In 1975 George Landow observed that “[r]omance, satire, and the literature of adventure have always relied on the device of the shipwreck to isolate a character and place him in a new setting” (642). Influenced by the still-prevailing New Criticism, Landow predictably stressed aesthetics and “timeless” themes in his analysis. For him, as for so many writers and critics, shipwreck was a metaphor. Rather than an event in a real environment, it reflected “the topos of the life-journey” (642). Of course, this view still has validity, but for a critic living at the beginning of the twenty-first century it is almost impossible to consider shipwrecks without also taking into consideration ecological concerns. Shipwreck can no longer be simply seen as a literary device. Like the pastoral, which also allows characters to test their mettle in surroundings removed from civil society, the shipwreck narrative needs rethinking.1 When we look at shipwreck with ecologists’
eyes, the role of nature and, in particular, the relationship between humans and animals, becomes increasingly significant as the survivors emerge from their sinking ships. The scene is the same, but the elements in it have shifted.

Yann Martel's prizewinning novel, Life of Pi (2001) addresses this shift. It provides a new paradigm, reversing the trend toward human dominance over animals that develops in children's literature involving shipwreck and the already established pattern of human dominance in the shipwrecks of adult literary history. In terms of children's literature, animals have traditionally been treated as equals—friends, even—but as the readers and the protagonists grow older, the affinity dwindles, and the dominance of human over non-human animal emerges. However, with Life of Pi, the domination paradigm is replaced with a more ecologically acceptable one of respect. A similar change may also be seen in terms of the historical development of shipwreck narratives and Pi. Here an equally new and satisfying attitude has evolved from the consideration of animals as servants or lesser incarnations of humans to their being treated as equals. Writers such as Martel and contemporary critics such as Nigel Rothfels, Randy Malamud, and Gary Wolfe have called into question both utilitarian and romantic historical attitudes towards animals, replacing them with ideas informed by the work of Charles Darwin.² Pi can be read as the twenty-first century convergence of both developmental and historical shipwreck narratives, a text where a young shipwrecked human grows up—so to speak—and takes his place in the circle of nature, rather than at the top of the heap.

In order to elucidate this evolution, I would like to borrow a schematic put forth by Tzvetan Todorov in The Conquest of America.³ Although Todorov uses it to explain relationships between humans, his structure may be extended to human/animal relations as well. Todorov suggests a triad of possibilities. In the first, the Other is treated as an object, a creature without subjectivity and unworthy of empathy. A slave or a beast of burden would be such a creature. The second possibility grants the Other a subjectivity, but one of inferior quality. The more the so-called inferior individual aspires to be like the person who is dominant, the greater his or her chance of acceptance will be. This is the colonial model, where colonized individuals win approval according to their abilities to adapt to the ways of the colonizers. This model reflects many owner/pet relationships as well.

The third possibility—Todorov's ideal—allows the Other respect and individuality equal to that of the observing self, no matter how great the differences between the two may be. He refers to this state simply as one of communication (177). It is the model for partnerships between vastly different individuals and encounters between distinct cultures. What we are beginning to see in the environmental movement and in selected contemporary literary texts is the emergence of this third possibility in relationships between human and non-human animals. Todorov's word “communication” for the ideal level of relationship is not limited to a verbal give-and-take between equals. Communication is possible between human groups that do not speak the same language, just as it is possible between an animal and a human. Another way of understanding the relationship of communication (and one that better epitomizes a human/animal relationship) is to think of it as giving the Other equal consideration; it is acceptance of the Other without imposing change on him.

Before turning to Pi, I would like to apply briefly the Todorov categories to the human/animal relationships in two modern children's
books involving shipwreck and to two well-known historical shipwreck narratives. I have chosen these four examples because I see them as representative of the attitudes of the age groups for whom they are targeted and of the times in which they were written.

