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## Politics and literature:

### The imagined borders and frontiers of political literature

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This chapter draws on the border and frontier concepts reviewed in chapter one, and the postmodern literary theories discussed thereafter to present an account of politics and literature. I construct a series of critical responses to Rushdie's literary project informed by my examination of:

- the interdisciplinary field of academic inquiry "politics and literature";
- critical challenges to the spatial logic of interdisciplinary study relevant to Rushdie's argument for permeable intellectual frontiers;
- the aesthetic character and practical function of political purpose in literature; and,
- the notion of "hybrid" literary forms as applicable to the problematic categories of "fiction" and "non-fiction" in Rushdie's literary project.

Having outlined the aims of this chapter, much of the analysis offered herein will be presented through processes of comparative methodology – a technique that, as I will show, is fundamental to interdisciplinary inquiry. The manner in which both the field of politics and literature and the permissive genre of political literature operate will be illustrated by a series of comparisons among Rushdie and relevant literary figures such as Jorge Luis Borges, Gunter Grass, Franz Kafka, Arthur Koestler, Milan Kundera, George Orwell, Edward Said and Madan Sarup. This

will incorporate progressions on the postmodern perspectives offered in chapter two, including theoretical and example based accounts of literary expressions of magical realism, parody, dystopian visions, allegory, personal-political frontiers, narrative structure and, lastly, political theory as explicated through stories. Much of the working profile of Rushdie's literary identity this chapter provides will be sketched through his contrast or convergence with other proponents of imaginative political narratives.

### 3.1 Literary zones of "conflict" and "cooperation"

"Writers and politicians", Rushdie argues, are "natural rivals because they fight for the same territory, reality".<sup>1</sup> Both parties, he adds, strive to "make" this reality "in their own image... that's why they fight so bitterly."<sup>2</sup> At first glance, Rushdie's claim presents an interesting contradiction. It suggests both a purposeful compatibility and a pronounced discord exists between the two pursuits in question. Ultimately, perceptions of both vocations are naturally shaped from markedly subjective vantage points. Given this fact, Rushdie's literary claim on "reality" is best illuminated by dissecting the sophisticated processes through which he fashions it; processes that (as I indicated in the previous chapter) he views as occurring "at the frontier".<sup>3</sup>

How do we define politics and literature? Interpretation of both terms is considerably diverse. Mindful of my discussion in chapter one of Leftwich's assertion that politics is present wherever there is "conflict" and "cooperation",<sup>4</sup> it might be assumed that any literature exhibiting evidence of these two activities can be considered political literature. Whilst this definition offers one way of understanding politics, a definition of political literature based on these criteria would be too general. It is an overly simplistic account of the pursuit that denies the potentially complex analytical structure of political literature. One could also adopt an opposing view and argue that the real fault with such an inclusive

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<sup>1</sup> U. Chaudhuri, "Imaginative Maps: Excerpts from a Conversation with Salman Rushdie". *Subir* (online), [http://www.subir.com/rushdie/uc\\_maps.htm/](http://www.subir.com/rushdie/uc_maps.htm/), 2002 (accessed 14 June 2005).

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Rushdie (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 427.

<sup>4</sup> Leftwich, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

definition is not its simplicity rather the fact that it is too broad. It is not my intention to attend to this or similar criticisms by attempting to impose rigid defining parameters on political literature. It is neither a literary genre nor a field of political inquiry that can be appreciated or understood within the confines of immovable discipline paradigms.

As I explained earlier, Rushdie's describes "the creative spirit" (the "spirit" that shapes and propels his literary project) as a phenomenon that by "its very nature, resists frontiers and limiting points".<sup>5</sup> In presenting a full account of this fundamental, frontier resisting aspect of Rushdie's literary project, it is necessary to adopt a methodology that countenances a reciprocal type of mobility across scholarly "frontiers and limiting points". The spatial logic of interdisciplinary inquiry typically affords the scholar this level of mobility. Of course, the intricacies and suitability of the particular form of interdisciplinary methodology utilised in this thesis is best explicated by the quality of thesis itself. However, at this point I wish to address certain overt challenges associated with interdisciplinary study relevant to its application to Rushdie and, in doing so, set out certain principles of academic freedom with which this thesis and Rushdie's literary project are both aligned. This exercise also contributes to the profile of political literature I present later in this chapter.

### **3.2 Political science and the challenges of interdisciplinary study**

Acknowledging the potential breadth and diversity in understandings of politics and literature respectively, it is inevitable that the concept of melding these two often-contested terms is a challenging proposition for some. Equally, it is also apparent that certain proponents of both fields, who openly strive to police the boundaries of their respective disciplines, will view such an exercise in a skeptical or critical light. Indeed, in his 2002 Presidential Address, the then head of the Australasian Political Studies Association, John Wanna encouraged political scientists to "defend their discipline and art" from a series of challenges, not least of all the supposed threat posed by "project-based... specialist" fields

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<sup>5</sup> Rushdie (2002), op. cit., p. 274.

such as “regional politics, women’s studies and gender studies”.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding the reservations of some political scientists regarding interdisciplinary study, the frontiers of a range of other academic disciplines have been challenged and shaped by paradigm debates.<sup>7</sup> Much of the criticism of interdisciplinary approaches stems from the manner in which various processes of critical inquiry are defined.

Politics and literature theorist Bernard Crick offers an interesting account of academic practices of interdisciplinary demarcation. Crick comments, that when presenting his varied politics and literature arguments to colleagues, he “found the mantle of ‘Professor of Politics’ too restrictive”.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, he did not necessarily arrive at this conclusion as a result of his own understanding of the parameters of the political science discipline; rather it was the firmly held convictions of others that led him to feel restricted. As he states:

If Pol. Sci. can be narrow, so too can Eng. Lit., to judge by a few who reacted to my *George Orwell: A Life* by not merely hinting but *saying* that I was a ‘political scientist’ and thus ill-equipped, incompetent, insensitive, crass, and wickedly perverse to cross a sanctified line of craft demarcation.<sup>9</sup>

Crick’s argument for a more permissive attitude to interdisciplinary study and discipline paradigms in general, is not based on his own sense that he has

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<sup>6</sup> Wanna argues that proponents of these type of hybrid fields “may not see their main intellectual orientation as political science”. He speculates that they “probably prefer to ‘talk’ to their own narrower networks of scholars with closely related interests”. See: J. Wanna, “APSA Presidential Address 2002 – Politics as a New Vocation: The Future of Political Science”, in *The Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 38, No. 1, March 2003, p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> The bitter paradigm protection or suppression debates that occurred at Sydney University in the 1970s between warring proponents of neoclassical economics and political economy exemplify much of the tone of these types of criticisms. These often-bitter debates centred upon the formerly accepted inclusion of post-Keynesian strains of social and political study within the discipline of economics. Neoclassicists advocated the severing of economics from socio-political inquiry. They favoured a more positivist approach to economics that, in their view, imbued their studies with a more readily identifiable form of scientific legitimacy. The economics curriculum was transformed. Neoclassicism gained the ascendancy within Australian universities and subsequently within Australia’s elite economic bureaucracy. Residual arguments stemming from this dispute continued well beyond the 1970s. The following texts provide interesting examples of the main themes to emerge from this paradigm debate: E. Jones & F. Stilwell, “Political Economy at the University of Sydney”, in *Intellectual Suppression: Australian Case Histories, Analysis and Responses*, (eds) B. Martin, *et al.*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1986; J. Pemberton, “What is the Economy?”, *The Trouble With Economic Rationalism*, (ed.) D. Horne, Scribe, Newham, 1992; and, M. Warby, “Scapegoating and Moral Panic: Political Reality and Public Policy Versus Anti-Rationalism”, in *The Australian Political System*, (eds) D. Lovell, *et al.*, Second Edition, Longman, South Melbourne, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> B. Crick, *Essays on Politics and Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1989, pp. vi-vii.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. vii.

somehow transgressed. Rather it is a response to the reactive defensiveness of those who seek to set disciplinary borders in stone. Crick promotes an understanding of “Politics” aligned with, what he describes as, the “Aristotelean sense of free speculation and analysis about conflicts of interests and values inherent in the human condition”.<sup>10</sup> This permissive approach is evidently adverse to the views held by theorists who restrict their attentions to matters that can be empirically assessed.<sup>11</sup> Reminiscent of the methodology used in natural sciences, this clinical approach is evident to varying degrees in, for example, the development of theoretical models concerned with quantifying the machinations of institutional, parliamentary or electoral politics.

In line with both Rushdie’s notion of creative spirit and Crick’s preference for free speculation, Edward Said asserts, “many arguments can be made to more than one audience and in different situations”.<sup>12</sup> As I discussed in chapter two, this is precisely what postmodern literature does – it argues, it questions, it presents more than one way of seeing – and it does so in a versatile manner that is potentially appreciable by “more than one audience”. And, as I will illustrate later in this chapter, it is precisely this level of versatility that allows the political novel to be recognised as a worthwhile resource for political and literary study. While it is legitimate to argue that the study of politics and literature must be demonstrably structured and analytically focused, equally it should not be dismissed as an amorphous, vague and recklessly esoteric exercise. The strength of analysis within the politics and literature field is ideally judged in accordance with the reasoning and conviction of a particular politics and literature scholar’s critical engagement with the genre. That said, this view should not be misinterpreted as an attempt to dismiss or silence potential criticism from singular proponents of political science, literature or indeed any other informed academic field outside of politics and literature. Research that is governed by the constant anticipation of paradigm-based criticism is research estranged from potentially progressive intellectual considerations.

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Graham Maddox’s critical account of this “empirical, descriptive, value free [and] objective” form of “utilitarian [political] theory” encapsulates many of the characteristics of this dispassionately scientific approach to political analysis. See: Maddox, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>12</sup> Said (2001), *op. cit.*, p. 376.

