approaches to storytelling. While the narrator, at least early on in the novel, tries to build a story on the facts as outlined in Pi’s testimony, Pi takes liberties with philosophical and figurative representations of his trauma. For Pi, a bare-bones testimony of his experience is not enough and it is in imaginative re-invention, as with his name, that he takes some refuge.



The way the novel focuses on the origin and metamorphosis of Pi's name is one way it emphasises the unnatural and arbitrary relations between names and that which they name. Pi destabilises the assumptions implied by his name by manipulating what his name is and what it denotes. The association of his name with irrationality as, illustrated by his blackboard demonstration in class, is perhaps symbolic of how any form of association or representation (be it naming something or representing trauma) through language is entirely irrational and impossible. Through creative and persistent representation, "*selective transforming of reality*" (LP viii) (which is what Pi does both with his name and his story) is achievable. Pi is named after a swimming pool that a family member liked to swim in. This association with a swimming pool is far removed from Pi as a person. Yet with this obscure name Pi still manages to create some form of identity and he grafts a symbolic meaning into his name. He also does this with the story he tells of his trauma. He has a scant and largely irrelevant diary, a similarly arbitrary and insignificant connection to his traumatic ordeal. He takes this diary and, with the help of the narrator, forges a story meaningful to him about all that he has suffered through and survived.

The lengthy description and analysis by Pi of his own name creates an important perspective for his narrative. Whilst the narrator's voice provides the outermost frame for Pi's narrative, Derrida's description of how the parergon "touches and cooperates within" (54) the ergon not only affects the ergon, but in the case of *Life of Pi*, the ergon, too, affects the frame around it. Pi's story begins to have a profound effect on the narrator and how he, in turn, narrates. The narrative position of the narrator shifts: Pi's story begins to affect the manner in which his interjections operate within the novel. This shift may also be attributed to the effects of the passe-partout, in the form of Mr. Adirubasamy's narrative position. In Chapter Twenty-One the narrator inserts an introspective passage in the text that is unlike his (up to this point) apparently factual reflections. Here the cadences of Pi and Mr. Adirubasamy are heard in the narrator's prose. After a session with Pi, the narrator confesses that his encounters with Pi always leave him feeling "*weary of the glum contentment that characterizes [his] life*". He ponders some of Pi's phrases, such as "*dry, yeastless factuality*" and "*the better story*" (LP 63), which prompts him to write the following.

*Words of divine consciousness: moral exaltation; lasting feelings of elevation, elation, joy; a quickening of the moral sense, which strikes one as more important than an intellectual understanding of things; an alignment of 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.*

*I pause. What of God's silence? I think it over. I add:*

*An intellect confounded yet a trusting sense of presence and of ultimate purpose.*  
(LP 63)

After a determined focus on what at least appears to be the observable facts, this impressionistic portrait by the narrator is rather radical and unexpected. It would seem that the narrator is indeed beginning to believe in God – just as Mr. Adirubasamy promised he eventually would. His abrupt change of tone is not sustained entirely after this initial change of heart, but the final three interjections that follow are far more interpretative, provisional and contemplative than the preceding ones.

The narrator shifts from a predilection for observable (or empirical) fact, to the conclusion that Pi's first account is the "*better story*" (LP 63), which alerts us to another key aspect of the novel. The narrator's voice is an important framing device that delivers Pi's story to readers. Yet his role before he narrates is also that of listener to Pi's traumatic account. To recap, Dori Laub describes the role of the listener in testimony saying that

testimony to the trauma [...] includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time.

By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience the trauma in himself.

(57)

The narrator begins using factual descriptions to record the story told to him by Pi. But it is clear that as the narrative progresses, the narrator in his role as listener undergoes his own crisis as witness and this profoundly affects the way in which his narrative frame interacts with the story it transmits. He does indeed "partially experience the trauma in himself". This change in the narrator poses questions about

how trauma is represented. The reliable “biographer”, whose presence in the novel provides readers with the “semblance of truth” that enables “suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge 169), changes his mind about how best to articulate the horror that Pi survives. He begins to favour the imaginative approach that Mr. Adirubasamy and Pi both make use of. The movement within all the narrative frames seems to be toward taking Pi’s trauma and fashioning it into something that can begin obliquely to gesture toward that moment in which Pi’s trauma occurred, that moment which for him remains unrecorded and unrepresented.

Arguably, this shift in the narrator’s position is a preparation for part two of the novel, which contains no interjections from him at all. His final sentence before this middle section begins is “[t]his story has a happy ending” (LP 93), which is perhaps offered as a preparatory comfort for the traumatic story of survival and loss that follows. “Part Two: The Pacific Ocean” begins with the sinking of the *Tsimtsum* and ends with Pi’s lifeboat finally finding dry land. Here Pi traces his harrowing ordeal in gruesome detail, without the reprieve afforded by the narrative interjections that are scattered throughout the early chapters; readers, like Pi, must face his suffering without distraction. Here Pi is adrift in his own narrative, and we are unhitched from the narrator – both conditions correlating with Pi being lost at sea. Pi’s description of his suffering is thus isolated within this middle section of the novel. The mode of narration he uses is strongly realistic, despite his constant reference to his multiple spiritual belief systems. He records everyday details, such as what he ate and how, alongside his philosophical reflections about suffering. This documentary style, however, has an effect that is quite the opposite of realistic. The content of Pi’s narration, especially that which refers to the animals that share the lifeboat with him, seems all the more radically fantastical considering his very pragmatic and comprehensive account. Form and content clash dramatically here. But this section is lengthy and with the “suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge 169) well enough established owing to the influential frames of the narrator and Mr. Adirubasamy, the strain placed on credibility is strikingly unproblematic. Pi himself is shocked by his bizarre circumstances. He says that to him even the fact of the ship sinking was “as unbelievable as the moon catching fire” (LP 103) and he “never thought that finding [himself] confined in a small space with a spotted hyena would be good news, but

there you go". The tone of resignation, a succumbing to the inevitable that the phrase "but there you go" (110) clearly suggests, is an attitude that Pi adopts throughout and, as a consequence, readers are encouraged to do likewise. Pi's apprehension, coupled with his credibility as a narrator of his own suffering, provides a platform in the story as well as the narrative structure that allows for the tension between faith and fiction to gather complexity.

Within the story, (as I shall discuss at some length in Chapter Four) the difference between Pi's account of his survival with animals and the alternative version that positions the animals as allegorical figures, serves to contrast fact and fiction in terms of content and the reader is invited to choose which story s/he prefers. But on the level of narrative, the Japanese officials who question Pi are pitted against the framed narratives of the narrator and Mr. Adirubasamy because they openly challenge the authenticity of Pi's story. These Japanese officials eventually agree that the "better story" (*LP* 317) is the imaginative one that includes animals. Readers are left to decide for themselves.

The position of the Japanese officials' frame within the novel is strategic to the unfolding narrative. At the end of the novel, the interaction between the ergon, *passe-partout* and *parergon* has gained sufficient momentum to cast doubt on the one narrative frame (the Japanese officials) that would have seemed to provide the most logical and reasonable explanation of events had it appeared first. The Japanese officials rely on facts and rational explanations to resolve confusion and restore clarity. However, by the time readers encounter them, the influence of the preceding narrative frames has worked to encourage readers to look beyond mere rationality. It is the Japanese officials' initially hesitant position which convinces the fact-driven narrator that Mr. Adirubasamy was correct in his summation that Pi's story was one to inspire belief in God.

Not surprisingly, the Japanese officials challenge the truth of Pi's story. Mr. Okamoto, one of the officials, listens to Pi's story and then says to him: "Mr. Patel, we don't believe your story". Pi, who has been helping himself to the cookies on offer, responds with some clever wordplay: "Sorry, these cookies are good but they

tend to crumble” (*LP* 292). Pi seems to be suggesting that hard facts, while more tangible than elaborate and imaginative stories, are, like cookies, susceptible to “crumbling”. The allegorical tale to which the officials reduce Pi’s story (in which the animals represent people), crumbles under Pi’s interrogation. Pi points out that the facts of the story that the officials regard as the “real” story are equally – if not more – mysterious and even more difficult to accept as true than his version of events, suggesting a genuine impasse.

Pi repeatedly elaborates on the point that facts are often as strange and unbelievable as fiction. For example, when the Japanese official says that Pi’s story is “just too hard to believe”, Pi responds by saying “You want hard to believe? I’ll give you hard to believe” and he informs the officials of a series of bizarre, yet apparently verifiable stories of wild animals escaping zoos and surviving in cities unnoticed. “If you stumble on mere believability” Pi asks, “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?” (*LP* 297). By providing the officials with examples of ostensibly factual stories that defy reason and which are difficult to believe as true, Pi is encouraging them to suspend their disbelief. For Pi, believability is no longer a reliable indicator, and should not be a factor in deciding which story is the “better story” (317).

The officials defend their stance saying that they are “just being reasonable”, to which Pi responds: “But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater” (*LP* 298). Pi clearly considers discounting the role of imagination to be as direly consequential as discounting reality. The officials persist and tell Pi that they want to know “what really happened”. Pi stubbornly insists that any story he tells them would still be invention because “the telling of something always become[s] a story ... [t]he world isn’t just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn’t that make life a story?” (302). What is clear here is that the Japanese officials want to hear a story that does not require them to suspend their disbelief; they want Pi to tell a story that fits in with their expectations of what happened. The officials prefer to regard fiction and fact as Manichean opposites. Pi tries to

destabilise this opposition and this agitates them. It is evident in the dialogue between Pi and the officials that any discussion about what is true, and for whom, is problematic, but it is precisely this troubled space that *Life of Pi* insists on occupying and it is these barriers that the narrative frames, as narrative tools, serve to challenge.

Pi's allusion to the invented nature of describing any event is one way in which the narrative challenges the relationship between fiction and reality. Waugh maintains that "it is impossible to describe an objective world because the observer always changes the observed". She also argues that "[t]he metafictionist is highly conscious of a basic dilemma: if he or she sets out to 'represent' the world, he or she realizes fairly soon that the world, as such, cannot be 'represented'". Pi seems keenly aware of this "basic dilemma" (1984: 3) and does not attempt to represent his world; instead he encourages readers to use their imaginations in receiving a story *about* it because "[his] feelings can perhaps be imagined, but they can hardly be described" (LP142). Waugh argues that in "literary fiction it is, in fact, possible only to 'represent' the discourses of that world" (1984: 3) and this is what *Life of Pi* attempts to address. This philosophical rendering of the constructed nature of reality and how it is no different from what we convince ourselves that "truth" is, is still not good enough for the officials, so Pi, frustrated with their inability to stretch their imaginations, bursts out:

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 factuality.  
(LP 302)

Pi then finally relents and gives them what they think they desire. He presents the officials with another account of his experience. In this story, the animals apparently represent (at least for the Japanese officials) the other people that were on the boat with him: The orang-utan is Pi's mother; the zebra is a sailor; the hyena is a cook; and Pi is the Tiger. This version of events is grisly in its depiction of how the human survivors on the lifeboat, in utter desperation, turn to cannibalism in order to survive. It also details how Pi bears witness to the murder of his mother and how he, too,

resorts to murder whilst stranded on the lifeboat. At the end of telling this story, Pi asks the officials if they prefer this version and their response is that the story without the animals is indeed horrible and they do prefer the story with animals. Perhaps they consider the graphic version of Pi's trauma unacceptable and subsequent to hearing it they decide that they prefer the animal version. One possibility is that the version in which Pi uses animals to tell his story contains personal reflections about his awful situation and, despite being richly imaginative, captures so much more than the facts. The narration of the "facts" does not change the trauma that Pi experienced. His imaginative (re)presentation, however, is something he can control and manipulate and it is this kind of representation that changes how he may attempt to approach and approximate that elusive moment buried in his memory.

The response of critic Garan Holcombe demonstrates the ambivalence the two stories generate:

The reader is left to muse upon which version might be the truth; there is of course the possibility that the story we have been told is nothing more than a fantasy elaborated by Pi as a coping strategy. [...] It is enchanting, a fiction that sets itself up as truth in such a convincing manner that at the novel's conclusion, the reader cannot be entirely sure that the events depicted did not in fact take place.

(2004)

The story with the animals is surely the more poetic and entertaining of the versions and the narrator dedicates over 180 pages to its narration as opposed to a dismissive eight pages that recount the story that replaces animals with people. The story with animals is also supported by justification through the narrator describing Pi's extensive knowledge of the animals with which he is trapped. The result is that the reader might be forgiven for wanting to believe Pi's animal version of events. However, the novel presents both stories and the only response is to "muse upon which version might be the truth" and muse we must, because the narrative does not privilege either version of events.

The opening chapter of this dissertation examined the ways in which Pi's diary falls short of capturing the horrific and overwhelming reality that besets him on the tiny lifeboat floating in the Pacific Ocean. This scant diary, as described by Pi, contrasts

notably with the 100 chapter narrative that is subsequently and artfully constructed around it in the novel. Pi's account of his survival forms the core story around which the voices of Mr. Adirubasamy and the narrator form frames and it is with these frames that this chapter has been preoccupied. Pi's story is the *ergon*, the work, the material with which the frame and the *passe-partout* interact. Mr. Adirubasamy introduces an element of the mystical or spiritual into the story; the narrator, by contrast, commences his account with biographical purpose which shifts into a pensive mode through the interaction with the *passe-partout*. The narrator, as a result of listening to Pi's story, begins to display the symptoms of bearing witness to Pi's trauma and in so doing, in certain ways, becomes a victim himself – and, by extension, so does the reader.