First, the children's books. Because shipwreck is so frightening a phenomenon to children, it rarely figures in children's picture books. (Children may sail off alone, as Max does in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, but they are in control, rather than at the mercy of nature.) One outstanding exception is William Steig's now classic picture book *Amos and Boris* (1971), in which there are two quasi-shipwrecks. Knowing the terror that shipwreck could instill in a small child, Steig distances the potential trauma by using an animal/animal relationship rather than a human/animal one. He understands that children will relate to the highly anthropomorphized animals without worrying about literally being shipwrecked themselves. In Steig's story, a mouse named Amos sets off in a boat he has built with his own paws. One night, "overwhelmed by the beauty and mystery of everything," he accidentally rolls off and is left alone in the sea. Or so he thinks. He is rescued by a fellow mammal, Boris the whale, who serves as his lifeboat, transporting him back to his home in Africa. During the voyage, the two (who, of course, talk) become the "closest possible friends." When they part, Amos, all gratitude, promises to aid Boris, should he ever need his rodent-friend's assistance. This need arises many years later when, "during one of the worst storms of the century, Hurricane Yetta," Boris is beached by a tidal wave. Amos discovers him and enlists the services of two friendly elephants who roll him back into the water. The story reassures children that although one part of nature (the winds and the sea) can be harsh and overwhelming, another part (animals) can be their good friends. The comradely connection between mammals is made explicit in Boris's memorable response to Amos's description of himself as a mammal. "Holy clam and cuttlefish," the whale responds, "I'm a mammal myself." The young human mammals reading the story feel comforted that they, too, are members of this friendly club.

Because children so easily relate to animals, one can assume that they will quickly imagine themselves as either Amos or Boris—that is, as a human friend to a non-human animal. In *Toucan and Taboo*, Freud notes children's affinity for animals and suggests it is often greater than what they feel for their elders (127). More recently Paul Shepard has noted that by the end of puberty, "we begin a lifelong work of differentiating ourselves from [animals]. But this grows from an earlier unbreakable foundation of contiguity" (88). Adult readers quickly notice that the two characters in *Amos and Boris* are not animals at all but thinly veiled representatives of humans: like humans, they consciously aid one another; they remember incidents from the past; and of course, they converse and interact, building a lasting friendship. But for children, there is no demarcation between themselves and animals, no "hard-and-fast line between their own nature and that of all other animals" (Freud 127). For them there is only "contiguity."

Parents read and reread this book to their children not only because of its wit but also because of its emphasis on friendship, its understanding of mutual aid, and its respect for differences. The two mammals inhabit different spheres, differ greatly in size, and exhibit different skills, yet they develop "a deep admiration for one another." There is a brief period of adjustment—Boris dives once, forgetting he has Amos on his back. And there is some suspicion on Amos's part:
“Are you sure you’re a mammal?” he asks. “You smell more like a fish.” But soon they are sharing with one another their ambitions and “deepest secrets.” Despite their bond as mammals, Steig strongly emphasizes their differences, which generate “curiosity” on the part of Boris and “fascination” on the part of Amos. The point is that they are interested in one another’s differences rather than suspicious or judgmental about them. In a very simple way, the mouse and the whale (and the child who has inserted him or herself into the narrative) would seem to be enacting the communication level of the Todorov paradigm, treating the Other as an equal despite differences.

However, this is not precisely what is happening, because the anthropomorphism in Amos and Boris serves to oversimplify and undermine the integrity of true animal-human communication. Ultimately, the story is not about how humans can respect animals’ differentness; it is about how humans represented as animals can respect one another’s differences. The animals in Amos and Boris are simply a useful medium to teach a lesson. A child’s affinity for animals is not the same thing as respect for their otherness. In fact, the reverse is true: children identify with animals rather than seeing them as different. So although we may say that children side with animals and relate to their behavior in difficult situations, this is not what Todorov means by communication. The child-animal relationship is an emotional attachment rather than a respectful, rational assessment. It calms young children’s fears of nature, which is all to the good, but it sets them up for dominance as they grow older.

If children continue considering animals to be like themselves and to be representatives of benign nature instead of granting them their otherness, then inevitably they will note that the balance of power rests with themselves. This attitude carries over into shipwreck narratives for older children and teenagers. If there are very few shipwreck stories for very young readers, the picture changes radically for pre-teen and teenage readers, fueled in part by their desire to assert their growing abilities. Many of these texts make progress toward realism but tend to move from anthropomorphism to anthropocentrism, privileging the know-how and the power of human over non-human animals. In these texts, the protagonists are usually sympathetic teenagers rather than adults, but they are humans nevertheless and illustrative of the colonial relationship in Todorov’s paradigm. They enlist their animal helpers to achieve their ambitions, which are often thwarted or misunderstood by the adult world. The teenager and animal work as a team, but clearly the former is the mastermind and the latter the willing accomplice.

