DOCTORAL THESIS: *A Transdisciplinary Approach to Salman Rushdie's Recent Fiction*
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SUMMARY

In the field of literary studies, transdisciplinary research in the sense described in the introduction to this study is still in a phase that we may call experimental. Although transdisciplinary theory has been enthusiastically received and successfully applied by scholars in various areas of research for more than twenty years now, literary theory and criticism, overflowing with so many brands of postmodernist thought, have been less permeable to the more diffuse, "non-oriented" and ideologically unengaged critical perspectives, which seemed to lack the esoteric terminology that has gained postmodern criticism its renown. Now, when we are beginning to see more and more clearly beyond Postmodernism, we seem to be witnessing the first stirrings of a cultural change characterized above all by a new awareness in our relation to reality: we feel the need to develop new modes of perception, to find ways of integrating the relevant data and methods of various areas of knowledge, in order to cope with an increasingly complex reality. Transdisciplinarity responds to this need to recuperate "what is felt to have been a former unity of knowledge,"[1] offering a new vision of Reality and proposing a new methodology for research in any field of study, one that seeks to reconcile the "hard" with the "soft" sciences, to integrate the methods and perspectives of different disciplines, to overflow disciplinary boundaries and to discover what is "at once *between* the disciplines, *across* the different

[1] Helga Nowotny, "The Potential of Transdisciplinarity," online at: <http://www.helga-nowotny.eu/documents/Transdisciplinarity.pdf>

disciplines, and *beyond* all disciplines," its goal being "the understanding of the present world"[2].

The transdisciplinary methodology, as defined by Basarab Nicolescu, "is founded on the following three postulates: 1) There are, in Nature and in our knowledge of Nature, different levels of Reality and, correspondingly, different levels of perception; 2) The passage from one level of Reality to another is insured by the logic of the included middle; 3) The structure of the totality of levels of Reality and perception is a complex structure: every level is what it is because all the levels exist at the same time"[3]. Hence, what transdisciplinary research endeavours to explore is a multidimensional and multireferential Reality: one that has several levels (governed by different types of logic), none of which "constitutes a privileged place from which one is able to understand all the other levels"[4]. Transdisciplinary theory promotes an open-minded attitude – encouraging dialogue and discussion, calling for a blurring of all boundaries (not only of those separating the various disciplines, but also of the divide between the academy and the Agora), acknowledging the right to ideas and truths opposed to the fundamental principles of transdisciplinarity, proposing a transcultural solution to the present cultural gap between the West and the Orient, as well as to the fragmentation within cultures – and view of reality as fundamentally complex, plural, discontinuous and indeterminate.

The Subject (i.e. the different levels of perception) – Object (i.e. the "open unity" the different levels of Reality) interaction being its fundamental concern, the transdisciplinary approach demands ontological change on the part of the researcher, who must maintain the role of observer and at the same time be included as participating Subject. Within the area of literary criticism

[2] Basarab Nicolescu, *Transdisciplinaritatea. Manifest* (Iasi: Polirom, 1999), 54 (my translation)
[3] Basarab Nicolescu, *Noi, particula si lumea* (Iasi: Polirom, 2002), 241 (my translation)

[4] Basarab Nicolescu, *Transdisciplinaritatea*. *Manifest* (Iasi: Polirom, 1999), 65 (my translation)

this attitude would be translated as "both detachment and identification, while being, at the same time, neither detachment from nor identification with the object of research," which is precisely what Pompiliu Craciunescu calls "true criticism"[5]. Transdisciplinary research attempts to transcend binary thinking by embracing a new kind of logic: the logic of the included middle, founded on the axiom of non-contradiction (i.e. "there exists a third term T which is at the same time A and non-A") and capable of accomplishing the reconciliation of opposites and of explaining the coherence of the multidimensional model.