The various frames resist the ascription of origin and they consistently test distinctions between faith, fiction and fact. The narrative's preoccupation with origin and representation reverberates through Pi's lengthy discussion regarding how he got his name; his manipulation of this arbitrary sign is one way the novel suggests that imaginative re-presentation may help to lessen the frustrating effects resulting from the disconnect between signifier and signified. The result is a metafictional text that straddles the border of fiction and criticism by telling a story that questions the nature of representation, especially representation of trauma. The frames of the author/narrator, Mr. Adirubasamy, the adult Pi and the Japanese officials spin a complex double narrative that bamboozles readers by offering them a choice of which narrative to believe. This choice of which story to believe comes after the very idea of belief is complicated by Pi, who believes in God, but considers himself a devout Muslim, Hindu and Christian. For Pi, it seems belief itself is more important than allegiance or what you believe in. In the ambiguous "Author's Note" Mr.

Adirubasamy propositions the narrator with "*a story that will make [him] believe in God*" (LP x) and this invitation to believe in God, fiction or storytelling, in turn, is also on offer to readers. The manner in which the narrative presented in the novel serves to accompany the diary, which lacks the story-telling aspect that Pi clearly desires to share, may be thought of as one way in which fiction may enable testimony to try to convey more than the factual and "*practical stuff*" (208) that it is sometimes, and often necessarily, limited to. The double narrative in the novel is never satisfactorily



resolved; neither of the versions is posited as “truer” than the other. Without resolution, all that remains is an option. And perhaps this is Martel’s point – fracturing and proliferating stories is possibly the only way to get to that elusive “better story” (317) that Pi encourages the Japanese officials to choose. The better story for Pi is one that emphasises faith and imagination. This theme is tested in Pi’s encounter with the carnivorous island, which is discussed in the next chapter. The use of the fantastic in this island encounter further encourages the suspension of disbelief and enables creative ways of dealing with Pi’s difficulty in representing his trauma.



## Chapter Three

### The Function of the Fantastic in Narrating Traumatic Stories

*Life of Pi* considers the possibility of representing trauma in diverse ways. The content of the story and the climax of the plot revolve around Pi's trauma of being shipwrecked, losing his family, being stranded on a lifeboat with an assortment of animals and his seemingly paradoxical compulsion to revisit this trauma, as averse as he may be to do so. The various voices that form the framed narrative – for example, the author/narrator's biographical technique in the "Author's Note", Mr. Adirubasamy's spiritual interpretation of events, Pi's testimonial-style account of his trauma and the Japanese officials' account – all circle around the elusive moment of Pi's horrific experience, even if such an approximation always draws attention to its deferred status. Amid these content- and narrative- based facets of the novel there emerges an ambiguity, a certain hesitation within the text. This ambiguity arises in many ways. In the "Author's Note", for example, the difference between author and narrator is indistinct; the mysterious Mr. Adirubasamy presents a narrative dominated by oblique and spiritually inclined riddles; and most notably, Pi's narrative offers two stories. The first story presented by Pi commands the greater portion of the novel and this is the story that details his survival alongside various animals – the most significant of which is Richard Parker, the tiger. But towards end of the novel, Pi gives a different version of events, a version in which there are no animals on his lifeboat. Instead, in this story, he shares the boat with other shipwrecked humans, including his mother initially. The presentation of two versions of Pi's story places the reader in a position of having to choose between them. These multiple ambiguities that are created by the narrative frames and the competing stories have a cumulative effect in the novel and, as I shall argue in this chapter, they give rise to, and reflect the operations of, the fantastic. The sustained ambiguity and the workings of the fantastic dramatically affect the way in which the paradoxes of trauma's representation might be worked through.

The development of the fantastic in the novel finds most effective expression in a section that is curiously free from the frequent narrative interjections that pepper the first part of the novel. Without the interruptions to give it its biographical tone, Pi's story enters an important phase that emphasises the use of the imagination in storytelling – especially in telling what Pi calls the “better story” (*LP* 317). This section of the novel, Part Two, pertinently entitled “The Pacific Ocean”, is thereby cast adrift from the preceding section, much like Pi is cast out to sea. Told solely in Pi's voice (that is, the voice of the adult Pi), this narrative focuses on his traumatic experience on the lifeboat. In dramatic contrast to the scant and fact-focussed diary that the young Pi keeps while on the lifeboat, this belated retrospective account takes up a substantial 59 of the one hundred chapters that the book comprises. The adult Pi, who obviously still carries the burden of his suffering, finally seems to be able to recreate and retell the story that escaped witness. One of the most radical occurrences within “The Pacific Ocean” section transpires in Chapter 92, where Pi makes “an exceptional botanical discovery” (256): A sinister, floating, carnivorous island populated by countless, comical meerkats. It is this extraordinary section of Pi's narrative that I will examine in the pages that follow, the better to trace the mode of the fantastic and the possibilities it offers for the representation of trauma.

The part of the story that details Pi's time on the island is exceptional in many ways. Its dramatic contrast with the rest of the narrative, in terms of its departure from putative realism, stretches our “willing suspension of disbelief” to the absolute maximum. It is within this very stretching of the “suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge 169) that the fantastic fully and most freely occupies Pi's narrative and is thus able to aid in the illumination of the dark void that is Pi's traumatic experience. In this chapter, and beginning with an outline of the theory of the fantastic, I will discuss the correlation between the nature of traumatic experiences, their representation and the fantastic. I will then describe how the mode of the fantastic functions within the narrative of *Life of Pi* by examining Pi's description of the carnivorous island. The fantastic, as a whole, will then be discussed in terms of its impact on the representation of Pi's trauma.

In the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* the word “fantastic” is listed as an adjective that means “existing only in the imagination” or that which is “perversely or irrationally imagined”. The term “fantasy” is described as a noun and its meaning is explained as a “mental apprehension of an object of perception” (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). I mention the commonplace definitions of these words here because the meaning of these terms in critical theory is slippery and they begin to acquire new and complex connotations without fully departing from their traditional ones. The term “fantastic” remains an adjective, but also acquires the definite article “the” to become a noun. Fantasy denotes a genre and is occasionally and most perplexingly used interchangeably with “the fantastic” by some critics (as I shall show below). Associated terms, such as “the uncanny” and “the marvellous”, add to and further bamboozle an already complicated and sometimes frustratingly vague field. It is my purpose, therefore, in this overview of the fantastic, to present a synopsis of it, how it works and what possibilities its use may create for representations that take the impalpable and ineffable as their subject – namely trauma. My approach will focus on the two critics in this area whose theories of the fantastic apply to my discussion of *Life of Pi*. I begin with arguably one of the most influential figures in this area, structuralist Tzvetan Todorov, and I then discuss the work of Rosemary Jackson, who develops, and also diverges from, Todorov’s approach.

Robert Scholes, in his foreword to Todorov’s book, *The Fantastic*, comments that Todorov’s work “is consciously structuralist in its approach to its generic subject. Todorov seeks linguistic bases for the structural features he notes in fantastic texts” (x). In this structuralist context, Todorov’s first assertion is that “‘The Fantastic’ is a name given to a kind of literature, to a literary genre” (3). He concedes, and extensively probes, the problematic nature of genre and its implications for literary study. Todorov states that the “concept of genre must be qualified” and, indeed, he does this. For instance, he comments “that a given work manifests a certain genre, not that this genre exists in the work” (21), and that “a work can, for example, manifest more than one category, more than one genre” (22). Todorov then assesses various descriptions suggested by other theorists of the fantastic and develops these to form his own definition. He decides that ambiguity is “the very heart of the fantastic” (25). When a text introduces supernatural or bizarre

possibilities and resists rationalising them, then something, namely the fantastic, occurs. According to Todorov, in

a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings – with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently.

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.

(25)

It is clear in Todorov's description of how the fantastic occurs in a text that at least one fundamental prerequisite is necessary for its presence. This prerequisite is something within the text that is incongruous with that which is expected or ordinary. This something must fall beyond the bounds of rational justification. Furthermore, the resultant uncertainty created by the existence of this anomaly must *persist* and *resist*. It persists through its resistance against lapsing into an explanation that seeks vindication in either assigning the fantastic to illusion, thus dismissing it altogether, or assimilating it into the order of a new or other reality that accommodates such strangeness, which then resolves the peculiarity and dissolves the ambiguity that underpins the conditions for the function of the fantastic in the first instance. The emphasis on the temporal in Todorov's description of the fantastic places stringent demands on it and, indeed, on any reading of a fantastic text. An interpretation of the fantastic text will necessarily, and like the fantastic, always remain suspended.

Todorov's description of the "event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world" (25) might well be used to describe a traumatic episode. Inexplicable occurrences that trigger uncertainty share a certain *beyondness* with trauma. Trauma is beyond perception because it is something "that cannot be processed or assimilated by the usual mental processes" (Luckhurst 2006: 499). Trauma thus defies assimilation and representation and remains strange and

unknowable because it falls outside the ambit of usual experiences. Todorov's "event" disrupts the internal logic of that text and, by definition, remains beyond rational explanation. In this regard, the "event" (25) and traumatic episodes share a similar peripheral existence on the edge of human understanding. Indeed, Pi says his feelings regarding his trauma "can hardly be described" (*LP* 142). If Pi's feelings cannot be described then their incommunicability suggests that they are beyond typical or accessible experience for him. Trauma, as something other-worldly in its effects, may therefore be understood as a type of "event which cannot be explained" (25) and which is capable of triggering precisely the ambiguity characteristic of the fantastic. In *Life of Pi* the narrative voices frame the traumatic episode in Pi's past and the trauma they attempt to represent gives rise to that indescribable, inaccessible and irresolvable uncertainty that permeates the novel (an uncertainty underscored most forcefully by the co-existence of two versions of Pi's experience). The fantastic is, therefore, an appropriate, and even necessary, narrative response to the problem of representing Pi's trauma.

An important aspect of Todorov's discussion is the point that the site of difference between a general hesitation in the text and the fantastic is the reader. He states that the fantastic "implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader's own ambiguous perception of the events narrated" and that the "*reader's hesitation* is therefore the first condition of the fantastic" (31). For readers to hesitate they need to be drawn into the story and experience the ambiguity as if it is their own. The way in which the fantastic depends on a reader echoes Dori Laub's assertion that traumatic testimony necessarily "includes its hearer" who, in listening to the "trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience the trauma in himself" (57). Readers of the fantastic text and listeners of a traumatic testimony become a part of that to which they are exposed and in this role they affect it in return.

Todorov's second condition for the identification of the fantastic as a genre in a text is that the hesitation must also be experienced by a character – hesitation is therefore a *shared experience*. Pi and the narrator both display hesitation. Pi is

unsure of whether he can share his story and whether he can adequately explain his feelings and the narrator's hesitation is evident early on in the "Author's Note", when he is suspicious of mystical Mr. Adirubasamy. But it is not until this hesitation also transmits to the reader that the text yields the mode of the fantastic, which represents a more contagious and interconnected hesitation. As part of this second condition, Todorov suggests, hesitation also becomes a theme in the text (33). The hesitation in *Life of Pi* is certainly consistent enough to be considered as a dominant theme. Hesitation is evident in the narrative of the author/narrator, the main character and in the plot itself. The ambiguities introduced within the novel remain unresolved even at its close, which is where the expectation of resolution is firmly denied and readers are left with a choice of which story to "believe". This final choice is between two very different stories, neither of which is free from a pervasive, and disturbing, sense of ambiguity.

The third condition is that "the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations" (33). This rejection indicates that the fantastic is thoroughly embedded in a text. In *Life of Pi* the effects of the fantastic are maintained because of the double narrative that Pi provides, as well as the text's refusal to privilege one version over the other (in Chapter Four I discuss the double narrative and allegory in more detail). The reader, although presented with options, cannot accept a straightforward allegorical resolution, because neither version of Pi's account relies on reductive allegorical reasoning. Thus, both of Pi's stories have an element of the fantastic and residues of ambiguity within them.

The hesitation created in a text that induces the effects of the fantastic is pivotal to Todorov's definition of the fantastic as a genre. For Todorov, "the fantastic [...] lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character". In his elaboration of what happens if the hesitation ceases, Todorov arguably places himself in dubious territory in terms of his assertion that the fantastic is indeed a *genre*. He explains that if a character resolves the hesitation by accepting an explanation for the phenomena, then the text is no longer fantastic and belongs instead to the genre of the uncanny. In this context, the uncanny is an anomaly for

which an explanation exists. This condition for the fantastic is particularly exclusive and leaves a very small margin for fantastic texts to be classified as such. Matters are further complicated by Todorov's suggestion that, if the character decides "that the new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena" (41), then the text shifts and fits firmly into the genre of the marvellous. Thus the fantastic, by Todorov's own admission, "leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment". His acknowledgment that this precarious fragility of the fantastic causes it "to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvellous and the uncanny" seems to consign it to a rather tentative border, even if it is a "frontier", which places into question the possibility of it being regarded as a genre at all. Todorov defends his stance by carefully qualifying what type of genre it is, saying that the fantastic is an "evanescent genre" (41). He makes an interesting comparison between the fantastic's position as trapped between the uncanny and marvellous, and the relationship between the stages of time: Past, present and future. For Todorov, the fantastic is the ever-fleeting present moment. The marvellous "corresponds to an unknown phenomenon, never seen as yet, still to come – hence to a future". On the other hand, with the uncanny "we refer the inexplicable to known facts, to a previous experience, and thereby to the past" (42).

