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Rebecca Lynn Colwell

Competing Literary Influences in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

The evolution of literary criticism follows prominent literary thought and philosophies on the purpose of poetry and literature as well as the role of the audience in experiencing these works. While many critics add their own interpretation on the purpose of poetry and the vital role the poet plays in this process, the critiques with lasting impact begin with classical thought concerning the role of the poet. This classical philosophy initiates the need to codify literature and its purpose and inspires further analysis as technology and newer philosophies shape mankind's thinking on the purpose of literature. But for contemporary literature, the Romantics hold the most influence. These poets and their revolutionary ideas on the role of imagination in poetry and art enable the artist and the audience to delve into the psychological aspect of humanity in a way unparalleled with earlier forms of literary thinking. While Plato and his contemporaries embraced the concept of poetry as a reflection and imitation of the divine, the Romantics embraced imagination as a way to explore humanity and divinity more symbolically. In Yann Martel's contemporary novel *Life of Pi*, the author brings the seemingly incompatible philosophies of Plato and the Romantics into harmonious co-existence, enabling this frame narrative to offer a unique vision on the nature of humanity and the importance of storytelling.

I. The Role of the Poet and Poetry

To understand the role of imagination and fancy in classical philosophies, critics of *Life of Pi* must first understand the point of view of the classical philosophers on the role of poetry in society. To most, Plato is the originator of this classical theory. Not only do Plato's *The Republic* and *Ion* examine the ideal city-state, they also designate the proper regulation of human desires. Most importantly, however, Plato examines the relevance of the poet and the role poetry has in society. Before he even reveals his definition of the role of the poet, Plato claims that all poets should be banished from this ideal city-state because "all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers" (*Republic* 2). This statement regarding poetry seems to allow no room for creativity in society, yet it does not divulge his view on the role of the poet, only the potential harms of poetry. Instead, Plato questions and inspires his audience to question the validity of the poet and his place in society. Plato argues that poets are not originators of their work; instead the poets "copy images of virtue, and other themes of their poetry, but have no contact with the truth" (*Republic* 7). It seems then that Plato's problem with poetry lies with the poet himself. Plato believes that the "poets are only the interpreters of the gods..." (Rutherford 2193). The poet merely reproduces images of the world around him, and what he creates becomes a false representation of the original creation. By creating these false images, Plato furthers his claim of the poet as "ruinous." Using Plato's analogy, the gods created all things; a

carpenter fabricates a chair, imitating the gods' creation, and then the painter, inspired by what he sees, paints his vision of the chair. By Plato's philosophy, the chair in the painting becomes less valid in that it has little in common with the original inspiration. With each step removed from the original, the creation becomes less valid because of this distance from the original inspiration. Thus the poet and poetry become like the painter and his imagined chair. Plato sees the poet as "creators of appearances" (*Republic* 4). What Plato values is the connection to truth. Because poetry, like his example with the chair, is man's imitation of divine thought, what is created in words and crafted in meter and rhyme scheme becomes a distant echo or imitation of the original focus.

In contrast to Plato's philosophy and many of the neoclassical ideals of the previous century, the Romantics seek to redefine poetry and the role of the poet for a new age. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the founding fathers of Romantic ideals, states that "a poem contains the same elements as a prose composition...[but] it is distinguished from prose by metre, or by rhyme, or by both conjointly" (260). While Coleridge's definition of poetry is ordinary and formulaic, it implies that the reader, and even the poet, derives a certain pleasure from the sounds and composition of poetry, but that this is simply a superficial manner of appreciating and understanding poetry rather than the complete definition. The Romantics tend to refuse to adhere to the classical style and form of poetry. Instead they desire more freedom to explore and express the wonders of the soul. Coleridge plainly states in his *Biographia Literaria*, "What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other" (262). In defining poetic ideals, Coleridge does not separate the two ideas that poetry is the creation and the poet is the creator; instead, he claims that poetry is an extension of the poet. The ideal vision of a poet is one who "brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties... [and] diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses by that synthetic and magical power..." (Coleridge 262). Coleridge's argument enables the emotions of the poet himself to be reflected in the poetical work. Rather than being a product of form and style, poetry then emerges as an expression of the poet, a way to blend this "synthetic" and "magical" power beloved by the Romantics in one composition. Coleridge asserts that by only writing according to the rules crafted by the classical poets, this definition only discusses the surface level of writing. This rebellion against style and form of the neoclassical period urges for the evolution of poetry. Where the classical poet is a skilled and truthful storyteller, John Keats claims in his letters that the poet is a man who receives his inspiration from a higher place. William Wordsworth agrees with Keats' assessment by claiming that the poet's role is to be a translator to the people. The poet becomes merely the vessel in which ideas can take hold, and he can be everyone and no one as he passes through all of nature's mysteries. Opposing Plato's philosophy, Keats suggests that the poet need not be educated in the classical style of writing poetry. Instead, the writing process comes from within and can take shape in any form. As a vessel receiving inspiration, the poet becomes incapable of defining the world's natural mysteries because of his role in the process of conveying such phenomena to a wider audience. His role is not to explain but to reveal. Divine inspiration comes to the poet, and it is his responsibility as a vessel to translate the vast mysteries of the world to the audience who are unable or unwilling to see these mysteries themselves. The poet exposes these mysteries that would otherwise remain hidden. Wordsworth sees the poet as the vehicle that "binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society" (250). The poet then becomes someone other than one who writes; instead, the poet becomes the presenter of the human experience to an audience, conveying emotions and knowledge in an easily understood package.