Applied to the field of literary studies, the transdisciplinary approach aims to integrate the manifold perspectives of those disciplines (or sub-disciplines) relevant to the Object of research, i.e. the levels of "reality" that make up the fictional world constructed by the literary text and the levels of the text itself as a multidimensional and multi-referential reality. By "levels of perception" we mean two things at once: both the various perspectives offered by several disciplines (literary theory, history, philosophy, physics, religious studies, anthropology, mythology, psychology) and a certain flexibility (on our part) in assuming different stances (i.e. an ability to place ourselves both outside the object of study and inside it, to develop a kind of empathy with the characters that would enable us to understand their world as if it were our own). This empathetic capacity – which requires both an effort of the imagination and a willingness to shake off the whole system of codes and rules through which we are accustomed to perceive reality – functions as an "included middle" that gives coherence and meaning to our picture of a multi-levelled universe.

The scope of our transdisciplinary inquiry includes Salman Rushdie's most recent novels – *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), *Fury* (2001), *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) and *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) – while Rushdie's other works of both fiction and non-fiction have been referred to

[5] Pompiliu Craciunescu, *Strategiile fractale* (Iasi, Junimea, 2003), 64 (my translation)

insofar as such insertions and comparisons proved relevant to the purpose of our undertaking. Our choice of Rushdie's later works was motivated by the dearth of authoritative evaluations of these novels, in sharp contrast with the profusion of scholarly studies of his early fiction: apart from book reviews, there is little critical material to rely on, particularly when it comes to exploring his very latest novels, *Shalimar the Clown* or *The Enchantress of Florence*. Another important reason for our choice of Rushdie's recent works of fiction was the generally unfavourable, unjust reception they met with, being usually rated as inferior to his earlier books, especially to his all-prize-winning *Midnight's Children.* It is our view that Rushdie's celebrity status has greatly affected his image as a writer in the past ten years, leading to an aggressive, systematic, almost programmatic derogation of his work by a number of critics and reviewers, whose allegations that Rushdie's powers of fabulation and talent as a storyteller have "slackened," that he has plunged into "mannerism" instead, are completely unsubstantiated.

One of the aims of our study is therefore to answer this need for a just re-evaluation of Rushdie's recent novels, one that should grant them their well-deserved place among the best of contemporary fiction. In our opinion, the difference detected by most critics between Rushdie's earlier work and the post-fatwa novels is not to be regarded as a sign of the writer's diminishing powers to invent, to entrance, or to entertain; quite on the contrary, his fictional worlds seem to expand into new territories, his characters are culturally, as well as psychologically, more diverse, he addresses a range of contemporary subjects (the global media, celebrity culture, rock music, hippie culture, international terrorism, religious violence, nationalist politics, communalism, multiculturalism, the pervasiveness of digital technology in our "age of simulation," the mechanization of the human, etc). Also, whereas in his earlier novels the focus was on the irreconcilable differences between East and West, here he seems to lay special emphasis on those things that are

common to all humanity, on the values, as well as the flaws that the Orient and the Occident share, that belong to the history of mankind and to civilization understood globally. Moreover, these novels reveal more of Rushdie's own views on a profusion of philosophical, political and cultural issues than any of his previous works of fiction.

The first objective of our research was to identify and gain insight into the "levels of Reality" that make up the fictional universe projected by each of the four texts under scrutiny, to perceive the subtle transitions from one level to another, to apprehend the interactions, interpenetrations and mutual reflections taking place among the various levels, and finally to be able to describe all these in a most explicit and compelling manner. We insisted on the notion of perspective (or "level of perception"), emphasizing that our description of each level depends on the position we assume as perceiving Subject (i.e. outside or inside the fictional world). We devoted a separate chapter to each of the four novels in question, because each generated a different kind of inquiry, but we endeavored to maintain, throughout the four chapters, the same (transdisciplinary) vision and the same method of investigation (i.e. the unity of perspectives). Apart from the approach, there is another constant to ensure the unity of the chapters: where the text allowed it (all texts, with the exception of *Fury*), we gave special attention to the various ways in which the characters perceive and relate to the sacred. It is our conviction that one cannot grasp the complexity of Rushdie's fictional worlds unless he/she acknowledges the crucial role played by religion in shaping the characters' notions of reality. Despite the writer's avowed atheism, his novels evince an empathetic understanding of religious behavior, of the way religious people perceive the world, of the special significance of myth, tradition and ritual in their lives. Living in India (for the first thirteen years of his life), where "the gods are there amongst you all the time" and where "people believe […] that the miraculous co-exists with the every day, literally