According to Todorov's classification, hesitations that do not maintain their hesitation (in other words those that are resolved) do not provide the necessary conditions for the fantastic. His metaphor comparing the hesitation to the present moment seems slightly unsatisfactory, however, because the present is, by definition, temporary and constantly becoming history. The fantastic, in such a view, would always cease to be at some inevitable stage and it would never have the capacity to remain what it once was. Hesitation, by contrast, is not necessarily end-stopped and suggests the possibility for an indefinite suspension. Todorov goes on to qualify, to some degree, this strict form of classification. He states that if

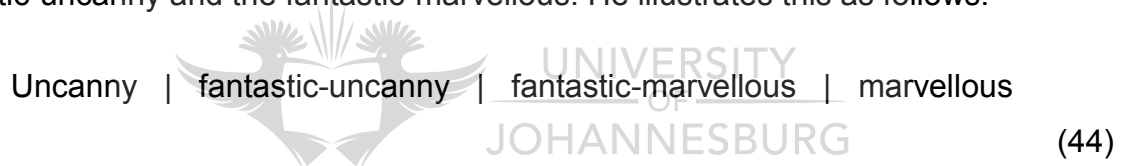
we do decide to proceed by examining certain parts of the work in isolation, we discover that by temporarily omitting the end of the narrative we are able to include a much larger number of texts within the genre of the fantastic. The modern (French or English) editions of *The Saragossa Manuscript* precisely confirm this: without its end, which resolves the hesitation, the book clearly belongs to the fantastic.

(43)



The method of “temporarily omitting” the ending of texts seems a bizarre way to alter the text in order to force it to accommodate a genre. But Todorov adds that it is the kind of text that manages to sustain its hesitation that constitutes a purely fantastic text. By this standard, *Life of Pi* could be classified a purely fantastic text because, even without excluding the end of the novel, the uncertainty continues to perpetuate retrospectively. The two narratives that Pi presents are both laced with irresolvable ambiguities and so the ending (that is, the end of the book) is not the end of the story.

Todorov compensates for the precarious precipice upon which he balances the position of the fantastic as a genre by making an allowance for sub-genres to occur on a continuum between the uncanny, on the one hand, and the marvellous, on the other. Between these extremes are the fantastic-uncanny and the fantastic-marvellous respectively (44). The pure state of the fantastic is precisely in the middle (but oddly absent from the illustration, possibly owing to its scarcity), between the fantastic-uncanny and the fantastic-marvellous. He illustrates this as follows:



The encroaching sub-genres constantly threaten to appropriate the fantastic text, should its hold over the hesitation falter at any point. The fantastic certainly shares an interesting relation to the marvellous and the uncanny and the associations of these three terms undoubtedly overlap. It is Todorov’s determinately structuralist position that causes him to force the fantastic into the mould of genre and, while the definitions developed by Todorov in this process are groundbreaking and important, they begin, inevitably, to delimit the fantastic almost out of existence.

Strict classification is a vexed undertaking, but through his writings Todorov brings lucidity to the definition of what the fantastic is and is not. While his specification that the fantastic is a genre is not especially important for my discussion, his delineation of the conditions for its existence, functions and effects are. Part of this chapter outlines how Todorov’s conditions for the fantastic manifest in the narrative of *Life of*

*Pi* and how they are sustained. For a slightly different approach to the fantastic, I briefly turn my attention to Jackson's *Fantasy: Literature of Subversion*.

Jackson credits Todorov's work on the fantastic for "encouraging serious critical engagement with a form of literature which had been dismissed as being rather frivolous" (5). But she quickly points out the limitations of his approach in what she sees as his dismissal of Freudian theory. For Jackson, "[f]antasy in literature deals so blatantly and repeatedly with unconscious material that it seems rather absurd to try to understand its significance without some reference to psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic readings of texts" (6).<sup>19</sup> She describes the function of fantastic literature as "expressing desire [...] it can *tell of*, manifest or show desire [...] or it can expel desire [...]. In many cases fantastic literature fulfils both functions at once, for desire can be 'expelled' through having been 'told of' and thus vicariously experienced by author and reader" (3).

Jackson outlines how the fantastic "traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" and it also "tells of the impossible attempt to realize desire, to make visible the invisible and to discover absence" (4). The way in which she describes the fantastic makes it seem less like a genre and more like something that may exist in any type of text in varying degrees of intensity. Indeed, one of the most helpful aspects of Jackson's text is her application of the rather more vague (and thus more useful) term "mode" to the fantastic.

Two of the definitions of the term "mode" in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* are that it is a "way or manner of doing or being of a thing" or a "manner or state of

---

<sup>19</sup> Jackson, with fantastic imprecision, uses "fantasy" and "the fantastic" interchangeably without clarifying that there might be a difference. Neil Cornwell, in *The Literary Fantastic*, devotes an entire chapter to criticising critics for "this particular lack of discrimination in terminology at the most basic level" (28). Of Jackson, among many others, he says, "it would have aided her argument had she been a little more precise in her definitions and categorisations" (30). In an attempt to remain clear, I will refer to "the fantastic" as the fantastic – unless citing critics who use the term "fantasy" to refer to the same concept. The irony is delightfully inescapable – somewhere between fantasy and the fantastic, the latter operates by maintaining a state of perpetual ambiguity.

being". It is a helpful term to apply to the fantastic, because it places emphasis on the text and how the narrative moves into a specific and different state of being – a shift therefore takes place. This delineation allows for the possibility that a text may move into and out of the mode of the fantastic. And, because it is a "mode" and not a "genre", certain elements or sections of a narrative may make use of the fantastic while others need not. This understanding of the fantastic as a "mode" certainly applies to its functioning in *Life of Pi*. And while the text partakes of the fantastic, much of it also manifests the characteristics of a distinctly realistic text – one example being the suggestion of biography that colour the author/narrator's frame.

For Jackson, the fantastic "is a literary mode from which a number of related genres emerge" (7). She is also interested in how the fantastic as a mode operates both in terms of the "*narrative qualities* of the mode [...]" and in terms of the *narrative effects* of basic psychic impulses" (8). A discussion of how the narrative of *Life of Pi* creates the necessary ambiguity that allows for the operation of the fantastic is one of the key aims of this chapter. Jackson's adaptation of Todorov's concept of the fantastic is important for this discussion, because in *Life of Pi* the term "mode" is more applicable to how the fantastic operates in the novel as a whole. The focus in what follows, then, is on how the fantastic begins to manifest in the text and how it dominates primarily the section detailing the carnivorous island.

In the "Author's Note" of *Life of Pi*, the oscillation between the author and the narrator, and fact and fiction, functions as the initial disorientation that may be described as a subtle leaning within the text toward the mode of the fantastic. However, because this hesitation is not clearly "common to reader and character" (Todorov 41) the narrative may not yet be described as functioning entirely within a fantastic mode. Apprehension of this hesitancy by a reader, at this stage of the novel, may be accompanied by the expectation that the ambiguities will be resolved. After the "Author's Note", the reader is almost immediately informed of the adult Pi's extensive academic achievements and the narrative becomes quasi-biographical in its attention to detail, such as the specifics of Pi's degrees. This shift from the ambiguously-narrated "Author's Note" to the first chapter, which is apparently realistic and straightforward, seems an odd transition in narrative style. However, this

is one way in which the fantastic operates: Jackson explains that the fantastic, which is inherently ambiguous, depends on some aspects of realistic fiction in order to operate. She notes how the “structure of the fantastic narrative is one founded upon contradictions” (21). Fantastic texts “assert that what they are telling is real – relying upon all the conventions of realistic fiction to do so – and then they proceed to break that assumption of realism by introducing what – within those terms – is manifestly unreal”. In *Life of Pi* the most conspicuous example of that which is “manifestly unreal” (34) is the island section.

Pi’s discovery of the carnivorous island is, notably, an “event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world” (Todorov 25); neither, however, can Pi’s indubitably anomalous coexistence with Richard Parker. But the fantastic relationship that Pi and the tiger share is compounded by the even stranger island passages. The island is a far more radical departure from realism than Pi’s living arrangements with Richard Parker: Scarcely anything about this strange place is at all familiar and nothing that Pi discovers about the island is predictable, expected, or in any way rational. Disbelief is the most obvious reaction to Pi’s account of the island and, indeed, Pi anticipates incredulity. He begins the chapter by detailing the island as follows: “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” (*LP* 256). Pi’s expectation and then acceptance of the disbelief he anticipates from readers is a reassurance that releases (if only momentarily) the obligation of having to believe his inconceivably weird discovery.

Even more telling, is Pi’s reluctance to believe that the island he has discovered is real – a point that is firmly underscored throughout this section of the novel. His internal monologue thus anticipates the scepticism he expects from his audience. Of the island, Pi says he “was certain it was an illusion that a few blinks would make disappear”. Despite his determination to consign the island to the realm of illusion, he admits that “it was a thrill to be deluded in such a high-quality way” (*LP* 256). Pi then comments: “I blinked deliberately, expecting my eyelids to act like lumberjacks. But the trees would not fall”. The island’s imposing image confounds Pi as he starts to consider the plausibility of such a place – “Who had ever heard of land with no

soil? With trees growing out of pure vegetation? I felt satisfaction because such a geology confirmed that I was right, that this island was a chimera, a play of the mind" (257).

Pi's use of the term "chimera" to describe the island aptly corresponds with the island's symbolic function within the novel. In terms of how Pi struggles to experience it, to believe in its existence and to represent it, the island challenges him in much the same way as his trauma does. In Greek mythology, a chimera is a "fire-breathing monster, with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail" (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). Pi compares the island to an impossibly grotesque and dangerous monster and his confrontation with this image threatens to overwhelm his sense of rationality. He is tempted to consign the island to the realm of fancy. The odd geology of the place does not match Pi's knowledge of what ought to be and yet the unreality of the island persists. Its physical impossibility overrides his instinct, which hints at the danger presented by the island, and his scepticism is replaced by a curiosity for the "chimera". But, as his reluctance to believe wanes, it is gradually replaced by a phlegmatic dismissal of the strangeness of the island. He states that he "was getting used to the mental delusion" and in order to avoid shattering it, he "refrained from putting a strain on it" (LP 257). Monstrous as the island may be, Pi is confronted with it and to test its boundaries is to risk rupturing it, which at first he seems unwilling to do. He represents the island to his audience just as he attempts to represent his trauma – ambiguously, with difficulty and with caution as he veers between utter disbelief and eventual, reluctant acceptance.

Finally, however, Pi feels the need for some kind of confirmation and he tests the island the only way he can, by disembarking from the relative safety of his lifeboat and stepping onto what has appeared, in much the same way, to be a mirage. He describes walking onto the island as follows:

The island was within reach of a foot. To judge – and be disappointed – or not to judge, that was the question.

I decided to judge. [...] I expected the bubble of illusion to burst at any second.

It did not. My foot sank into clear water and met the rubbery resistance of something flexible but solid. I put more weight down. The illusion would not give up. I put my full weight on my foot. Still I did not sink. Still I did not believe.

Finally, it was my nose that was the judge of land. It came to my olfactory sense, full and fresh, overwhelming: the smell of vegetation. I gasped. After months of nothing but salt-water-bleached smells, this reek of vegetable organic matter was intoxicating. It was then that I believed, and the only thing that sank was my mind; my thought process became disjointed. My leg began to shake.

'My God! My God!' I whimpered.

I fell overboard.


(LP 258)

After stepping onto the strange island, Pi is obviously overwhelmed. Like a traumatic experience, the island causes his "thought processes" to become "disjointed". He says that, while the island supported his physical weight, the "only thing that sank was [his] mind". The excessive irrationality that surrounds him is irresolvable and he has no choice but to fall overboard, so to speak, and experience the raw, "organic" and "intoxicating" power of the strange place that he has inadvertently found. Like his own traumatic experience, this island cannot be "processed or assimilated by the usual mental processes" (Luckhurst 2006: 499); because it is not an ordinary or expected experience, Pi's only coping mechanism is to fall into the experience. The island, in some ways, then, may be described as symbolic of the characteristics of Pi's trauma. The image of Pi falling overboard has metaphoric suggestions for readers. We, too, are confronted with the bamboozling bizarreness of this carnivorous island, which adds to the cumulative effect of the plethora of smaller ambiguities. Pi's resignation, then, becomes a cue for readers to "fall overboard" into the perpetual onslaught of ambiguities presented in the narrative.