The theoretical margins of respective academic disciplines – a discipline’s borders and frontiers – need not be perceived as rigid and impenetrable. As the methodology employed throughout this thesis demonstrates, progressive research is research that uses the central concepts of its field as a proven foundation from which contested or marginal ideas can be questioned in an informed and intellectually rigorous manner. This may seem to be a reasonable assumption, however, as Said argues, this progressive approach is not always recognised as part of the “intellectual process”.<sup>13</sup> Many traditional understandings of this process, he observes, correctly advocate that intellectual inquiry must have its basis in “historically informed research” and “the presentation of a coherent and carefully argued line that has taken account of alternatives”.<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to dispute this view, yet as Said says, such an understanding is incomplete:

In addition, there must be, it seems to me, a theoretical presumption that in matters having to do with human history and society any rigid theoretical ideal, any simple additive or mechanical notion of what is or is not factual, must yield to the central factor of human work, the actual participation of peoples in the making of human life. If that is so then it must also be true that, given the very nature of human work in the construction of human society and history, it is impossible to say of it that its products are so rarified, so limited, so beyond comprehension so as to exclude most other people, experiences and histories. I mean further, that this kind of human work, which is intellectual work, is worldly, that it is situated in the world, and about that world. It is not about things that are so rigidly constricted and so forbiddingly arcane as to exclude all but an audience of like-minded, already fully convinced persons.<sup>15</sup>

Political science and literary theory (when considered as either independent fields or as a combined form of analysis) are inextricably linked with “human history and society”.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, literature is “human work”, and by implication, as Said asserts, it can also be understood as “intellectual work”.<sup>17</sup> It is an expression of the human experience. Said’s argument is not a debunking of established intellectual processes. Rather he is advocating the need for a humanist dimension to be restored to the intellectual process. Indeed, Said’s reasoned criticisms also serve to illustrate the manner in which the testing of intellectual frontiers is an

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 375.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

integral part of the intellectual process itself. This is a point that, as I will show in chapters four and five, Rushdie illustrates through the questioning impulse that determines the style and structure of both *Fury* and *Step Across This Line*.

The interpretive properties of literature, its humanist dimension, ensure that it can be considered a useful vehicle for the testing of the intellectual frontiers of political science. Without acceptance of the humanist dimension that fields of inquiry such as politics and literature can bring, the study of politics risks accusations of intellectual exclusivity. As Said adds, there is a “danger” in following an overly “theoretical and specialised approach”.<sup>18</sup> Such an approach, he argues, is characterised by “dogma” or “technical jargon designed to repel all but a small handful of intimates and coteries”.<sup>19</sup> This is not to deny the fact that research can in many ways benefit from a researcher’s consciousness of a particular audience. Yet researchers who allow this consciousness to dominate the development of their research risk undermining their ability to tread new ground or challenge existing intellectual frontiers.

In an institutional context, specifically within universities, the study of politics and literature can be seen as one of many potential articulations of what Said calls “the concept of academic freedom”.<sup>20</sup> Said offers his account of this concept claiming that “university ought to be a place not where many vigorous and exiting intellectual pursuits should be forbidden but where they ought to be encouraged on as wide a front as possible”.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, as evidenced earlier, proponents of politics and literature could be viewed as occupying a wide front. As such, it is a field of inquiry that, despite certain ongoing challenges, has rightly gained a level of institutional recognition within many universities.

### **3.3 “Categories overlap”: the permeability of genres and disciplines**

The novel, by the very nature of its diversity in form, structure and style avoids accusations of exclusivity. Politics and literature theorist Michael Wilding

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 376.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> E. Said. *Identity, Authority and Freedom: The Potentate and the Traveller*, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1991, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

acknowledges this level of diversity. The interdisciplinary field of politics and literature is, in his view, “not something to be narrowly defined”.<sup>22</sup> For Wilding, just as the appeal of the novel is potentially diverse, the manner in which the political novel is critiqued must exhibit a reciprocal level of diversity. Like Rushdie, he argues against the rigidity of frontiers delineating areas of literary and academic specialisation. “Categories”, Wilding argues, “overlap”.<sup>23</sup> An appreciation of the scholarly worth of politics and literature relies on an adherence to Wilding’s belief in the permeability of differing academic categories. Through its exploration of, for example, correlating private and public themes, the political novel actively illustrates the manner in which categories overlap, borders are permeable and frontiers contestable. As such, it is fitting that conceptual approaches to the study of the political novel are constructed with these factors in mind.

Politics and literature breaks through specialist, purely theoretical accounts of politics to present a different perspective of the social or, more aptly, the *human* implications of politics. As a generally character-based narrative of politics, literature can introduce new dimensions into political science. A political reading of a novel allows the proffering of Said’s “many arguments” and, in turn, political concepts and dynamics are potentially exposed to a wider audience. This is not to suggest that literature is immune from accusations of elitism, it is however, open to many with an interest and purpose possibly beyond that of dedicated academic study. The character-based focus of literature also raises the potential for a level of personal identification between the reader and protagonist.

The character-based nature of the majority of political novels is a key analytical feature of the form. By using the term “character-based”, I wish to highlight the typically central position of characters or protagonists within the plot, structural disposition and thematic exposition of political novels. This feature of the political novel ensures that it is a form of literature capable of offering a unique type of personal articulation of otherwise impersonal political concepts. Politics and literature theorist Maureen Whitebrook highlights this fact, suggesting that the

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<sup>22</sup> M. Wilding, *Political Fictions*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1980, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*



political novel “can help restore to political thought a more adequately complex view of human nature”.<sup>24</sup> It does so, she adds, through its ability to “present a coherent argument about politics in a manner and to an effect not usually achieved by works of theory”.<sup>25</sup> The political novel can, as Whitebrook attests, bring a humanising perspective to politics. I would suggest that texts she classifies as “works of theory” also have this humanist capability; indeed, these “works” can and do, on occasion, offer personal, individual-based accounts. However, the processes through which these accounts, and broader theoretical concepts are presented typically abide by narrative techniques fundamental to imaginative literature. By analysing these processes we can work towards a clearer account of the characteristics of the political novel.

### **3.4 Political theories “cast in the form of stories”**

Politics and literature theorists John Horton and Andrea Baumeister argue “story telling has played a significant role in the presentation of many political theories”.<sup>26</sup> They briefly cite Hobbes and Locke as examples of their view, observing that their “theories are cast in the form of stories about the transition from a (largely) hypothetical state of nature to political society”.<sup>27</sup> I strongly concur with Horton and Baumeister’s account of the integral role of storytelling in political theory. Indeed, I can think of no greater emotionally and intellectually impacting contemporary exemplifier of this idea than Madam Sarup. In his posthumously published text *Identity, Culture and the Modern World*, Sarup concludes the respective theoretical themes he engages in each chapter with powerfully illustrative autobiographical examples of his arguments. For instance, in reflecting on his theoretical account of identity and death, Sarup candidly states,

When, a few years ago, my eldest brother Rashid stayed at my house for a night, he said to me: ‘You are just like your father – your gestures, even your life-style’. I was astonished, and wondered how this could be, as I had not really known him. But I think he was right. I can feel my father’s influence

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<sup>24</sup> M. Whitebrook, *Real Toads in Imaginary Gardens: Narrative Accounts of Liberalism*, Roman & Littlefield, Lanham, 1995, pp. 2-3.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> J. Horton & A. T. Baumeister, “Literature, Philosophy and Political Theory”, in *Literature and the Political Imagination*, (eds) J. Horton & A. T. Baumeister. Routledge. London, 1996, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

all around me. I am crying as I write this. My wish to do well, the desire to be educated, my compulsion to try and write, to study, is as if I were saying to him: 'Am I educated enough? Do I have your approval now, Father?'<sup>28</sup>

Narratives of this sort can be seen as extraordinarily potent didactic devices, not solely on an intellectual level, but on a crucial personal front as well. Of course, intellectual work should not be totally clouded by emotion, yet more importantly; it should *not* be completely isolated from emotion. Sarup's confessions bravely unmask the intrinsically "human" element that, as we have seen, Said identifies as being at the heart of all "intellectual work".

Sarup's account of his father's pervading "influence" can be seen as a humanising reply to theoretical comments he presents elsewhere in his text regarding what he views as the inordinate "value... placed on life and on the living".<sup>29</sup> "This exclusion of death from 'normality'", he argues, "means that it haunts us all the more powerfully".<sup>30</sup> In "feeling [his] father's influence all around him", could it be that Sarup is "powerfully" haunted by "death"? The link between narrative and theory is clear. Sarup's personal story assists in shifting his earlier, perhaps static, theoretical account into gear. His personal candour imbues his theory with a compelling level of meaning and vitality. Sarup's inclusion of these intensely personal confessions represents a significant departure in tone from the bulk of his text yet they are not mere asides or transgressions. Whilst his stories are presented separately in terms of the book's layout, they are evidently a crucial and undeniably cohesive part of a thematic whole.

The role of narrative in political theory and political philosophy need not be seen as interjectory. Indeed, Horton and Baumeister suggest that the link between narrative and theory is inextricable. "Our understanding of who we are", they argue, "seems inseparable from our sense of the story of our lives".<sup>31</sup> They propose that the narrative form is "the most 'natural' way of explaining ourselves, both to others and ourselves".<sup>32</sup> According to this account, the narrative form is by extension also the "natural" way to express our respective theoretical perspectives

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<sup>28</sup> Sarup, op. cit., p. 117.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

of politics. Horton and Baumeister locate additional theoretical aspects of personal narratives by arguing that our articulation of “our beliefs and intentions” is related to “what we have been and done”. As a result, our historical and conceptual understandings of “politics” are similarly “embedded in stories”.<sup>33</sup> Narratives are purposeful and deliberative personal constructs. They are human constructs with consequently distinct, and diverse features that resist categorisation.

### **3.5 Political narratives and the “leap of imagination”**

Political narratives can indeed, as Horton and Baumeister attest, be read as accounts of “what we have been and done”. It is, however, important to note that they can also be seen as vehicles for the postulation of the common political dilemma: “what is *to* be done?” These possibilities are open to political narratives of the theoretical and novelistic type alike. This places renewed emphasis on Wilding’s earlier cited comment that the borders of academic disciplines “overlap”. Applying a similarly permissive approach specifically to the borders of politics and literature, political scientist Jeff Archer argues that the “categories of political theorist and storyteller tend to overlap at times”.<sup>34</sup> Citing political scientist Sheldon Wolin’s argument that “all political philosophers and theorists have used metaphors and narratives” as illustrative devices, Archer argues that “literature is always evident in political writing”.<sup>35</sup> He identifies the function and didactic potential of literary devices in political theory through his suggestion that “it is the leap of imagination through the literary element in political writing that enables us to make political choices.”<sup>36</sup> It is the nature of the structural and stylistic devices that enable this “leap” that offer the most discernable trace of distinction between the otherwise overlapping frontiers of imaginative and theoretical political narratives. The most notable embodiment of this distinction is the political novel.