in the public streets"[6] – the author confesses – has had a major role in shaping the unmistakable kind of writing that he has produced so far and has given him "a different sense […] of realism."[7] It is precisely this special kind of realism – which defines and distinguishes his fiction – that we attempted to foreground, by looking at it from a different angle. Thus, the other objective that we proposed to accomplish was that of releasing Rushdie from the pigeonhole of "magic realism" in which he has so conventionally and so reductively been placed by the great majority of critics, by offering a new perspective on this much-discussed particularity of Rushdie's writing, which (in our view) arises quite naturally from his empathetic comprehension of a world governed by different norms than our own. Building on one of Mircea Eliade's concepts, we proposed a more inclusive description of the specific fictional mode in which most of Rushdie's novels are written, one which is not meant to function as a label, but as a guide to a better understanding of the complex worlds he constructs. Borrowing from Eliade, we have called this special kind of realism which acknowledges and manages to capture the centrality of religion in the characters' everyday existence, "the realism of a *mythical mode of being in the world.*" An ocean of references to ancient myths, legends and sacred stories of various cultures (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian) attests to an outstanding knowledge of the narrative foundations on which the world's major religions are built, which justify and give meaning to the principles and practices of each religion. The way he uses this knowledge to create fictional worlds in which the supernatural coexists with the mundane, the otherworldly with the material, the miraculous with the trivial, reveals an attitude which – contrary to the general perception of Rushdie as a confirmed sceptic – is neither religious nor irreligious, but very close to a transreligious recognition of the sacred.

[6] Bill Moyers and Salman Rushdie, Bill Moyers on Faith and Reason (June 23, 2006), http://www.pbs.org/moyers/faithandreason/print/faithandreason101_print.html
[7] Ibid, http://www.pbs.org/moyers/faithandreason/print/faithandreason101_print.html

The first chapter – "Levels of Reality and Transreligious Mysticism in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*" – is probably the most effective in its application of the transdisciplinary vision, since the novel itself invites such a reading: the very construction of its heterocosm, we argued, is grounded on the view that there are various levels of reality which communicate and interact in ways that few of us are able to apprehend. Ormus Cama, one of the protagonists, and Rai (the first-person narrator) both experience some sort of encounter with an otherworld. One of the main assumptions of this thesis has been that our understanding and description of the various levels of reality depend on the perspective we are willing to assume (i.e. our own or the characters'); therefore, one of our main concerns in this chapter was to explore these two characters' worldviews, their different "philosophies," and the ways in which their experiences (which are "peak" experiences, involving, in each case, some sort of revelation of the sacred) compel them to rethink their notions of reality.

Ormus Cama's "double vision" – his ability to perceive two variations of the same world, which he describes as being "slightly different […] almost the same and yet utterly separate"[8] – provided the textual justification for our treatment of the historical level of this novel in a manner that departs from the usual discussion of subversive devices characterizing the postmodern genre that Linda Hutcheon has labeled "historiographic metafiction." Thus, in the first section, we attempted a different approach to a typically postmodernist historical novel, generally defined by postmodern theory in terms of subversion, revision or parody (with an emphasis on the various discourses it consciously deconstructs). Instead of interpreting the novel's deviations from the official historical record as subversive devices meant to expose the subjectivity, provisionality and unreliability of any account of the past (and thus to question the validity of historical truth), we argued that the text

[8] Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (London and New York: Vintage, 2000), 325

actually exploits the idea of different levels of reality to the extent that it constructs a version of history which is "at a slight angle" to history as we know it, suggesting that the reported events may have taken place on another level of reality (i.e. in the otherworld of Ormus Cama's visions).