In this description of Pi's first step onto the island, his rational expectations refuse to reconcile with his current experience, and thereby yet another ambiguity is formed. The disjunction between the rational, on the one hand, and the evidence of his senses, on the other, forces Pi to reassess the island's reality. According to Todorov's description of the fantastic, when an unfamiliar event occurs that cannot be rationalised, the one who encounters such an occurrence "must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is a victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place". However, the choice between these solutions must remain pending if the fantastic is to be maintained, because "the fantastic occupies the duration of the uncertainty" (25) and the uncertainty only continues to persist

while indecision prevails. While Pi does decide to test the island in order to resolve its mystery, his judgement never removes ambiguity; rather, his investigation actually perpetuates the uncertainty because his view of the island fluctuates constantly as he learns more about it. The more he learns, the stranger the place becomes since it raises yet more and more questions. And even when Pi ascertains that the island is a real object upon which he can stand, this fails to resolve the uncertainty, because the island's tangibility, for Pi, paradoxically adds to its utter unbelievability. The maintenance of the uncertainty caused by the island is ensured, not by Pi's believing or not believing its reality, but by him suspending his decision regarding it. His indefinite suspension of disbelief allows for the figurative re-presentation of aspects of his trauma through the fantastic, which is at work in the story of the strange island. Thus the island may be regarded as a distorted symbolic representation of Pi's traumatic experience.

The island's inconceivability makes it conceptually inaccessible, just like the moment of Pi's trauma: The representation of the island traces the very nature of Pi's loss. He describes the island in the following way:



I never saw such a stripped-down ecology. The air of the place carried no flies, no butterflies, no bees, no insects of any kind. The trees sheltered no birds. The plains hid no rodents, no grubs, no worms, no snakes, no scorpions; they gave rise to no other trees, no shrubs, no grasses, no flowers. [...] With the single, notable exception of the meerkats, there was not the least foreign matter on the island, organic or inorganic. It was nothing but shining green algae and shining green trees.

(LP 271)

The island is suspended spatially as well as conceptually in this description. Pi's account of the island above relies largely on what it does *not* have in order to paint a picture of just how other it is to what he expects. The description of the ecology of the island being "stripped-down" is comparable to traumatic episodes that are almost primal in their raw violence, disconnected from the expected feelings associated with ordinary experiences. The island is a self-sustaining organism that floats, detached, in a seemingly endless ocean – Pi comments on its "complete desolation". The way in which it floats without bounds is comparable to traumatic memories that are present in a mind that cannot adequately synthesise them and so they lurk endlessly

in the subconscious, unwanted, like “an intruder or ghost” (Luckhurst 2006: 499). When Pi crosses the island’s seemingly aimless path through the ocean, he and Richard Parker have no other choice but to inhabit it, to confront it. But the island begins to threaten Pi in a most sinister way. It begins to undo Richard Parker’s training and the tiger (symbolic of Pi’s attempt to control the trauma that threatens to overwhelm him) begins to become wild again, which forces Pi to train the animal once more. Richard Parker’s re-training is symbolic of Pi’s attempt to gain control over his traumatic memory and the repeated training sessions function as simulations of Pi’s compulsion to repeat. The tiger’s training regresses on the island however, which points to the ominous character of the place and its ability to consume Pi, just as the experience of his trauma does, and its ability to unravel the hard work he has put into coping with his trauma. While Pi does obtain relief from some of his physical suffering, in that the island provides him with food and fresh water, it also gravely threatens, in turn, eventually to consume him nonetheless.

The grim threat posed by this strange island becomes horribly evident to Pi one evening when he discovers a fruit on one of the trees and, within that fruit, “the seed of [his] departure” from the island. He peels the many-layered fruit and, as he does so, “sheath after sheath of leaf lifted, like the skins off an onion” (*LP* 280). Inside he finds “an unspeakable pearl at the heart of a green oyster. A human tooth [...] the island was carnivorous” (258). After inhabiting the island for some time, Pi’s gruesome discovery propels him to once again brave the unforgiving ocean from which he sought refuge on this island in the first instance.

Finding a human tooth at the core of a fruit is one of the stranger moments in the text and its interpretative possibilities are thus plentiful. Pi’s traumatic survival up until the moment when he arrives on the island, and his subsequent discovery that the place will literally consume him, suggests the island may be linked with Pi’s subconscious repressed traumatic memory, which harbours a similarly destructive capacity. The island, whether real or not, comes to represent the very real threat – “an unspeakable pearl” (*LP* 258) – Pi’s trauma poses to his continued survival. The island’s threat is not idle and in his hand Pi holds a human tooth, which might be regarded as a symbol of death. The tooth alludes to the possible price he will pay



should he fail to cope with the enormity of the traumatic crisis that he has confronted, and continues to confront.

The island, which is an impossibly inconceivable place, is how the fantastic holds a mirror to Pi's trauma in the text. The island is a distorted symbol of his suffering and a reminder of the danger his trauma still poses to his survival, both physical and psychological. The fantastic, and especially the island in this novel, is also a narrative response to the near impossibility of representing Pi's trauma. The ambiguity of the island is much like the uncertainty of trauma and the way the fantastic works with imaginative re-presentation shows how the "(non)experience" (Hartman 539) of trauma may be reflected through a narrative device. It is the novel's very dramatic move into the mode of the fantastic, which gives "utterance to precisely those elements which are known only through their absence" (Jackson 25) – namely trauma.

The workings of the fantastic in *Life of Pi* correspond with Jackson's description of this narrative mode when she explains that the "fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" and, in so doing, the fantastic aims "to make visible the invisible and to discover absence" (Jackson 4). For Jackson, the function and importance of the fantastic is that it "opens on to a region which has no name and no rational explanation for its existence. It suggests events beyond interpretation". Pi's trauma is, as we have seen, apparently beyond interpretation and so is the island. His attempt at telling his audience about the island corresponds with a similar undertaking to that of describing the horror of his loss and unlikely survival. The fantastic points to Pi's unspeakable experience. For Jackson the "fantastic exists as the inside, or underside, of realism, opposing the novel's closed, monological forms with open, dialogical structures, as if the novel had given rise to its own opposite, its unrecognizable reflection" (25). In *Life of Pi* the unrecognizable reflection that the fantastic reveals is the approximation of Pi's trauma as he tells the story of his survival, which would not have been possible had the novel made use of realism alone. The mode of the fantastic allows for the uncovering of "all that is not said, all that is unsayable, through realistic forms" (26).

Hartman asks the question: “How does traumatic knowledge become transmissible – how can it extend into personal and cultural memory?” (545). Perhaps the manner in which *Life of Pi* makes use of the mode of the fantastic is a fitting, if only partial, response to such a question for Pi. His traumatic experience can only become assimilated for him if and when he manages to represent it in some way, because it is only in the telling and constant repeating of that moment that it becomes a manageable memory for him. But representing any experience is fraught with pitfalls and representing trauma is an even greater challenge. The way in which the fantastic holds a mirror to Pi’s experience – at once reflecting it and distorting it – reflects and refracts the uncertainty and unknowability of trauma. The island’s outrageous characteristics spark an uncertainty within Pi and his persistent inability to resolve the island’s incongruity perhaps serves as a suggestion for the reader of this novel to embrace its strangeness rather than clarify it. The island is merely one device through which the novel seeks to reflect some of Pi’s experience, since the entire text is filled with ambiguous threads that perpetuate that uncomfortable uncertainty that encourages speculation but refuses clarity. Furthermore, it should be noted that the island on its own is not enough to sustain the effects of the fantastic. For Todorov, the “fantastic implies, then, not only the existence of an uncanny event, which provokes a hesitation in the reader and the hero; but also a kind of reading, which we may for the moment define negatively: it must be neither ‘poetic’ nor ‘allegorical’ (Todorov 32). *Life of Pi* is in many ways both poetic and allegorical, but these functions of the text do not operate in an ordinary fashion and Martel wields them in ways that deftly perpetuates the mode of the fantastic. The double narrative, for example, is an allegory that functions to destabilise and complicate the narrative, rather than draw comforting parallels, and it is a discussion of this allegory that will be presented in the next chapter. This novel does not seek to decide which of the two stories is “truer”. Truth is as inconsequential as the facts of Pi’s suffering – that he suffered is the point. His trauma is beyond words: This much is obvious. The fantastic draws focus away from unequivocal representation to allow for an imaginative engagement that enables Pi to repeat his traumatic moment as contemporary experience and, in so doing, control this re-presentation – control he never had at the moment the trauma occurred.

## Chapter Four

### Allegory in *Life of Pi*

The *Tsimtsum* sank on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1977. [...] And I arrived on the coast of Mexico, the sole human survivor of the *Tsimtsum*, on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1978. [...] I told you two stories that account for the 227 days in between. [...] 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. [...] Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?

(LP 316-317)

In this excerpt, Pi is addressing the two Japanese officials to whom he has told two stories, both of which account for his survival after the sinking of the *Tsimtsum* in the Pacific Ocean. The story that commands the most space in the narrative is the initial one told by Pi, which presents the animals quite literally as his co-survivors. The story that appears toward the end of the novel, while only spanning a seemingly insignificant eight pages, has a dramatic effect on the way in which the earlier story, and indeed the novel as a whole, is perceived. The presentation of two stories and the manner in which the novel parallels them in such a way as both to encourage readers to choose which one to believe, and simultaneously to thwart them in their attempts to do so, is an important strategy in the narrative which has repercussions for how Pi's trauma is represented.<sup>20</sup> One way to assess the novel is to presuppose that the human story is nothing more than a straightforward substitute for the animal story – simply a second option in which “Pi retells his tale, turning his animal shipmates into humans” (Boyagoda 71). This view interprets Pi's presentation of two stories as an uncomplicated allegory where the human story is privileged as the source; the animal story then ostensibly functions as a substitute whose purpose is to soften or obscure the brutality of the loss of Pi's mother and, indeed, of his own agonizing survival. However, in this chapter, I will argue that, within this seemingly simple allegory, there resides a profound and irresolvable ambiguity that undermines any consistent correlation between the stories.

---

<sup>20</sup> For ease of distinction I will refer to the story that Pi tells first (the one with animals) as the “animal story”, and the other as the “human story”.

Ambiguity, echoed throughout the narrative as a whole, becomes most powerful in the indeterminate space between Pi's two stories and complicates the double narrative rather than reductively clarifying it. As I have demonstrated, the novel's sustained ambiguity and the effects of the fantastic dramatically influence the way in which Pi's trauma is represented and allow for a creative approximation of his unspeakable agony. Pi's trauma cannot simply or unequivocally be "told" in a story, but – as it will be the purpose of this chapter to explain – the allegory dexterously constructed in the novel provides a possibility for an alternative kind of rendering. Indeed, the term allegory "derives from Greek *allēgoria*, 'speaking otherwise'" – and it is in this sense that the allegory in *Life of Pi* operates: As a means by which Pi can speak "otherwise" (Cuddon 20) about his loss and survival.

My approach in this chapter will be to consider two dissimilar definitions of allegory. First, I discuss allegory as described by M.H. Abrams in his authoritative and widely consulted *A Glossary of Literary Terms*.<sup>21</sup> I shall argue that the narrative's treatment of anthropomorphism and the emphasis on the importance of names systematically undermine the possibility for a clear-cut and conventional allegorical resolution to the double narrative. I then turn my attention to a consideration of allegory that contrasts significantly with the conventional definition provided by Abrams: That is, the view presented by Paul de Man in his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality". By reading the allegory in Martel's novel from within de Man's deconstructive framework, I hope to show how the allegory fails to meet Abrams's definition, only to succeed in another, altogether more radical way, a way which allows for the working of the fantastic in the narrative. Furthermore, I shall argue that the narrative may also be interpreted as a commentary on the very function of allegory.

Abrams defines allegory as

a narrative, whether in prose or verse, in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived by the author to make coherent sense on the "literal," or primary level of signification, and at the same time to communicate a second, correlated order of signification.

(8)

---

<sup>21</sup> The glossary is now in its 10<sup>th</sup> edition.

What seems to be important in this definition is the condition of correlation: That a literal element in the narrative matches neatly and unproblematically with its (non-literal, secondary) equivalent – indeed, equivalence is the driving force of allegory in this sense. The assumption that the two stories presented by Pi form an allegorical relationship is apparently well indicated; after all, Pi himself makes the connection: “In both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer” (LP 317). According to the definition offered by Abrams, however, these events and their outcomes, provide only some of the necessary common ground that allegory requires, as I shall show below.

On one level, then, some key elements of both the stories seem to match. The way in which the stories match is the aspect that most critics focus on and it is on the basis of these correlations that they draw their conclusions regarding the novel. For example, Lucie Armitt, in *Fantasy Fiction: An Introduction*, explains the allegory as a realisation “that all this has been fabricated, and the ‘real’ antagonists are human” and she asserts that the “details can be – at least in part – assumed to be the product of Pi’s imagination” (142). However, a more thorough comparison of the two stories reveals disturbances to these tidy parallels that undermine the success of the allegory (as outlined by Abrams). Furthermore, the way in which Pi presents the narratives to the Japanese officials resists easy correlation between them.