Many of the structural characteristics of the postmodern novel I discussed

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> J. Archer, “Orwell’s Political Vision”, in *A Passion For Politics: Essays in Honour of Graham Maddox*, (ed.) T. Battin, Pearson Longman, Frenchs Forest, 2005, p. 214.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

in chapter two (for example, characteristics encompassing a novel's style, its use of symbols and its narrative structure), combine to imbue the form with the necessary imaginative license required to execute the "leap". Imaginative narratives can of course be informed by all manner of things "been and done", yet to imagine is to look beyond past experience and explore different possibilities. To imagine is to implicitly pose the question, "what if?". This questioning impulse is also apparent in theoretical texts; however, the imaginative tools and structural versatility of the postmodern novel enables it to approach such questions from a multitude of perspectives not open to theoretical texts. Most notably, the typically character-focused structure of the novel allows it to explore the personal implications of theoretical questions.

As fictional constructs, characters within political novels can harness the communicative power of imagination, allowing the author and, in turn, the reader to vicariously ask: "what if?". For example, by subjecting K., the protagonist of his novel *The Trial*, to a nightmarish world of judicial extremes, author Franz Kafka is able to examine the corrosive personal implications of the dynamics of justice, politics and identity. Kafka pushes these dynamics to uncharted, almost surreal extremes. Through exchanges with diverse figures such as his uncle Karl, his Advocate, the Examining Magistrate, Leni and the Prison Chaplain, the inexplicably guilt ridden K. speculates as to the intricacies of his "case".<sup>37</sup> However, the judicial "machinery" that engulfs him, and the nature of the charge against him are strangely non-descript and ambiguous.<sup>38</sup> Rather, the psychological dynamics of K.'s public-private dilemma become the focal point. It is the personal effect of the blurring of public-private frontiers and not necessarily the process of blurring itself to which Kafka's novel gives salience. Despite the text's peculiar ambiguities, the extent of the public-private intrusion it relates could not be clearer: K.'s unidentified public accusers pursue him unannounced into his private space, "his own dwelling", his bed.<sup>39</sup> This is only one of the public-private frontier distortions evident in, what could be

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<sup>37</sup> F. Kafka, *The Collected Novels of Franz Kafka: The Trial, The Castle, & America*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1998, p. 76.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.* pp. 9-30.

called, Kafka's "what if?" hypothesis. Despite its overt themes *The Trial* is not so much a critique of the judicial process following K.'s arrest, nor is it a dedicated study of the political environment that allows such a process to occur. Indeed Kafka, as narrator, presents no direct criticisms of these matters whatsoever. Rather, *The Trial* offers a unique and insightful dissection of the personal effects of the above-mentioned processes. Kafka's text facilitates the "leap of imagination". In doing so, it places personal concerns ahead of public, the particular ahead of the essential, to question the remarkable personal impact the "machinery" of justice, politics and identity can have on an otherwise unremarkable individual.

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* examines similar themes yet in a markedly bleak, oppressive and seemingly extreme manner.<sup>40</sup> Orwell's "leap of imagination" is primarily facilitated by his construction of the plight of the text's protagonist Winston, a figure immersed in a totalitarian nightmare. Indeed, this stark nightmarish tone, a tone that is consistently evoked by the text's pessimistic symbols, imagery, and themes allows *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to be readily classified as a dystopian vision. To describe the nightmare of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a dystopia is to view it as a reply, perhaps even an antidote to what Archer calls the "dominant and unquestioned... utopian element" of "modernist ideologies".<sup>41</sup> As he explains, "all political theory has an element of utopianism in that a picture of a political possibility has to be imagined before a basis for action can be advocated".<sup>42</sup> The utopianism Archer refers to is characterised by "political ideologies which promise inevitable victory by, for example, setting up a new world free from all the oppressions and dominations of the previous era".<sup>43</sup> These promises, he adds, "have had a huge impact both before and after Orwell's lifetime".<sup>44</sup> Utopian political and literary visions, fascist, imperialist and nationalist "ideologies of perfection", Archer argues, "exhibit the same modernist

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<sup>40</sup> G. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Penguin, Mitcham, 1963.

<sup>41</sup> Archer, op cit., p. 214.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

conceit".<sup>45</sup> *Nineteen Eighty-Four* counters the dominance of utopianism and its paradoxically flawed perfectionism. Interestingly, it does so in a manner reflective of the literary and political utopianisms it addresses. Orwell's text, to use Archer's words, can be seen as "advocating" a basis for "action" that requires an "imagined... picture of a political possibility".

As with *The Trial*, it is the nature of the "leap of imagination" that Orwell makes that allows his text's essentially utopian structure to be inverted. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is dystopian because Orwell's imagining of political possibilities is focused on the personal possibilities or, more aptly, the personal consequences of the unchecked quest for political utopianism. As stated earlier, the impact of his type of theoretical imagining is powerful precisely because it is a character-based form of imagining. Indeed, the propensity to imagine is a definitively humanist characteristic that when employed in the novel serves to emphasise this form of literature's profoundly humanist substance. However, in a characteristically humanist manner, the frontiers delineating literature's real and the imagined spheres are not always clear.

### **3.6 The "minute integrity" of "magical realism"**

Commenting on the role of imagination in literature, Rushdie biographer Damian Grant highlights Rushdie's claim that "the real frontiers of fiction 'are neither political nor linguistic but imaginative'".<sup>46</sup> Certainly, Rushdie has been widely labeled as an exponent of "magical realism", yet, of course, he is not the lone purveyor of this style of literary imagining.<sup>47</sup> In order to build an informed profile of the distinctive aspects of Rushdie's use of magical realism I wish to first present a brief examination of certain fundamental magical realism techniques employed by others.

Kafka is often appraised as a master of the literary juxtaposition of "the

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Cundy, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

real and the surreal".<sup>48</sup> The oblique imaginative landscape of, for instance, *The Trial* exemplifies the subtleties of this technique. Similarly Kundera – who, for example, momentarily departs from a historically contextualised account of a *real* event to depict the equally *real* character, French poet Paul Eluard *surreally* taking flight above the *real* streets of Prague<sup>49</sup> – could also be seen as exemplifying several significant stylistic traits of magical realism. Literary theorist David Lodge offers what could be seen as a plausible rationale for the use of magical realism, at least in Kundera's case. "The contradictions and outrages of modern history are of such a scale", Lodge observes, "that only the overt 'lie' of the fantastic or grotesque image can adequately represent them."<sup>50</sup> Indeed, magical realism as expressed by Eluard's levitation could be understood as the most suitable reply to the nightmarish personal-political flights of the type exemplified throughout the Stalinist-terror period of Czech totalitarianism Kundera seeks to relate.

Selected fictional writings of Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges offer further interesting insights into the peculiar creative dynamics of magical realism. For example, in his short story "The Circular Ruins", the narrator describes a "stranger" whose "*magical* project had exhausted the entire content of his soul."<sup>51</sup> If the reader were to imagine Borges as this stranger, then the nature of this fictional "project" could almost be read as a description of the authorial processes characteristic of magical realism. The narrator states that the "purpose" of the stranger's project was clear.<sup>52</sup> "He wanted to dream a man: he wanted to dream him with minute integrity and insert him into reality".<sup>53</sup> In a further development, perhaps reflective of the interpretive role of the reader, the stranger of Borges' tale eventually discovers that "he too was a mere appearance,

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<sup>48</sup> L. Balomiri, "Intertextual Correspondences Between the Works of Franz Kafka and Salman Rushdie", *Exeter University* (online), <http://www.sml.exeter.ac.uk/research/balomiri.html>, 2004 (accessed 21 May 2006).

<sup>49</sup> Kundera (1986). op. cit., pp. 66-68.

<sup>50</sup> D. Lodge, "Milan Kundera, and the Idea of the Author in Modern Criticism", in (ed.) P. Petro, op. cit., p. 149.

<sup>51</sup> J. L. Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1999, pp. 72-73. [My italics.]

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

dreamt by another".<sup>54</sup> This narrative twist pays homage to the reciprocally imaginative role of the reader.

As the duality of the term suggests, magical realism defies any singular definition. It may indeed be read as a concerted stylistic blurring or even an obliteration of the frontiers of the real and the surreal, yet it does not deny the existence of "reality"; indeed, it is defined by its relationship, however abstract, to reality. As such, it should not be seen as an effacing, fanciful or esoteric stylistic device. It is, as Borges' "stranger" attests, a sophisticated and complex literary trope that demands "minute integrity". Imagination is conceived in reality, a fact that the latter half of the term magical *realism* itself emphasises. Magical realism explores the spaces in-between questioning the permeability of the frontiers of dreams - asking where do they stop and where does reality begin? In posing this question, magical realism pays homage to both the real and surreal complexities of the human imagination. It asks the reader to consider that dreams and reality need not be considered as wholly independent spheres of the human experience. Of course, not all readers perceive magical realism in this manner.

### **3.7 Notes from a "novelistic life" or scrawls of "cartoonish" banality?**

Particular critics of magical realism argue that it can be the hallmark of poor writing. In his "critical" review of Rushdie's *Fury*, James Wood suggests that many reviewers have "flattered" Rushdie with "the term 'magical realism'".<sup>55</sup> Wood prefers instead to label this aspect of Rushdie's technique as "cartoonishness".<sup>56</sup> He argues that the application of the term magical realism "only proves that [Rushdie] is incapable of writing realistically".<sup>57</sup> According to Wood, Rushdie's "limited literary talents" confirm that he is not up to the "difficulty", the "hard challenge" of "realism".<sup>58</sup> He savages Rushdie, labeling his mere "writing" as "flat and unoriginal" laden with a technique which is, at best

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>55</sup> J. Wood, "The Nobu Novel: Salman Rushdie's *Fury*", *The New Republic*, 24 September 2001, p. 35.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 35-36.