This is all neatly illustrated in Walter Farley’s The Black Stallion (1941), which like Amos and Boris tells a tale of shipwreck and mutual aid between mammals. But because of the greater age and greater assertiveness of the human protagonist (and of those who read about him), the center of power has shifted considerably. The narrative joins the teenaged Alec Ramsay and the horse of the title in a lasting relationship. After freeing the stallion from the sinking ship on which they are both passengers, Alec is dragged by the Black to a nearby island. Although they are not immediate friends (and never speak English to one another), a bond grows between them. Before their inevitable rescue, Alec learns to ride the horse and trains him to come when he whistles. Of the stallion and the boy, the reader is told that “they needed each other to survive” (26), nevertheless while they are on the island, a hierarchy develops. There is friendship, but there is also ownership. Alec notes (totally without self-consciousness)
that “he had conquered this wild, unbroken stallion with kindness” (30). Alec is good to his horse, but he is also in charge. The story is a version of every young teenager’s fantasy—control over wild nature and through it, the ability to confound the adult world. Here nature, showing fierce and benign faces as it did in *Amos and Boris*, mediates between the teenager and those adults who seek to control him. It does so first by its power to separate the young man from other humans through storm and shipwreck, and then by producing an affectionate animal helper. Together they re-enter adult civil society empowered by the relationship they have built during their shipwreck period on the island.

Over and over again the adults allude to the Black’s “wildness” and his “savageness,” but they do not respect it; they respect Alec. For them, the stallion’s behavior evokes fear. As one sailor observes, “it’s almost uncanny the way those two get along—a wild beast like that, a killer, and yet gentle as a kitten when the boy’s around” (49). Alec, too, seems less impressed by the Black’s wild nature than by his willingness to submit to a teenage master. To his great satisfaction the stallion comes “under control” on the island. We are told, “With the days that followed, Alec’s mastery grew greater and greater. He could do almost anything with him. The savage fury of the unbroken stallion disappeared when he saw the boy” (32). There is no question about who is in charge here; despite their “working together” (27), once Alec is able to ride the Black successfully, the hierarchy is clear: “He felt sure that from that day on, the Black was his—his alone!” (30). Although Alec is nearly drowned by the wild ocean, he is able to control the wild stallion. The adults can only watch and marvel.

Interestingly, (and probably without any symbolic intention on the part of the book’s author) Alec is returning from India where he has been visiting his missionary uncle when he is shipwrecked. The missionary, of course, is the great exemplar of Todorov’s second level of relationship, a person who grants the Other a subjectivity but tries to modify his behavior and beliefs rather than respecting them. India in 1941 (when the book was written) also evokes this colonial mindset. Alec’s uncle comes across as a hardworking, decent man, but if he is trying to convert the Indians to Christianity, he is, like his nephew with the Black, proceeding on the assumption that he should call the shots. Both relationships assume a colonial superiority. The book is willing (as are so many books for teenagers) to upset one hierarchy, that is, the one that says that adults know best. But it retains another one, the one that says humans should dominate animals.

This urge to dominate animals is a staple of a number of shipwreck narratives written for adult audiences as well. The grandfather of English shipwreck narratives involving animals, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), reflects a utilitarian Enlightenment view of them. The eponymous hero spends twenty-seven years shipwrecked on a desert island in the eastern Caribbean Sea. Although he is in the company of animals—two cats and a dog make it to shore with him—they are hardly his companions. He never names them and actually comes to see the cats as vermin after one successfully interbreeds with a wild cat. He shoots their offspring. The dog, whom he does not consider a fellow survivor, is instead catalogued with other lucky supplies that Crusoe is able to salvage from the wreck. The animal is cited as a faithful servant for the sixteen years that he survives on the island, performing useful functions such as scaring away birds from a newly planted field and catching a stray kid from the island’s herd of wild goats. Yet, on an island where
Crusoe regularly mentions his want of society, the dog is never studied, talked to affectionately, or celebrated as a being with its own consciousness. Crusoe’s attitude toward animals reflects the biblical Adam’s: they are there for his use rather than for companionship or for observation. And this attitude, of course, is a prime example of the first level of the Todorov paradigm.