In the second section, we explored those elements in the narrative that may give us a sense of the uncanny, and that have generally been treated as belonging to the genre of the fantastic, or to the fictional mode called magic realism, arguing that the extent to which we can safely categorize such elements of the Rushdiean heterocosm as "fantastic" depends entirely on the perspective (level of perception) that we as readers are willing to assume (i.e. our own, Western, secularist, rationalist outlook or the characters' magico-mystical worldview). We used Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the fantastic to ground our view that in most cases, there is no hesitation, on the part of the characters, between a natural and a supernatural explanation of mysterious events (which is, according to Todorov's definition, the essence of the fantastic) and therefore we cannot speak of a genuine fantastic effect. We argued that such occurrences (which the Western, secular reader may perceive as fantastic) do not disturb the world of the characters' encyclopedia (i.e. their notions of reality), but, on the contrary, are regarded as natural, as part of their everyday existence. Therefore, we suggested that what has been interpreted as "fantastic" or "magical" in Rushdie's fiction should be redefined and rethought in terms of perspective, that such elements fit naturally into most characters' worldviews and do not disturb their everyday existence. In the light of this idea, we proposed the phrase "realism of a *mythical mode of being in the world*" as a more appropriate description of the specific mode characterizing most of Rushdie's fiction than the overused term "magic realism".

In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, what may generate the reader's hesitation and thus produce the fantastic effect is the possibility of

communication and interaction between different worlds: this world, the otherworld of Ormus Cama's visions, the underworld (where Ormus can mentally travel by virtue of his intimate spiritual connection with his dead twin Gayomart, and symbolically descends in search of his dead lover). We argued that the relationship this world – underworld can be explained in terms of mythical behavior – which the character certainly evinces – while the relationship this world – otherworld remains problematic insofar as both characters experiencing revelations of another dimension (Ormus and Rai) profess rather secularist worldviews. However, if we follow their evolution throughout the narrative, it becomes obvious that such attitudes – Dyonisian, in Ormus's case, and rationalist, declaredly skeptical, in Rai's – that these characters display and even flaunt before their respective audiences (Ormus's fans and the readers of Rai's narrative) are to some extent artificial, or consciously constructed as barriers against the parents' influence (in Ormus's case) or against anything (homeland, tradition, system of thought) that might claim allegiance in Rai's case, who describes himself as a "non-belonger."

The last (and longest) section – which explores the mythical level of the novel's heterocosm – includes a theoretical discussion of myth, religion and mysticism informed by some of Mircea Eliade's definitions and inspired by some intriguing ideas expressed by the French author Jean Vernette in his book *Le XXIe siècle sera mystique ou ne sera pas* (2002). We argued that for modern man (by which we mean the man of contemporary Western society with a secularist view of the world) myth has no more authority than fiction; that he rarely differentiates between myth and fable, ascribing both the quality of falseness. For the man of traditional society (by which we do not mean "primitive" or "semi-civilized," but a category of people with a certain spiritual disposition or *Weltanschauung*), myth "represents a certain mode of