“startlingly banal”.<sup>59</sup> The form of literary reality Wood seems to demand, a reality that is precariously perched alone atop an impossibly unrealistic pedestal, is unachievable. Even ignoring the multifarious rationale and the “startlingly banal” level of personal vitriol behind his anti-Rushdie tirade, he seems unable or stubbornly unwilling to consider any trace of a thematic relationship between the real and surreal. His comments regarding the supposed literary “prestige of realism” and the artistic “rigour” it apparently demands betray the almost clinical nature of his perspective.<sup>60</sup> Reality, for Wood is prestigious territory – too precious to be entrusted to the flighty hands of the imaginative novelist, much less an apparently inept conjurer of magical realism such as Rushdie. The intensity of his desire to quarantine realism renders Wood’s interpretation of the type of literary imaginings that constitute magic realism at best erroneous. To find indisputable examples of magic realism in Rushdie’s supposedly “flat and unoriginal” writing, one may choose to cite, for instance, the Kafkaesque man-to-goat metamorphosis of Saladin Chamcha of *The Satanic Verses*.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, in *Fury*, the bizarre allegorical twists of the Lilliput-Blefuscu “Puppet Kings” counter-coup,<sup>62</sup> or the indistinct dream-reality intermeshing of Solanka’s fear of his “terrorist anger... black-outs” and his imagined culpability as the mysterious “concrete killer”,<sup>63</sup> could be seen as clear examples of magic realism.

Wood misconstrues his assault on Rushdie’s use of magic realism, instead attacking carefully edited selections of Rushdie’s writing in *Fury*. For example, Wood takes umbrage at Rushdie’s apparently “cartoonish” depiction of the “octogenarian plumber” Schlink. As Wood relates, Rushdie describes Schlink as “a talker” with “Albert Einstein white hair and Bugs Bunny front teeth”.<sup>64</sup> Even worse, for Wood, Rushdie emulates Schlink’s “transplanted German Jew” accent in the following manner: “I like to do the vork prompt”, and “let zem call me Schlink the Bismarck, it von’t bother me, it’s a free country”.<sup>65</sup> Wood is thoroughly

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>61</sup> See: S. Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, Viking, London, 1988.

<sup>62</sup> Rushdie, (2001). *op. cit.*, pp. 226-255.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 63-76.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

unimpressed, suggesting that Rushdie's "vulgarity", his "hazy swipes at vivacity" leave the reader with little more than "anterior images" of "characters (so-called)."<sup>66</sup> Wood offers the following assessment of the root of Rushdie's apparent failings in this instance: "when a man is described as having Bugs Bunny teeth, you see the Bunny, you do not see the man".<sup>67</sup> I would argue that this is perhaps one of the points Rushdie seeks to make. Specifically, identity, within the context of contemporary Western culture, is fragmented; it is obliterated and readily reconstructed in the guise of popular culture stereotypes. Ironically, it would seem that Wood and Rushdie concur - describe a man using the language of stereotypes and you don't see the man, you see the stereotype. This is not, in my reading, a point that Rushdie retreats from.

Wood mistakes parody for magical realism. Rushdie explicitly defines his characterisation of Schlink as a parody. Schlink's was "a novelistic life", almost "filmic", the reader is told immediately after the character's introduction.<sup>68</sup> More evidence still is available should the reader require it. For instance, it is perhaps no coincidence that the name Schlink is such a close intertextual alliteration of the Hollywood genre term "Schlock". Furthermore Rushdie employs language (Schlink's accent) that is deliberately reflective of the language of the cartoonish culture he is critiquing. Schlink's accent and his name can also be seen as a direct evocation of one of television's archetypal cultural stereotypes: Sergeant Schultz - Colonel Klink, (*Schultz-Klink*).<sup>69</sup> This amalgam would seem to exemplify the very essence of parody. The text's broad thematic devices, for instance puppetry and mimicry, offer additional examples of parody and, what may be understood as, cultural re-animation. This aspect of the text would seem impossible to overlook.<sup>70</sup> Wood, however, seems resolutely committed to averting his gaze.

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<sup>66</sup> Wood, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Rushdie (2001), op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>69</sup> The name Schlink may bring to mind the German author Bernhard Schlink. Schlink's 1997 novel *The Reader [Die Vorleser]* examines the Holocaust and intergenerational notions of guilt and atonement. Given the light "novelistic" tone of Rushdie's character of the same name and the comparatively unbearable emotional weight of Bernhard Schlink's text's subject matter - this nominal link is unlikely. See: B. Schlink, *The Reader*, trans. C. B. Janeway, Phoenix, London, 1997.

<sup>70</sup> Eco's account of the postmodern literary feature of "double coding" encapsulates not only the structural dynamics of Rushdie's use of parody but also the possible reasons for Wood's rejection of it. Eco offers "many different profiles" of double coding. In referring to the [continued/...]

Clues as to the factors governing Rushdie's use of parody are apparent in his discussion of the technical attributes of European novelist and essayist Gunter Grass. Rushdie states, "a writer who understands the artificial nature of reality is more or less obliged to enter the process of making it".<sup>71</sup> This statement can readily be understood as a declaration of one of the many motivations to write; yet it also offers a clarification of the literary "process" of rationalising "reality" and the "artificial". Returning to *Fury*, Rushdie's adoption of the "artificial" language of "reality" – for example, Schlink's accent – can be seen as an insightful way of unmasking the language that perpetuates this type of cultural stereotype. Rushdie's use of parody sees him "enter the process" of "artificiality"; however, the broader thematic tack of *Fury* suggests that it would be a mistake to classify his literary parody of artificiality as itself artificial.

Wood fails to recognise Rushdie's thematic use of parody. His dismissal of the text as a failed attempt at magical realism, leads him to conclude that *Fury* "has been corrupted by the very corruption that it decries".<sup>72</sup> Rushdie's text, in his view has no realist foundation "from which to launch its ethical armada".<sup>73</sup> If we accept Kundera's view of the novel as a question, then it is doubtful that ethical didacticism is Rushdie's aim. In seeking to vehemently attack Rushdie's literary abilities on the basis of magical realism Wood falls into the trap of one-dimensional criticism. Magical realism, like parody and narrative ambiguity, is only one of many facets of Rushdie's multi-dimensional literary style. To say that Rushdie exhibits some of the stylistic traits of magical realism (poorly or otherwise) is perhaps acceptable, but to suggest that this is *all* he offers is to deny the complexities of his authorial technique; and indeed the complexities of

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"different levels of reading" apparent in double coding, he observes that the reader typically has certain broad-scale responses to this postmodern feature. One of these responses seems remarkably applicable to Wood, whom, to use Eco's words, could be referred to as "a reader who does not accept the mixture of cultured and popular styles and contents, and who therefore refuses to read it, precisely because he recognises this mixture." See: Eco, op. cit., pp. 217-221. My account of the "new sensibility" in chapter five of this thesis offers an additional reading of the complexities of the contemporary intersection of traditionally delineated "high" and "low" cultural forms.

<sup>71</sup> S. Rushdie, "Introduction", in *On Writing and Politics 1967-1983*, G. Grass, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, London, 1985, p. xiv.

<sup>72</sup> Wood, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*

It seems blithely ironic that Wood, a critic so openly enamoured with the apparent "prestige of realism" chooses to "launch" his attack on Rushdie with this seafaring metaphor.

postmodern literature in general. Given the evidently limited scope of Wood's perspective it is not surprising that he finds Rushdie's writing banal.

Indicative of its postmodernist basis, magical realism is clearly also a contested literary concept. In her comparative discussion of the "works" of Kafka and Rushdie, literary theorist Laura Balomiri argues that both writers make use of magical realism or "the fantastic in order to render their works ambiguous and uninterpretable".<sup>74</sup> Whilst the effects of this rendering may indeed be "ambiguous and uninterpretable" in particular instances and to particular readers, it is difficult to concur with the claim that this is a deliberate decision on the part of the respective authors. I am more inclined to agree with Balomiri's subsequent suggestion that the disputed territory of magical realism is the figurative terrain at the frontiers, or the "threshold", of the real-surreal "metamorphosis".<sup>75</sup> It is the "transitional, uncertain, in-between stage", the frontier that exists between "two realms" that is the ambiguous zone of contention.<sup>76</sup> This "uncertain" point of ambiguity may also be the source of the type of critical wrath exemplified by Wood. Wood neither recognises nor navigates these "transitional" stages in *Fury*. Instead, he and an array of other reviewers of the text have sought to eschew "incredibility" in favour of what they perceive to be the "realist" frontiers of Rushdie's writing.<sup>77</sup> This has typically entailed a search for links between Rushdie and the novel's protagonist Solanka. Indeed, Wood ironically pursues his own form of magical realism to the extent that he chooses to refer to these respectively *real* and *unreal* figures as a singular amalgam: "Solanka-Rushdie".<sup>78</sup> The problematic nature of several critical interpretations concerning the transitional frontiers in *Fury*, however, raises a series of questions regarding the clarification of authorial intent. These questions are of such a level of significance that many authors choose to directly address them in relation to their respective fictional writings. As will be apparent later in this chapter (with further reference to the many narrative voices in *Shame*), they are questions of direct relevance to

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<sup>74</sup> Balomiri (online), op. cit.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Wood, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37.

Rushdie's literary project. However, in order to build an informed account of the distinguishing features of Rushdie's authorial intent, I will to briefly utilise a telling rationale offered by the Hungarian born British author Arthur Koestler to illustrate the tension that exists between the literary frontiers of the "fictitious" and the "real".

### 3.8 The tension between the "fictitious" and the "real"

In the preface to his 1940 novel *Darkness at Noon*, Koestler declares, "the characters in this book are fictitious".<sup>79</sup> However, he is careful to add, "the historical circumstances which determined their actions are real".<sup>80</sup> Koestler's statement introduces an interesting dichotomy. Put simply: by suggesting that his fictional characters are governed by real events Koestler ironically creates a tension between the frontiers of the "fictitious" and the "real" rather than allaying confusion. For example, his statement could indeed be perceived as a form of negation that inadvertently directs readers towards the very perspectives he seeks to dismiss. Additionally, his assertion that "the characters in [*Darkness at Noon*] are fictitious" is a fact that could be evidenced alone, if desired, through a review of their resemblances to figures of public record. Koestler's opening statement is designed to illustrate the existence of such a tension. It is a clarification of his creative process rather than a succinct delineation of his creative intent or a declaration of his political bias. Koestler's authorial intent and his political bias are matters for the reader to decipher; they become another part of the greater series of questions inspired by the political novel form rather than a blunt point to be neatly resolved by his declaration.

In the *Darkness at Noon* Preface Koestler reveals additional complex facets of his creative process, stating that "the life of the man N. S. Rubashov", the text's protagonist, "is a synthesis of the lives of a number of men who were victims of the so-called Moscow Trials.<sup>81</sup> Several of them", he continues, "were personally known to the author".<sup>82</sup> Again, his motivations in revealing his personal link

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<sup>79</sup> A. Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1984, Preface.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*

may be questioned. However, when related to the dynamics of his creative process, Koestler's declaration could be seen as an attempt to emphasize the peculiar subtleties of *his* imaginative process, in conceiving *Darkness at Noon*. The events and people upon which his story is based are well documented; as such Koestler seeks to clarify the manner in which his account will differ.

