

Textual Memories: History, Tradition and Novelty in Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*

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*Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that
is how newness enters the world. It is the great
possibility that mass migration gives the world, and
I have tried to embrace it.*
Salman Rushdie, "In Good Faith"

The Paradox of "Canonic Modernity:" Novelty and the Temporality of Fiction

GIVEN BOTH the enthusiastic critical reception, and the popularity his books have enjoyed so far, the sense of urgency by which the inclusion of Salman Rushdie in a discussion on the literary canon seems to be accompanied cannot be fortuitous, or solely motivated by the postcolonial debate. A constant presence on the Man Booker prize shortlists, Rushdie has accomplished the singular feat of winning the award three times for the same novel—in 1981, upon the publication of *Midnight's Children*, followed by the "Booker of Bookers" competition of 1993, marking the 25th anniversary, and, finally, the 2008 "Best of the Bookers," which celebrated the 40-year history of the prize (and, as he takes pleasure in reminding us, the latter distinction was won not from the critics, but from the audience, for the first time invested with the power of vote). However, the purpose of the present paper is only marginally that of advocating Rushdie's place into the literary canon, and much less that of contributing to the protracted debate on the nature or function of the latter. To all these, my aim is closely related, but nevertheless different, and consists of investigating the writer's use and abuse of tradition(s) in order to reinterpret the manner in which fiction makes sense of time. Drawing on research into the temporality of narrative by the British theorist Mark Currie, I will identify the way one of Rushdie's most recent novels, the 2009 *The Enchantress of Florence*,¹ addresses a multi-faceted and uncontrollable growth of time(s) and time perceptions by historicizing not only the past and the present, but also the future.

Narrated from an anonymous third-person perspective comfortably settled into the conventionality of the fictional preterite, the story in the novel (that of an ominous meeting between three continents during what we have been accustomed to think of as the European Renaissance, but which gets overturned in the novel in an image of a Mughal utopian undertaking) is apparently confined to the domain of historical reconstruction. Still, the round comfort offered by relegating the narrative into a closed past is promptly disturbed, first by the effect of “presentification” that the use of the narrative preterite is always said to trigger, and secondly, but more subtly, by the text’s continuous commitment to the future and its potentially explanatory power.² When discussing such a commitment, I have in mind Mark Currie’s notion of “anticipation of retrospection,”³ which suggests that, in an age of technological reproducibility and archivization (Derrida’s term), we live much of our life projecting forward a future memory. Anticipating a memory to be enjoyed later influences the way the present is lived, which amounts to saying that the future effectively creates the present, or “the very being for which presence is supposed to act as a foundation is structured by the non-being which it anticipates.”⁴ This opens several very interesting avenues of investigation, to be taken up again at a later point. For the moment, it is important to keep in mind Currie’s basic assumptions with regard to “the relationship between storytelling, future time, and the nature of being:” “The first is that the reading of fictional narratives is a kind of preparation for and repetition of the continuous anticipation that takes place in non-fictional life. The second is that the place of fictional narrative in the world has altered since the beginning of the twentieth century, and that fiction has been one of the places in which a new experience of time has been rehearsed, developed and expressed.”⁵

To approach the issue from the perspective of canonicity, we need to resort to an awareness of modernity as defined by what theorists have been calling “time-space compression,” or what Currie would identify as “accelerated recontextualisation,” which somehow relativises the very idea of the canon. The modern defines itself according to a “a logic of constant transformation”⁶ continuously on the lookout for the overtaking of past traditions, up to the point to which the current moment of transformation rapidly vanishes into the image of tradition and needs therefore to be itself left behind. (Still, it is important to remember that in Rushdie’s case, as with most postmodern historical fiction, such surpassing of tradition is more appropriately described as willful reincorporation and refashioning, without losing sight of the desideratum of the new). In other words, as Middleton and Woods have noted, the modern present is “a moment which is always slipping away into that pre-modernist past, rendering the modernist culture itself pre-modern, and requiring continual novelty to sustain itself.”⁷ This inscribes a reciprocal tension within the relationship between the canon and the modern, since a work needs to be modern in order to access the canon, but, according to the logic expounded above, it starts losing its modernity the moment it does so, and will necessarily be supplanted by something newer. Past, present and future are thus inextricably caught together, a situation illustrated—as shown in what follows—by *The Enchantress of Florence*, both on a thematic and a technical level.

Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* is famously concerned with the open question “How does newness come into the world?”⁸ which he defends in an essay during the post-fatwa years:

“I do not believe that novels are trivial matters. The ones I care most about are those which attempt radical reformulations of language, form and ideas, those that attempt to do what the word *novel* seems to insist upon: to see the world anew. I am well aware that this can be a hackle-raising, infuriating attempt.” It will therefore be worthwhile to explore the ways in which such questions are staged in Rushdie’s latest novel, and suggest a series of possible answers based on an investigation of both the text’s complex temporality, and its heterogeneous charting out of a complex set of inner and outer spaces. I will suggest that this particular novel’s time is grafted on, and in a sense generated by, the conflation of spatial signifiers played against the reader’s “historical knowledge” of the “actual space” of India, Florence or America. The question of novelty is taken up—once again explicitly—in *The Enchantress* along with the theme of the origin of discourses, events and facts in previous discourses, events or facts. One might thus rephrase the issue so as to consider the dimension of acceptability, importance, and eventually, canonicity: “How does novelty establish itself as worthy of notice and preservation?” In other words, in what manner are the new arrivals invested with the meaning that allows them, in their turn, to act as explanations or points of origin for future new arrivals?

Novelty and the Past

CONFIRMING A return to what seems to be its author’s favourite theme, history, *The Enchantress of Florence* is an ambitious projects spanning three continents, during several decades pertaining to a critical period in world history: that of the discovery of the Americas and the beginnings of the Renaissance. The reader receives an early warning that the text will operate the typical reversals that we have grown accustomed to expect from Rushdie, as the heart of the Renaissance seems to be set in the East, at the court of the Mughal emperor known as Akbar the Great, who dreams of creating a utopian community where all religions, beliefs and opinion have an equal right to be heard, thus inaugurating an age of reason commonly ascribed to European thought. Furthermore, again unsurprisingly, the underlying strategy of the novel is the conflation or crossing of ontological boundaries, as, for instances, in the case of the eponymous character, a Mughal fictional princess known under several names (Angelica, inspired by the medieval poem *Orlando innamorato*, and Qara Köz, or Lady Black Eyes). One of her counterparts is an “imaginary” woman created by the mind of the emperor, who wills her into being to the extent that she lives a life fully acknowledged by other people, but who turns out to be one of the identities of the actual historical character Mariam-uz-Zamani, Akbar’s wife and the mother of his heir. The name Jodhabay, given to her by the emperor, was actually one erroneously attributed to the queen by European travelers.

Such conflation of ontologies acts as the background for the conflation of spaces and temporalities, and appears as especially fit to comment on the relationship between the presence of being and the nonbeing of the future that the novel explores. As will further be seen, one of the most important tropological figures in the text will be doubling, or mirroring. Both Qara Köz and the emperor’s mother have female slaves that mirror their appearance and repeat their language. Excess of repetition and replication

is so much a feature of every spatial arrangement in the novel, and of most of the character's relations to each other (to the extent that the almost everybody gets mistaken for somebody else, or takes over another person's story), that it ceases to be a figure for something else, and becomes a figure of itself: the excess of excess. This excess of mirroring also characterizes the ontological conflicts foregrounded by the text in several directions, as certified by the story of the painter Dashwanth, whose artistic project is to map—thus actually bringing into being—the movements and spaces of the Mughal empire:

The hero in Dashwanth's pictures became the emperor's mirror, and all the one hundred and one artists gathered in the studio learned from him, even the Persian masters, Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad. In their collaborative paintings of the adventures of Hamza and his friends, Mughal Hindustan was literally being invented; the union of the artists prefigured the unity of the empire and, perhaps, brought it into being. "Together we are painting the emperor's soul," Dashwanth told his collaborators sadly. "And when his spirit leaves his body it will come to rest in these pictures, in which he will be immortal."¹⁰

When commissioned to create the image of the lost princess, Qara Köz, Dashwanth is so smitten by the beauty of his own work, that he paints himself into the picture, thus disappearing from the "real" world in a reversion of the Pygmalion myth already enacted by the emperor for his creation of Jodhabay. There is no end to replication in the text, which sometimes makes it difficult for the narrative to advance, and it certainly bewilders even the most versatile reader. The issue of the text's self-duplication on the level of narrating modes, and the effect this has on the temporality of both writing and reading, will be taken up shortly; for the moment, let the point be that it is the absolute necessity of telling the story ("All men needed to hear their stories told. He was a man, but if he died without telling the story he would be something less than that, an albino cockroach, a louse,"¹¹ is something that both Niccolò Vespucci and Niccolò Machiavelli will discover in prison) that drives the plot forward, but this drive creates the very mirroring that lends the narrative its temporal circularities and its continuous anticipatory reference. This is evinced by the Scheherazadian tactics Niccolò Vespucci uses in order to prolong the narrative and assure the emperor that things will make sense in retrospect, and that it is the coming to pass of the future that will create the eventfulness of the past.

