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Considering the alternative: Bakhtin's carnivalesque and convergence of worlds of animals and humans in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

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Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* recontextualises the traditional castaway narrative's rationalist and reductivist worldview by incorporating carnivalised writing, or the carnivalesque, to examine alternative or 'non-human' ways of encountering the world. It is this subversive and liberating approach towards dominant cultural forms and beliefs that is manifested in *Life of Pi* through grotesque realism. Grotesque realism, as defined in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his world*, is relevant to Martel's novel, as this convention purports that animals embody the raw physicality of existence through their instinctual and amoral nature. In the context of the novel, carnivalesque writing contributes to the blurring of boundaries between human and animal in a way that also reveals the transformative abilities of storytelling. The dissolution of boundaries that separate humans from animals and the rational from the irrational emphasises the redeeming potential in alternative – or imaginative – ways of interpreting existence and, ultimately, casts light on uncanny spaces of existence such as loss, suffering and deprivation.

Introduction

Winner of the Man Booker prize in 2003, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2002) is a story of survival against all odds that explores the nature and the extent of the kinship that exists between humans and animals while also contextualising the animal–human relationship as being integral to the survival (whether physical or psychical) of both. Pi Patel, the central character of the novel, is able to survive 227 days cast away at open sea on a lifeboat. Pi's awe-inspiring account of his death-defying ordeal presents readers with two possible versions. The first story, to quote the official report on the shipwreck tragedy, is 'an astounding story of courage and endurance' (Martel 2002:319) and is suggestive of the transcendental power of the spiritual over the merely physical. In this regard, the first story, which makes up most of the novel, is overtly preoccupied with the way in which humans and animals co-exist – not only at a physical level but also a spiritual one. In this version, Martel seems to merge elements of fantasy with reality, especially in his portrayal of the peculiar bond between Pi and the tiger. However, in stark contrast to the first, the second story is a horrible and grim reminder of the corrosive effect physical deprivation can have on the human condition, or the state that defines us as fallible, self-aware beings, fated to live a mortal life in an imperfect world. This version features no animals and, significantly, there is no possibility of kinship in this story as Pi is utterly alone for most of his ordeal.

As the contrasting stories demonstrate, the novel juxtaposes ontologies of the rational and irrational. In this regard, aspects of the carnivalesque emphasise the role of the imagination and relate it to the ability to (re)interpret the world in a creative, resourceful or even nonsensical manner. The concept of the carnivalesque, as described in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his world* (1984 [1968]), is a subversive literary mode that can temporarily invert and subvert dominant forms, such as social hierarchies and power structures, to 'destabilize … to make comic that which is taken seriously within the social order' (Wolfreys 2004:27). The term 'carnivalesque' is derived from the notion of *carnival*, a communal celebratory practice mostly associated with the medieval world (Dentith 1996:67). Carnival and carnivalesque in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin are drawn upon cultural studies and critical discourse to explore the liberating potential of 'low' or popular cultural practices in relation to the ecclesiastical and feudal political culture of the Middle Ages (p. 25). In the context of Martel's novel, carnivalised writing destabilises a logical or rational interpretation of events by putting forth 'non-human' ways of encountering the world. To this end, the carnivalesque invokes

the emancipatory power of imagination by incorporating the grotesque with realistic representations of characters, animals and events, thereby making the convention of grotesque realism evident. Dentith (p. 67) contends that grotesque realism is the most important convention of carnivalised writing, expressed through 'feasting, Feasts of Fools, game-playing and symbolic inversions'. Grotesque realism as defined in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his world* (1984 [1968]) is especially applicable to *Life of Pi*, as this convention emphasises the body as a physical manifestation of existence in a wildly exaggerated way that destabilises spatial and temporal boundaries to conflate human and animal modes of being. Animals, especially, embody the raw physicality of existence through their instinctual and amoral nature.

In the novel, the transgression of the ontological boundary that separates humans and animals is made evident by the way in which Pi, in both versions of his story, assumes animal-like traits in order to survive. The identity of humans and animals gradually merges so as to become almost indistinguishable, thereby establishing a liminal zone where transformation and renewal can take place. The liminal zone resists an experience of the world based solely on fact and empirical truth, focusing instead on moral and spiritual transcendence. In this regard, carnivalesque writing in *Life of Pi* facilitates the blurring of the boundary between humans and animals and imbues the act of storytelling with the ability to reinvent, reinterpret and make sense of a deeply traumatic event.

Linking up with the notion of the power of stories to redeem and reinvent, the carnivalesque literature collapses constrictive and outdated modes of thinking about our self and our place in the world. In the novel, animals and their experience of the world seem to be associated not only with emotion and instinct, but also with the imaginative and transcendental, as it is the story with animals that potentiates redemption and spiritual transformation. Accordingly, the carnivalesque represents identity as dynamic and adaptable as Pi, a docile young man who has never lived apart from his family, is able to transform his identity to become not only self-reliant in the face of incredible odds, but also a ferocious master of his fate.