Three major factors offer additional insight into Koestler's motivations in clarifying his creative process. The reader is informed that Rubashov is a character amalgam based on: firstly, public knowledge; secondly, personal experiences; and thirdly personal relationships. I will offer a brief account of these three points, followed by a final clarification of his authorial motivations and my reasons for placing such emphasis on them within this thesis.

- i) **Public Knowledge:** The Moscow Trials (1932-1938) were public knowledge. They were widely reported both within the Soviet Union and the outside world, particularly within the U.S. However, the style and use of this reportage was intensely political and, as would be expected, the manufacture and manipulation of these respective reports as, for example, vehicles for propaganda was vastly different.<sup>83</sup> Some aspects, however, were remarkably similar; for example, both the Soviet and U.S. responses neglected the glaringly dehumanising character of the trials, choosing instead to use their reportage as a platform from which to launch culturally and ideologically based accusations of political inferiority.
  
- ii) **Personal Experience:** Some readers may perceive Koestler's personal experiences as having significant bearing on the character dynamics of particular figures within *Darkness at Noon*. For example, like Rubashov, Koestler had direct experience of party politics, persecution and incarceration.

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<sup>83</sup> Stalin used the trials as a means to purge the Party of those he perceived as threatening his absolute rule. The proceedings were given extraordinary coverage within the U.S.S.R. and, as Koestler's novel exemplifies, the accused were persuaded by extraordinary means to make public admissions of guilt regardless of their culpability. The high profile nature of both the inquisition and the political standing of many of the accused allowed Stalin to eliminate potential threats whilst maintaining a public veneer of impartiality and impassive political dutifulness. Alternatively, opponents of Soviet communism, most ardently a selection of U.S. commentators, recounted the trials in a markedly different manner and for clearly different reasons. "The trials were peculiarly Russian in their garish externals", wrote prominent U.S. critic Harold Strauss in 1941. "At their core", he added, "they were a clash between programmatic absolutism and humanitarian democracy". Strauss presents a pronounced "humanitarian" demarcation along overtly ideological grounds that may be interpreted as empirically rating democracy against absolutism. See: H. Strauss, "The Riddle of the Moscow Trials", *The New York Times* (online), <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/01/02/specials/koestler-darkness.html>, 2002 (accessed 28 March 2004).

Throughout the early 1930s Koestler was a member of the German Communist Party and, later, whilst travelling through the U.S.S.R. he worked as an officially sanctioned writer of regional-based Soviet propaganda.<sup>84</sup> Eventually becoming disillusioned with Stalinist communism, he became editor of the dedicated "anti-Stalin" German periodical *Zukunft*.<sup>85</sup> His anti-fascist sentiments then led him to fight in the Spanish civil war, where he was imprisoned and sentenced to death. Released as a result of an extensive international lobbying campaign, he initially wrote various non-fiction accounts of his experiences, before beginning work on *Darkness at Noon*.

**iii) Personal Relationships:** Rubashov can be seen as a composite of particular senior Party figures. Many of those accused of "counter-revolutionary or deviationist activities" were, as Koestler states, "personally known" to him.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, certain aspects of the activities and character of high-ranking Bolsheviks like Sedov, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Bukharin are replicated by Rubashov. Equally, the novel's inquisitors Ivanov and Gletkin espouse judicial rhetoric of a tone remarkably similar, and in some cases verbatim, to the idiom of the actual investigative magistrates of the Moscow Trials. For example, Gletkin tells Rubashov, "your testimony at the trial will be the last service you can do the Party".<sup>87</sup> The conveners of the actual trials regularly referred admissions of guilt as dutiful acts. As the above example highlights, the interrogative process and the orchestration of the subsequent trials were used by the Party to promote, what they regarded, as the supreme virtue: absolute personal devotion to the Party. Koestler, as a former Party propagandist, is well acquainted with these motives and equally, he understands the personal implications of such a level of devotion – he has both promoted that alleged virtue and subsequently recoiled from it.

The three factors I have detailed above provide a clearer indication of the possible motives behind declaration in the *Darkness at Noon* Preface. The common point in these three explicatory accounts is the potential for ideas, events, writings and, most abhorrently, people to be used for political purposes. Koestler recognises the various forms of political bias evident in the reportage of

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<sup>84</sup> "Books and Writers", *Kirjasto* (online). <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/koestler.htm>, 2000 (accessed 28 March 2004).

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Koestler, *op. cit.*, Preface.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, p. 188.

the Moscow Trials of which Koestler offers his own fictional account. He clarifies his creative process, not to declare his own possible bias, rather to remind the reader of the fact that, as Orwell states, no writing is “genuinely free of political bias” even his own.<sup>88</sup> It could be argued that there is a degree of authorial nobility or rare integrity in Koestler’s declaration. He seeks neither to deny nor to admit the existence of a particular type of author-subject or link; rather, he merely wishes to remind the reader of the propensity for such a conclusion to be drawn.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, conclusions of this nature are regularly proffered, not only concerning the political novel but also across the broader spectrum of the literary canon. The marked level of importance many readers, theorists and literary critics place on arguing for the existence or otherwise of such a connection ensures that the notion of an author-subject link is a matter that demands significant attention.

### 3.9 Psycho-biographic borders and frontiers: fictionalising the author

Perhaps in response to the ambiguities of the postmodern narrative form, literary criticism is increasingly framed within a psycho-biographical context; a context aimed at locating a union or link between a particular author and his or her fictional protagonist. Indeed, in deference to the sleuth-like investigative nature of their task, proponents of this type of criticism often attempt to present extensive lists of *evidence* of apparent author-protagonist correlations. For example, “psychoanalytical” literary critic Donald Carveth claims he can “detect” biographical links between the contemporary U.S. author Sam Shepard and “Travis” the protagonist of Shepard’s play *Paris, Texas*.<sup>90</sup> Linking a particular

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<sup>88</sup> G. Orwell, “Why I Write”, in *The Decline of the English Murder and Other Essays*, G. Orwell, Penguin, Ringwood, 1986, pp. 184.

<sup>89</sup> As will become apparent on chapters four and five of this thesis, Koestler’s clarification of authorial intent is particularly relevant to Rushdie’s literary project in light of the manner in which both *Fury* and *Step Across This Line* contain, what could be interpreted as, implicit and explicit references to aspects of Rushdie’s biography, and certain “real” life events and settings.

<sup>90</sup> Carveth attempts to link many aspects of Travis’ fictional narrative with Shepard’s personal life. In doing so, he makes extraordinary claims, not only regarding Travis’ fictional psyche, but also by inexplicable implication, Shepard’s personal character. Carveth argues that Shepard’s treatment of his own child confirms that his depiction of Travis as “the absent or defective father” is confessional. He then turns his attention to the play’s themes, suggesting that “the precarious, artificial, insubstantial and divided nature of the self; the problematic nature of language and communication; and the obsessive exploration of symbiotic and sadomasochistically enmeshed [continued/...]



author to his or her fictional protagonists effectively fictionalises the author. As Rushdie states, “the experience of being profiled is perhaps closest to what it must feel like to be used as a writer’s raw material”.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, in proffering a psycho-biographical link, reviewers of fiction are partaking in their own highly subjective act of fiction. Rushdie is reluctant to pass judgment on psycho-biographical critics, perhaps because he is wary of encouraging further intrusions into his personal life; however he does recognise the irony in such a pursuit. “For a novelist to be... re-written”, he states, is “a case of the biter bit”.<sup>92</sup> Psycho-biographical criticism can only offer a limited static caricature of the intrinsically kinetic identity it seeks to encapsulate.

“My books are not a means of discovering or expressing who I am”, proclaims novelist and literary theorist Susan Sontag.<sup>93</sup> “My life has always felt like a becoming, and still does”, she adds. “But the books are finished”.<sup>94</sup> Sontag’s comments highlight one of the many misconceptions attendant to the practice psycho-biographical criticism. As I will discuss in detail in the following chapter, identity is a *process*, not a matter of record. Sontag’s identity as the theorist, the novelist, or the person is naturally transitory and contradictory, and most importantly it is neither static nor complete. As she correctly attests, her identity is in a constant state of becoming. In seeking to find evidence of a link between author and protagonist, the psycho-biographic critic places an inordinate level of importance on the one-dimensional transitory fragments of what is in reality a multifaceted and sophisticated set of perspectives constituting identity.

As I indicated earlier, Rushdie is a regular target of psycho-biographic

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relationships” are all themes that Shepard struggles with personally. These are extraordinary deductions. Shepard has never publicly discussed these matters nor the existence of a link between such factors and his work. Even regardless of this fact, Carveth’s form of psycho-biographical criticism remains extremely problematic; not because his observations are necessarily inaccurate, rather they are misdirected. *Paris, Texas* could indeed be recognised as a play that engages the themes Carveth mentions, yet to seek to explicate or justify the existence of such themes by applying them directly to the author, or using the author’s experience as proof, suggests that Carveth is unable to offer an independent and thus truly critical articulation of them.

See: D. L. Carveth, “The Borderline Dilemma in *Paris, Texas*: Psychoanalytic Approaches to Sam Shepard”, *Canadian Journal of Psychoanalysis [Revue Canadienne de Psychanalyse]*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Autumn 1993, pp. 19-46.

<sup>91</sup> Rushdie (2002), op. cit., p. 144.

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> S. Sontag, *Where The Stress Falls*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2002, p. 260.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*

criticism. Wood justifies his linking of Solanka and Rushdie on his belief that Rushdie's fictional character constructs are flawed. "The unlikely vulgarities of Professor Solanka", he argues, "are so distorting that they abolish him as a character, and leave him only as a figment of Rushdie's painful confessional urge".<sup>95</sup> Interestingly, Wood's nominal reference to "Solanka-Rushdie" is not based on "evidence" of the sort presented by Carveth.<sup>96</sup> Rather, he inexplicably links his decision to merge the fictional and the real to Rushdie's apparent literary ineptitude. Many reviewers of *Fury* have presented a similar nominal link, yet for markedly different reasons.