In his contemporary novel *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel also discusses the role of literature and of the “poet.” In this case, he asks his reader, through a fictional narrator, about the purpose of the artist and the story itself. While Plato argues against the poet due to his inferior imitation of the divine, the fictional narrator reasons, “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?” (302). For Martel, Plato’s argument fails to qualify the extent to which everything is an imitation of divine thought. If the moment words are written down or an idea is created into an object lessens the value of the word or object, then where in the world is originality other than in nature itself? Through his fictional narrator, Martel is able to invite the reader on his journey for inspiration. He asserts that a writer must make sure “[y]our theme is good, as are your sentences...the plot you’ve mapped out for them is grand...You’ve done your research, gathering the facts – historical, social, climatic, culinary – that will give your story its feel of authenticity...” (Martel viii). Martel’s theory on writing then becomes formulaic, echoing basic definition of the classical and Romantic philosophies on poetry. There are characters, plot, and theme that all must connect in a manner that makes sense to the reader. He offers his idea that there must be research to assure an authentic feel for the story as well. Like Plato and Coleridge, Martel suggests that there is a proper formula to create a genuine story and that there are essential elements in the course of writing that must explore some ideal beyond the surface level of the story. Martel’s fictional author then begins to write with “pen in hand, for the sake of greater truth” (viii). In this moment, he agrees with both the classical and Romantic philosophy of basic writing once again: literature must bring a sense of greater truth to the audience, or it is not compelling literature. Words, even in their smallest form, craft an image in a person’s mind and then that picture conveys meaning. Therefore, Martel argues, that invention has its place in literature because all written works are creations of man rather than the divine.

Martel also sees the role of the writer as a vessel who explores the depths of humanity or any great idea for a larger audience. If this greater purpose is missing, including the voice of the author, then according to Martel, “your story is emotionally dead...” (ix). In his novel, Martel utilizes a frame narrative to enhance the experience of storytelling. The Author’s Note opens the novel with a fictional author, not Martel as is presumed, searching for inspiration to write another book after his first offers moderate success. It is in this search that the fictional author encounters Pi, the character on which whose story the novel focuses. In his interview of Pi and through learning of Pi’s life story, the author no longer narrates the events in the novel. Instead, Pi as an adult assumes the role of a narrator, further convoluting the story. Like Plato’s analogy of the chair, Pi’s story of himself as an adolescent lost at sea with a tiger as his only companion is no longer told by the person closest to the original events. Pi tells his story as an adult, and the fictional author writes Pi’s story in novel form for a wider audience. What the audience experiences is now three times removed from the original source: Pi experiencing these events as a teenager. Such a distance of truth begs the reader to question the validity of the story presented. Plato’s claim of poetry being “ruinous” due to distance offers Martel a reprieve: poetry is only valid if “...[it] possess the knowledge of the true nature of the originals” (*Republic* 2). Rather than being labeled harmful to the reader, Martel’s novel can be acceptable to the audience if and only if it can bestow knowledge of a greater truth. Martel gives this power of labeling to his audience. At the conclusion of his story, the adult Pi offers his fictional author, as well as the reader, a chance to evaluate his story as told in Part Two, mysteries and all, or the “true” story without any symbolic meaning. This distance from the actual events in his story allows Pi to rationalize his experience in order to comprehend to deeper truth of his ordeal that Plato deems

acceptable. He is, as far as Plato is concerned, allowed to tell his story in this manner because it reveals a universal truth about the human experience.