The central premise of this article is thus concerned with how animal modes of existence, which is made evident by the carnivalesque, emphasise the redeeming potential in alternative ways of interpreting existence. Hence, the following section will discuss *Life of Pi* as a 21st-century novel that utilises a postmodernist approach to resist fixed, one-dimensional representations of identity and rationalist notions of truth and reality as empirically definable concepts. Following this, the article will trace the nature of Pi's relationship with animals, specifically Richard Parker. This section will also focus on Pi's relationship with the tiger and his gradual reversion into a state in which he relies more on the instinctual and animalistic aspects of his character. Pi's apparent 'bestialisation' will be examined in light of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and the dissolution of boundaries between humans and animals and between the rational and the irrational.

Life of Pi and the postmodern context

As the title suggests, the novel mainly focuses on periods in the life of the main character, an Indian boy named Piscine (Pi) Molitor Patel. The story centres on his spiritual and psychological growth as the result of a defining life experience during his young adulthood. Though deeply religious, Pi has an unconventionally hybridised view of religion as he proclaims to love God so much that he embraces three religions – Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. For most of the novel, Pi tells of his miraculous survival after the Japanese cargo ship carrying him, his family and a collection of zoo animals sinks in the Pacific on journey from India to Canada. Pi is the only human survivor of the shipwreck, and he finds himself sharing a lifeboat with a hyena, a zebra with a badly broken leg, an orangutan and an adult male Bengal tiger, called Richard Parker. Within a few days, only Pi and Richard Parker remain, and the two castaways endure their fate together until the lifeboat reaches the coast of Mexico after almost 7 months adrift at sea. However, when the officials from the Japanese Ministry of Transport call his story into question, Pi provides an alternative account in which the animals are replaced with people. In this version, Pi assumes the persona of the fearsome tiger, Richard Parker. His mother is the orangutan of the first story, the zebra is a Taiwanese sailor with a severely injured leg, and the ravenous Frenchman, who also was the ship's cook, takes the form of the hyena. In a gut-wrenching turn of events, Pi has to bear witness to the Frenchman butchering of his mother and the sailor. In a fit of desperate rage, Pi in turn kills the cook and thus becomes the sole survivor of the shipwreck and its aftermath. This act can be seen as the starting point of Pi's identity transformation, as he not only kills but also eats the flesh of the Frenchman in order to survive.

Pi's contrasting versions of events blur ontological boundaries in order to resist implications of a purely rationalist worldview. Consequently, the novel relates narrative representation, or storytelling, to the realm of the irrational and the imaginative. This is clearly illustrated by the tension between the two worlds embodied by Pi and the Japanese officials, respectively. Accordingly, as the purpose of the Japanese officials' interview with Pi is to establish the reason – 'mechanical or structural' (p. 312) – why the Tsimtsum sank, they represent the rational world of logic and verifiable facts. Initially, the officials refuse to believe that Pi managed to survive with an adult Bengal tiger castaway with him on the small lifeboat. They insist on hearing 'what really happened', the 'straight facts' as opposed to a 'story', as they consider stories to be fictional events that always invariably contain 'an element of invention' (p. 302). Pi refutes their argument and asks: 'Isn't telling about something – using words, English or Japanese – already something of an invention? Isn't just looking upon this world already something of an

invention?' He implies that the acts of 'looking' and 'telling' are subjective and partial experiences, which suggest that even the representation of 'straight facts' can in itself never be more than just an *interpretation* of events. It is therefore apparent that Pi regards stories as transcultural and universal phenomena that facilitate our 'looking upon this world' that enables us to order, interpret and represent our experiences of the world. Accordingly, Pi's story enables him to process and adjust to the tragedy of his ordeal; thus, he fictionalises the 'truth' to ensure his physical and psychological survival and, as a result, emerges as a spiritually tested but exalted human being. Storytelling thereby transcends the rational world of cold hard fact and becomes concomitant to the notion of survival.

In light of the above contextualisation, the novel is undoubtedly postmodernist with its conflation of worlds of the rational and the irrational and humans and animals, emphasising notions of multiplicity, hybridity and liminality, while the narrative predictably resists closure and engages the readers in the process of interpretation in deciding which of Pi's stories is to be believed. On top of this, *Life of Pi* also deals with prominent postcolonial issues, such as multiculturalism, migration and displacement. In a view that highlights the novel's theme of the dynamics of traumatic experience and its aftermath, Duncan (2008:167) defines *Life of Pi* as a 'postmodern survival narrative', as Pi's story not only articulates his individual trauma but also 'invite[s] contemplation of the aesthetics of memory, the construction of selfhood, and cultural representation'. As my own analysis and interpretation suggest, Duncan (p. 168) maintains that postmodern narratives position the survivor not as a centred, stable self but rather as decentred, fragmented, and, I would like to add, hybridised by the reconciliation of the past, untraumatised self with the present, traumatised one. In the case of *Life of Pi* specifically, Pi also becomes a hybrid of human and animal traits, or the rational and animalistic.