Amitava Kumar implicitly draws a litany of biographical parallels between Solanka and Rushdie that lead him to conclude that Solanka's "voice is indistinguishable from the author's".<sup>97</sup> Anthony Macris adopts a different tack, choosing to rationalise his merging of "Solanka/Rushdie" primarily on the basis of what he views to be flaws in the text's narrative structure.<sup>98</sup> He is disconcerted by Rushdie's construction of Solanka's "omniscient" and "garrulous" narrative voice.<sup>99</sup> It is the breadth of Solanka's perspective, his "discourses... on every aspect of the American of the new millennium" that seems to be the source of Macris' ire.<sup>100</sup> In his view, the apparent incredulity of Solanka's all-pervading perspective betrays the fact that his fictional voice is Rushdie's voice. This is an extraordinary assumption, one that denies, not only, the possible complexities of postmodern narratives I discussed in chapter two, but also the structural complexities of the postmodern literary form in general. Macris is also cynical of the text's critique of contemporary Western culture. How can Rushdie, a novelist who according to Macris has willingly participated in "all the cross-marketing techniques" of this culture, possibly offer an objective critique?<sup>101</sup> Macris claims that it is

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<sup>95</sup> Wood, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> A. Kumar, "The Bend in Their Rivers", *The Nation*, Vol. 273, Issue 17, 26 November 2001, p. 32.

<sup>98</sup> A. Macris, "Rage Slave", *The Bulletin*, 5 September 2001.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.* Macris makes some extraordinarily speculative claims regarding Rushdie's authorial motivations. "In the late 1990s", Macris states, "Rushdie worked with U2's Bono, writing lyrics for the song "The Ground Beneath Her Feet" (also the name of his previous novel). [continued/...] The collaboration obviously had a big effect on him. All the cross-marketing techniques of the rock world must have made the novel business look like a commercial backwater". [*ibid.*]

consequently “hard to know whether in *Fury* Rushdie is criticising or craving the power of these hyper-accelerated, money spinning synergies.”<sup>102</sup> Criticisms of this nature completely dismiss the complexities of authorial intent discussed earlier with reference to Koestler. The psycho-biographical view of literature is blind to the structural nuances and thematic possibilities of the novel. Indeed, the postmodern form is characterised by tensions in narrative voice and tensions between the real and the imagined. To deny this fact is to strip literature of its humanising voice – the voice of imagination.

Rushdie’s position on the literary frontiers of the real and the imagined is ironically defined by the interview question he claims “irritates” him most of all; that is: “How autobiographical” are his novels?<sup>103</sup> This question most commonly arises, he suggests, “with books that are either narrated in the first person or which have a really tightly focused point-of-view character, in the way that *Fury* does.”<sup>104</sup> In responding to such questions, Rushdie claims he is reluctant to offer “the actual truth”; that truth being that the characters that populate his writing are each unique and incalculable blends of personal experience, invention and modification.<sup>105</sup> For Rushdie, the melding of these factors ensures that his writing is fictional; “but nobody wants to know that”, he argues, cynically adding that the “correct answer is: it’s *completely* autobiographical”.<sup>106</sup> Fictional writing that is based entirely on the author’s personal experiences is, in Rushdie’s view, “oddly inert”.<sup>107</sup> In his view, a novel only “comes to life when you let the fictional characters have their own independence”.<sup>108</sup> This is what he seeks to do in *Fury*. Indeed, there may be certain biographical similarities between Rushdie and Solanka, yet to allow these likenesses to completely guide one’s perspective of the novel is to deny the many perspectives the text offers.

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<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> L. Richards, “Salman Rushdie”, *January Magazine* (online), <http://www.januarymagazine.com/pr/offiles/rushdie2002.html>, 2002 (accessed 14 June 2005).

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> R. Montagne, “Interview: Salman Rushdie Discusses His Newest Novel, *Fury*”, *Morning Edition – Washington DC* (online), <http://www.morningeditiondc.com/features/rushdie20804.html>, 2001 (accessed 14 June 2005).

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*

The point at which Rushdie's fictional characters gain their "independence" is naturally ambiguous, impossible to precisely locate and quantify. It is only one of many stylistic sources of literary tension. In an attempt to diffuse the tension at the literary frontiers of the fictitious and the "real", psycho-biographical criticism displays an ignorance of the aesthetic vitality of this frontier. It vainly seeks to offer a succinct answer to the "wisdom of the novel", which is, as Kundera asserts, to "comprehend the world as a question".<sup>109</sup> To accept that a novel can carry this level of "wisdom" is to adopt an open and permissive view of its potential. This too, is the viewpoint required to locate the political dimension of a particular text.

### **3.10 Locating "political purpose" in literature**

The seemingly unlimited possibilities of the political novel's "leap of imagination" raises questions regarding the scope of politics in literature? Orwell argues, "no book is genuinely free of political bias", noting that selected examples of his own writing that, as he describes it, "lacked a political purpose" were "lifeless".<sup>110</sup> Without seeking to dispute Orwell's claim, defining the political dimension or indeed the "political purpose" of literature can, however, be a difficult task. Perspectives of the incidence of politics in literature can naturally be diverse. For Bernard Crick, a political novel is identified as such because it engages what he describes as the "great themes" of political science; namely: "justice, authority, obligation, order, equality, toleration and liberty".<sup>111</sup> Given the imaginative scope of literature, it is reasonable to assert that respective fictional treatments of the political themes Crick cites can be markedly varied.

Certain thematically aligned writings of Orwell, Kundera and Rushdie exemplify the potential scope of imaginative variation in literature. For example, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell's depiction of Winston's involuntarily emotive love for Julia and his comparatively emotively forced ideological "love" for Big Brother directly engages many of the themes Crick mentions; it does so in an explicit manner within the thematic context of the frontiers of the personal and the political.

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<sup>109</sup> Kundera (1986), op. cit., p. 237.

<sup>110</sup> Orwell (1986), op. cit., pp. 184-186.

<sup>111</sup> Crick (1989), op. cit., p. 18.

However, particular aspects of, for example, Kundera's imaginative treatment of personal-political dynamics may, for example, alternatively be seen as implicit. For instance, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* there is no overt reference to the personally invasive totalitarian state in Kundera's construction of Tamina's dreamlike experience on the island of children.<sup>112</sup> Despite this fact, the greater thematic structure of Kundera's novel allows the reader to recognise Tamina's story as an allegory.<sup>113</sup> Just as Tamina learns that in order to placate and "identify with" the hostile and invasive children she will have to "give up her privacy",<sup>114</sup> other characters in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, such as Mirek, are horrified that the hostile and invasive Czech totalitarian state makes the same demands.<sup>115</sup> Interestingly, Kundera is reluctant to define Tamina's story as an allegory. He trenchantly states, "nothing is more foreign to me than allegory, a story invented by the author in order to illustrate some thesis".<sup>116</sup> Kundera's approach is more concerned with literary aesthetics. "Events," Kundera adds, "whether realistic or imaginary must be significant in themselves, and the reader is meant to be naively seduced by their power and poetry."<sup>117</sup> Evidently, Kundera is reluctant to articulate the "political purpose" of his writing. Nor is he willing to completely clarify the subtleties of his imaginative technique. Indeed, to do so would potentially undermine the possible political and aesthetic vitality of his work. Imaginative writing is typically described as such precisely because of its potential ambiguity.

Literary theorist D. Goonetilleke identifies a similar level of versatility of

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<sup>112</sup> Kundera (1986), op. cit., pp. 168-191.

For an insightful reading of Tamina's function within Kundera's novel see: F. Ricard, *Agnes's Final Afternoon: An Essay on the Work of Milan Kundera*, Faber & Faber, London, 2003, pp. 110-112.

<sup>113</sup> Kundera explicitly highlights this structural feature of the text with his claim that *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is "a novel about Tamina, and whenever Tamina is absent, it is a novel for Tamina. She is its main character and main audience, and all the other stories are variations on her story and come together in her life as in a mirror." [Kundera, (1986), op. cit., p. 175.] Evidently, her allegorical story inhabits all of the symbolically in-between spaces of the text. The dynamics of her personal-political dilemma are seemingly apparent throughout the balance of the text, regardless of her contextual and nominal absence. However, can the reader trust Kundera's apparently non-fictional statement regarding Tamina's thematic importance; especially considering the array of contradictory claims he offers regarding the book's structural complexities? Could this supposed authorial confession be yet another imaginative narrative technique? See my discussion of Kundera's reference to allegory and my engagement with Rushdie's claims regarding narrative structure (with reference to *Shame* later in this chapter.

<sup>114</sup> Kundera (1986), op. cit., p. 175.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 3-24.

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*

political purpose in Rushdie's literary project. In discussing *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Goonetilleke locates what he describes as a "complex and multi-layered" expression of the personal-political dilemma Rushdie experienced writing the novel in the immediate aftermath of *The Satanic Verses* and the *fatwa*.<sup>118</sup> Put simply, he sees *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* as a text that symbolically promotes Western liberal democratic "attitudes to censorship and democracy".<sup>119</sup> Indeed, I would argue that the symbolism Goonetilleke discusses can be found in the text's parable that the "sea of stories" belongs to us all, and that no singular interpretation of historical, religious, political or personal imagining should be derided or celebrated as an absolute truth, nor should such an imagining be misappropriated to attack the freedoms of the individual. In the character of Rashid Khalifa, Goonetilleke sees an individual who, like Rushdie, has his "position as a storyteller" threatened.<sup>120</sup> "You're only interested in pleasure", one of Khalifa's detractors asserts, "but a proper man would know that life is a serious business. Your brain is full of make-believe, so there is no room in it for facts".<sup>121</sup> Goonetilleke argues that the *fatwa* meant that Rushdie's creative impetus was, affected by the "serious business" of disputed reality and misplaced "facts". However, a "proper man" understands that in the sea of stories, there is room for all of the innumerable liquid elements that combine to make a story, be those elements "facts", "serious business" or "pleasure".

Despite Goonetilleke's claims regarding the text's exploration of the personal crises of authorship and the novel's concurrent political "opposition to dogmatic exclusiveness", he is reluctant to call the story a personal-political allegory.<sup>122</sup> He turns to author J. R. Tolkien's description of allegory to explain his reservations. In the Foreword to *Lord of the Rings*, Goonetilleke observes, Tolkien wrote: "I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but one resides in the freedom of the reader and the other in the purposed domination of the

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<sup>118</sup> Goonetilleke, op. cit., pp. 108-109.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Rushdie (1991), op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>122</sup> Goonetilleke, op. cit., pp. 122-123.

author".<sup>123</sup> Goonetilleke argues "*Haroun* is 'applicable' rather than 'allegorical'".<sup>124</sup> Indeed, as I discussed in chapter two, Rushdie claims to have developed *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* through his opposition to literary categories that demarcate writing in accordance with the assumed "domination of the author". To describe a text as an allegory is to give primacy to one dimension of the text by ascribing a particular meaning to it. However, to say that certain facets of a text may be applicable to an idea is to permit a text to carry many different meanings, or at the very least more than one.