being in the world" and the "only valid revelation of reality"[9]. Rushdie's fictional worlds are densely populated by characters who exhibit typical forms of mythical behavior – whether they consciously imitate exemplary patterns or unconsciously re-enact mythical events or situations (Ormus and Vina repeat the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, echo actions or gestures of other gods, performed in *illo tempore*). In this novel, however, most of the drama unfolds in the modern, Western world in an age marked by an unprecedented boom in all kinds of spiritual movements – from the mystical eclecticism of the hippie culture to the New Age spirituality – which prefigure the kind of mysticism that Jean Vernette envisages as the cultural dominant of the twenty-first century (one inspired by a large variety of religious ideas from various cultures and completely free of any type of commitment to official religious doctrines). In this last section, we also discussed the text's numerous mythological references – from characters' names to motifs and models of human behavior – as well as the presence of myth at the level of discourse (i.e. the mythical mode of narration). In dealing with the main characters' "brands of mysticism" (Vina's genuine religious feelings despite her readiness to embrace any of the spiritual fads of the age, Ormus's religion of the future, and Rai's belief in the supremacy of the imagination) we aimed to substantiate our view that, by playfully involving characters who describe themselves as "nonreligious," "skeptical," "Dyonisiac" or "rationalist" in miraculous encounters with an "otherworld" and in symbolic journeys to the "underworld," this novel unwittingly conveys the idea that human beings are inherently religious and brings to mind several articles and essays in which the author outwardly confesses that he lacks any mystical inclinations or aspirations, but nevertheless evinces a transreligious attitude.

[9] Mircea Eliade *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities* (Translated by Philip Mairet), (Harper & Row, Publishers: New York and Evanston, 1967), 23

The second chapter – "Fiction, Representation, and Virtual Reality in *Fury*" – postpones our discussion of levels of reality until its last section, in order to concentrate, in the first part, on a number of contemporary issues that the novel addresses, and to attempt, in the second part, a psychoanalytical interpretation of the main story, which centers around the protagonist's past experiences and present condition. Thus, the section entitled "Contemporary America and Its Detractors" discusses the novel's portrayal of New York (as the epitome of America's affluence, superficiality, and power) in close connection with Rushdie's own ambivalent feelings towards America, as evinced by several essays and articles published in his two volumes of collected non-fiction (*Imaginary Homelands* and *Step Across This Line*). We detected a significant change in the writer's attitude from the early writings included in *Imaginary Homelands* – which reveal a very critical, disapproving, sometimes condescending Rushdie – to the more recent articles, written from the vantage point of the insider, which attest to a more sympathetic perception of America, especially since 9/11/2001. Malik Solanka, the novel's "furious" protagonist – whose irate, condescending reflections on everything he sees and experiences during his American summer reveal an ambivalence towards this place which, despite its unforgivable faults, seduces him – epitomizes the hypocritical, stereotyping attitude of the outsider, the now fashionable anti-Americanism of the rest of the world, which often masks a half-conscious craving for precisely those things that make America so detestable. In disagreement with the opinion expressed by one critic (Madelena Gonzalez, in *Fiction after the Fatwa: Salman Rushdie and the Charm of Catastrophe*), that Rushdie's recent fiction (*Fury* in particular) lowers the standards set by his earlier novels in terms of cultural references, replacing classical or modern literary intertexts with less demanding allusions to pop culture products, we argued that *Fury* – which abounds in all types of interdiscursive references, from Shakespeare to Yeats,

from Machiavelli to Kafka, from Swift to Fitzgerald, from ancient myths to sci-fi novels, from old fairy-tales to contemporary movies – does not only allude to various literary works, classical, modern, and postmodern, but demands that we recognize its intertexts, since it rarely provides any pointers or explanations to the reader. A relevant example is the novel's intertextual use of Jean Baudrillard's *America*, which is never made explicit, but is nonetheless detectable in some of the passages describing Malik Solanka's perception of New York.