II. Poetry and the Emotional Appeal

In classical thinking, the main concern of poetry is the emotions poetry can inspire. While Plato does not despise poetry outright, he expresses his fears that poetry “feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up” (*Republic* 14). Plato claims that there is “no invention in [the poet] until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and reason is no longer in him” (*Republic* 15). Poetry, in this sense, exits the realm of imitation and moves into the realm of the gods. For Plato, man, in this fit of divinely inspired ecstasy, is able to receive the inspiration of the gods, but “no man...while he retains this faculty, has the oracular gift of poetry” (*Poetry* 2195). This excessive feeling of emotions inhibits man from being able to reason and limits man’s ability to express the greater truth to others. It is this moment in which Plato finds fault later in his philosophies, for man is no longer in control of himself when in the process of crafting poetic works. Plato is disgusted by the fact that the poet must lose control of himself and his grasp on reason in order to receive this divine inspiration. He claims that it is man’s role not “to learn of the image...[but] to learn the truth” (Bundy 354). Like many of his contemporaries, Plato argues that only through rational thought can man comprehend absolute beauty rather than excessive emotion. Thus, poetry fails to teach humanity about greater truth or reason and instead inspires subjective truth and chaos through the exploration of emotions.

In *Phaedrus*, Plato discusses the concept of the soul as the origin of all emotions. He divides the soul in three parts: the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive. This division of the soul illuminates Plato’s philosophy on the dangerous aspects of poetry. The rational part is the well-regulated portion of the soul. This is the division of the soul that discerns all rational thought from irrational thought and is capable of determining reason from chaos. This is where mankind is most productive and most philosophical. Plato utilizes the metaphor of a charioteer to demonstrate the other two divisions of the soul. The spirited part of the soul, which loves honor and victory, is one horse, and the appetitive aspect of the soul, which is the source of sensual cravings and base desires, is the other (Rutherford 1). The spirited part of the soul finds delight in constructive and positive emotions, while the appetitive part of the soul finds pleasure through more destructive and devious emotions. According to Plato’s philosophy, a well-regulated soul is guided by the rational portion by a charioteer who controls the more emotional parts of the soul (Rutherford 1). Through his analogy, one can determine the root of classical fears about poetry: if poetry can lead a man to feel extreme emotions, whether positive or negative, then the rational part of his soul is no longer in control. Unregulated by reason, the audience is then led by either the spirited or appetitive aspect of the soul, which will definitely lead to chaos. These passions will then lead the audience to act in a manner that leads to destruction of Plato’s ideal society due to being led by the impulses and whims of the baser aspects of the soul. Because of this danger, Plato argues that self-control is the only way to overcome the destructive emotions found in poetry.

Where Plato argues against the irrational emotions poetry can inspire, the Romantics see purpose in these emotions as a way to appreciate nature. Wordsworth, in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, defines poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” that originates from “emotion recollected in tranquility” (243). For the Romantic poets, emotions are a vital product in the experience of interpreting art. Where Plato argues that poetry inspires excessive emotions that will ultimately lead to chaos, Wordsworth claims that these emotions, at least those that are truly from the appreciation of art, are recalled in a serene and composed state of mind, which allows one to reflect and comprehend the nature of the artwork and the emotions