It is important to note, however, that despite the novel's inherent postmodernist premise, Martel is critical of the rational agnosticism or atheism of more radical forms of postmodernist fiction with regard to their sense of 'depthlessness' (Wolf 2004:119) and extreme relativism that manifests as a tendency to neglect ethical and existential issues to persistently focus on deconstructive processes instead. According to Wolf (p. 119), *Life of Pi* transcends radical postmodernism's anti-metaphysical approach – referring to speculative and unexamined assumptions that have not been empirically confirmed by logic and observation, such as religious belief – by scrutinising the failures of such an overly secularised and rationalist worldview in terms of its failure to facilitate spiritual cognisance through what Stratton (2004:119) defines as a 'lack of openness towards religious questions'. Stratton (p. 6), however, aligns Martel's position on religion with the novel's postmodernist approach, as the narrative does not relate God's existence to fact or faith but rather to the question of which story is better: the one that confirms God's existence or the one that denies it? Although I agree with Wolf that the novel is critical of an overly secularised and rationalist worldview, like Stratton I do not consider it to be anti-postmodernist – rather, I would suggest that postmodernism's open-endedness establishes a context in which Martel can explore alternative ways to think about the nature of existence, such as the possibility that God may indeed exist, or that humans and animals are not that different as both species are motivated by the same forces of instinct and an awareness of their mortality. Martel therefore seems to relate rationalism with agnosticism, logic, reason and human modes of being-in-the-world, while he relates the irrational to religious belief, spirituality, imagination and more animalistic, or instinctual, modes of being-in-the-world.

Animals and animal worlds

Life of Pi is replete with references to animal life that seems to ally animals with the metaphysical world of spirituality, imagination and the intangible. Pi has an almost sentimental respect and affinity for all forms of life and strongly believes that '[a]ll sentient life is sacred' (p. 183). Consequently, the first time he kills a fish unsettles him deeply and fills him with guilt (p. 183). Having awareness of animals as beings of 'pattern and purpose' (p. 16), Pi displays a keen interest in the habits and characteristics of animals, while as an adult, he also studies and specialises in zoology.

Pi's relationship with animals is based on knowledge, respect and admiration, as well as the recognition that they are different from, yet equal to, humans. Growing up, Pi is surrounded by a vast variety of animals in his father's zoo in Pondicherry, India, a time which he reminisces as being 'paradise on earth' (p. 14). By constantly studying animal behaviour in the zoo, Pi learns valuable lessons about the temperament of wild animals that proved to be of great advantage to him when he was stuck on the lifeboat with a tiger. The most important of these lessons are that wild animals are driven by 'compulsion and necessity' (p. 16), that they are extremely territorial and that their main imperatives are to avoid enemies and get food and water (p. 17). Most importantly, he learns 'the lesson that an animal is an animal, essentially and practically removed from us' (p. 31) when, as an 8-year-old boy, he first bears witness to the fierce brutality of a tiger. A rational and pragmatic man, his zookeeper father forces him to witness a zoo tiger killing and devouring a goat in order to make his sons aware of just how dangerous and ruthless wild animals can be. This lesson proves to be invaluable and forms the basis on which he conducts his ambivalent relationship with Richard Parker.

His relationship with the tiger is without sentiment in the sense that Richard Parker inspires both fear and awe. Pi's conflicting feelings towards the tiger are aptly illustrated

by the novel's subliminal allusion to William Blake's 'Tyger'-poem (2005 [1794]), from which I quote the first stanza:

> Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
>
> In the forests of the night;
>
> What immortal hand or eye,
>
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

The tiger's 'fearful symmetry' (line 4) therefore becomes a metaphor for the sublime duality of the rational (beauty, divinity and benevolence) and the irrational (hideousness, depravity and malevolence) in nature, including human nature. *Life of Pi*'s intertextual parallel to Blake's poem emphasises the tiger's fierce beauty, as well as the horror of his primeval nature. When Pi views Richard Parker in full sight for the first time on the lifeboat, he describes the tiger as follows:

> I beheld Richard Parker from the angle that showed him off to greatest effect: from the back, half-raised, with his head turned. The stance had something of a pose to it, as if it were an intentional, even affected, display of mighty art. And what art, what might. His presence was overwhelming, yet equally evident was the lithesome grace of it. He was incredibly muscular … His body, bright brownish orange streaked with black vertical stripes, was incomparably beautiful, matched with a tailor's eye for harmony by his pure white chest and underside and the black rings of his long tail … Wavy dabs of black circled the face in a pattern that was striking yet subtle, for it brought less attention to itself than it did to the one part of the face left untouched by it, the bridge, whose rufous lustre shone nearly with a radiance. (p. 151)

In both the poem and the above passage, the tiger is associated with a fire of the spirit that burns brightly with 'lustre' and 'radiance' (p. 151). According to Stratton (p. 10), the dazzling display of colours and patterns on Richard Parker's body relates him to the 'incantatory' or 'transcendent power of art', which in Martel's novel is exemplified by imaginative truth, or stories, and Pi's infinite faith. However, for all the tiger's beauty, Pi is almost immediately reminded of its primitive and dangerous nature that may explode with 'rage' at any moment:

> His ears twitched and then swivelled right around. One of his lips began to rise and fall. The yellow canine thus coyly revealed was as long as my longest finger. Every hair on me was standing up, shrieking with fear. (p. 152)

Pi's fear and awe defy reason and comprehension as these feelings are driven by an instinctual awareness of the tiger's superiority in terms of physical strength and fierceness. Like Blake's tiger, Richard Parker is a metaphor for binary oppositions that define existence. Moreover, the tiger represents animals' divine ability to exist beyond the limitations excessive reason places on freedom and individuality.