Our attempt at a psychoanalytical approach to this novel was motivated by the reviewers' general opinion that the characters in this novel are "one-dimensional" or "cartoonish," that the author does not sufficiently explore the psychological phenomenon which the novel describes, that he fails to explain Solanka's deviant behavior. In response to such misguided views, we argued, with overwhelming textual evidence, that Rushdie managed to construct in *Fury* a plausible, convincing case of posttraumatic stress disorder, with identifiable causes, recognizable clinical symptoms and carefully plotted development from the outward manifestation of seemingly unmotivated anger, through successive revelations of traumatic history, and finally to the release of repressed feelings through a series of therapeutic "reminiscing sessions" triggered by exposure to trauma-related stimuli. After discussing the extremely traumatic past experiences that lead to Malik Solanka's condition, the symptoms he exhibits, the various defense mechanisms he uses to cope with the painful memory of his past traumas as well as with the disappointments of his adult life, and the form of therapy he unknowingly undergoes (purely accidental, but nevertheless conducive to recovery), we concluded that the novel's description of pathological behavior, its probing into neurotic (and often delusional) mind, its construction of a believable clinical record, are well-informed, brilliantly managed and prove, beyond

doubt, Rushdie's deep comprehension of the psychological phenomenon he describes.

In the final section of this chapter, also the most substantial, we returned to our exploration of levels of reality, focusing our attention on what seems to be the novel's central theme – i.e. the dissolution of boundaries between levels (real, fictional, virtual), as well as between categories (human and machine, original and copy, reality and simulation) – and its underlying message, i.e. the need to resist the mechanization of the human by constantly affirming our humanity. Informed by contemporary theories of the image and its successive stages from representation to simulation (Wunenburger, Baudrillard), definitions of virtual reality (Cavallaro, Lanier), and opinions about the increasingly blurry distinction between human and cyborg (Cavallaro, Haraway), we discussed several instances of boundary-crossing between levels – from fiction into the real world, from reality into fiction, from the real into the virtual and from virtual reality into hyperreality – as well as the novel's insistence on the threat of mechanization, of digitization, of dehumanization, posed by the overwhelming presence of technology, of false images and simulated experiences in our lives. We argued that the message of this novel is a profoundly humanist one, plainly expressed by the main characters (Malik Solanka and Neela Mahendra) and always implicit in the writer's discourse, which constantly hints at the "inexplicable," the "uncontrollable," the "unanswerable," the "capricious," the "unpredictable," the "mystery" in human nature, the very aspects that define and proclaim our humanity.

In the third chapter, "Conflicting Levels of Reality: History's Invasion of the Mythical in *Shalimar the Clown*," we used the notion of conflict – which is present on every level of the text (on the fictional-historical level, on the inter- and intra-personal level) as well as between levels – as a key interpretive tool in our exploration of the fictional universe of this novel,

which complicates the usual dynamics between levels of Reality (so far described in terms of communication, coexistence, interpenetration) with a new type of interaction. Thus, we focused our investigation on the gradual intrusion of history (the fictionalized version of the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir) into the mythical world where the narrative places the main characters (the fictional community of Pachigam in the Kashmir Valley).

In the first part, starting from Mircea Eliade's definitions of a "traditional society" and of its "mythical mode of being in the world," we endeavored to describe this fictional microcosm (Pachigam) as a world of living myths, where people display every form of mythical behavior, struggle to preserve their tradition of inter-religious harmony and, by the power of rites, manage to live permanently in the presence of the sacred. Thus, we discussed certain aspects of the characters' lives and certain events in the narrative in terms of ritual (rites of passage, rites of initiation), repetition of mythical patterns, reenactment of primordial gestures. Viewed from this perspective, the magical elements and miraculous events the narrative places in this microcosm, where people still preserve an archaic mode of existence and strongly believe in the supernatural (prophecies, premonitory dreams, snake omens, ghostly apparitions etc.), come to be seen as natural, everyday aspects of a world governed by other laws than our own. The much-criticized "old clichés of magic realism,"[10] we argued, are nowhere to be found in this novel, whose force rests on its empathetic depiction of a "mythical mode of being in the world."