it inspires. Keats offers his own ideas on the purpose of art: “The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth...” (283). Like the classical philosophy of Plato, Keats sees the purpose of poetry as a means to reflect the beauty of the divine and of the world around him. Yet, in contrast to Plato’s philosophy, Keats’ argument encompasses more than just beauty and truth. Not only does art need to reflect the beauty of nature, art must also kindle the audience’s emotions and passions, otherwise the piece of art becomes a thing that has a “driveling nature...[and] pleasure is entirely lost” (Keats 282). Ultimately, poetry becomes a vehicle for expressing and embracing emotions, but poetry must also allow the audience some measure of pleasure in what they are experiencing. If the art form is music, the chords and harmonies must transport the hearer to a place beyond the reality of sitting in an auditorium surrounded by other people. This music needs to evoke such emotions as to cause the audience to feel something others than the physical pleasure the notes and harmonies provide. The purpose of this form of art is not only to appreciate the sounds, but also to transport the audience to such feelings they cannot experience on their own. Wordsworth claims that poetry should describe objects and utter sentiments so that “the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified” (243). Where Plato argues against the effectiveness of these emotions in a rational society, the Romantic poets offer a chance to embrace such feelings as a way to fully understand the beauty around them. In no way do the Romantics see emotion as something that detracts from the productivity in the world. These emotions do not destroy or lead to chaos. Rather, poetry enables the audience to release those stifled emotions that Plato wishes to control and instead direct these emotions to an appreciation of nature and to a better understanding of nature’s mysteries. These emotions are a valuable process in the appreciation of art. According to Keats’ argument, if there is no emotional release when interacting with the piece of literature or art, then it is not true art due to the failure of the piece to inspire or to bring the audience closer to a greater truth. The Romantic emotional appeal essentially allows for the inspiration of a person’s emotional state in the recognition of the transition of the rational and reasonable facts of the everyday experience to the realization of the unexplored relationships (Egan 70). Poetry in this sense must adhere to truth of nature, yet also bring the reader into a state of emotional release that is inspiring rather than destructive. These emotions, and the inevitable release, draw the reader closer to an intellectual and spiritual relationship with the piece of art and in turn with the focus of the piece. The Romantics also believe, like Plato, that all inspiration comes from God and through His creation. To transcend a simplistic imitation of the divine, which Plato claims lessens the work of art, the poet must employ creativity to provide an alternative view of nature that enables the reader to see familiar ideas and settings in a new way. Where the artwork may be inspiring to the audience, the most important aspect of the experience are the emotions and feelings experienced. This exploration of emotional inspiration carries the audience beyond the bare facts and merely hints at the wonder of their unexplored relationships to the object. For greater truth, the Romantics claim that this added creativity allows for the audience to be closer to beauty and truth than they would be able to on their own.

In *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel offers his own philosophy on the importance of art and emotional connections through his fictional author’s introduction. He writes, “If we, as citizens, do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams” (xii). He supports the idea that the artist, whether a writer, a painter or a sculptor, is a vital member of society. It is through poetry and art that humanity is able to share emotional experiences and find inspiration for dreams. By sharing this experience, people are able to communicate constructively about these unifying

feelings. Martel's fictional author asserts that his book was "born as I was hungry" (vii). As an author Martel searches, just like a poet or artist, for inspiration. All of mankind has been at a similar moment of defeat and can sympathize with the fictional author's desperation in his quest to find inspiration for his next great work. Martel, as the literal author, parallels his own struggle with writing, and so his struggle becomes the fictional author's struggle. With this shared experience between the literal and fictional author, the reader is able to make a connection to the novel and this search for inspiration. When Pi's own quest for truth begins, then the shared experience grows as the reader learns of the struggles Pi faces as a child and then as a teenager in his desperate attempt to survive. Where Pi shares his story with the fictional author, and then the fictional author shares with the world, the reader is drawn into an emotional and epic journey for self-discovery and enlightenment. Martel's aim in having an author recount this frame narrative enables the story to morph from a mere shipwreck story to one of deep psychological reflection.

Where Plato fears the emotions that poetry can inspire and the Romantics openly embrace these emotions, Martel offers his own philosophy on the reasons why people seek this emotional release rather than siding with one or the other. Much of the novel focuses on the quest for greater truth. In the novel, religion offers "words of divine consciousness...moral exaltation...[and] lasting feelings of elation..." (Martel 63). Whether or not the reader buys into this idea is trivial; Pi clings to his faith and essentially teaches the reader about faith overcoming belief. On his own quest for the greater truth, the fictional author is initially enticed with Pi's story as a story that will "make you believe in God" (Martel x). This billing sends the author on his search to seek Pi out and hear this miraculous story. Having heard the story, the fictional author assumes the role of Pi's advocate in introducing the reader to such a claim and performs for the reader the same role Mamaji, a family friend of Pi's, played for him, finally asserting by the end of his author's note, "this was, indeed, a story to make you believe in God" (Martel xi). Neither Pi nor the fictional author demand the reader believe this claim, yet both characters' search for truth inspires the reader to reflect on this claim and determine whether or not it is true.