Pi himself gradually transgresses the boundaries of what is considered civilised human behaviour as he increasingly relies on the more irrational and instinctual aspects of his character. The longer he lives on the lifeboat with Richard Parker, the more he becomes like a wild animal himself when he succumbs to the basic urges of hunger and survival:

> It came as an unmistakable indication to me of how low I had sunk the day I noticed, with a pinching of the heart, that I ate like an animal, that this noisy, frantic, unchewing wolfing-down of mine was exactly the way Richard Parker ate. (p. 225)

He notices that suffering and deprivation have turned them into 'two emaciated mammals, parched and starving' (p. 239), while in addition, he has gradually started to sync his daily routines with the tiger's as he begins to sleep excessively, slipping into a liminal zone where 'daydreams and reality were nearly indistinguishable' (p. 239).

These passages bring to mind a kind of 'bestialisation' in the sense that Pi gradually hybridises into animal form, a notion that is supported by the allegorical relation his two stories establish between humans and animals, with himself as the tiger. Associating humans with animals dehumanises them as it strips the human of civility and the faculty of reason; according to Bakhtin (1984 [1968]:226), the human form acquires 'a grotesque character' when it adopts the animal form. Animals in the novel therefore tend to represent the primitive and instinctual aspects of human nature. The reverse is not true as the novel contains no real instances of anthropomorphism in that all the animals portrayed in the novel mostly act in ways true to their species. Even though their behaviour and reactions are interpreted from a human perspective, such as the orangutan's caring nature, the zebra's fear and the hyena's repulsiveness, they are never attributed human traits, such as the case in George Orwell's *Animal farm* (1945), or Walter Farley's *The black stallion* (2002 [1941]), a children's novel about a young boy who tames and befriends a wild horse (Dwyer 2005:12). Although it must be acknowledged that Pi's fellow-castaway is a 450-pound Bengal tiger and not a horse, the relationship between Pi and Richard Parker is based on neither friendship nor ownership, but on Pi's respect of the tiger's alterity. Pi is under no illusion that he will be able to befriend or domesticate Richard Parker because he knows that the tiger's animal nature is not compatible with his own. Even though he is able to tame the tiger to some extent by conditioning him to remain on his side of the lifeboat, the tiger's compliance is never assured. Nonetheless, Pi does not regard Richard Parker's fierceness and aggression as amoral but realises that his nature defies human comprehension as it is driven by instinct, impulse and a primal drive to survive at all cost. Although Richard Parker's presence is strangely comforting in the sense that it means Pi is not completely alone, it is also 'overwhelming' (p. 151). The tiger, though his companion, is essentially a wild animal and therefore always on the verge of 'exploding with rage' (p. 152). Ironically, as Pi also admits, the life-threatening presence of Richard Parker on the lifeboat motivates him to survive his ordeal:

> I will tell you a secret: a part of me was glad about Richard Parker. A part of me did not want Richard Parker to die at all, because if he died I would be left alone with despair, a foe even more formidable than a tiger. If I still had the will to live, it was thanks to Richard Parker. He kept me from thinking too much

> about my family and my tragic circumstances. He pushed me to go on living. I hated him for it, yet at the same time I was grateful. I am grateful. It is the plain truth: without Richard Parker I wouldn't be alive today. (p. 164)

Richard Parker therefore forces Pi to focus on staying alive, as you cannot share a lifeboat with a tiger without constantly being aware of how effortless it would be for the animal to kill you, unless you constantly monitor its behaviour and mood. It is the threat posed by this unpredictable and wild animal that is continually on Pi's mind, rather than his devastating loss and the hopelessness of his situation. If he were to focus too much on the latter, he would in all probability have decided that he could not bear to go on living. Pi explains that Richard Parker's presence calmed his mind and 'brought [him] peace, purpose … even wholeness' (p. 162). His ability to adapt his own nature so that he can co-exist with a tiger in a small space and maintain dominance over his section of the lifeboat enables him to survive. As tigers are extremely territorial, Pi has to demarcate space and train Richard Parker to remain within his own territory:

> I had to make him understand that I was the top tiger and that his territory was limited to the floor of the boat, the stern bench and the side benches as far as the middle cross bench. I had to fix in his mind that the top of the tarpaulin and the bow of the boat, bordered by the neutral territory of the middle bench, was my territory and utterly forbidden to him. (p. 168)

In addition to the organisation and demarcation of space, Pi has to construct 'markers' that designate territory by regularly splashing his urine onto the areas that are off-limits to the tiger (p. 172). After they have been castaways for a number of months, Pi notices how the space inside the lifeboat has gradually been altered by their habitation of it, as 'the lifeboat was resembling a zoo enclosure more and more: Richard Parker had his area for sleeping and resting, his food stash, his lookout and now his water hole' (pp. 188–189). The demarcation of space on the lifeboat extends to the tiger's territory as well, and it seems remarkable that Pi is able to transform the lifeboat by re-organising space in terms of subdividing it according to proportional divisions that not only separate humans and animals but also 'civilised' and domestic spaces from chaotic nature. Richard Parker thereby becomes a symbol of an alternative reality – a submerged presence whose symbolic significance will be echoed in the alternative story when Pi assumes the fearsome traits that enable him to kill in order to survive. The tiger's presence under the tarpaulin seems to be suggestive of the concealed presence of the visceral aspects of Pi's character. In this regard, Martel's novel is very clear about the cruelty that is inherent to the battle to survive, especially with regard to its examination of themes of human depravity. During his interview with the officials, Pi suggests that the 'evil' hidden within him, the 'selfishness, anger, ruthlessness' (p. 311) gave him the strength and determination to kill the cook, and consequently to stay alive.