Toward the close of *Life of Pi*, there is a section described as “*verbatim transcript*” (LP 290) that details Pi’s interview with two Japanese officials investigating the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*. The officials, who are presented as buffoons, perceive Pi’s account of his miraculous survival to be rather implausible. They confront Pi, telling him that his story is “just too hard to believe” (297). The trio argue extensively over whether logic and reason serve as reliable and constant measures of what is true, possible, or believable. Pi retaliates against the men’s refusal to believe his story by saying “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 factuality” (302). He then offers the officials, and his audience, an alternative to his account that includes the animals. In this alternative, the animals are presumably

replaced with people: The orang-utan is Pi's mother; the zebra is a sailor; the hyena is a cook; and Pi is Richard Parker. This far more gruesome version of events describes how the human survivors on the lifeboat resort to cannibalism in order to survive, how Pi witnesses his mother's horrifying murder and how he ultimately commits murder while stranded on the lifeboat on which he experienced only death and horror. At the end of telling this story, Pi asks the officials if they prefer this alternative and their response is that the story without the animals is an awful one and they prefer the story with animals. The story with the animals is surely the more poetic and entertaining of the versions, and the narrator dedicates over 180 pages to its narration as opposed to a dismissive eight pages that relate the story that replaces animals with people. The story with animals is also supported by extensive justification – especially through the narrator's description of Pi's extensive knowledge of the animals with which he is trapped. Critics who privilege the human story as the foundation for the allegory, fail to account for the incongruous meerkat bones that remain in Pi's lifeboat in the human story, and which seem not to have a human correlative. The presentation of alternative endings to the Japanese officials is extended to the reader. Pi tells "two stories that account for the 227 days" (316) of his survival and we are implicitly invited to decide which story is "the better story". However, like the officials, we as readers "can't prove which story is true and which is not" (317).

In order for the double narrative in *Life of Pi* to meet the requirements of allegory in terms of Abrams's definition, the animal story and the human story need to draw very precise parallels. Put plainly, the animals in the animal story need to function as direct representations of the humans in the human story – this would be a matching of the "agents" (Abrams 8). This one-to-one correlation is something that the Japanese officials, who are investigating the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*, earnestly seek to establish. These officials, dissatisfied with and disturbed by Pi's animal story, which they see as outlandish, compel him to offer them another story. When Pi presents them with a different account they begin forcefully forging a correlation between the two stories in order to clarify any exasperatingly lingering disparities. After hearing Pi's human story they seem horrified at its graphic detail, yet are relieved to have something with which to equate the animal story, and they

immediately begin connecting the two versions. The conversation between the two men after hearing Pi's human story goes as follows:

Mr. Chiba: "**What a horrible story.**"

[Long silence]

Mr. Okamoto: "**Both the zebra and the Taiwanese sailor broke a leg, did you notice that?**"

"**No I didn't.**"

"**And the hyena bit off the zebra's leg just as the cook cut off the sailor's.**"

"**Ohhh, Okamoto-San, you see a lot.**"

"**The blind Frenchman they met in the other lifeboat – didn't he admit to killing a man and a woman?**"

"**Yes, he did.**"

"**The cook killed the sailor and his mother.**"

"**Very impressive.**"

"**His stories match.**"

"**So the Taiwanese sailor is the zebra, his mother is the orang-utan, the cook is ...the hyena – which means he's the tiger!**"

"**Yes. The tiger killed the hyena – and the blind Frenchman – just as he killed the cook.**"

"**But what does it mean, Okamoto-San?**"

"**I have no idea.**"

"**And what about the island? Who are the meerkats?**"

(LP 311-312)

The Japanese officials are trying to make the two stories that Pi tells fit together – to "**match**", as one of them triumphantly proclaims. However, their determination to rationalise the animal story by means of interpreting it as an allegory of the human story seems rather desperate and is undeniably comical. Their fervent attempt at assigning each animal a human counterpart is fundamentally flawed. Because sufficient similarities between the stories surface in their conversation, they are encouraged to begin treating the stories like a riddle but, despite their earnest attempts at constructing a coherent picture, the pieces do not fit as faultlessly as they might wish. They decide that the sailor must match with the zebra, Pi's mother with the orang-utan and Pi with the tiger. However, some inconsistencies begin to arise within their system. The officials assume that the blind Frenchman and the cook correlate to one another as well as to the hyena – which forms an odd triangle rather than the expected binary relationship. They have assigned both these human characters to one animal, but in the novel the cook and the blind Frenchmen are presented as separate characters. The cook is a part of the human story. In the animal story there is a hyena (which the officials assume is representative of the

cook), but long after the hyena has died in this story, Pi comes across the blind Frenchman whom Richard Parker kills and eats – the Frenchman is thus a character quite separate from the cook. The officials conveniently ignore this and the fact that they have assigned the hyena two different human counterparts does not seem to concern them, but it does signal to us that the allegory is not as clear-cut as it may at first appear.

Furthermore, if Pi corresponds to Richard Parker, then why is he present in both stories? If Richard Parker “represents” him then, by the laws of correlation that seem to drive allegory in Abrams’s definition – and the Japanese officials’ logic – he should not be in the animal story as well. The alignment of the two stories reveals some other, more obvious inconsistencies that even the officials notice: “**And what about the island? Who are the meerkats?**” one of them asks. When no obvious answer materialises, they stop asking questions and also halt their speculations as to how, why and if the stories match. Mr. Chiba, initially impressed by the apparent insight of the parallels that his colleague detects, asks: “**But what does it mean Okamoto-San?**”, to which the response is “**I have no idea**” (LP 312). Thus the two characters in the novel that have the most confidence in the undeviating allegorical connection between the double narrative remain unclear as to the connection between the stories and the connections that they do see do not make sense to them. Their initial excitement at being able to clarify the meaning of the animal story is swiftly beleaguered and replaced by a sense of enduring unease – an uncertainty that they cannot explain or resolve. In Mr. Okamoto’s final report on the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*, he summarises the probable reasons as to why the ship sank. At the end of the report, he adds a reference to Pi, which, significantly, comprises the final lines of the novel:

*As an aside, story of sole survivor, Mr. Piscine Molitor Patel, Indian citizen, is an astounding story of courage and endurance in the face of extraordinarily difficult and tragic circumstances. In the experience of this investigator, his story is unparalleled in the history of shipwrecks. 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.*

(LP 319)



It is significant that Mr. Okamoto uses the word “*unparalleled*” in his account; while he means it to refer to the uniqueness of Pi’s experience, the ironic implication is that it reflects on how Pi’s stories resist being placed in parallel relation. It is telling, too, that the final word in the novel refers to the tiger as just that – a tiger, not an allegorical representation of Pi. This is a revealing admission by the very character who believes most resolutely that the stories are undoubtedly and unproblematically allegorical. The attempt by the officials to allegorise the stories is clearly a doomed endeavour.

Furthermore, the supposition that the animals represent people in the animal version of Pi’s story relies on an anthropomorphic premise, which flies in the face of the novel’s repeated opposition to anthropomorphism. Early in the novel, Pi tells the story of how his father taught him a frightening lesson in how dangerous it is to think of animals as anything other than animals:

I learned at my expense that Father believed 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. We’ve all met one, perhaps even owned one. It is an animal that is “cute”, “friendly”, “loving”, “devoted”, “merry”, “understanding”. These animals lie in ambush in every toy store and children’s zoo. Countless stories are told of them. They are the pendants of those “vicious”, “bloodthirsty”, “depraved” animals that inflame the ire of maniacs I have just mentioned, who vent their spite on them with walking sticks and umbrellas. In both cases we look at an animal and see a mirror. The obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything is the bane not only of theologians but also of zoologists.

(LP 31)

This fairly pointed criticism of anthropomorphism is followed by the anecdote that describes Pi’s father teaching his young sons just how dangerous it is to forget that animals are animals and that to think of them as human can end in disaster. As if to anticipate the perils of reductive allegorizing, he warns against the desire for reflection, “see[ing] a mirror” that informs both anthropomorphism and allegory. The “obsession with putting ourselves at the centre of everything” could, it might be argued, be the “bane” not only of the “theologians” and “zoologists” but also of Japanese officials and the logocentrically-inclined readers they represent. Pi’s father tries to enforce this lesson by forcing the boys to witness the feeding of a live goat to

a food-deprived tiger in the hope of demonstrating that their familiarity with the zoo animals must be tempered by a keen appreciation of the differences between human and animal behavior, as well as fear for their own lives.

Anthropomorphism functions in a similar way to allegory: It relies on an eliding of differences and on reductive equivalences. The strong stance against anthropomorphism that the novel seems to engender in these accounts (both in Pi's musing about animals and in his father's lesson) unsettles the assertion that the animal story should represent, unproblematically or reductively, the humans in the human story. That Pi's lesson against humanizing animals is learned by witnessing the threat of a ravenous tiger further supports the argument against his identification with this specific animal, since he has been explicitly taught to fear it. Or is it perhaps the fear and respect that he has for the tiger that makes the animal the most obvious choice to substitute for himself in his alternative story? Perhaps it is precisely the tiger's fierce qualities he most wishes to appropriate in his moment of vulnerability and helplessness. As with so many questions provoked by the novel, the evidence could be interpreted more than one way. However, Pi's continual and well-supported resistance to anthropomorphism, makes his choice of a tiger to represent him (if this is indeed the case) problematic. Pi comments that he "learned the lesson that an animal is an animal, essentially and practically removed from us, twice: once with Father and once with Richard Parker" (*LP* 31). This insistence upon how removed from animals humans are, substantially undermines the allegorical correlation between the two stories. The repeated opposition to anthropomorphism in the novel also seems to weaken the apparently obvious links between the two versions of Pi's survival. Even when Pi admits to indulging in playful humanization when he, as a child, "anthropomorphized the animals till they spoke fluent English" (34), he still adamantly insists that he "never deluded [himself] as to the real nature of [his] playmates" (34).

Perhaps the warning against anthropomorphism is a caution against making the simple allegorical assumption that one story reflects the other unproblematically. This is tantamount to saying that an animal is a person or that Pi is a tiger, which is precisely what a straightforward allegorical analysis would assume. The zoological

accuracy that underpins Pi's descriptions of and interactions with the animals certainly emphasises their reality. Conversely, the Japanese officials are represented in a caricatured manner, which is in stark contrast to the detailed realism of the animal descriptions, particularly those of Richard Parker, thus making it difficult to think of the animals as anything other than animals. The complexity of the animal story and its lengthy rendition, which dominates most of the central chapters of the novel, surely weaken the assertion that it is a simple reflection of the human story. In an interview with Sabine Sielke, Martel comments that, when "people claim *Life of Pi* is an allegory, in fact they're mistaken. The animals are possibly allegorical, but otherwise they really are animals" (2003). Arguably, to ignore the novel's warning regarding anthropomorphism is to align oneself with the likes of the Japanese officials. On even the most superficial level, as demonstrated by these officials' attempt to correlate the stories, the two versions of Pi's narrative do not draw a parallel unequivocally and the lack of "coherent sense" (Abrams 8) required for the allegory to function, puts into question whether this allegory functions as a straightforward allegory should. An analysis of how the novel deals with names reveals a similar propensity within the narrative for incongruity.

The way in which the two stories in the novel resist identification with one another may be described as embodying a theme in the novel that permeates other areas of the text – such as its treatment of names, since the correlative function implied by naming is persistently subverted. The most obvious example of this is how the title of the novel implies an autobiographical or biographical text and yet the narrative proves to be something quite different. Pi's name is another example (as discussed in Chapter Two). His unusual name frustrates him as he is named, and very strangely so, after a swimming pool. He actively resists his designated signifier by creating a nickname for himself. Pi's unusual name causes him to be teased at school and creates administrative confusion. His desire to adopt a nickname that he prefers demonstrates the arbitrary association forced by the act of naming. In a similar way, Pi explains how "Richard Parker was so named because of a clerical error" (LP 132). He then tells the story of how a hunter, commissioned to kill a man-eating beast in Bangladesh, stumbles across a female tiger and her cub. He sets a trap to capture them and sell them to Pondicherry Zoo. Using a live goat to attract

the hungry pair, he waits for them. When they arrive, the cub chooses thirst over hunger and rushes to the nearby river to drink. Once the pair is caught, the hunter, named Richard Parker, names the little tiger Thirsty. However,

the shipping clerk at the Howrah station was evidently a man both befuddled and diligent. All the papers we received with the cub clearly stated that its name was Richard Parker, that the hunter's first name was Thirsty and that his family name was None Given. Father had a good chuckle over the mix-up and Richard Parker's name had stuck.

(LP 133)

This lighthearted and amusing anecdote, along with Pi's desperate desire to mould his name to suit him (rather than live with a name that means nothing to him), demonstrates an attitude toward names and naming in the narrative that is suspicious of the implied correlative connection between names and their bearers that is often entirely baseless.