Religion represents a major motif in *Life of Pi*. As Pi begins his search for greater truth, he finds this truth not only in Hinduism, the religion of his mother, but also in Christianity and Islam. As Pi narrates his story, he often comments on the "better story," at times emphasizing religion as a form of storytelling. In his discourse on the difference between atheists and agnostics, Pi feels anger as he ponders their dying moments. According to Pi, an atheist will have a "deathbed leap of faith," and the agnostic, instead, clings to his science and "dry, yeastless factuality...lack[ing] imagination and miss[ing] the better story" (Martel 64). Martel, it seems, attempts to discuss the better story through the lens of organized religion. Where people often are bogged down with religious doctrine and the search for answers, Martel, through his narrator Pi, sees religion as a story that delivers hope to mankind in everyday life as well as in times of despair. Using his example of the deathbed scenarios, Pi sees the "better story" as believing in an afterlife, that the soul transcends the earthly realm. Pi's problem then with atheists and agnostics is not that they do not believe in a deity but that they have no faith in the unexplainable. All answers are scientific, and they cling to cold, hard facts. Religion to Pi allows the exploration of the unknown and enables one to feel a connection to a force greater than the self. Pi and his belief in multiple religions are seemingly contradictory, yet Pi does not concern himself with the doctrine of each religion. Instead, he feels a pull toward the offerings of peace and a closer connection with the divine. Like the greatest works of art, religion offers Pi a moment to experience emotional release without delving into emotional excess. According to Plato's philosophy, this hedonistic emotional release is dangerous to mankind in that the audience could

potentially act upon their heightened emotions and cause chaos in society. Religion especially can provoke humanity to act in a way contrary to reason, as we can see in wars waged in the name of a god. On the other hand, the Romantics see the benefit of emotional release in that this release allows the audience to become transported to a place beyond their reality. This emotional catharsis permits humanity to express their innermost soul and to reflect on their shared emotional state. Martel suggests that religion offers the same emotional release favored by the Romantics, while offering the sense of structure that Plato advocates for poetry. The emotional release found in religion, and ultimately in his novel, becomes more internal for Martel and his fictional author, allowing for the experience of sorrow, joy, and outrage in the private setting of the story. While the reader is alone with the novel, Martel permits his audience to explore the emotional implications found in Pi's quest for greater truth.

III. Imagination, Perception, and the Effect on Storytelling

As a final reason against poetry, Plato speaks against the dangers of imagination and man's creativity found in poetry. He claims that poets are "seduced [by] the emotions and [create] in the soul falsehoods and illusions about reality" (Egan 62). Outlining the aspects of the soul, Plato believes imagination exists in the parts of the soul that enable excessive behavior rather than rational thought, and muddies the water of truth. If the purpose of poetry is to view beauty in its natural state, then truth comes from true vision and will be embraced by the rational part of the soul. If a person finds pleasure in these "shadows" and "phantasies" created by man, then "truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images" (Bundy 370). If man is not the creator of his work and is instead divinely inspired, then what he creates is an imitation of an ideal; the poet has embraced inspiration in a frenzied state rather than in a state of rational thought. This imitation deals with "faint reflections of truth rather than with truth itself, with products of imagination rather than ideas" (Bundy 372). Imagination, then, leads the audience to believe in false appearances that are "liable to be distorted" (Bundy 374), which can lead the audience to a false sense of knowledge and in turn a false sense of emotion. Thus the audience clings not to truth, the main purpose of creating art, but to these false images and irrational passions. These false images cause the audience to have emotions and feelings about things that they should not have or will never have in real existence. Plato only values poetry and imitation in so far as it "aids reason in arriving at universal ideas, and in turn giving them concrete expression" (Bundy 389). If these "phantasies" do not lead the audience to truth and knowledge, then there is no value in utilizing imagination in poetry. Instead, these "phantasies" run the risk of leading the soul to immoral conduct. Plato so highlights the danger of the varying perception of mankind. With vastly different life experiences and knowledge bases, Plato argues that these false images do not convey the same meaning to all. Instead, each person can perceive the poem or work of art differently, and thus art runs the risk of revealing untruth to some or all of those who hear or see it. Imagination then becomes just as dangerous for the rational thinker as emotional release.