The one animal that Crusoe does name and privileges above all others on the island is a wild parrot that he tames and, after years of labor, teaches to speak a few sentences. This valuation of an animal that can speak limited English (with little if any understanding) underlines Crusoe’s attitude about the primacy of the human animal, whose distinguishing attribute is speech. But since the parrot cannot actually converse, his words reflect the protagonist’s view of himself. So the bird becomes a crude mirror of his master, saying, “Robin Crusoe, Robin Crusoe, poor Robin Crusoe, where are you Robin Crusoe? Where are you? Where have you been?” (104). This is as close to an emotional bond as we see between man and animal in this shipwreck narrative, but it is, at best, a low-level, colonial one.

When Crusoe finally encounters another human being on his island, the man whom he calls Friday, the reader sees immediately that the decent-hearted cannibal is not welcomed as an equal either, but instead quickly falls into the role of servant. In gratitude for his rescue from rival cannibals, Friday becomes Crusoe’s excessively devoted retainer. In fact, to those carefully watching animal relationships in the text, Friday’s behavior resembles nothing so much as that of a pet dog. From fawning about Crusoe’s feet to fetching whatever he is asked, Friday’s loyalty is positively canine. And, like a dog, his master names him. It never occurs to Crusoe to inquire of his new charge the name by which he was formerly called. Neither does he consider giving Friday a Christian name; he is called Friday because he appeared on a Friday. Such associative nomenclature again reflects the master-pet association and not the serious business of naming that is the hallmark of so many human cultures. No creature on the island—man or beast—is Crusoe’s equal; Todorov’s third level of relationship is far removed from this shipwreck environment.

It is no surprise that an early eighteenth-century adult shipwreck narrative like Robinson Crusoe would reflect the preoccupations of the day, figuring forth a utilitarian hierarchic society with the European white man at the top. Likewise, it is no surprise that Samuel Coleridge’s The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, published almost a century later in 1798 (and revised in 1817), would reflect a Romantic awe of nature and a lesson in respect for animal life. The gradual shift toward the consideration of animals as sentient beings whose care was the responsibility of mankind took place throughout the eighteenth century. According to Keith Thomas:

It grew out of the (minority) Christian tradition that man should take care of God’s creation. It was enhanced by the collapse of the old view that the world existed exclusively for humanity, and it was consolidated by a new emphasis on sensation and feeling as the true basis for a claim to moral consideration. (180)

Accordingly, Coleridge’s mariner suffers greatly during a South Pole voyage for gratuitously killing, rather than caring for a “harmless Albatross” (l. 405), who had become something of a pet, daily visiting the ship “for food or play” (ll. 73, 89). The mariner’s shipmates, although they do not harm the bird, are equally callous. They have no genuine respect or love of animals,
as their temporizing behavior over the slaying of the bird indicates: first they condemn the mariner for his act, then they change their minds when a brisk breeze begins to blow, then they condemn him again when they are becalmed. At this last juncture, they force the mariner to wear the dead bird around his neck, but they are thinking of their unfortunate fate rather than the bird’s. Eventually, all but the mariner die of thirst, and he is left alone on the sea. Release comes only when he is able to observe and then appreciate God’s living creatures. At the end of the poem’s fourth section, the mariner details this appreciation and then expresses a love for the seemingly insignificant sea snakes around his wrecked and aimless ship:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware. (286-89)

Once the mariner can see and love nature’s creatures—even the lowliest and evil-associated snakes—the albatross falls from his neck, and his rescue begins.

This work is probably the first, and certainly it is the best known of shipwreck narratives that begin to respect animals as the Other. Lack of respect for them causes the mariner’s shipwreck, and an appreciation of their right to live allows him to re-enter society, where he compulsively retells his story. He preaches, according to the words of the poem’s gloss, “love and reverence [for] all things that God made and loveth” (opposite 1.614-17). Moral though his sermons may be, they still lack interest in the creatures. Somewhat like a child, the mariner feels an affinity with them, but he does not understand them—nor does he seek that knowledge. His relationship has made progress over a child’s simple emotional attachment to animals in that his has a moral component, and it is certainly preferable to Crusoe’s utilitarian construction of animals. But he has no curiosity or cognitive appreciation of them, and so he comes across more as a steward of animals than their equal. In imitating God through loving “all things both great and small” (1.619), he is putting himself, like God, above them. And so the mariner remains in Todorov’s realm of the colonial.