The two stories contained within *Life of Pi* are, however, undoubtedly related. And while the allegory does not behave unproblematically as an allegory "should" (at least, in terms of Abrams's definition), we cannot simply dismiss the possibility that an allegory, of some sort, is at work here. There are connections between the two stories that seem to function in a way strongly reminiscent of allegory – the animal story is offered to both the Japanese officials and the reader as a co-narrative of the human one, after all. Another interpretation, in which the stories' tangential relation may be better explained, may allow for a different view of how the stories work, and indeed a different view of how allegory functions within this text. This alternative view of allegory, which allows for another interpretation of how allegory works in *Life of Pi*, is informed by the writings of Paul de Man.

In the essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality", from *Blindness and Insight*, de Man discusses a history of poetics and, more specifically, the way in which, in the eighteenth century, in spite of symbol being regarded as superior to allegory as a form of representation, writers found themselves describing symbol in terms of its temporal – therefore, allegorical – condition. The preference of symbol over allegory is coincident with the Romantic belief that experience and representation of

experience can be synonymous – that there is no temporal deferral between the two. De Man's analysis reveals how the idea of the symbol comes to denote the supposedly unproblematic preservation of subjectivity of experience and thus refers to universal truth. According to de Man,

this appeal to the infinity of a totality constitutes the main attraction of the symbol as opposed to allegory, a sign that refers to one specific meaning and thus exhausts its suggestive potentialities once it has been deciphered. 'Symbol and allegory,' writes Gadamer, 'are opposed as art is opposed to non-art, in that the former seems endlessly suggestive in the indefiniteness of its meaning, whereas the latter, as soon as its meaning is reached, has run its full course'.

(188-189)

De Man goes on to note that allegory is represented as "dryly rational and dogmatic in its reference to a meaning that it does not itself constitute, whereas the symbol is founded on an intimate unity between the image that rises up before the senses and the supersensory totality that the image suggests". While de Man does note some exceptions, he contends that the "supremacy of symbol, conceived as an expression of unity between the representative and the semantic function of language, becomes a commonplace that underlies literary taste, literary criticism, and literary history". This domination of the symbol over allegory pervades the "romantic and post-romantic eras", to the point where "allegory is frequently considered an anachronism and dismissed as non-poetic" (190).

However, this "main attraction" of the symbol is wrought with contradiction, as de Man methodically reveals. Allegory is disdained because it can never coincide with experience, and always draws attention to the space between referent and sign. This is regarded as a limitation and undesirable fixity. Symbol, on the other hand, is regarded as the "infinity of totality" (de Man 188): An oxymoron to which de Man draws our attention because it suggests precisely the end-stopped limitation that Gadamer places on allegory.

In de Man's teasing out of the contradiction inherent in the insistence upon the dominance of symbol over allegory, he critiques Coleridge's dismissal of allegory as being nothing more than "phantom proxy" (192). An ambiguity becomes evident in Coleridge's choice of adjectives, though, and de Man sharply points this out. In

Coleridge's attempt to highlight the insubstantiality of allegory, he emphasises the depth of the symbol, and he seeks to do this by contrasting the two. De Man quotes Coleridge's description of the symbol: "The symbol is characterized by the translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal" (191). For de Man, these transcendental descriptions deconstruct the role given to symbol as a direct representation of life, and thus the symbol's "material substantiality dissolves". De Man then points out what he terms a "surprising" description by Coleridge – of allegory as "*merely* a reflection", which for de Man signals that the "spiritualization of the symbol has been carried so far that the moment of material existence by which it was originally defined has now become altogether unimportant". Thus, "symbol and allegory alike now have a common origin beyond the world of matter. The reference, in both cases, to a transcendental source, is now more important than the kind of relationship that exists between the reflection and its source" (192).

Coleridge's comments on allegory (and de Man's critique of them) echo some key sentiments with regard to how allegory works in *Life of Pi*, particularly as an alternative response to the inescapable difficulties involved in representing Pi's trauma. The comparison of symbol and allegory is less important to this discussion than are the unusual descriptions of the function of allegory that result from the apparent contrast of these two figures of speech.<sup>22</sup> Coleridge's description of allegory as a "phantom" (in de Man 192) bears some resemblance to how trauma may be described as a "ghost", which lurks in the victim's mind, not assimilated by "the usual mental processes" (Luckhurst 2006: 499) and thus unable to be

---

<sup>22</sup> In examination of seventeenth century poetry in comparison to late eighteenth century poetry de Man reveals the slow return of allegory (against the earlier glorification of symbol), which he refers to as a "prevalence of allegory", which for him "corresponds to the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny. This unveiling takes place in a subject that has sought refuge against the impact of time in a natural world to which, in truth, it bears no resemblance" (206). The argument that de Man represents thus traces a history of the dominance of symbol over allegory, which reveals a profound contradiction in the impossible pursuit of unity between subject and object. His argument shows how allegory does not insist on this dialectic, but instead resists it.

adequately represented. Obviously, a traumatic memory is not merely a ghost of a terrible moment; it is more profound and frightening than that. The memory of a traumatic occurrence cannot simply reflect that terrible moment, instead it repeatedly reflects and refracts, resulting in a haunting, persistent and present reminder of that traumatic moment. In the case of *Life of Pi*, then, form and content bear an interesting relation, as the allegory as a “phantom” is not “*merely* a reflection” (Coleridge in de Man 192) either; it is a haunting presence. A reflection of the trauma no doubt it is, but not *merely* so (as Coleridge suggests). In the case of *Life of Pi*, the very fundamental act of differentiating between that which is source and that which is reflection is unremittingly thwarted.

In his attempt to polarise the supposedly incongruous roles of symbol and allegory, Coleridge, inadvertently, ascribes allegory a powerful position – that of “proxy” (in de Man 192). The way in which the allegory in *Life of Pi* is used to challenge the impossibility of representing trauma certainly gives it a certain power to “stand in place of”, as it were, and “speak otherwise” (Cuddon 20) of an experience that defies telling and of which Pi cannot coherently speak. Allegory in this sense – as a “phantom proxy” (Coleridge in de Man 192) – far from being the weaker relative of symbol, is in a position to engage more fruitfully with the intricacy of representing trauma.

De Man also, and quite radically, posits that allegory resists close correlative associations. While

the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as a non-self.  
(207)

In de Man’s assessment of allegory, the “desire to coincide” which, I would argue, is precisely the desire that informs Abrams’s definition of allegory, is “renounced”. De Man states that allegory is characterized by discontinuity, “distance” and that which is “non-self”. In *Life of Pi* the narrative persistently frustrates any endeavour that

attempts to make the stories “coincide”: As the Japanese officials’ effort to reconcile the stories demonstrates, no matter how allegorically related the two stories are, the allegory “designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin” and it does so persistently. The result of this “distance” and resistance against the “desire to coincide” is an allegory that “establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference”. In this novel the narrative connects the stories only to undermine this connection, thus insisting on a “temporal difference”. The double narrative presents what seems to be a mechanical allegory, only swiftly to change that presentation through introducing an onslaught of ambiguities and inconsistencies, which enable the allegory to operate from within “the void of this temporal difference”. The implication of an allegory operating in the “void” created by the ambiguities between the two stories is that the accounts are not bound by the strict binary relation designated when one story represents another directly. This is not to say that the novel is not presenting readers with an allegory; the point is that the allegory functions self-reflexively by gesturing towards its own deconstructive practice. The allegory is free of reductive parallels and instead, it insists on the impossibility of unequivocal representation. The very structure of this kind of allegory allows for more creative possibilities in terms of story-telling and in the case of *Pi*, the telling of trauma.

De Man’s discussion of the similarities between irony and allegory demonstrates further how the latter operates. For him, in allegory (as in irony) the

relationship between sign and meaning is discontinuous, involving an extraneous principle that determines the point and the manner at and in which the relationship is articulated. In both cases, the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning and has for its function the thematization of this difference.

(209)

In allegory the “relationship between sign and meaning is discontinuous”. This discontinuity may be thought of as one way in which the allegory in *Life of Pi* allows for creative possibility to exist in the text. The two stories do not correlate perfectly and the gap that exists between them causes the “relationship between sign and meaning” to become even more elastic. The lingering uncertainties that are never



resolved in the novel continue to haunt the reader and they function self-reflexively, behaving like loose threads that begin to unravel the fragile illusion of coherence; they demonstrate, instead, that the allegory is not and cannot be a simple mirror. The human story is by no means the original referent of which the animal story is an untroubled and secondary sign, just as experience cannot be signified without distortion. This discontinuity is painfully manifested in Pi's experience. For Pi, the trauma he endures paradoxically exists as a kind of "(non)experience" (Hartman 539) owing to its unprecedented severity. His memory of his experience is thus remote from that actual moment – "sign and meaning" for him are utterly and excruciatingly dislocated both temporally, and psychologically. The use of allegory in the novel acknowledges the nature of discontinuity and the impossibility of correlation and representation. The allegory, as understood in terms of de Man's definitions, assumes (and even insists upon) a gap between Pi's experience and the story he tells about it, because in allegory "the sign points to something that differs from its literal meaning" (de Man 209). In *Life of Pi* the vague and unknown referent is exploited to perpetuate uncertainty and ambiguity and in so doing creates the possibility for imaginative representation.

The ambiguous allegory in the novel and the way in which it promotes discontinuity may be interpreted as one of the methods the narrative makes use of to allow for the perpetuation of the mode of the fantastic. As we have seen, the fantastic requires persistent hesitation in order to function and the ambiguities that arise between the two stories in the allegory provide just that. The fantastic "traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" (Jackson 4) and allegory "establishes its language in the void" of "temporal difference" (de Man 207). Allegory and the fantastic thus complement one another in this novel, as both are preoccupied with the unarticulated and inexpressible parts of Pi's story.

The position of the human story in the last few pages of the novel is an important strategy that assures a lasting sense of ambiguity. Readers really have no way of knowing which version of events is the primary level of signification in the allegory; priority and origin are endlessly deferred. Allegory, in this instance, works to

perpetuate the mode of the fantastic and the fantastic similarly resists correlative allegorical assumptions. The response of critic Garan Holcombe demonstrates the ambivalence experienced with regard to the two stories:

The reader is left to muse upon which version might be the truth; there is of course the possibility that the story we have been told is nothing more than a fantasy elaborated by Pi as a coping strategy. [...] It is enchanting, a fiction that sets itself up as truth in such a convincing manner that at the novel's conclusion, the reader cannot be entirely sure that the events depicted did not in fact take place.

(2004)

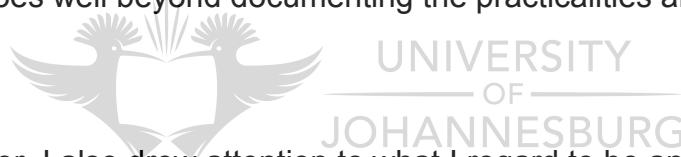
That readers are left “to muse” is a crucial point, because the perpetuation of indecision is precisely that which enables the fantastic to persist in the text. In the allegory, the “original” story is lost (as the moment of Pi’s trauma is lost) and all we have are two stories to consider. Without any firm resolution as to which story should take precedence, the hesitation is sustained indefinitely.

The beginning of de Man’s “Rhetoric of Temporality” describes how the “traditional forms of rhetoric have fallen into disrepute” (187). These forms of rhetoric, allegory being one example, return in recent criticism and are no longer considered to be simply “normative or descriptive” (188). Their departure therefore, was nothing more than a “temporary eclipse” (187). For de Man, what problematises investigations of allegory is “the association of rhetorical terms with value judgements that blur distinctions and hide the real structures”. In *Life of Pi* the structuring of what appears to be a simple allegory is a technique in the novel that depends on a traditional value-based assessment of the two stories that Pi presents – one which will presume a straightforward allegorical relation. But the narrative systematically introduces sufficient ambiguous elements that pull apart the value judgements that attempt to “hide the real structures”. The “normative and descriptive” (188) response to allegory in the novel thus may also be thought of as a kind of “temporary eclipse” (187), as the narrative self-reflexively problematises its own use of allegory. In certain respects, then, the manner in which the allegory develops in the novel resembles the way in which de Man describes a changing perception of allegory in “The Rhetoric of Temporality”.

That *Life of Pi* is an allegorical novel is the primary observation of almost every reviewer who has commented on it. Indeed, any reference to the novel that fails to acknowledge this will have missed the most obvious and important technique of the narrative. Yet to take refuge in the allegory as an uncomplicated explanation for the double narrative seems unsatisfactory considering the numerous ambiguities that arise between the two stories. To understand this allegory only in terms of the ways in which the two stories do correlate is to leave too many aspects of the text unexamined – too many nagging details (such as the inexplicable meerkat bones left in the lifeboat) would have to be simply ignored. Many irreconcilable differences between the two stories make them unsuitable for analysis only in terms of Abrams's view of allegory, because in terms of this understanding of allegory the stories do not correlate satisfactorily. In terms of de Man's discussion of allegory, however, the function of the double narrative is to create the very divergence that the Japanese officials and superficial critics seek to avoid noticing. And it is precisely this deviant allegory that Pi's story requires if it is to tell a story *about* his suffering. Pi's trauma cannot be represented unequivocally or reflected without distortion. The novel's response to the impossibility of representing trauma is to offer the readers a story that will inspire belief in God – but then it provides two. These two stories present sufficiently irresolvable ambiguities to form an aporia in the narrative. Within this aporia, the "fantastic exists as the inside, or underside, of realism, opposing the novel's closed, monological forms with open, dialogical structures, as if the novel had given rise to its own opposite, its unrecognizable reflection" (Jackson 25). This reflection is unrecognizable because the stories correlate imprecisely and this imprecision allows for imaginative play, which results in something of an approximation of Pi's horror. In the indeterminate space between Pi's stories he is, therefore, "speaking otherwise" (Cuddon 20) of an experience that defies representation.