The novel's careful avoidance of any contemporary setting must strike readers familiar with Rushdie's earlier works, which had made it their business to show the past in its inextricable connection to the present, as rather untypical. Such readers might be tempted to think of *The Enchantress of Florence* as one of the author's most hetero-geographical and "globalizing" texts to date, but not immediately recognize the subtle engagement with the variety of temporal experiences underlying the apparent historicizing undertaken by it. It is not an accident that the narrated time parallels the expansion of the world that immediately preceded Amerigo's Vespucci's realization that the land discovered by Columbus was not the sought-after Indian territory. Thus, the novel spans three conti-

nents in its examination of the production of modern space—an aim made clear, for example, by the characters' perusal of one of the first maps of the New World, showing Ptolemy and Vespucci as giants dominating space (“the *Universalis Cosmographia Secundum Ptholoemaei Traditionem et Americi Vespucii Aliorumque Lustrationes*, the Geography of the World According to the Tradition of Ptolemy and the Contributions of Amerigo Vespucci and Other People.”)¹² In the person of Niccolò Vespucci, or the Mughal of Love, the reader might get the first hint that the novel's proliferation of continents, cities, oceans and deserts is rather reminiscent of the contemporary experience of spatial simultaneity and incessant mobility. The map is alluded to as among the original attempts to chart the new territory into being, as for the moment, neither space, nor time makes any sense:

Across the Ocean Sea in Mundus Novus the ordinary laws of space and time did not apply. As to space, it was capable of expanding violently one day and then shrinking the next, so that the size of the earth seemed either to double or halve. Different explorers brought back radically different accounts of the proportions of the new world, the nature of its inhabitants, and the way in which this new quadrant of the cosmos was prone to behave. There were accounts of flying monkeys and snakes as long as rivers. As for time, it was completely out of control. Not only did it accelerate and slow down in utterly wanton fashion, there were periods—though the word “periods” could not properly be used to describe such phenomena—when it did not move at all. The locals, those few who mastered European languages, confirmed that theirs was a world without change, a place of stasis, outside time, they said, and that was the way they preferred it to be. It was possible, and there were philosophers who argued the point vociferously, that time had been brought to Mundus Novus by the European voyagers and settlers, along with various diseases. This was why it didn't work properly. It had not yet adapted to the new situation. “In time,” people in Mundus Novus said, “there will be time.” For the present, however, the fluctuating nature of new world clocks simply had to be accepted.¹³

It may be argued that it is this very spatial confusion—present everywhere the characters move on the map—that produces the jumbled temporality of the text. Akbar's project is to “conjure a new world, a world beyond religion, region, rank and tribe.” He even has an “embroidered and mirrorworked Tent of the New Worship” built; here, the advocates of all doctrines may be heard and the guiding principle is freedom of speech. The emperor's unspoken project is to set the foundations of a “religion of man,” a project fraught with dangers from the beginning: as Akbar painfully learns when trying to extricate his own subjectivity from that of the multitude of his subjects, a definition of such a religion's object proves impossible to find. Even if this “futuristic” (from the character's perspective) objective, strongly reminiscent of early modern projects such as “the project of the Enlightenment,” is also relativised by the emperor's warmongering, it remains a desideratum that informs, in retrospect, the creation of time, including clock time and the universal time defining modernity, precisely by the “extra-knowledge” of the future that the reader brings to the text.

If, with Hayden White, historical discourse is tropological and, far from being a reflection of the past, it constitutes its own object, then the historian works to render an “unfamiliar past familiar again,” by analyzing both the events and the act of emplotment which lends them meaning: “In looking at the ways in which such structures took shape or evolved, historians refamiliarize them, not only by providing more information about them, but also by showing how their developments conformed to one another of the story types that we conventionally invoke to make sense of our own life-histories.”¹⁴ Rushdie’s writing becomes performative insofar as it is historical, and it is historical also because it chooses to reappropriate the form of the medieval romance. By fictionalizing various histories/the histories of various spaces, Rushdie explores the ways in which the historiographical discourse constitutes its own object(s)—to use Hayden White’s phrase—as well as the characteristics of such objects themselves. In his rewriting of the Pygmalion myth, the emperor Akbar manages the feat of bringing into existence an ideal wife by the sheer force of his will. This performative act mirrors the novel’s recreation of the past by the juxtaposition of previously unrelated stories and the parallel drawn between the European Renaissance and the tolerant and humanistic atmosphere of Akbar’s court. A “new” past is created from the convergence of Western and Eastern histories. But his new past would not have been possible in the absence of the reader’s pre-existent awareness of the historical future. *The Enchantress* offers a new, re-interpreted version of globalization *avant la lettre*, one which remains cultural, rather than political or economical, and the main purposes of such a utopian vision are primarily ethical. In other words, it is not so much that Rushdie *believes* in the reality of such closeness between the West and the East during the 15th century, as he might be suggesting the possibility or necessity of it for the present and the future.