In the second section – which explores the fantastic level – we picked out for discussion three unsettling occurrences or situations in the development of the narrative, which we considered somewhat problematic, in that they cannot be fully explained as natural aspects of the community's

[10] Peter Kemp, "*Shalimar the Clown* by Salman Rushdie" (*The Times Online*, September 11, 2005), http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books

mythical mode of existence and neither can they be understood in simple realistic terms. Therefore, when dealing with this novel, we cannot avoid an elaborate discussion of the fantastic, since the narrative circumstances surrounding these events are likely to generate the kind of hesitation that, according to Todorov's definition, lies at the heart of the fantastic. One of these occurrences, which might otherwise be explained in terms of natural causes, is infused with an aura of strangeness by strong foreshadowing; another is placed outside the context of the community's mythical existence (which could have explained the event in terms of perception, of a different view of reality) and transported to a place where people are likely to be disturbed by it (i.e. modern, secularist America); the other involves the interference of a supernatural force in the development of a form of communication (telepathy) that could have otherwise been explained in quasi-scientific terms.

In the last section, we discussed the historical level of the novel, both in relation to the other intratextual level (i.e. the mythical level) and within the context of its relationship with the extrafictional structures (especially with its real-world, extratextual referent). We argued that, unlike Rushdie's other novels, *Shalimar the Clown* observes (to a comfortable degree) the conventions of the classical historical novel and the few deviations from official historical record are acceptable within the framework of a fictional account, and not perceived as subversive devices meant to challenge the authority of historiography. The extratextual field of reference includes two major historical conflicts: the World-War II conflict between France and Germany over the Alsace-Lorraine province and the ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan over the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. We briefly sketched the fictional versions of each of these historical conflicts and chose to concentrate instead on the development of the conflict between levels, which we discussed in terms of gradual intrusion, oppressive invasion

and complete destruction of one level (i.e. the mythical) by the increasingly violent confrontation unfolding on the other (i.e. the historical level). We focused particularly on the way the people of the traditional community perceive and respond to this invasion of their no longer protective microcosm, where the only reality they have ever known and lived – the reality of myth – starts to feel like an illusion.

The fourth chapter, "The Historical, the Marvelous, and the Magic of Storytelling in *The Enchantress of Florence,*" begins with a discussion of the novel's philosophical content, meant to substantiate our view (also expressed by some reviewers) that Rushdie's latest novel is, above all, a novel of ideas. *The Enchantress of Florence* brings back to life two historical worlds – Renaissance Florence and Mughal India – at a time when they were becoming aware of each other and when the migration of people and ideas between them was becoming possible. The underlying message of this novel seems to be that despite the apparent differences, these worlds are essentially similar. In each world there is one character (in each case, a fictionalized version of a real historical figure – Akbar the Great and Machiavelli) that represents that world's moral centre, and between them there seems to be an unlikely exchange of ideas – across space and time – which nevertheless convincingly proves the novel's thesis: that the humanist ideas that "grew up in the West" (the idea of individual freedom, of religious tolerance, of man being at the centre of things, etc) also developed, "in a slightly different form […] in the East."[11]

The more substantial part of our analysis, however, returns to the exploration of levels of Reality and of their interaction – both within the fictional universe projected by the text and within the text itself as a multi-layered narrative construction. Thus, since the novel is, after all, a fictional

[11] Salman Rushdie, interviewed by Matthew D'Ancona, "We have been wimpish about defending our ideas" (*The Spectator*, April 9, 2008), <http://www.spectator.co.uk/the-magazine/features/600936>

account of real historical events, we discussed the historical level in connection with the extratextual plane of reference – i.e. the body of historical fact that informs the novel. The book is thoroughly researched, as the appended bibliography indicates, and therefore it demands of the reader a certain amount of historical knowledge about the periods in question, which, if acquired, leads to the surprising discovery that, despite being written in the language and the narrative mode of fantasy, the novel does not depart too much from official historical record. Apart form the constant interference of purely fictional characters in the development of historical events – to which Rushdie's loyal readers are already accustomed – there are few deviations from official accounts and anachronisms cannot be readily detected because the narrative offers only one actual date (which may have slipped in by mistake). We argued that such deviations and anachronisms could easily be defended by the fact that they occur in the intradiegetic story told by a character whose reliability is constantly undermined and questioned by the omniscient narrator or by other characters in the frame narrative.