It remains for Martel’s *Life of Pi* to fully realize the communication stage of the Todorov model. *Life of Pi* rewrites other shipwreck narratives involving animals by unsettling anthropomorphic and anthropocentric norms of friendship and dominance. It presents instead a Darwinian, or more broadly speaking, an ecological story line, which means that the human protagonist has emotional, moral, and intellectual interest in the animal in question. He manifests, in Paul Shepard’s words, “curiosity, receptive courtesy, gratitude, and respect for the power of animals” (5). Resistance to this kind of relationship and this kind of story is rooted not only in a lengthy literary tradition, it is also engrained in more than two thousand years of Western philosophical and religious tradition. Aristotle asserted in the *Politics* that “Plants exist for the sake of animals and brute beasts for the sake of man” (qtd. in Singer 206). Over two millennia later, although much progress had been made, Pope Pius IX still refused to allow the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to establish a presence in Rome, on the grounds that “to do so would imply that human beings have duties toward animals” (qtd. in Singer 213-14). Well aware that telling a shipwreck story from a Darwinian and ecological perspective would be troublesome to those steeped in another tradition, Martel incorporates and then interrogates these difficulties in *Life of Pi*.
The novel is divided into three parts, the centerpiece of which is the ordeal of Pi Patel, the sixteen-year-old son of an Indian zookeeper, after his Canada-bound ship sinks in the Pacific, with many of the zoo’s animals aboard. Pi initially finds himself sharing a twenty-seven-foot-long lifeboat with a badly wounded zebra, a hyena, an orangutan, and a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. The hyena kills and eats the zebra and the orangutan, and is in turn consumed by the tiger. Initially terrified, Pi is nevertheless intellectually prepared for the unlikely voyage with the lifeboat’s inhabitants because he has lived and worked at a zoo where he has been well instructed by his father about the ways of animals and the ways of men. He understands that animals resist change and assert territoriality. To assure respect for the fierceness of wild animals, Pi’s father makes his eight-year-old son witness one of the zoo’s tigers hungrily attacking and killing a live goat. The grisly act makes the appropriate impression. Pi survives on the lifeboat eight years later not only because he has learned about animal behavior from his zookeeper father but also because he has been instructed by him that the creature to fear most of all is “Animalus anthropomorphicus, the animal as seen through human eyes.” He is not eaten by Richard Parker because he knows that “an animal is an animal, essentially and practically removed from us.” Pi notes that he learned this lesson twice, “once with Father and once with Richard Parker” (31).

Once Pi and Richard Parker are alone at sea, they do not make friends, and although they do help each other out, such aid is totally unconscious on Richard Parker’s part. Pi provides Richard Parker with fish that he catches and with fresh water, not so much out of kindness for the animal as to ensure that he himself is not the tiger’s next meal. He establishes his own territory by urinating around the perimeters, and he compensates for his lack of power by using the techniques of animal trainers to assure that Richard Parker considers him an alpha tiger. The only time during the entire voyage that he touches the tiger is during a particularly difficult stretch when both of them are near starvation and losing their vision. Pi notes in his diary: “Touched him for first time ever. To see if dead” (240). When both are temporarily blind, they meet another castaway, also blinded, a Frenchman who may have been on the crew of their ill-fated ship. After a dreamlike and wandering conversation about food, the Frenchman (unaware of the tiger) attempts to board their lifeboat in order to kill and eat Pi. Richard Parker immediately attacks and eats him, not out of a desire to save his companion, but out of sheer instinct, out of hunger. In this shipwreck narrative, there is no split between raging and friendly nature. There is just Darwinian nature—open-ended and amoral. Richard Parker is as dangerous as the ocean.

The tiger’s name, the result of a mix-up—he was found by a hunter named Richard Parker and was supposed to be called Thirsty—serves as a reminder of the equal footing he shares with his human boatmate. During their 227 days at sea, Pi notes their growing affinity, but it is not that Richard Parker is becoming more domesticated in the manner of Alec Ramsay’s black stallion. The reverse is true. Pi is becoming more like a wild animal. His sleep pattern changes, he is rarely down for more than an hour at a time. He notes unhappily “how low I had sunk” and perceives that “I ate like an animal, that this noisy, frantic, unchewing wolfing-down of mine was exactly the way Richard Parker ate” (225). At other times he simply grants with forthright acceptance the similarity of their predicament: “We were two emaciated mammals, parched and starving” (239).