The structure of the novel continues to rely on the narration of false collective and individual memories, as the narrative of the yellow-haired stranger loses its substance when he is revealed to be an impostor, and his stories to be fabrications. However, this is to be interpreted against the background of the fragile relation between fiction and truth, or reality, that the novel has made abundantly clear by means of crossing ontological boundaries. The rich overlapping of fiction, history, memory and textuality has been so often studied that it is hardly necessary to detail it here. I shall content myself with alluding to the definition given to historical literature by Middleton and Woods, who describe its the vacillation between the poles of fantasy and intervention—a picture that very well fits Rushdie’s technique in *The Enchantress of Florence*. According to Middleton and Woods, fiction’s historical impulse is not archivistic, but concerned with “elicit[ing] the unfulfilled potentialities of the past” as retrospectively suggested by the perspective of the changing relationship between the past and the present.¹⁵ What happens then if the future (accompanied by the tension between teleologically-oriented action and the strategies of emplotment) is brought to bear on this impulse?

Bringing the Absent Into Being: the Novel and the Future

WHILE THE close relationship between fiction and time has not been a matter of contention for several decades now, there seems to be still room enough for new light to be cast on it. The reason is that most of the research on fictional temporality, taking its cue from Paul Ricoeur's groundbreaking *Time and Narrative*, focused largely on the ways in which storytelling configured and made sense of the past, while the ways in which the future relates to narrative have been granted less attention. It is this gap that Mark Currie's *About Time* attempts to fill. Currie's main assumption is that the ways of experiencing the world currently active deepen the orientation towards the future that might well be, with Heidegger, a defining trait of the human.

The temporal self-distance identified by Currie within storytelling, once again allowing for a definition of narrative as a mode of being, operates in the text on multiple levels when it comes to the versions of identity the novel performs. The interposition of distance at the heart of the subject often acts as a means of connecting constantly forming individual selfhoods to emerging collective identities. As Currie claims with regard to the nature of fiction, again the novel seems to observe a logic of Derridean supplementarity, where the part becomes greater than the whole and the fate of the individual determines communal history.¹⁶

As we have noticed, *The Enchantress of Florence* abounds with mirror imagery and doubling of characters, geographies and narrative structures. Reflection and self-reflection burst out of their own boundaries to multiply signs and signifiers: Sikri and Florence, Angelica and her Mirror, beginnings and endings. Seen from this perspective, excess and endless proliferation have been shown to represent defining traits of the novel, but it is this very excess, or overstepping of boundaries, that draws attention to the distance inserted at the heart of the subject, which often becomes its own object of thought. Translated in terms of the novel's temporality, such a distance is projected against the background of the narrative's backbone, or, as Currie remarks, "[o]nce again, it is the incorporation of self-distance within the lived present, and most significantly the installation of future retrospect in present experience, in which we find the most convincing explanation of the new norms of temporal organization in the novel."¹⁷

Since Currie examines the structure of confessional narrative with the express aim of identifying an allegory of the temporality of all language insofar as autobiographical texts provide samples of the collapse of temporal distance in the act of self-narration,¹⁸ the forming (or unforming) of this temporality can be extrapolated to the structure of other fictional genres, as well. In confessional narratives, the sequence of events inevitably stops when the narrated time becomes identical to the time of narration, when nothing but the present remains as both the subject and the object of storytelling, and writing is turned into its own theme. Conventionally written third-person novels do not usually conflict, or even overlap, narrated time with the narrating time, but nevertheless the awareness of this potential opens fiction up to a wide range of combinatorial possibilities. The time structure of *The Enchantress of Florence*, once decoded, suggests itself as an appropriate framework with, and *against*, which the multiplicity of historical reconstructions can be projected.