Goonetilleke presents an insightful account of the personal-political aspects of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. He achieves this through avoiding the common temptation to categorise the text on the basis of allegory or applicability alone. His engagement with what he deems to be the political aspects of the text is incisive (a point exemplified by his discussion on censorship); yet in recognising the "postmodern" characteristics of Rushdie's approach, Goonetilleke presents his perspective as but one way of seeing.<sup>125</sup> He recognises the political possibilities that enable *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* to, on one level, be described as a political novel, and perhaps on another level, a children's tale. In doing so, he illustrates the extent of these possibilities and thus potentially broadens the text's political scope.

As the above examples illustrate, Orwell's observations regarding the vitality that "political purpose" can bring to literature are valid; however, his comments are not a call to define this "purpose". The incidence of politics in the novel, whether it is expressed explicitly, implicitly, allegorically, applicably or indeed in a series of other ways, is of course a matter for subjective consideration. Yet, it is important to recognise that this deliberative process may involve a level of shared understanding. For example, the political purpose or bias of Orwell's *Animal Farm* is not made explicit, yet few readers would choose to restrict their reading of this satirical political fable in a manner that renders it a mere children's story about the trials and tribulations of a group of barnyard animals.<sup>126</sup> The leap of imagination apparent in *Animal Farm* is facilitated by the

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<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>126</sup> G. Orwell, *Animal Farm*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1977.

reciprocal propensity of the reader to understand, not only its correlation to actual political events, entities and concepts, but also to comprehend the language of satire. As I explained in the previous chapter, this is also the propensity Rushdie seeks to grant the reader with his argument against restrictive literary categories. According to Rushdie, however, Orwell's understanding of this process is considerably different.

### **3.11 "For every text, a context"**

In his essay "Outside the Whale", Rushdie details his "dispute" with Orwell's "assertions about the relationship between politics and literature".<sup>127</sup> In Rushdie's view, Orwell accepts that "political purpose" can bring life to literature, yet it is literature lacking in purpose that provides the most accurate reflection a real life. Orwell cites U.S. author Henry Miller as exemplifying this technique. He praises Miller for "opening up a new world 'not by revealing what is strange but by revealing what is familiar'".<sup>128</sup> Orwell admires Miller's "quietism", his decision to "accept" the many political atrocities occurring around him through his ignorance of them.<sup>129</sup> Because Miller "is passive to experience," Orwell states, he "is able to get nearer to the ordinary man than is possible to more purposive writers, for the ordinary man is also passive."<sup>130</sup> According to Rushdie, Orwell may well believe in the literary qualities of political purpose, yet such qualities can never be seen as speaking "the people's voice".<sup>131</sup> Rushdie argues that Orwell's view is more a pessimistic reaction to the "horrors of the age in which he lived" than a dismissal of political literature or, worst still, a commendation of a writer like Miller whom Rushdie derides as "very little more than the happy pornographer".<sup>132</sup> To view ordinary man as passive is to see him as without politics. For Rushdie, such a view seems impossible to sustain, particularly for a writer of Orwell's era.

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<sup>127</sup> Rushdie (1992), op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 95-96.



According to Rushdie, Orwell's view stems more from his own yearning for quietism rather than a denial of the political dimension of literature. "For a man as truthful, direct, intelligent, passionate and sane as Orwell," Rushdie suggests, "politics had come to represent the antithesis of his own world-view. It was underworld-become-overworld, Hell on earth."<sup>133</sup> Rushdie locates what he identifies as the rationale for Orwell's "curious essay" in its closing remarks in which "Orwell speaks of 'the impossibility of any major literature until the world has shaken itself into its new shape'"<sup>134</sup> Indeed, Rushdie highlights how six years later, in 1946, Orwell wrote: "in our age there is no such thing as 'keeping out of politics'"<sup>135</sup> At the beginning of this chapter I highlighted Rushdie's comment that "writers and politicians... fight for the same territory, reality".<sup>136</sup> Through his engagement with Orwell's dilemma, Rushdie incisively identifies the gravity of this struggle. "It seems to me", he argues in relation to Orwell, "imperative that literature enter [political] arguments, because what is being discussed is nothing less than *what is the case*, what is truth and untruth."<sup>137</sup> Literature exhibits the truths and untruths Rushdie discusses through its imaginative interplay with reality and the many nuances of its structural form. There is no escaping politics, and this is particularly so for literature, precisely because it is no lesser reflection of "what is the case" than politics. Both vocations rely on imagination, truth and untruth, to arrive at abstractions of reality. Rushdie is correct to say that "politics and literature... do mix, are inextricably mixed"<sup>138</sup> He is also right in suggesting that this "mixture has consequences"<sup>139</sup> This fact is, of course, evidenced by his own experience subject to the *fatwa*, and indeed, his openly expressed empathy for Orwell's crisis of authorship.

In the previous chapter I discussed Rushdie's self-reflective comment that "realism can break a writer's heart", a comment that he made in reference to the

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<sup>133</sup> *ibid.*, 96.

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Chaudhuri (online), *op. cit.*

<sup>137</sup> Rushdie (1992), *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*

“political purpose” of his own writing; specifically, the difficulty he experienced in devising a way to describe the realities of Pakistani politics.<sup>140</sup> In *Shame*, Rushdie chooses to describe these realities through the prism of magical realism, yet the reality is in no way diminished. He identifies a similar, if not greater, level of strain in Orwell’s literary negotiation of political realities. “Orwell”, he argues, “did give way to a kind of defeatism and despair.<sup>141</sup> By the time he wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four*... he had plainly come to think that resistance was useless.”<sup>142</sup> Again, however, this does not undermine the “political purpose” of Orwell’s text. As Rushdie observes,

In an age when it often appears that we have all agreed to believe in entropy, in the proposition that things fall apart, that history is the irreversible process by which everything gradually gets worse, the unrelieved pessimism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* goes some way towards explaining its status as a true myth of our times.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* confirms Orwell’s claim that it is impossible to separate politics from the human condition. Yet, as Rushdie observes, the political purpose Orwell identifies in both life and literature gives him little cause for optimism. Orwell’s prophetic study reads as a painful admission that the quietism he seeks is unattainable. For even inside the metaphorical whale, politics intrudes – be it overtly through the omnipotent lens of a “telescreen”, or surreptitiously through a “dissidents” book. The passivity he ascribes to “ordinary man” is also a fallacy. The sensitivity he affords Winston is anything but ordinary. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a political novel that emphatically confirms Rushdie’s claim that “for every text” there is “a context”.<sup>143</sup> And, as I discussed earlier, much of the context of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be understood as a dystopian response to the utopian political ideology of Orwell’s era. “Works of art”, Rushdie argues, “even works of entertainment, do not come into being in a social and political vacuum; and... the way they operate in a society cannot be separated from politics, from history.”<sup>144</sup> As Rushdie seems to suggest, this is a

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<sup>140</sup> Rushdie (1995), op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>141</sup> Rushdie (1992), op. cit., 97.

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>144</sup> *ibid.*

point Orwell was both acutely aware of and distinctly uncomfortable with. As in life, the politics of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is inescapable.

Orwell's comments concerning his longing to eschew political purpose in literature serve only to confirm its pervasive and, at times oppressive influence; arguably, this is his intention. In this sense, the act of explaining the chasm between ordinariness and politics in literature and in "man" can be seen as a political act itself – an illustration of the blurring of personal-political frontiers in both life and literature. Returning again to Orwell's claims regarding political purpose, it is doubtful that he is suggesting that the political purpose of a novel need be solely restricted to the implicit or explicit exposition of politics by a particular text's subject matter. Indeed, the political purpose or bias of a novel may also lie in the structural challenge it presents to traditional literary forms. For example, a challenge based on ambiguity of narrative voice, a challenge regularly proffered by Rushdie.

### 3.12 Literature's "hybrid forms"

I have discussed numerous contested interpretations of narration or metanarrative within the postmodern form. I have also engaged competing notions of authorial technique concerning the biographical dynamics of particular authors and their respective fictional protagonists. The political novel potentially introduces additional layers to the already complex structure of postmodern narratives. Mindful of my earlier comments concerning speculation about a "Rushdie-Solanka" link in *Fury*, it is significant that the ambiguity of the narrative voice is often the result of a deliberate act on the part of the author. Rushdie highlights this fact when discussing the narrative structure of his novel *Shame*.

In *Shame* there's no narrator. It's not narrated, except by me. There is an "I" figure in it which is me and occasionally says things. And even that isn't quite me because novelists, being sneaky people, will rationalise even the bit that looks like autobiography. One of the things that interested me was to occasionally slip out of fiction and seem to be writing non-fiction – to put essay-type material into the book. And, as it were, to look at the theme both fictionally and non-fictionally at the same time and see if that produced fruitful results.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Chaudhuri (online), op. cit.

From the tone of this statement it may be surmised that Rushdie is dualistically intent on retreating and promoting his narrative voice. Indeed, this “essay-type material” is evident in *Fury*, – for example, the discussion of Clinton’s brokering of Barak-Arafat negotiations.<sup>146</sup> As Rushdie admits, this material is also evident in *Shame*, where for instance, he purposefully defers the text’s predominately fictional narrative tone to offer an essay-type commentary on an actual Pakistani “honour killing” in the U.K.<sup>147</sup> However, the presentation of, what could be perceived as, non-fictional commentary in *Fury* differs from *Shame* in that it is not as clearly delineated. Whilst, as stated, both novels periodically engage historical or “real” events, the “slip” between fiction and non-fiction is at its subtlest in *Fury*. As I have shown, it is this aspect of Rushdie’s narrative technique in *Fury* that is problematic for many critics. However, given Rushdie’s facetious confession that novelists are “sneaky people”, it may be that this criticism is misdirected.

The apparent ambiguity of Rushdie’s narrative technique is, it would seem, a matter of secondary concern for him. Rather than seeking to obscure the boundaries of narrative voice, his literary project could be seen as embracing a bigger challenge, one that questions the independent rigidity of the borders defining apparently different literary conventions, forms and genres. Again, narrative structure is only one component of this broader project.