The Romantics choose to express their realities in a more symbolic form associated with the utilization of the imagination. Romanticism, however, does not merely dwell in the playful imagination of childhood. Rather, Romanticism offers the poet and the audience the "freedom to explore afresh the reality of human experience..." (Egan 64). The poet's role then becomes the vessel that lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and shows the familiar in "strange wonder" (Egan 64). This claim directly contradicts the Platonic philosophy for the education of the audience. The Romantic revolution is not solely in the use of imagination in poetry and art, rather it is "the open[ing] up new avenues to truth...[leading] to a deeper understanding of man and society" (Szenczi 193). Rather than simply rejecting reality, the Romantics see poetry as a

vehicle for expressing this reality in a new, inspirational manner. The search for a greater truth no longer needs to have definite answers; instead, this quest for truth becomes private to each person. Imagination becomes the defining factor in what makes the Romantic era different from its predecessors. Imagination fulfills the “means of grasping some kind of supersensuous ultimate reality...” (Coleridge 193). In other words, imagination makes it possible for poets to delve into the psychological human experience. It is vital to the creative process and represents the mind’s “active contribution to the fabric of experience” (Coleridge 194). Without imagination, humanity runs the risk of not only failing to interpret the mysteries of the natural world but also of failing to see the everyday details of the world in a new light. Imagination restores the visions of humanity and brings this vision into communication with the natural elements of the divine. By utilizing imagination, the Romantics are able to penetrate the human soul and to represent man as they forge a connection with the forces of nature and divinity.

Keats especially argues against the classical drive for realism through his philosophy of negative capability. The logic of literary interpretation is to “answer questions in terms of... plausibl[ility] rather than with an unqualified yes or no” (Tsur 777-778). With Keats’ philosophy, the poet need not explain all of nature’s mysteries. Keats uses the concept of negative capability to discuss the state in which readers are “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason ...[Being] content with half knowledge” (283) where one trusts in the heart’s perception. Negative capability is the state of creative opposition that enables one to transcend any intellectual or social constraints. It describes the ability of the individual to perceive and to think beyond the capacity of human intellect. It further captures the ability of human beings to reject the constraints of a rigid structure, and to both experience events free from any limitations and assert their own will and individuality upon their activity. For the Romantics, the point of literature is not needing to have all the answers. Instead, by seeking emotional release and using the imagination, a person can truly appreciate various art forms. The indefinable aspect of art therefore becomes an added bonus to enable a person to fully embrace an emotional release. Unanswerable questions then elevate the experience and can allow a person to internalize their perception of the piece of work. In understanding literature like poetry, parables, and other similar works, Keats suggests that it is only the readers who are capable to believe “in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts” are able to perceive the “subtle and minimal cues” and other ambiguous meanings in artwork (Tsur 779). Keats encourages an acceptance of the limitations what humanity knows about the world, urging us to not try to analyze or rationalize the unexplainable. He demands that the poet be receptive to the natural world and to the divine rather than searching for fact or reason, arguing that some things are unexplainable and deserve to stay that way.

The main discrepancy between the classical philosophers and the Romantic poets lies in the nature of reality. Where Plato and his contemporaries rely on reason to explain the mysteries of nature, the Romantics prefer to prioritize the imagination to help explore these mysteries. The question then becomes whether or not imagination or reason reveals the greater truth. In *Life of Pi*, the author considers this question but leaves it for the reader to decide the answer. While Martel presents his philosophy on the purpose of the writer and the need for emotional release, whether in life or fiction, he also provides a means to achieve harmony with these two philosophies. Pi begins his narration with the assertion that “To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation” (Martel 28). As Pi discusses his reasons for having faith, he recognizes the need for humanity to believe in something outside of itself, and thus he begins his symbolic tale. In the author’s note, Martel questions, “That’s what fiction is about, isn’t it, the selective transforming of reality? The twisting of it to bring out its