Martel, to his credit, creates a protagonist with Darwinian knowledge, but also with residual
anthropomorphic longings. It is important to note here that there is little reason that the two perspectives need be at odds. As Marian Schollmeijer points out, evolutionary theory gives license to anthropomorphism simply because it allows humans a "felt affinity" with animals along with "an appreciation of difference" (89). This affinity can be along the lines of the less attractive physical behaviors like Pi's wolfish eating habits that develop at sea, but the bonds can also show a healthy, emotional, life-saving side. The fact that Richard Parker does not panic during the initial hours in the lifeboat calms Pi down. "It is the irony of this story," he admits, "that the one who scared me wisest to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even wholeness" (162). His sense of companionship with the tiger also contributes strongly to Pi's mental health: "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" (164). What is initially stressed is not so much Pi's sense of companionship as his need to work, attending to Richard Parker's needs keeps him extremely busy. But the point comes when Pi is simply grateful to have another sentient being sharing his ordeal. When an oil tanker passes them by without seeing them, Pi notes that Richard Parker "did not see that it was salvation barely missed. He only saw that the alpha here, this odd, unpredictable tiger (Pi himself), had been very excited. He settled down to another nap. His sole comment on the event was a cranky meow." Pi's behavior, in contrast to the tiger's, is a highly emotional expression of affection and a promise to save Richard Parker, as Richard Parker has saved him:

"I love you!" The words burst out pure and unfettered, infinite. The feeling flooded my chest. "Truly, I do. I love you Richard Parker. If I didn't have you now, I don't know what I would do. I don't think I would make it. No, I wouldn't. I would die of hopelessness. Don't give up, Richard Parker, don't give up. I'll get you to land, I promise, I promise!" (236)

Anthropomorphic as this outburst may sound, we have not re-entered the world of Amos and Boris or The Black Stallion because the affection does not need to be returned—and indeed, it is not Pi's words express a love of nature without dominance and without exacting reciprocity. It is an outburst of respect, appreciation, and affinity, and as such, an apt example of Todorov's highest level of relationship.

Nevertheless, Martel pointedly highlights Pi's wistful desire to have had a more humanly satisfying end to his relationship with Richard Parker. As their boat comes ashore in Mexico, Richard Parker jumps out and runs clumsily along the beach. Says Pi:

I was certain he would turn my way. He would look at me. He would flatten his ears. He would growl. In some such way, he would conclude our relationship. He did nothing of the sort. He only looked fixedly into the jungle. Then Richard Parker, companion of my torment, awful, fierce thing that kept me alive, moved forward and disappeared forever from my life. (284-85)

Unlike his human companion, Richard Parker feels no need for closure or for ordering his experiences. This difference between him and Pi is hard for the latter to internalize. He weeps "because Richard Parker had left me so unceremoniously
What a terrible thing it is to booch a farewell" (285).

Edward O. Wilson has suggested that the evolution of complex intelligence in humans allows us many options, but it also creates a serious disorientation. He posits the development of the arts as a way of ordering this confusion (Carroll 40). Pi's need for closure as well as his desire to tell his story and to frame it in an orderly fashion reinforce this point. He explains:

I am a person who believes in form, in the harmony of order. Where we can, we must give things a meaningful shape. For example—I wonder—could you tell my jumbled story in exactly one hundred chapters, not one more, not one less? (Pi, with the help of his narrator, has done this.) I'll tell you, that's one thing I hate about my nickname, the way that number runs on forever. (285)

Pi then further demonstrates his need to order his experience by writing out the speech that he wishes he had been able to deliver to Richard Parker, complete with a recapitulation of the events, his thanks to his feline companion for his company, and some parting advice about the dangers of Man.

When Pi warns Richard Parker in his undelivered speech to "Watch out for Man. He is not your friend," he speaks as a Darwinian. But then he adds, anthropomorphically, "But I hope you will remember me as a friend" (286). His statement is less a contradiction than an indication of the split in his own nature, and indeed one that all Darwinians must feel because of their humanity. Pi understands animals' differentness, but at the same time he feels an affinity with them. His story reflects this duality, as does his choice as an adult to pursue careers in both religious studies and zoology. His interest in these two disciplines reflects his desire to understand both human and non-human animal behavior. The fact that he can handle the two disparate disciplines nicely epitomizes Todorov's third level of relationships. Humans and animals are different; they need to be studied differently; and yet there is room in the human psyche for their equal consideration.