## Conclusion

The main thrust of my argument in this dissertation has been to show how Pi's traumatic story is given a "meaningful shape" (*LP* 285) by means of three strategies: The use of framed narratives, the fantastic and allegory. In Chapter One, my aim was to introduce the theoretical framework of this dissertation, to identify the nature of trauma in *Life of Pi* and, most importantly, to elaborate on the challenges that the representation of trauma presents to the narrator of the novel and to Pi himself. The diary Pi keeps during his time on the lifeboat illustrates the difficulty of capturing a reality fraught with trauma. Pi describes the contents of the diary as words that are "scratched on a page" rather than simply written. The violence of 'scratching' underscores the utter desperation of his attempt to document his suffering, as well as the complications intrinsic to such a task. Pi's need to record his trauma is not satisfied by the scant diary, limited as it inevitably is to the "practical stuff" (208) of his survival, and in his subsequent retelling of his experiences he seeks a narrative elaboration that goes well beyond documenting the practicalities and facts of his experience.



In this early chapter, I also drew attention to what I regard to be an illuminating parallel between Pi's account and that of another sea-trauma survivor, Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*. Both Pi and the *Ancient Mariner* feel an urgent compulsion to share their stories, to repeat and represent their traumatic tales. To this end, they both enlist a listener. In the re-telling of their stories, however, Pi and the *Mariner* unwittingly spread the effects of their trauma, and the listeners they turn to (the wedding guest and the narrator) are viscerally and, to a certain extent, negatively affected by the very act of bearing witness.

In Chapter Two, I turned my attention away from identifying what comprises trauma in the novel (and the problematics of its representation), to how Martel deploys different narrative devices in an attempt to address these problematics. Taking my cue from the term "bamboozle", introduced early in the text, I sought to show how this term could be seen as describing the ways in which conventional expectations in the novel are destabilised and how readers are thereby prepared for an alternative

rendering of Pi's story – one that emphasises imaginative re-telling rather than factual recollection. The framed narrative is the device through which Pi's story is presented, but it also behaves self-reflexively in its navigation of the complex terrain of Pi's trauma.

In this chapter, I argued that the "Author's Note" of the novel reveals a metafictional preoccupation with the concept of origin. The matter of the origin of Pi's story is pondered extensively in the "Author's Note" but never resolved, thereby initiating a lasting sense of ambiguity. This ambiguity is initially established through the first narrative frame, which at this early stage is composed of a curious mixture of the author, Yann Martel, and the novel's narrator. Derrida's essay on the deconstructive behaviour of frames proved to be a useful way of articulating how the framing narrative in the novel works, as well as the creative possibilities that are engendered when the work in the centre, the space between work and frame, and the frame itself are understood as dynamic, permeable and in constant co-operation with one another. The continuous interaction between the story and the various narrative frames, and indeed between one narrative frame and another, is a performance that paradoxically points to the (im)possibility of an (un)equivocal representation of Pi's story, while attempting to represent it nonetheless.

With reference to the first frame of the novel, I discussed how the narrative voice of Mr. Adirubasamy contrasts with that of the narrator. Initially, the narrator appears to be writing a biography, as indicated by his frequent self-referential interjections. However, the influence of Mr. Adirubasamy, as well as the effects of bearing witness to Pi's story, begin to affect the narrator and we see his narrative become more pensive. Pi's narrative frame, conversely, is characterised by a more philosophical perspective. Pi makes use of illustrative anecdotes, which come to characterise the position his narrative frame occupies. His discussions regarding his strange religious belief system, as well as his manipulation of his name the better to suit him, are two examples of how he builds a case for treating the representation of his traumatic story in a similar manner – by using creativity and imagination to compensate for the "(non)memory" (Bal x) of his traumatic experience. The way in which Pi's story develops through these narrative frames and the way in which it affects and is

affected by them, results in a text that is intensely self-reflexive regarding the process of representation and in this case, especially the representation of trauma. The final narrative frame, which presents the double narrative, further bamboozles readers by providing an altogether different story that places readers in a position of having to choose between accounts. Hartman describes the memory of trauma as a “perpetual troping” and the frames surrounding Pi’s story serve to create a kind of narrative *mis-en-abyme* that mimics the troping of traumatic memory. Within this “perpetual troping” (537), the metafictional framed narrative of the novel defers origin and refuses to resolve the numerous ambiguities that arise within the text.

In Chapter Three my aim was to show how the ambiguities of the novel lay the groundwork for the introduction of the fantastic. Ambiguity first arises in the “Author’s Note” with the displacement of origin and the oscillation of narrative voice between author and narrator. This sense of ambiguity persists throughout the various narrative frames and in the presentation of the double narrative. The section that manifests the most vivid sense of ambiguity and which therefore demonstrates the fantastic most clearly, is the carnivorous island that Pi encounters somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. I situated my discussion of the fantastic in *Life of Pi* in terms of structuralist Tzvetan Todorov’s definitions of what the fantastic is and how it works. Further, Rosemary Jackson’s explanation of how the fantastic works as a mode that “traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” proved particularly useful when elaborating on how *Life of Pi* uses this mode to address the representation of trauma, which is precisely “that which has been silenced” (4).

In this chapter, I argued that the narrative of the carnivorous island is much like a traumatic occurrence. It is an event so anomalous in the text that, like a traumatic episode, it “cannot be processed or assimilated by the usual mental process” (Luckhurst 2006: 499) that govern ordinary experiences. The island thus comes to trace some aspects of Pi’s trauma, albeit in a distorted and oblique manner. As an expression of the fantastic, the island exists “as the inside, or underside, of realism, opposing the novel’s closed, monological forms with open, dialogical structures, as if the novel had given rise to its own opposite, its unrecognizable reflection”. The island

in turn, like Pi's trauma, threatens to destroy him, as is made evident in its destructive effect on the behaviour of Richard Parker and in the portentous human tooth that Pi discovers. The island in the text may be understood as a narrative reaction to the near impossibility of representing Pi's trauma; in its strangeness, it is perhaps an effort to give some sort of oblique "utterance to precisely those elements which are known only through their absence" (Jackson 25).

The ambiguity in the novel and the mode of the fantastic are not limited to the example of the carnivorous island. In the final chapter of my dissertation, I suggested that these trends are also at play in the final narrative frame in the novel, which offers readers a double narrative, an allegory, with animals in one story and humans in the other. On closer inspection, however, I discovered that the allegory presents unremittingly nagging dissimilarities. Despite numerous obvious equivalences in the allegory, the stories do not match one another in quite the way that I expected. In Chapter Four, therefore, I proposed that traditional definitions of allegory fail to adequately describe the performance of the allegory in *Life of Pi*. However, in the context of the deconstructive possibilities of allegory as delineated by de Man, the allegory in *Life of Pi* is shown to operate in a similar way to the fantastic. The allegory's firm resistance to close and easy correlation is a narrative acknowledgement of the nature of discontinuity in representation and the difficulty of representing trauma in particular.

Working around the challenges attached to putting words to Pi's trauma is one of the main preoccupations in *Life of Pi*, and the aim of this dissertation has been to analyse how, and to what extent, the novel does this. As explained in Chapter One, the question of how to represent trauma is also a central concern for trauma theory. One landmark concept of trauma theory that this discussion has repeatedly reflected upon is the role of a listener – or witness – to a traumatic testimony and the repercussions that this listening has both for the teller (the primary victim) and the listener. The role of the listener is an issue raised by Dori Laub in *Testimony*, published in the early 1990s and it has come to dominate many discussions (some contentious) in the field of trauma theory.

Laub's widely referenced and debated assertion is that

testimony to the trauma [...] includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time.

By extension, the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience the trauma in himself.

(57)

Whitehead, reflecting her understanding of the position of the listener as outlined by Laub (and Felman), has this to say:

In the face of narratives burdened by the incoherence of trauma, Felman and Laub insist on the possibility of nevertheless transmitting truth in the new space opened up by testimony. Speaking beyond understanding, testimony requires a highly collaborative relationship between speaker and listener. The listener bears a dual responsibility: to receive the testimony but also to avoid appropriating the story as his or her own. A fragile balance is engendered between the necessity to witness sympathetically that which testimonial writing cannot fully represent and a simultaneous respect for the otherness of the experience, which resists rendering it too familiar or indulging in too easy an understanding or identification.

(7-8)

For Whitehead, it is important to work towards opening up a "new space" in which the difficulties of trauma may be engaged. Though she is referring to actual testimony here, she also asserts that the complexities of trauma are "reflected in contemporary fiction" (3). To turn to the example of *Life of Pi*, the mode of the fantastic is one way that the novel creates a "new space" where the paradoxes of Pi's trauma may be challenged. The maintenance of a "fragile balance" and the need to "witness sympathetically" (7) are endeavours that the novel undertakes to fulfil. The way in which Pi's story is delivered through multiple framed narratives that engender ambiguity resists "too easy an understanding or identification" (8), yet through the narrator's own engagement with Pi as a listener we are still able, as is he, to "witness sympathetically" (7) the effects of Pi's traumatic ordeal. My suggestion here is not that *Life of Pi* magically circumnavigates or traverses the inherent complications involved in the representation of trauma, but that the techniques used within this narrative are an example of how a certain *kind* of working through may be considered.



Nevertheless, the participatory nature of the listener as outlined by Laub and developed by Whitehead raises ethical red flags for some trauma theorists. Luckhurst points out a recent surge in concern, explaining that “[t]ransmissibility has become a central ethical concern about the representation and response to traumatic narratives and images”. Trauma is something that “violently opens passageways between systems that were once discrete, making unforeseen connections that distress or confound”. The connection between the victim of trauma who tells her/his story and the listener, is one example of an “unforeseen” link created by trauma and the telling thereof. Luckhurst asks the question: “Can or should the right to speak of trauma be limited to its primary victims? Who can claim ‘secondary’ status without risking appropriation?”. Luckhurst’s reservations about appropriation and the possible development of a “secondary status” (Luckhurst 2008: 3) are rather more urgent than Whitehead’s earlier warning of “indulging in too easy an understanding or identification” (Whitehead 8) with the trauma of another. The ethical questions that Luckhurst probes are developing into a complex debate in contemporary trauma theory, a debate that is taking a considerably more critical stance towards Laub’s understanding of the role of the listener.

In a recently published (2011) collection of articles entitled *Other People’s Pain: Narratives of Trauma and the Question of Ethics*, the editors Martin Modlinger and Phillip Sonntag outline some of the recent concerns developing around the subject of representing trauma. The essays in this collection reflect the complexity of the subject matter at hand and the stakes involved in telling traumatic stories. For Modlinger and Sonntag,

if all engagement with horrific events is subsumed under the equalizing term of trauma, there will be no ‘we’ left at all to talk about other people’s pain. The tendency to welcome empathic understanding (as opposed to unsettlement) as a way to experience the pain of the other, thereby assuming at least in part the position of the traumatized victim, might in fact disavow the victim of his or her most personal experience and history.

(8)

Modlinger and Sonntag critique the role of the listener (as conceived of by Laub). Similar to Luckhurst, who raised the potential problem of the listener inhabiting a kind of “secondary status” (2008: 3) as traumatised victim, they find that “assuming at

least in part the position of the traumatized victim” (8) may in fact have the alarming effect of denying the original victim her/his story. This particular ethical dilemma, raised by Modlinger and Sonntag in their Introduction, is developed further in an essay entitled “Trauma and Ethics: Telling the Other’s Story” by Colin Davis.

Davis rightly calls the process of talking about the trauma of other people an “ethical minefield”. For Davis, the “duty to preserve the memory of pain has been asserted so frequently that it has become difficult to contest” (19), but contest it he does, and his focus is on the “less evident but insidious dangers inherent in secondary witnessing and vicarious trauma” (20). Laub’s view – that “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience the trauma in himself” (57) – is “ethically problematic” for Davis. He argues, instead, that “we do not participate in or co-own the other’s trauma; and the sense or desire that we do should be resisted because it gives us the potentially self-serving illusion of empathic understanding” (20). Davis supports the view taken by Judith Butler, in her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, that one cannot narrate the experience of another (20-21). He states that it is “impossible to account without distortion for the lives and deaths of others” (22).