essence?" (viii). This fact alone supports the Romantic ideal of poetry; Martel utilizes his audience's imagination to delve into the complexities of human nature. Pi's journey ultimately uncovers a truth about humanity that many seem to be unaware of or repress. Martel seems to embrace Keats' concept of negative capability through Pi's narration of a baffling account that is not capable of being explained, and seemingly, the reader is swept up into the events of the story, making the story's believability secondary. Pi tells his story of survival in a way that does not support man's knowledge of science or even seem to be believable. He spends two hundred twenty-seven days in a lifeboat in the presence of "an adult Bengal tiger" (Martel 319). In this time, Pi, a mere boy without any formal education, trains the tiger to answer to a whistle and to respond to his will. Pi ultimately becomes the alpha male on the lifeboat and manages to feed the tiger along the way. The reader, having some background in science and the natural world, stands in awe of Pi's capabilities in this situation. Yet there are many questions as well: how does Pi manage to do this without formal training? why does Richard Parker, the tiger, never attack Pi, even when in the clutches of starvation? and how is it that only Pi manages to escape the sinking ship, while every other creature perishes in the depths of the Pacific Ocean? These questions are not answered in Part Two. Pi never contemplates the "why"s and the "how"s that the reader feels must be addressed and sees no problem with the mysteries in his story. Pi only asks his audience to have faith rather than to believe his story. In fact, Martel, the fictional author, and Pi all agree that this survival story, mysteries and all, is a powerful message in the exploration of the greater truth. This version of the story requires immense faith to accept and explores the will to survive and the lengths to which a person will go in order to do just that. The carnivorous island especially adheres to the Romanticized ideals of art and Pi's prerequisite of faith. It symbolizes Pi's despair in his realization about the slim chance of being rescued. The chapters leading up to this episode admit to murderous acts of survival between Richard Parker and Pi, emphasizing the desperate conditions in which they live. In this despairing mood, Pi comes upon the floating island. Though the island seemingly offers Pi protection and food, it will eventually destroy him, like it did another human, which Pi realizes when he discovers the human tooth in the cluster of leaves. This part of the novel seems the most unlikely, and the fictional author and the Japanese officials interviewing Pi fail to have faith in this part of his story. While Pi is insistent on this point as a turning point for his survival, the island remains under speculation for those who align their thoughts with rational philosophy. The carnivorous island tests the reader's faith in ways that the prior events of Pi's narrative have not. The reader is forced to confront his faith in the face of an unbelievable story.

By the end of his narration in Part Three, Pi reveals his greatest secret, answering the mysteries and questions from Part Two: there are two iterations of his journey. The first is told using the veil of Romantic symbolism, where each element represents an idea more powerful than its original meaning. The second is told last in sequence and adheres to the Platonic philosophy. At the end of Pi's Romantic narrative, the Japanese officials demand that Pi tell his story in a more believable, Platonic format. Pi merely replies: "You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want a dry, yeastless factuality" (Martel 302). The version of Pi's survival story that he tells the Japanese officials is devoid of imagination and symbolism, and instead this version relays the events of the shipwreck in order and without additional elaboration. The Japanese officials, who seek answers for the *Tsimtsum*'s sinking, represent the Platonic search for rational and logical truth. The officials are not concerned with the "better story" that Pi and the fictional author insist is more resonant; instead, they want a story that is believable and makes rational sense, a story that is not a distortion of the original event. With their insistence on finding the "dry, yeastless factuality," Martel utilizes the classical philosophy. Plato argues for

poetry to only explore rational topics and express reason to its core, and likewise, the Japanese officials also maintain their belief that Pi's original story is not a story one can believe, frequently emphasizing the flaws found in the original story. Their search for truth highlights the fact that Pi tells a story that requires more faith than the Japanese officials are willing to give. Plato and the Romantics both claim that poetry must lead the audience to a greater truth, and with his symbolism, Pi begins to leave the realm of factuality and instead explores the spiritual journey. In this moment, Pi reveals the "truth," albeit grudgingly. After both iterations of the narrative are revealed, the greater truth of the novel is exposed.