Not everyone, however, has Pi's ability to accept the Darwinian view of our relationships with animals. Two Japanese investigators from the company that owned Pi's ill-fated ship refuse to believe his unusual story. They themselves have had a mishap-filled car trip to reach Pi in the Mexican hospital where he is recuperating, and they freely lie about it: "We had a wonderful trip. It was a beautiful drive," they say (291). Rather than telling the truth, they respond with the expected discourse of car drives in foreign countries. They expect the same predictability in Pi's shipwreck narrative, and when they are not treated to the familiar shipwreck clichés from books and movies, they assume Pi is lying. Even when Pi meets all their objections about what has really happened to him by citing evidence, evincing reasons, and even performing certain demonstrations, his credibility is still in doubt. His interlocutors want traditional shipwreck discourse—Robinson Crusoe or the Ancient Mariner, not Charles Darwin. Because they know nothing about animal behavior, Pi sees that they cannot accept his tale. "So you want another story?" he asks them. "I know what you want," he continues. "You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently [. . .]. You want a story without animals" (302-3). He then proceeds to cook up a tale of murder and cannibalism among humans, rife with acts of cruelty, dominance and submission, a kind of reverse
beast fable where human beings are substituted for the actual animals in his real story. The Japanese, however, think that Pi's original tale was a beast fable. Says one, "His stories match." The other replies, "So the Taiwanese sailor is the zebra, his mother is the orang-utan, the cook is... the hyena—which means he's the tiger!" (311). Once they think they have decoded the original story as nothing more than the familiar genre of the beast fable, they are satisfied.

When Pi says, "you want a story without animals," he means without animals as they really are; he means animals as Darwin sees them and as zookeepers like his father see them. He means animals viewed on Todorov's third level of communication. The two Japanese investigators represent tradition-bound audiences who have certain expectations for shipwreck narratives and for animal behavior, expectations that need emendation. They know shipwreck narratives, and they know beast fables, but they don't know beasts. In the end, Pi makes some headway when he gets them to admit that since it makes no difference to them and they "can't prove the question either way," that the "better story" is "the story with animals" (317).

The phrase that the two Japanese use with respect to Pi's tale is that it is "hard to believe," a concept which Pi seizes upon, asserting that the world is full of mysteries that are hard to believe. "Love is hard to believe, ask any lover," he points out. "Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?" (297). When Pi gets the two Japanese to concede that a new kind of shipwreck narrative, a "story with animals," is a "better story" than the traditional fare, he is not simply privileging new ideas over seeming certainty. He is suggesting that openness is more enriching to human beings than entombing themselves in what they think they absolutely know. He is pointing out not only the usefulness but also the appeal in otherness. As Todorov observes near the end of The Conquest of America, the encounter between two cultures should be "a dialogue in which no one has the last word, in which neither voice is reduced to the status of a simple object, and in which we gain advantage from our externality to the other" (250).

Life of Pi shows the possibility of this kind of dialogue between human and animal cultures, and it suggests at the same time that both Pi and Richard Parker have gained an advantage from their externality to one another. But still today many in the intellectual media fail to appreciate these possibilities, as a recent New York Times article about a young keeper of the Bronx Zoo's tigers demonstrates. Although the zoo respects the animals' otherness in a positive fashion by stressing that they experience "protected contact" with humans, the Times reporter assumes a colonial tone reminiscent of one of the astounded adults from The Black Stallion as he writes his story. He accentuates the smallness (5'6") of the featured keeper, Jamie Viezbicke, in contrast to the eleven-foot span of the tigers and plays up her youth by noting her "apple-red cheeks" and "blond ponytail." And yet she braves contact with the tigers, her "secret being that she feels "tenderness" for them. Shades of Alec and the Black.

Although Viezbicke makes clear that "there's always a barrier between these large animals and us," the reporter seems more interested in noting her courage, while at the same time minimizing the tigers' fierceness in her presence by likening them to domestic cats. His article begins with the observation, "Deep down, a tiger, even a Siberian tiger, must be a pussycat. How else to explain the fearlessness Jamie Viezbicke claims to feel as she tenders her tigers at the Bronx Zoo?" (Berger B2). Fearlessness? Her tigers? Pussycats?
Todorov’s communication level that the zoo so clearly seeks to develop is reduced here to pet ownership by the Times reporter’s blinkered observation. Rather than despair, the environmental critic needs to remember that the very long tradition of treating animals as slaves or lesser humans will need time to change. At least with Life of Pi, it has begun.