Martel's novel therefore makes evident a change in traditional perspectives and attitudes towards nature and animals represented in the literature that pertains not only to the way in which humans view animals, but also to the way how they view themselves. As Pi's relationship with animals suggests, Martel rethinks the utilitarian and hierarchical way in which the relationship between human and nature is often portrayed in the literature. Dwyer (2005:13) contends that such a utilitarian view of nature, particularly animals, reflects the Enlightenment belief that nature and animals should serve the ends of human progress and advancement. In Daniel Defoe's, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), for example, Crusoe regards all creatures (including his fellow-human Friday) as his subjects. His urge to domesticate animals stems from his perspective of them as inferior and, accordingly, he views them only in relation to their usefulness (Dwyer 2005:14). Though not as extreme as such Enlightenment views, traditional binary oppositions between human and animal modes of existence tend to define humans as autonomous beings, capable of rational thought, while animals are deemed less rational in the sense that their reactions and behaviour are determined by primal emotions and instinct. However, *Life of Pi* conflates the ontologies of the rational and irrational as even in the second story (which the Japanese officials regard as more rational or probable), Pi's behaviour involves murder and cannibalism. Significantly, his depravity is not motivated by reason but by instinct and the compulsion to survive. In human terms, his behaviour is irrational, as it is inconceivable that a rational and civilised mind would revert to such extremes. The instinct to survive is therefore not a product of our rational mind but rather of the visceral and inexplicable parts of our (human) nature.

In the subsequent section, the destabilisation of the boundary between animal and human worlds will be related to prevalent motifs in Martel's novel that allude to the carnivalesque and grotesque realism. These motifs, which defy logic and reflect subversively on the rational, are related to the convergence of human and animal modes of existence and are made evident by bizarre or inexplicable incidents, ritual, human depravity, violence and suffering, and degradation.

The human animal and the carnivalesque

Life of Pi is preoccupied with the relationship between human and animal modes of existence. The bizarre presence of wild animals on the lifeboat and Pi's mastery and training of a Bengal tiger both have allusions to circus life that are reminiscent of carnival. Similar to carnival, the circus also involves a kind of ceremonial but playful posturing in which humans and animals act and interact in exaggerated ways. Soon after becoming a castaway, Pi assigns himself the role of 'ringmaster' as he realises that the only way he can safeguard himself from being attacked by Richard Parker is to force the tiger into submission by making him understand that he, Pi, is the 'top tiger' (p. 168). This proves that Pi realises that he needs to communicate his authority to the tiger in a 'language' that he would understand, that is, the primeval language of

dominance and submission that would acknowledge Richard Parker's animal nature. During Pi's first training session with Richard Parker – aware of the ensuing spectacle – he exclaims:

> Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, without further ado, it is my pleasure and honour to present to you: THE PI PATEL, INDO-CANADIAN, TRANS-PACIFIC, FLOATING CIRCUUUUU SSSSSSSSSSS!!! (p. 165)

Pi then proceeds to blow loudly and persistently on a whistle attached to his lifejacket, and as a result, the tiger recedes to his part of the lifeboat (p. 165).

This image imparts to the novel a sense of mock-playfulness that is ironical in relation to the gravity of Pi's situation: the small lifeboat becomes a floating circus smeared with blood and excrement with Pi, the 'ringmaster' himself reverting to savagery in the struggle to stay alive. Though courageous, his dominance over the tiger is deceptive and temporary, a fact that he is well aware of. As this allusion to circus life suggests, it is the relational and existential differences between animals and humans that are often emphasised by Martel, especially the way in which animals exist without an intellectual awareness of morality and are mostly guided by their instincts.

Bizarre and inexplicable incidents

Grotesque realism is also made evident through Pi's uncanny encounter with another castaway – a blind, cannibalistic Frenchman. This incident epitomises the subversion of the rational by the irrational in the novel, and when considered in relation to the predominantly realist mode in which the novel is written, the episode appears significantly out of place, irrational and bizarre. Pi who is temporarily blind – probably as a result of starvation, dehydration and exhaustion – encounters another castaway, also blind and adrift on the Pacific Ocean. As Stratton (p. 13) also contends the strange, absurd and pointless conversation between these two castaways exploits the devices of Absurdist theatre by stressing the futile nature of human existence, the fluidity of identity and the incoherent nature of the inner language of the subconscious. Shortly after becoming aware of each other's presence, Pi is addressed by the other castaway. They continue to have a pointless yet strange conversation in which Pi alludes to the power of the imagination when he points out that '[i]f you're not happy with this figment of your fancy, pick another one. There are plenty of fancies to pick from' (p. 243). From here, most of the conversation is concerned with food and eating, both of which are significant motifs of grotesque realism, as Bakhtin purports that the 'most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; [a] wide-open bodily abyss' (1984 [1968], cited in Dentith 1996:226), an image that is also alluded to when Pi compares Richard Parker's mouth to 'an enormous pink cave', his teeth 'long yellow stalactites and stalagmites' (p. 197). The repetitive and nonsensical dialogue that takes place between the two castaways reveals the desperation and immateriality of an existence compounded by bodily, or physical, deprivation. This notion is further highlighted when the Frenchman, mad with hunger, eventually attempts to strangle Pi so that he can eat his 'heart', 'liver' and 'flesh' (p. 255). However, Richard Parker gets to him before he gets to Pi:

> This was the terrible cost of Richard Parker. He gave me life, my own, but at the expense of taking one. He ripped the flesh of the man's frame and cracked his bones. The smell of blood filled my nose. Something in me died then that has never come back to life. (p. 255)

Here, the tiger's predatory nature saves Pi's life and he is again reminded of the wild animal's ferociousness and that in the heat of the battle for survival, rational morality has to make way for basic instinct. As such, aspects of the carnivalesque subvert human modes of existence so that the human, as represented by Pi (and his fellow castaways in the second version of the story), becomes stripped of all the pretension of human refinement and morality.