Many reviewers have focused, again, on the novel's mixture of realism and magic, on the intrusion of supernatural occurrences into an otherwise realistically depicted historical world. We insisted once more on the inappropriateness of such an approach, especially since the events in this novel take place in a time "before the real and the unreal were segregated forever,"[12] before the age of reason, in a time when people normally explained everyday reality by referring to supernatural forces. Therefore, the profusion of omens, prophecies, curses, spells, miraculous healings, magic mirrors, witches, ghosts, occult potions, and the like are not perceived as disturbing; they are received by the characters with the same familiarity as any tangible object. Hence, we argued that such elements do not belong to the fantastic, but to an adjacent genre, the marvelous, which literary theorist

[12] Salman Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), 324

Tzvetan Todorov describes as the fictional mode of the fairy tale, in which "supernatural elements provoke no particular reaction either in the characters or in the implicit reader," in which "supernatural events are reported without being presented as such."[13]

Since we cannot separate the historical from the magical in the fictional universe of this novel, because, in the characters' perception they belong to the same level of reality, we concentrated our attention on a different kind of relationship – that between the real and the imaginary, between reality and dream, between life and art**,** between life and story – and we discussed several episodes in the narrative that illustrate or allegorize the idea of free passage between levels, of the permeability of boundaries between worlds. Thus, one of Akbar's queens, Jodha, lives on the threshold between reality and dream; thus, a painter falls in love with his own creation and, in a reversal of the Pygmalion myth, flattens and disappears inside his own painting; thus, the narrator-protagonist Niccolo Vespucci, or Mogor dell'Amore, after concluding his story, "crosses over into the empty page after the last page," into the world of his own tale, to start "a new life inside it."[14]

Finally, we discussed the central role of stories and of storytelling in this fictional world, and the transformative power of narrative: its therapeutic function, the vital importance of having one's story told, the effect of stories on the characters' behavior, thoughts and feelings. Like Scheherazade, the narrator-protagonist in this novel is aware that his life depends on his skill, charm, and persuasiveness as a storyteller and the yarn he spins has the effect of influencing not only the worldviews and dispositions of the emperor, his immediate audience, but also the everyday existence of every man and woman in the city, who imitate models of behavior offered by the story, thus elevating it to the status of a living myth. What occurs while reading this

[13] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (translated by Richard Howard) (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 54-55
[14] Salman Rushdie, *EF*, 343

novel, we argued, is not only a "willing suspension of disbelief," but an empathetic reader will experience a return to mythic belief.

We attempted, throughout this experimental endeavor, to cast a fresh light on Salman Rushdie's recent fiction by applying a novel approach, an attentive, thorough reading of the texts, by using various theoretical and critical perspectives and confidently expressing personal opinions. We endeavored to maintain that flexibility of perspective which enabled us to explore these worlds both as distant observers and as empathetic participants (as readers, we necessarily participate in the creation of fictional worlds); we constantly insisted on the crucial role of perception (i.e. of reading) in defining the mode of writing that distinguishes Rushdie's novels from the rest of contemporary fiction, and argued for a more cautious use of the well-worn label "magic realism," which is not always an appropriate description of Rushdie's complex, protean, hybrid fictional mode. Finally, we hope that our evaluation of the writer's recent work from the viewpoint of transdisciplinary theory (which aims to achieve a unity of perspectives) has managed, to some extent, to dissipate the cloud of hostility and denigration hovering over these fascinating, thought-provoking novels and to do them justice by granting them their well-deserved place among the masterpieces of contemporary literature.