Where the Romanticized iteration of the story is powerful enough in its entirety, highlighting Pi's struggle to survive and his love and loss of Richard Parker, it is in the unveiling of the "real" story in Part Three that truly makes the first iteration resound with the reader. Man has the potential for darkness and evil, for doubt and violence, but that man also has the potential for grace and confidence. Pi is able to fully immerse the reader in this greater truth by telling the second iteration of his story. In this iteration, Pi's great tale of survival in the Pacific Ocean in the company of a Bengal tiger is symbolic. Pi initially describes his experience in the company of animals, yet these animals in fact represent his mother, an injured sailor, the French cook, and even himself. This "dry, yeastless factuality" illuminates the relevance of Pi's survival and of Richard Parker to the larger audience. To Plato, Richard Parker represents the baser part of Pi's soul that seeks revenge when angered by the actions of the French cook, characterized as the hyena. Pi acts instinctively after his mother, depicted by the orangutan, dies at the hands of the French cook, and, in turn, violently kills him. The reader feels the full force of this action only when he is enlightened to the reality that Pi, rather than Richard Parker, murders the cook. Pi utilizes symbolism and imagination, favored by the Romantics, to express the horrors of his ordeal, yet this symbolism will be lost without the factuality of the second iteration of the story. Without his "dry, yeastless factuality," Pi's survival, although quite striking and powerful, means less. The reader needs the stark clarity of the "dry" version in order to fully appreciate the inspiring, symbolic revelations of the iteration Pi tells in Part Two. In analyzing the two versions of Pi's story, Martel forces the reader to make a decision: which story do you as a reader believe? Yet this decision is not a simple process due to the fact that one telling of the story reveals an emotional truth, while the other reveals a rational truth. Emotionally, Pi cannot deal with the implications of his actions. To cope with reality, he romanticizes his story and creates the "aggressor" in the form of a tiger. The tiger then protects Pi and kills the hyena, who is the despicable killer of the orangutan and the zebra, as representative of the injured sailor. While Part Three of the novel reveals the events of Part Two as more symbolic than literal, the narrator does not discount either version of Pi's journey. Pi's purpose in telling the Romanticized version first is to give his audience the faith necessary to believe in his spiritual journey. To Pi, this iteration of his story is the equivalent of a religious ritual, where believers have faith that their actions are symbolic of actual events, such as the Eucharist in remembrance of Jesus' sacrifice for mankind. Even though Plato and the Romantics disagree on the role of emotions in writing, the emotional clarity of the story is what makes Pi's survival more meaningful. For Pi, the "better story" is the one that asks the audience to suspend their disbelief and to trust with blind faith as they hear about Pi's ordeal. Yet it is through the rational telling of the story that the reader is enlightened as to the implications of Pi's actions on the lifeboat. Where the reader is originally led to assume Richard Parker is the violent force on the lifeboat, it is in fact Pi himself who kills the French cook -- Pi, who is a mere boy, angry and afraid of the events that have unfolded. Such an unveiling of truth shocks the reader, yet this desperation is the lasting emotion of the story. The reader is initially set up to believe that a wild animal is responsible for the

deaths of other animals on the lifeboat and that Pi is the sole human survivor. The revelations of Part Three require the reader to reevaluate Pi's experiences on the lifeboat as well as the implications of these experiences as a teenager and as an adult.

Once the fictional author and the reader hear both accounts, neither version retains its full significance in the absence of the other. As a boy, Pi clings to the symbolic story of his survival to cope with the truth of the matter: he has killed and sacrificed certain moral and religious beliefs in order to survive two hundred and twenty-seven days in a lifeboat. But as an adult, Pi is able to acknowledge the facts in a rational manner. He can seemingly deal with the implications of his emotional ordeal and can rationalize what his survival means. He can see the strength of faith in his Romanticized story and can acknowledge the facts in the Platonic iteration. Pi defers to his audience to make the choice about which story is "better." The third unspoken option Martel seems to present that Pi does not requires blending the knowledge gained in the second version of his narrative with the symbolic aspect of his first version. And, perhaps, Martel also asks the reader to search within himself and find the "greater truth," just as Pi does in his amazing struggle to survive against all odds. By having this unspoken third option, Martel allows for faith in the symbolic story, which utilizes the emotional appeal and imaginative symbolism the Romantics favor, and the concrete and rational certainty from the Platonic iteration. With the symbolic story, the reader is astonished with Pi's endurance and courage in the face of overwhelming odds; and with the rational story, the reader fully understands the depths of human depravity, especially when confronted by the French cook's brutality. The Romanticized telling portrays the cook as little more than an opportunistic scavenger who preys on the weak and helpless. Pi's violence, once revealed, becomes nobler, more righteous, and more forgivable in the end. He becomes a majestic tiger, fierce and deadly, yet at the same time, he is a boy who must live with the consequences of his actions for the rest of his life. Thus, the reader understands Pi's need to blend two such disparate literary philosophies.

With the events in Part Three, Martel brings the Platonic and Romantic philosophies into harmony while commenting on the two versions of Pi's story. He asks his audience to suspend their disbelief to experience a story of survival so powerful that it will "make you believe in God" (Martel x). Just as he demands the reader to have faith in his story rather than doubt every minute detail, Pi demands the Japanese investigators, the fictional author, and the reader make a philosophical choice: to decide which story offers more inspiration and ultimately gives the reader faith in a greater truth. Through *Life of Pi*, the reader comes to the realization that the Platonic and Romantic extremes are not the more ideal ways to interpret literature and its significance; rather, a harmonious blending of these two philosophies will lead the reader to the greater truth both claim as the ultimate purpose for literature.

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