Modlinger and Sonntag’s apprehension regarding the “tendency to welcoming empathic understanding (as opposed to unsettlement) as a way to experience the pain of the other” (8) and Davis’s caution to “not participate in or co-own the other’s trauma” (20) may be understood as a resistance to an unguarded identification of listener with victim that may contradict the very point of telling of trauma – which is to communicate the suffering of the victim. Emphasis then, for these critics, should always lie with the primary victim; any effects that the listener may come to experience should not be compared with the suffering of the victim. In *Life of Pi* the narrator comes to experience various changes as a result of bearing witness to Pi’s traumatic story. While the emphasis does remain on Pi, the frequent narrative interjections in the early parts of the text bring the reader back to the narrator and his role. The effects of listening cause the narrator physical discomfort and we see him become introspective about his own position in the dynamic of listening to and then telling of Pi’s trauma. In the example of *Life of Pi* then, the narrator as listener to Pi’s

story, if regarded through the eyes of Modlinger, Sonntags and Davis, could be in danger of identifying too closely with Pi's story. Yet Davis goes on to say that, although we cannot "possess the stories of others", we "are bound to attempt" to do so, which leads, inevitably, to a task "fraught with intellectual and ethical dangers" (22). I would suggest that in *Life of Pi*, while the narrator certainly displays precisely the kind of participation that Davis warns against with regard to the role of the listener, the novel as a whole displays an intensely self-critical attitude toward narration that acknowledges the complications of witnessing and narrating trauma.

Davis clarifies his position in relation to Laub's concept of the role of the listener when he notes that the "responsibility of the witness is not to *become* the victim, to partake of the victim's pain" but rather to "regard the other's pain as something alien, unfathomable, and as an outrage" (30). For Davis it "should be possible to speak of these difficult topics with moral urgency, but also analytically and with respectful distance". What seems to be key is a vigilant attitude that resists breaching that "respectful distance" (40) that Davis feels should exist between the victim of trauma and the listener. However, the question remains: How much distance can or should a listener maintain? For all the criticism that Laub has received for his suggestion that "the listener to trauma comes to be a participant" (57), he too recommends that some distance be maintained. He expressly qualifies his stance (a qualification seldom referred to by his critics) when he writes, for example, that the

listener, however, is also a separate human being and will experience hazards and struggles of his own, while carrying out his function of a witness to the trauma witness. While overlapping, to a degree, with the experience of the victim, he nonetheless does not become the victim – he preserves his own separate place, position and perspective; a battleground for forces raging in himself, to which he has to pay attention and respect if he is to properly carry out his task.

(58)

For Laub, then, the listener is the "enabler of the testimony – the one who triggers its initiation, as well as the guardian of its process and of its momentum" (58). The listener is also a "guide and an explorer, a companion in a journey onto an uncharted land, a journey the survivor cannot traverse or return from alone" (59). Keeping some distance is surely critical and the cautions suggested by Modlinger, Sonntags and

Davis place the ethics of testimony at the forefront of considerations regarding how we should listen to trauma. But without the involvement of a listener, the victim of trauma lacks that “companion” (58) who makes the process of telling a possibility. In *Life of Pi*, it is the interest shown by the narrator that encourages Pi to speak of his trauma at all and, through the process of listening, the narrator becomes Pi’s “companion in a journey onto an uncharted land” (59). By contrast, the Japanese officials who listen to Pi’s story are an example of unsympathetic listeners and their reluctance to hear Pi out results in a reduction of his animals story, at least in their eyes, to a vague symbolic reference of the “real” story. The sympathetic narrator fully inhabits the role and burden of being a listener and he embraces the ambiguities of Pi’s story as evidence of the ways in which trauma will always remain, in some way or another, out of reach. It is clear that the balance of listening with compassion and involvement, yet maintaining enough distance to preserve the dignity of the victim of trauma and respect for the victim’s pain, is a delicate one. And, perhaps, with each traumatic story that is told, the distance that should be maintained will be different.

It should go without saying that *Life of Pi* is a fictional text that deals with a fictional trauma. Modlinger and Sonntag comment, however, that literature

can indeed engage with trauma. It has always done so. Yet the narratives of trauma that ‘we’ are being offered about other people’s pain in literature, film, photography and art are, in the overwhelming number of cases, not the same ones that psychologists and psychotherapists are dealing with in their treatment of real victims and witnesses. Distinguishing between the two would seem, therefore, to be not only a question of proper procedure, but of ethics.

(8-9)

I am mindful that fictional trauma cannot be simply correlated with real trauma. However, what I hope this dissertation has demonstrated is that some of the strategies creatively experimented with in fiction, and specifically those used by Martel in *Life of Pi*, may contribute to the way in which trauma is approached in all forms of representation, be they fictional or testimonial. What this novel offers is an exploration of the ways in which narrative may work toward representing trauma. I do not wish to be reductive in my stance on the possibilities that literature, and this novel, proposes because the complex and figurative performance of the novel resists precisely such reductiveness. Nevertheless, *Life of Pi* suggests a more positive than

negative response to the possibilities of narrative as a contribution to the process of representing trauma, or working through the difficulties of representing trauma. Modlinger and Sonntag write that “[a]rt, in particular postmodern art, can navigate brilliantly the territories of trauma, but it should be careful not to succumb to voyeuristic and arrogant spectatorship” (9). Here they refer to art that looks specifically upon actual historical traumas, such as the Holocaust or slavery; but is there a place in trauma theory for the discussion of the purely fictional traumatic event? Or of a comparison between texts that have real trauma at their core and those that do not? *Life of Pi* is purely fictional, but Martel’s more recent *Beatrice and Virgil*, which employs many of the same techniques used in the former text, takes the Holocaust as its subject.

Unfortunately, the “voyeuristic and arrogant spectatorship” (9) that Modlinger and Sonntag warn against is precisely that which many critics feel Martel is guilty of in *Beatrice and Virgil*. Ron Charles of *The Washington Post*, for example, refers to the novel as “a convincing example of the perils of Holocaust creativity” (2010). Lev Grossman, in *Time*, calls the novel

a true oddity. Its subject is violence and the impossibility of describing it: violence is an atrocity that immolates language itself, turns us into dumb animals and brute flesh. But Martel’s story is so arbitrary and oblique that its savage truth almost misses making itself felt.

(48)

In *Worlds of Hurt*, Kali Tal warns that

[t]raumatic events are written and rewritten until they become codified and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention. For example, the Holocaust has become a metonym, *not* for the actual series of events that occurred in Germany and the occupied territories before and during World War II, but for the set of symbols that reflect the formal codification of that experience. There is a recognizable set of literary and filmic conventions that comprise the ‘Holocaust’ text. These conventions are so well defined that they may be reproduced in endless recombination to provide us with a steady stream of additions to the genre.

(6)

Tal’s assertion that the constant re-writing of the Holocaust misplaces focus, alerts us to the risks involved in representing trauma. For Martel however, the Holocaust “is

gone; we are left with stories about it”, and for him *Beatrice and Virgil* “is about a new choice of stories” (2010: 15). With any traumatic experience, it is the memories of the event that enable testimonial or narrative re-presentation – however oblique or inadequate they may be. But what happens when, as is now increasingly the case with the Holocaust, living memory becomes extinct and all we are left with are stories? As with most questions regarding trauma, there is no easy answer; nevertheless, I would propose that a comparison of how trauma is represented in *Life of Pi* and *Beatrice and Virgil* – especially in terms of how allegory operates in both these texts – might well offer some new insight on these matters.

In *Life of Pi* the narrative does not provide easy answers either. In the novel, Pi asks: “Why can we throw a question further than we can pull in an answer? Why such a vast net if there’s so little fish to catch?” (LP 98). The framed narrative that deftly weaves around Pi’s traumatic story demonstrates that *questioning* how Pi’s trauma may be represented is in itself as important as finding an answer to that question. The fantastic exploits the ambiguity left in the wake of the novel’s many unanswered questions and it demonstrates the possibility of an alternative response to the problem of representing that which resists representation. And the allegory in the novel promotes precisely the kind of ambiguity and discontinuity that enables the fantastic to function, thus facilitating the attempt in this novel to tell the untellable and give some kind of utterance to Pi’s horror. Whether the novel succeeds in offering a new angle on how to approach trauma is a matter of debate. The long list of debatables in this novel engenders a lingering sense of the inconclusive that haunts both the narrative and consequently any study of it. But this lack of closure and certainty in the novel is not a hopeless one. The “Author’s Note” promises “a story that will make you believe in God” (x) and whether the reader of the novel does so believe is entirely individual, of course. However, Martel has, I believe, fashioned a novel that allows us to believe in the curious workings of literature, which might, for some, be the same thing.

## Bibliography

Abrams, M.H. 2005. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth.

Armit, L. 1996. *Theorising the Fantastic*. London: Arnold.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2005. *Fantasy Fiction: An Introduction*. New York: Continuum.

Bal, M., J. Crewe and L. Spitzer. (eds). 1999. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Hanover: University Press of New England.

Blackstock, C. 2002. "Book Winner in Plagiarism Row". Available from <http://www.guardian.co.uk>. (Accessed 29 June 2010).

Boyagoda, R. 2003. "Faith, Fiction, Flotsam". *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*. Available from <http://www.firstthings.com>. (Accessed 29 June 2010).

Brett, R.L. 1960. *Reason and Imagination: A Study of Form and Meaning in Four Poems*. London: Oxford University Press.

Caruth, C. 1995. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Charles, R. 2010. "Ron Charles reviews 'Beatrice and Virgil', by Booker Prize-winner Yann Martel". Available from <http://www.washingtonpost.com>. (Accessed 27 January 2012).

Coleridge, S.T. 1817 (1962). *Biographia Literaria*. Hertfordshire: J.M. Dent and Sons.

- Cornwell, N. 1990. *The Literary Fantastic*. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Cuddon, J.A. 1999. *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. London: Penguin.
- Currie, Mark. (ed). 1995. *Metafiction*. New York: Longman.
- Derrida, J. 1987. *The Truth in Painting*. Trans. G. Bennington and I. McLeod. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- De Man, P. 1983. *Blindness and Insight, Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. London: Methuen.
- Felman, S. and D. Laub. 1992. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge.
- Ferguson, A., J. Salter and J. Stallworthy. (eds). 1970. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. New York: Norton.
- Freud, S. 1920 (1955). "Beyond the Pleasure Principle". *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. J. Strachey. Volume XVIII. London: Hogarth.
- Hartman, G.H. 1995. "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies". *New Literary History*. 26 (3): 537-554 Available from <http://0-web.ebscohost.com.ujlink.uj.ac.za>. (Accessed 10 March 2008).
- Holcombe, G. 2004. "Critical Perspectives". Available from <http://www.contemporarywriters.com>. (Accessed 8 October 2007).
- Innes, C. 2002. "Robinson Crusoe, Move Over". *Nation*. 275 (6): 25-29. Available from <http://0-web.ebscohost.com.ujlink.uj.ac.za>. (Accessed 1 July 2009).



- Jackson, R. 1981. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Methuen.
- Kakutani, M. 2010. "From 'Life of Pi' Author, Stuffed-Animal Allegory About Holocaust". Available from <http://www.nytimes.com>. (Accessed 27 January 2012).
- Luckhurst, R. 2003. "Traumaculture". *New Formations*. 50: 28-47. Available from <http://0-web.ebscohost.com.ujlink.uj.ac.za>. (Accessed 9 November 2011).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2006. "Mixing Memory and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Psychology, and Trauma Theory". In Waugh 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. *The Trauma Question*. Oxon: Routledge.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2010. "Beyond Trauma Torturous Times". *European Journal of English Studies*. 14(1): 11-21. Available from <http://0-web.ebscohost.com.ujlink.uj.ac.za>. (Accessed 9 November 2011).
- Martel, Y. 2002. *Life of Pi*. Edinburgh: Canongate.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. Interview. "The Empathetic Imagination". *Canadian Literature* 117: 12-32. Interviewer Sabine Sielke. Available from <http://0-web.ebscohost.com.ujlink.uj.ac.za>. (Accessed 1 July 2009).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003a. (1996). *Self*. London: Faber and Faber.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005 (1993). *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*. Edinburgh: Canongate.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2007. Interview. Interviewer: Tasha Robinson. Available from <http://www.avclub.com>. (Accessed 1 July 2009).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2010. *Beatrice and Virgil*. New York: Spiegel and Grau.

Modlinger, M., and P. Sonntag. (eds). 2011. *Other People's Pain: Narratives of Trauma and the Question of Ethics*. Germany: Peter Lang.

*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. 2005. 7<sup>th</sup> edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rose, S. 2009. "Memories are Made of This". In Wood and Byatt 2009.

Rivkin, J. and M. Ryan. (eds). 2004. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Oxford: Blackwell.

Scherzinger, K. 2006. "'Yarn Spinning is Also Highly Recommended': Yann Martel's Framing Narratives". *Journal of Literary Studies* 22(1/2): 54-69.

*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

Tal, K. 1996. *Worlds of Hurt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Todorov, T. 1975 (1970). *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. New York: Cornell University Press.

Van der Kolk, B. and A. McFarlane. 2007. "The Black Hole of Trauma". In Van der Kolk, et al 2007.

Van der Kolk, B, A. Mc Farlane and L. Weisaeth. (eds). 2007. *Traumatic Stress. The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*. New York: Guildford Press.

Waugh, P. 1984. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London: Routledge.

Waugh, P. (ed). 2006. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Weine, S. 2006. *Testimony After Catastrophe: Narrating the Traumas of Political Violence*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Whitehead, A. 2004. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Wood, H.H. and A.S. Byatt. (eds). 2009. *Memory: An Anthology*. London: Vintage.