Ritual

Carnivalised writing is also made evident by the motif of ritualistic behaviour. The carnivalesque counters the serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal rituals as it often parodies these by incorporating 'giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals' as the main participants in the seemingly pointless or obnoxious ceremonies, or 'spectacles', of carnival festivities and comic performances (Bakhtin 1984 [1968]:5). Nonetheless, despite the comical way in which the carnivalesque engages with ritual, the motif still fulfils an important function, and Bakhtin (pp. 5, 6) points out that '[c]arnival festivities and the comic spectacles and ritual connected with them had an important place in the life of medieval man' as these occasions 'built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less'. Despite nonsensicality, such carnivalised rituals still provided structure and purpose to medieval life, maybe even more so than serious rituals.

In *Life of Pi*, ritual also fulfils an important function in Pi's daily life as a castaway as it enables him to recreate a semblance of 'normal' life. He feels comforted by a series of daily habits that structure his day and prevent him from spending too much time contemplating his fate. Similar to carnivalised ritual, Pi's ritualistic habits provide a temporary escape from reality. These include activities such as breakfast, lunch, dinner, prayers, inspection of the lifeboat and food stores, fishing and the preparation of fish, collecting and safekeeping of distillate from the solar stills and storing foods and equipment (p. 190). Even though these rituals seem menial, they keep him lucid and alert, which are very important for his survival. Rituals also help him to structure, and thus control, Richard Parker's daily routine, such as when he eats and when he is allowed to emerge from the tarpaulin. From observing wild animals in the zoo, Pi knows that animals crave routine and predictability and that even the smallest changes in their daily routine can cause them distress.

Even in the wild, Pi points out 'animals stick to the same paths for the same pressing reasons, season after season' and that any deviation from this routine is meaningful (pp. 16–17). Martel suggests that for animals, rituals provide purpose while also being an outward manifestation of the intuitive manner in which they interact with their environment. For the same reasons, humans need even menial rituals, routines and habits to make them feel grounded and secure. In addition, ritual becomes a way for Pi to establish a sense of solidarity with the tiger as it usually facilitates some form of interaction between them. When Pi is an adult, rituals remain important to him and take the form of religious practices, such as prayer and meditation. Rituals are therefore prevalent among humans and animals and counteract the chaotic and disorderly aspects of existence. Rituals structure and give meaning to abstract ideas and emotions, which implies that storytelling is also a type of ritual; in other words, a ritual is an alternate form of storytelling, as stories have the ability to reveal the emotional reality of an event.

Human depravity and violence

In the novel, the most obvious examples of the carnivalesque are manifested through grotesque realism which emphasises the body as a vehicle not only for depravity but also for rejuvenation. Depictions of the brutal realities Pi faces during his ordeal are prevalent as the story is ridden with blood, guts, gore and death, as each act of violence and human depravity on the lifeboat is recounted with meticulous detail. In a macabre unfolding of the plot, the hyena first 'feasts' on the injured zebra – devouring it alive – before viciously attacking and decapitating the frantic orangutan. The tiger then stealthily kills off the hyena. At one stage, Pi's hunger even drives him to attempt to eat Richard Parker's faeces. Repeated references to bodily suffering and bodily functions signify how Pi increasingly yields to base or savage impulses and instincts, which eventually culminate into cannibalism and his reversion into savagery. Grotesque realism therefore emphasises that extreme physical suffering has a degrading and corruptive influence on the human psyche and, as Bakhtin (1984 [1968]:19) explains, it entails the 'lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity'. The tiger's physical deterioration seems to weaken his ability to act on his instincts, which adds to Pi's advantage. It is also when Pi's and Richard Parker's torment is at its worst that the boundary separating humans and animals is at its weakest, which, albeit temporarily, allows for a kind of solidarity, a spiritual kinship through which humans and animals attain a hybrid state of being that is both human and animal, a *being* that exists 'in the throes of unremitting suffering' (p. 284).

In the alternative story, the debasing effect of extreme physical and psychological adversity is even more pertinent. While Pi is only a witness to human killing in the first story, in the second story he slays the cook with a butcher's knife, the same knife the cook used to kill and decapitate his mother. The characters of the Frenchman in the first story and the cook in the second one bear marked resemblances: not only do both revert to the ultimate savage and incomprehensible act of cannibalism, but similar to Richard Parker, both function as alter-egos to Pi's character. The depravity of these characters signifies Pi's own moral regression and he confesses that 'driven by the extremity of [his] need and the madness to which it pushed [him]' (p. 256), he ate some of the dead Frenchman's flesh. In the alternative story, Pi notes that the cook 'was such an evil man … Worse still, he met evil in me … I must live with that' (p. 311). Grotesquery, savagery and cannibalism in the novel exemplify Pi's existential regression and despair and as such, transgress the boundary, not only between humans and animals but also between the rational and the irrational which ultimately facilitates Pi's spiritual redemption.