In order to carry this point home, a more detailed analysis of the tensions inscribed in the novel's temporality is probably necessary, and it will be here that my contentions will come to a full circle. On a cursory reading and when compared to other works by Rushdie, the third-person, past-tense narration of *The Enchantress* does not really come across as "innovating" or "experimental;" if set against the versions of identity rehearsed by it, however, the embedded structure of the story gains meanings as yet hidden and further illuminated by the application of Currie's distinctions. The novel refashions the Scheherazade convention by having a young male story teller, seemingly a European, share the mysterious circumstances leading to his birth and subsequent travels to the Orient to the legendary Mughal emperor Akbar the Great. By telling his story, the protagonist, who calls himself Mogor dell'Amore (the Italianized version of a composite name) ostensibly hopes to recover some of the privileges of what he regards as his birthright as a member of the emperor's family and the comfortable sense of selfhood imparted by solidly established origins. On the other hand, neither he, nor the reader, is taken by surprise when the part of Scheherazade is thrown upon him and he finds himself in the position of needing to prolong the narrative in order to save his life. The story recounted to the emperor, which requires rather considerable reconstructing efforts on behalf of the reader, is contained by the act of storytelling performed by an anonymous narrator, thus allowing not only for the transposition of the protagonist's voice in the third person, but also for the insertion of multiple distances within the very heart of the narration.

Three embedded temporal levels thus emerge: the *time of the recounted events* (in itself divisible, heterogeneous and subjected to a logic of inversion, anticipation and flashbacks), the *time of the Mogor's act of storytelling*, and the *time of the narration* performed by the anonymous, largely unobtrusive third-person narrator encoded in the narrative preterite. The distinction between the last two dimensions is easy to operate, since the Mogor's story continues long after he has lost his audience and therefore the right of recounting it himself. But the second—or middle—temporal layer seems to be the most interesting, because it can be construed as both narrating and narrated time, as the act of storytelling becomes in itself the topic of the framing narration and is thus turned into a narrated event. Such a strategy is not new, but lends itself to unexpected effects and, reinforced by the ambivalence of the grammatical third-person, appears to justify the connection Currie places between self-consciousness and the temporality of fiction. The distance between thinking/speaking subject and the object of thought is simultaneously created and subverted, since it is at all times difficult to distinguish between the voices involved in the telling.

The issue of the grammatical person is taken up by the emperor himself, in this failed attempt to think of himself, and be received by others, as an "I," rather than a "we," or the sum of his people. The problem will be encountered, but again prove impossible to deal with in a definite manner, by princess Qara Köz, whenever she strives to determine her being in the absence of her male protectors. Moreover, one of the figures the novel proposes for the nonbeing that presents itself as the condition of being is foreignness: "Was foreignness itself a thing to be embraced as a revitalizing force bestowing bounty and success upon its adherents, or did it adulterate something essential in the individual and the society as a whole, did it initiate a process of decay which would end in an alienated, inauthentic death?"¹⁹

As a conclusion, it is important that this propensity towards individuation is somehow precluded by language itself. Language refuses the unity of the self and, in its rigid conventionality, turns up to strengthen the diverse roots of identity. Furthermore, the foreignness placed at the heart of the discourse parallels the self-distance involved in the perception of time as a complex configuration of past, present and future, shown in the novel to be oriented by the reader's previous knowledge of what history would become.



Notes

1. Salman Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence* (New York: Random House, 2008).
2. For an interesting discussion of the temporality of reading literature, see Istvan Berszan, "Time(s) of Reading," in *Transylvanian Review* 19, 2 (2010): 25–37.
3. Mark Currie, *About Time. Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).
4. Currie, *About Time*, 14.
5. Currie, *About Time*, 7.
6. See, among others, Peter Middleton, Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, Time, and Space in Postwar Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 60.
7. Middleton and Woods, *Literatures*, 61.
8. Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Picador, 2000), 9.
9. Rushdie, "In Good Faith", in *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 393.
10. Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 118.
11. Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 90.
12. Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 332.
13. Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 329.
14. Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 87.
15. Middleton and Woods, *Literatures*, 3.
16. Currie, *About Time*, 73.
17. Currie, *About Time*, 97–98.
18. Currie, *About Time*, 100.
19. Rushdie, *Enchantress*, 319.

Abstract

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The Enchantress of Florence

Focusing mostly on Salman Rushdie's 2008 *The Enchantress of Florence*, the paper explores the controversial relations between history and the idea of the present, suggested in the text through a reinterpretation of Western and Eastern canons; the novel's intricate games with historical and geographical structures are taken to reveal a radical revision in the understanding of time-perception.

Keywords

time awareness, fictional temporality, anticipation of retrospection, excess, self-consciousness