Rushdie rejects literary theorist George Steiner’s claim that the contemporary “novel” is a “tired” and inferior literary “genre”.<sup>148</sup> Steiner argues that the novel’s halcyon period is over and the emerging “fact/fiction... hybrid forms” of the novel cannot “compete with the best of reportage” or “the very best of immediate narrative”.<sup>149</sup> As he readily professes, Rushdie is a sometime exponent of the fact/fiction hybrid, yet he rejects Steiner’s notion that there need be a *competition* between “forms”. Rushdie enlists the works of a series of contemporary novelists, including Kundera and Grass, to illustrate that Steiner’s view is “demonstrably false”.<sup>150</sup> Indeed, Kundera and Grass are also recognised

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<sup>146</sup> Rushdie (2001), op. cit., pp. 65-66.

<sup>147</sup> Rushdie (1995), p. 115.

<sup>148</sup> Rushdie (2002), op cit., p. 54.

<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*, p. 57.

exponents of the hybrid form Rushdie promotes; and both authors have also presented similar arguments in defence of the novel.

As stated, Rushdie's reply to Steiner is based on his rejection of the idea that the novel need compete with reportage or immediate narrative. Indeed, he suggests that the best examples of non-fictional writing excel through the adoption of a similar hybrid. Rushdie lauds "imaginative essay-writing", "new journalism" and "travel writing" as particular examples of the type of non-fictional texts that can achieve "all the tension and intellectual excitement of the best fiction".<sup>151</sup> These factors, Rushdie attests, need not spell the death of the novel. Indeed they are, he adds, literary hybrids to be embraced. As he states,

There is, in my view, no crisis in the art of the novel. The novel is precisely that 'hybrid form' for which Prof. Steiner yearns. It is part social enquiry, part fantasy, part confessional. It crosses frontiers of knowledge as well as topographical boundaries. He is right, however, that many good writers have blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction.<sup>152</sup>

Rushdie is arguing for the permeability of literary frontiers. The blurring of boundaries is a worthwhile creative exercise, not a transgression to be feared, ridiculed or discouraged. Rushdie's response to Steiner is a warning against being too rigid or overly possessive of, not only the novel form but a series of what he views as intermeshed literary genres. It is significant that the type of genre versatility Rushdie seeks to promote in his own writing is a feature he also prizes in other writers.

When discussing the dynamics of Grass' apparently dualistic, superficially opposed roles as novelist and essayist, Rushdie presents a convincing case for the intellectual value of the process of creative blurring. "When Grass writes about literature", Rushdie observes, "he finds himself writing about politics, and when he discusses political issues, the quirky perspectives of literature have a habit of

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<sup>151</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>152</sup> *ibid.*

Michael Ondaatje's novel *Running in the Family* can be seen as an excellent contemporary example of the "hybrid form" Rushdie speaks of. Ondaatje shifts through fiction and fact with his employment of diverse literary styles such as: historical examination, political commentary, personalised diary extracts, poetry, fictional narrative and photographic record. See: M. Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*, Picador, London, 1984.

creeping in".<sup>153</sup> As I have shown, these "quirky perspectives" are the very perspectives that enable the leap of imagination discussed earlier. Rushdie's claim that these imaginative devices creep into theoretical discussions could be seen as a "sneaky" or playful suggestion that the presence of fictional language in politics is invasive and somehow inappropriate. However, given the greater substance of Rushdie's response to Steiner, it is more likely that it is an admission that he is aware that many view literary perspectives of politics as transgressive. Yet as he states, this need not be the case.

### 3.13 "To be at once creative and political"

The life or "political purpose" that Orwell discusses need not be limited to particular aspects of politics, political theory or indeed certain overtly political literary genres. As Rushdie states in a further reference to Grass' literary technique, "to argue about reality is to be at once be creative and political."<sup>154</sup> This is a rejection of imaginatively barren and thus intellectually limiting borders and frontiers; wherever, and in whatever form, they may exist. Using Grass as an example, Rushdie also, perhaps unwittingly, offers an insightful articulation of his own attributes as an imaginative writer. Rushdie's claim on reality is made through his argument for an inclusive, even symbiotic approach to political and literary imaginings. As I seek to illustrate throughout this thesis, his argument is exemplified by his writing.

Earlier in this chapter I cited Rushdie's claim that "writers and politicians are natural rivals because they fight for the same territory, reality".<sup>155</sup> In light of this

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<sup>153</sup> Rushdie (1985), op. cit., p. xiv. This aspect of Grass' writing is particularly evident in his 1999 novel *My Century*. This is literature that also embodies precisely the type of hybrid form Rushdie speaks of. Grass' text is part fiction, part essay, part political reportage and part historical record. As the publisher's note explains, "Gunter Grass tells us a story for every year of our century. He writes of great events and seemingly trivial events... Although each story has a different narrator, collectively the stories form a complete and linear narrative in which the individual is the focus". See: G. Grass, (trans. M. Heim), *My Century*, Faber & Faber, London, 1999.

<sup>154</sup> Rushdie (1985), op. cit., p. xiv.

<sup>155</sup> Chaudhuri (online), op. cit. The character Leo, in Philip Roth's novel *I Married A Communist* treats the novel's narrator to an interesting account of this rivalry: "Politics is the great generaliser," Leo told me, 'and literature the great particulariser, and not only are they in an inverse relationship to each other – they are in an antagonistic relationship. To politics, literature is decadent, soft, irrelevant, boring, wrongheaded, dull, something that makes no sense and that really oughtn't to be. Why? Because the particularising impulse is literature. How can you be an artist and [continued/...]

claim I have sought to illustrate, what seems to be the “natural” role of imagination in the fashioning of reality. The writer’s claim on reality’s disputed territory is proffered, not through a sense of rivalry, rather it is articulated through their use of imagination. However, as I have shown, it is important to note that the expressive virtues of imaginative writing need not be solely limited to writers of fiction.

### 3.14 Conclusion: seeing the “world anew”

Rushdie’s writing does not conclusively define the borders between the real and the imagined. Indeed, he works at their frontiers purposefully seeking to obliterate them. As a writer, he correctly asserts that he is “in the business of... mapping”; specifically, providing readers with “imaginative maps”.<sup>156</sup> It is not the task of imaginative literature to delineate between the real and the imagined. As I have illustrated, this is a task typically undertaken by intellectual cartographers like Wood who strive to isolate and contain realism within impossibly rigid borders. Rushdie can be called an imaginative essayist, a literary critic, a postmodern author, and a writer of political fiction precisely because, through the distinct timbre of all of these varied and entwined literary voices, he challenges the apparently artificial nature of reality through the leap of imagination. Indeed, his collection of essays *Step Across This Line* nominally and provocatively states his literary intent.

In discussing the imaginative scope of Rushdie’s contribution to politics and literature, it is helpful to briefly draw again on another facet of Wood’s criticism. One of Wood’s most damning dismissals of *Fury* is directed at, what he calls the “redundant detail” of the text’s narrative.<sup>157</sup> Perhaps ironically, for a writer of his professed imaginative license, Rushdie could not be seen as entirely disagreeing with Wood’s claim. Indeed, Rushdie refers to this detailed technique in *Fury* as “hyperrealism”.<sup>158</sup> “Too much information” or “detail”, Rushdie

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renounce the nuance? But how can you be a politician and *allow* the nuance?” See: P. Roth, *I Married A Communist*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1998, p. 223.

<sup>156</sup> Chaudhuri (online), op. cit.

<sup>157</sup> Wood, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>158</sup> D. Weich, “Salman Rushdie, Out and About”. *Author Interviews* (online), <http://www.powells.com/authors/rushdie.html>, 2002 (accessed 17 June 2004).

states, the kind of detail in which “every hair on every dog” is intricately described, creates “an atmosphere of surrealism because nobody sees the world in such detail”.<sup>159</sup> Rushdie likens this literary technique to those employed by particular impressionist painters, where almost incomprehensible detail is used, not for its own sake but rather to facilitate a distinctly new and unique larger view. This hyperrealist technique, he argues, “conforms to the ancient rule of writing, which is: make it strange”.<sup>160</sup> Imaginative literature demands an imaginative response, indeed: a *strange* and possibly unexpected response. As Rushdie states,

we all have a habituated way of seeing the world. In order to get us to see freshly, the writer has to catch habit off guard... if [hyperrealism] works properly it makes readers see afresh, see the world anew.<sup>161</sup>

Evidently imaginative literary techniques of this hyperrealist nature may not work “properly” on those who seek to reinforce and “guard” the borders of realism; those who struggle to preserve their habitual view of the world. Rushdie does not seek to make an indisputable claim on reality. He merely asks readers to *imagine* a reality.

The literary power of imagining can, like reality, catch us off guard. As Australian author and educator Paul Brock stated in his 2006 occasional address to University of New England graduates:

When I first started to teach Orwell’s powerful novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* back in the 1970s, I felt very comfortable in being able to point the finger at totalitarian regimes from earlier history and far off places like Communist Russia, Communist China, Nazi Germany as powerful exemplars of the appalling forces and perversions of freedom explored in the novel... but how would I engage my senior students in the searing social critique at the heart of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* today in a world whose consciousness is saturated by the real, perceived and sometimes artificially manufactured threats of terrorism... would I be liable to being charged with sedition under the Act passed late December in [Australian] Federal Parliament?<sup>162</sup>

Who could have imagined, as Brock states, that these “searing” elements of

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<sup>159</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> P. Brock, “Occasional Address”, *The University of New England Graduation Ceremony: Education, Health and Professional Studies* (online), [http://fehps.une.edu/Faculty/2006\\_Graduation/Brock.html](http://fehps.une.edu/Faculty/2006_Graduation/Brock.html), 2006 (accessed 9 April 2006).



Orwell's dystopia could possibly be validated by contemporary reality? Even sixty years on, Orwell's literary imaginings, his "political purpose" can be seen as tightly intermeshed with reality. The political novel need not define the manner in which the spheres of imagination and reality are blurred; it works at the frontiers of these spheres and questions the relationship between them.

Rushdie's literary project presents an argument for the validity and, more importantly, the vitality of imagination. This is the political purpose of his writing. His execution of this project, as exemplified in *Fury* and *Step Across This Line*, is a matter that will be examined in the following two chapters. In this chapter I have offered an account of the many identities of politics and literature. The following chapter draws on the concepts, theories and methodology I have engaged thus far to present perspectives of the borders and frontiers of identity within the political novel.