Suffering and degradation

Linking up with grotesque portrayals of depravity and violence, suffering and degradation further emphasises the inevitability of our material existence. Bakhtin (1984 [1968]:19) asserts that the essential principle of grotesque realism is 'degradation', which serves to remind us that as 'creatures of flesh and thus of food and feces also' we are bound by our bodily needs and functions. However, as Bakhtin (p. 175) also emphasises, this degradation of the grotesque body is also an ambivalent affirmation of the potential for regeneration and renewal. In *Life of Pi*, this is manifested by the triumph of the imaginative over the bleak sterility of the rational world. Related to the concept of grotesque realism and bodily degradation is Bakhtin's distinction between the 'grotesque body' and the 'classical body' (p. 175). The latter is conceptualised as being completed and finished – the attainment of perfect proportion, while the grotesque body appears unfinished, uncompleted:

> ... a thing of buds and sprouts, the orifices evident through which it sucks in and expels the world … a body marked by the evidence of its material origin and destiny. (Bakhtin 1984 [1968], cited in Dentith 1996:67).

In being a completed thing, the classical body therefore is defined, bound and fixed and consequently unable to achieve regeneration and renewal. The grotesque body, however, is undefined and boundless and, according to Bakhtin, 'a body in the act of becoming' (Bakhtin 1984 [1968], cited in Dentith 1996:226). The breakdown or decay of the grotesque body is therefore a manifestation of a liminal condition and possesses regenerative potential.

In the novel, material disintegration signifies Pi's moral and spiritual suffering. Pi notes that after months at sea:

> Everything suffered. Everything became sun-bleached and weather-beaten. The lifeboat, the raft until it was lost, the tarpaulin, the stills, the rain catchers, the plastic bags, the lines, the blankets, the net – all became worn, stretched, slack, cracked, dried, rotted, torn, discoloured … We perished away. (p. 239)

Pi continues to describe his physical deterioration which culminates in him eventually turning blind, a day which he recalls as 'the day [his] extreme suffering began' (p. 241).

His physical body grows increasingly weary, exemplifying his spiritual despair but also facilitating spiritual rejuvenation and transcendence of his material body:

> I grew weary of my situation, as pointless as the weather. But life would not leave me. The rest of this story is nothing but grief, ache and endurance.
>
> High calls low and low calls high. I tell you, if you were in such dire straits as I was, you too would elevate your thoughts. The lower you are, the higher your mind will want to soar. It was natural that, bereft and desperate as I was, in the throes of unremitting suffering, I should turn to God. (p. 283)

As the above passage suggests, Pi's spiritual rejuvenation is facilitated by the degeneration of his material (human) body. At the peak of his utter misery and desolation, he finds solace in his faith and is consoled by the presence of Richard Parker.

Pi's unwavering faith is yet again tested when the raft reaches the coast of Mexico, and Richard Parker jumps onto the beach and disappears into the jungle and from Pi's life 'unceremoniously' and without even glancing in his direction (p. 285). Though he realises that it is not in the tiger's animal nature to seek emotional closure, he is devastated by the abrupt way their journey together ends. It pains him that their story of suffering and endurance together comes to a close in such an anticlimactic way. Foremost, he regrets that he would never have the opportunity to express his gratitude, affection and feelings of kinship towards the tiger (p. 286), even though he will only be able to do this in human terms. This incident points to a clash between Pi's human nature and Richard Parker's animal nature, and thus the boundary that separates animal and human modes of existence is restored when their arduous journey comes to an end. Even though Pi's rational mind acknowledges and understands the tiger's alterity, emotionally and spiritually it is very difficult for him to accept that they should separate in such an impersonal manner. This affirms that even though a degree of kinship exists between humans and animals, the conditions thereof are different for each. In the novel, the gap between these different modes of experiencing and understanding the world is temporarily bridged as a result of the fellowship that arises from Pi's and his animal companion's suffering. Nevertheless, the tiger's presence continues to pervade Pi's memories throughout his life. As Richard Parker also plays a definitive part in Pi's spiritual revival, the animal will always remain entrenched with his being.

Transcended boundaries

In *Life of Pi*, aspects of carnivalised writing and grotesque realism destabilise the boundaries between the ontologies of human and animal and the rational and irrational by tracing Pi's regression into savagery through grotesque depictions of physical suffering and deprivation. The emphasis on the irrational highlights the notion that 'established authority and truth are relative' (Bakhtin 1984 [1968]:10) by challenging deterministic concepts of social, cultural and individual identity. In the novel this is made evident by both stories' inference that human nature is made up of aspects of good and evil, reason and intuition and that identity is often a hybrid manifestation of these. Martel conceives identity as being fluid and dynamic; such a conceptualisation destabilises ontological divisions, resulting in the convergence of human and animal worlds that opens up a liminal zone in which transition, transformation and social reintegration take place. Pi's ability to imagine non-human ways of being-in-the-world becomes a metaphor for his voyage towards existential autonomy. Thereby, Martel relates imagination to storytelling and conceives it as an aesthetic and ethical experience of transcendence. Pi's story with animals therefore enables him to overcome his ordeal and return to society – but not before he is brought to the brink of physical, spiritual and moral annihilation.