Notes
1 Pastoral, too, is now being looked at ecologically. The entire Spring 2003 issue of Green Letters was devoted to it. See also “Revaluing Nature,” where Glen Love notes that “literary pastoral traditionally posits a natural world, a green world, to which sophisticated urbanites withdraw in search of the lessons of simplicity which only nature can teach.” Love suggests that the traditional pastoral mode is reflective of “anthropomorphic assumptions” that are in “dire need of reassessment” (231). I would extend this observation to shipwreck narratives.


3 This is laid out in detail in a subsection of chapter three of The Conquest of America called “Enslavement, Colonialism, and Communication” (163-92).

4 See for example, Johann Wyss’s Swiss Family Robinson, Captain Marryat’s Masterman Ready, and more recently Marjorie Heins of Chincoteague, Hillary Hysen’s The Wreck of the Bahn, and Caroline Alexander’s Mrs. Gripply’s Last Adventure. I would like to thank Professor Kate Capshaw Smith for alerting me to these and many other shipwreck narratives for young readers.

5 Some might suggest that Shakespeare’s The Tempest be considered an earlier exemplar of the shipwreck narrative involving animals because of the presence of Caliban. However, the First Folio’s cast of characters describes Caliban as “a savage and deformed slave.” Furthermore, his ability to speak and his perceived sexual menace toward Miranda add to the evidence that he should be read as a degraded human, or—more in keeping with the time in which Shakespeare was writing—a dangerous colonial subject. I would like to thank my colleague, Shakespeare scholar Mark Taylor, for his insight on this matter.

6 See “Man’s Dominion,” chapter 5 of Peter Singer’s Animal Liberation, for a concise history of Western attitudes toward animals.

7 Keith Thomas stipulates three conditions that constitute the owner-pet relationship: pets are allowed in the house; they are given names; they are never eaten (112-15).

8 I agree with James McKusick, that the poem may be read as “a parable of ecological transgression” (395). Paul Fry in his essay on the biographical and historical contexts of the poem in the Bedford-St. Martin’s Case Studies edition of the Ancient Mariner, alludes to “the diversity of interpretive frameworks” (21) for the poem. I would maintain that whether the poem is read as a Christian allegory or as alluding to the violent history through which Coleridge was living, these interpretations still allow what Raymond Medcalf calls a “healing ethos” (213) in the blessing of natural life.

9 Another famous sea story involving animals, Melville’s Moby-Dick (1851), may come to readers’ minds here. For my purposes, it does not qualify as a shipwreck narrative involving animals, since the story ends with the wreck of the Pequod. There is no postshipwreck interaction with animals that we see. Nevertheless, one must note Ishmael’s scientific interest in whales (see, for example, chapters 32, 74-6, 86, 88, 103-5) as well as his respect for them (chapters 4, 45), making him an avatar of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Darwinian consideration for the animal subject. Elizabeth Schultz notes that Ishmael contemplates “all whales in objective and scientific as well as in historical, cultural, and literary terms and simultaneously accepts them [ . . . ] as an ‘everlasting terra incognita’” (99).

10 Pi’s affinity and respect for animals also stems from his religious beliefs (in particular his Hindu upbringing). He prays for the soul,
of the dying zebra in the lifeboat (120) as well as for the first fish he catches and kills, an act necessitated by his need to survive, but made difficult by his "lifetime of peaceful vegetarianism" and his belief that "[a]ll sentient life is sacred" (183).

I need to acknowledge here that I, like the Japanese, am making a choice as to which version of PI's story to believe. PI's shipwreck narrative is a metafiction, a story about stories, complicated by a frame narrative told by an unnamed first-person narrator. A case can be made for the more traditional reading of PI's shipwreck—the story without animals. When I taught this novel in an Animals and Literature class, two of my students, Mike Scollins and Sandy Maranto, took opposite sides and both argued so convincingly that the class was divided on what to finally believe. The novel thus testifies not only to the power of stories but also to the multiple ways of receiving them.

Works Cited


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