Allusions to the carnivalesque in *Life of Pi* therefore subvert 'the uniform, fixed and hierarchical world-view of rationalism' (Dentith 1996:79), or what Pi refers to as 'dry, yeastless faculty' (p. 302) in favour of 'the better story' (p. 317). This brings to mind Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogism' (1984 [1968], cited in Dentith 1996:52), which defines the self and society as being in a dialogical relationship. This entails that individual and social languages define each other and as such, any individual discourse is negotiated by social discourses, a practice that Bakhtin terms 'heteroglossia' (1984 [1968], cited in Dentith 1996:52). Linking up with the concepts of 'dialogism' and 'heteroglossia', Bakhtin situates the novel as a 'polyphonic' mode of discourse in the sense that it is particularly open to the influence of competing ideological voices (1984 [1968], cited in Dentith 1996:41). The theme of storytelling in the novel seems to align itself with an interpretation of the world that resists a monological and fundamentalist interpretation of reality in support of a more dialogical position. Instead, Martel relates themes of transformation and transcendence in Pi to an examination of what it means to exist-in-the-world, whether it is in human or non-human form. *Life of Pi* leaves the readers with the impression that animals are enigmatic entities and that by regarding them, and all other living beings emphatically and ethically, we just might come to terms with alterity, or those unknown, but vital, spaces of existence that transcend conventional notions of morality, rationality and self.

Conclusion

This article examined how animal modes of being-in-the world, which is made evident by the carnivalesque, emphasise irrational dimensions of existence that invalidates interpretations that are solely based on reason and empirical 'truth'. In this way, Pi's two thematically incompatible stories relate rationalism to agnosticism, logic and reason, and the irrational to religious belief, spirituality and imagination. Pi explains that when castaway on a lifeboat, physical existence

becomes 'extraordinarily arduous' while 'morally it is killing'; consequently, '[you] must make adjustments if you want to survive' (p. 217). He therefore adjusts not only the space of the lifeboat but also his moral principles, mentality and psyche in order to survive. Pi's identity, and by extension also Richard Parker's, becomes representative of the metaphysical world of spirituality and imagination. In this world, animals, particularly the tiger, become important symbols for the physical aspects of survival, such as instinct, intuition and a fierce will to survive at all cost.

When his ordeal ends, Pi's physical body is able to heal while his spiritual self is slowly and steadily renewed through academic study and his wholehearted dedication to the practice of his religions (p. 3). Yet again, religion and spirituality become the means of Pi's existential survival and, throughout the novel, his eclectic religious sentiments are associated with the novel's thematic emphasis of issues dealing with:

> … [D]ivine 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. (p. 63)

As the above passage suggests, Pi's mediation of events allows him to come to terms with the terrible way in which he lost his family and his childhood innocence. Consequently, he is able to lead a productive and fulfilling life as a husband and father.

The novel invokes metaphor and symbolism to make sense of a traumatic event in the life of its main character, which suggests that truth is not only made up of facts but also of our imaginative interpretation of these facts. Martel seems to imply that the alternative to the 'better story' would entail the 'sacrifice of our imagination on the altar of crude reality' (p. xiv). Therefore, even though the first story relates to the trauma of loss, fear and existential isolation, the way in which the narrative merges material and ordinary details with an incredibly imaginative story enforces the novel's central theme of the redemptive power of fiction. Ma (2012) points out that in the second story, 'humans are reduced primal terror', the outcome of which 'could lead only to a brutally shattered life … an abandonment by God'. Accordingly, Pi's religious belief atones for his moral suffering and effects existential regeneration beyond the physical and material world. Aspects of the carnivalesque juxtapose the rational and human – the *conceivable* – with the irrational and animalistic – the *inconceivable*. When considering the severity of the abominations recounted in this more reasonable or plausible version of events, it becomes clear that the 'story without animals' (p. 317) – in its inconceivability – is in fact the story that engages with the incomprehensible or *unthinkable* realm of human existence. In this sense, it is not so much the fact that there is another story that is of significance but rather the possibility thereof.

Martel's preoccupation with notions of spirituality and the imagination seems to initiate a movement away from radical or overtly theoretical forms of postmodernism with its anti-metaphysical approach and overly deconstructive tendencies. Even though *Life of Pi* utilises unquestionably postmodernist techniques to question dominant epistemological paradigms, it seems that philosophical shifts in this novel express larger cultural changes in society and literature, such as a renewed interest in the role of religion, or any other forms of spirituality or anti-secularism. Martel's novel makes evident such a postsecular or post-postmodernist approach by signalling a new mode of narrative that situates the reader as the recipient of the text to the degree that they become, without irony, complicit in the 'heteroglossic' production of its meaning, as the reader can decide for himself or herself which of Pi's stories is closest to the truth and what his or her choice of story implies. Consequently, Pi personifies the potential for an emerging breed of fiction that is able to articulate the sense of cultural, intellectual and spiritual displacement and estrangement that has come to define the 21st century, not with paradoxical and self-reflexive irony but unaffectedly and ethically.

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