Between

Frontiers and Thresholds in Rushdie's Writings

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> A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing.
>
> Heidegger

Frontiers, Thresholds, and Language Betrayal

Despite the discursive inflation and the tremendous quantities of texts on de-territorialisation, frontiers, borders and margins are still relevant for many across the globe. It is not an easy task to understand how borders function and what may happen when they relate to intrastate conflicts. It must be first acknowledged that, as Georg Simmel wrote, the border is «not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but a sociological fact which takes a spatial form» (Simmel 1999: 607). The other assumption is that the only way to appreciate a frontier is to observe its essence or whether it is crossed, and why. Borders have to be measured for their presence, or absence, and the role they play in constructing social relations. They can be walls that hinder mobility, ideal lines that describe the geographical location of political communities. But there is also a substantial difference whether a wall is "built" to protect the inside from the outside, or is meant to discourage the population from moving abroad. In some localised crisis situations,

fences may be erected by neighbouring countries to avoid "contagion"[1]. This becomes even more relevant when applied to conflict areas - in the case of refugees - and it presents serious consequences for the lives of millions of people every year. Borders are barriers, and understanding them in their concrete dimensions, as walls, is crucial to any analysis of their relation to intrastate conflicts. But contrary to the concept of "borderless world", and the frequently assumed irrelevance of frontiers in response to contemporary welfare, we notice every day that borders have been strengthened in several cases. The 9/11 attacks, the growing xenophobia and nationalisms, racism and fundamentalism all contributed to highlight homeland security and border control.

Being on the border, means more than simply facing a frontier. So the understanding of borders as constituted by walls or ideal lines that depend on context, historical moment and location, is important but incomplete. The physical frontiers, the social boundaries and the geographical extension of borderlines are also necessary elements that define complex areas. When Simmel - as we mentioned before - argues that the frontier line that creates the borderline is the result of a sociological fact, he means that the institution of a frontier, and the subsequent creation of a borderland, are sociological facts that take a spatial form. But borderlands can also be established to affirm one group's dominance above others, or as solutions for intrastate wars. In civil conflicts where the central authority deals with "insurgents" or "minorities" within the homeland, fences can be raised unilaterally by the "sovereign state", creating enclaves.

Borders are spatial, social, and cultural facts, but they are above all political facts. A «*space* comes into being» as soon as a *border* is established, and an observer looks at both sides of the border including at the border separating the sides. «Without the border, no space». But there is also an aesthetic concept of space, a condition of the possibility of certain phenomena, that is to say, the possibility of the subject to imagine itself and objects as claiming to exist in different places in it.

[1] Cfr. Acuto 2008.

The concept of space should start with the acknowledgment of the degrees of freedom we discover while hitting on the restrictions we attribute to it. Jacques Derrida for example refers to space as a «lieu d'inscription de tout ce qui au monde se marque» (Derrida 1993: 52). In other words, space, to be sure, presupposes its own *khora* the very moment it gets marked, thus producing the concept of spaces entangled within spaces. There is always, therefore, the necessity through the space of this world without which there is, properly speaking, nothing. For Kant, space is the place where boundaries are to be drawn and distinctions to be crossed. As Heidegger puts it - in *Sein & Zeit* - space is, «the place where de-distanciation and alignment take place» (cfr. Banham 2008).

Philosophy traditionally begins by asking the question, «What is the frontier», and demanding something like a definition. I think that any experience of the frontier is an experience of life as life on the edge. The frontier, carries the notion of a place that is an edge, an edge between the known and the unknown, the settled and the wild; it can also be a mental realm of new ideas, ideas about space and time, and even the origins of the world.

Today, the frontier is as much a marketing concept as an idea or an ideal. However, the experience of the frontier is intrinsically perilous in that as such, it exposes to something as yet unknown or beyond a frontier, and this experience is perhaps none other than what gives rise to the sense of wonder, of *traumazein* revived by Heidegger from Aristotle as the root of all philosophy.

At the frontier, says literature, life is on the line, identities tremble, something passes into something else, somewhere new opens up. At this point, "experience" is never a simple accretion of knowledge or wisdom, because on the frontier, at the edge, I am not quite me, but the opening of identity to an alterity. Frontiers are always points both of contact and of separation; the point of contact is itself a frontier, between the frontier as question and the frontier as experience. Consequently, boundaries, edges, frontiers, thresholds, like horizons, are forever in translation, always receding from our efforts to transgress them. The circumstance calls us into the open, decentring

our attunement within an atmosphere of questioning. We have entered a liminal space, a veil between inner and outer. The border represents then a unique case of entry into the social contract: it is not an entry that is inherited or claimed by right but a status that is requested. At the border, one is neither citizen nor foreigner in the face of the agent of customs. The bordering process constituted by the decision to include/exclude is a dialogue between body and body politic requiring the confession of all manner of bodily, economic, and social information. Of utmost importance is Derrida's treatment of the theme of hospitality and the question about foreigners (*xenos*). In *De l'hospitalité,* for istance, he notes that in the dialogues of Plato, the foreigner is frequently presented as the one who asks about others; and as a consequence, the foreigner is he who shakes the rein of dogmatism about being and not-being. The very notion of hospitality is treated here within the context of the rights of the foreigner. This question which Derrida repeats throughout his book, is a broadly abstract metaphor that symbolises the restrictions that often face a stranger when he is far away from home. Going through *The Apology of Plato*, Derrida maintains that «among the problems we handle here, there is a foreigner who unable to speak the language of the host country, may be rejected or injured without any type of defence» (Derrida 2000: 21). The language of the host interrogates violently and abruptly, since it imposes the home owner's interpretation. Therefore, the foreigner is forced to adopt another "tongue" which is not the one he usually speaks or writes in. The host's translation is part of his very own abode and, according to Derrida, it is precisely the point where the possibility of hospitality takes place. But what happens when hospitality becomes hostility? One would even admit that «both hospitality and hostility imply the possibility of the other». The ambivalence is important and even recognised in the tensions detected in the words, *host*, *hospitality* and *hostility*. Visser provides a detailed overview of the etymology: confusing as it seems at first sight, the word "host" and "guest" originally meant the same thing, deriving as they did from the Indo-European term "ghostis" meaning "stranger". Visser explicates further, referring to the antecedents of the origins of the world "hospitality" as

being derived from the Latin *hostis* (stranger equated to enemy), and the French "hôte" both used to denote host and guest (cfr. Visser 1993). That hospitality transgresses the boundaries between the stranger/unknown and us/known, may be attributed to the use of the rituals of hospitality as a means of communication. The stranger is the stranger precisely because (they) are not recognised as from within the socially constructed space that is "home". Hospitality thus acts as cultural agent, facilitating the (re)negotiation of both collective (social) and personal identity. Historically the concept of a bordered space ensured the notion of hospitality and was considered a collective ideal, conditioning individual behaviour and ensuring the domination and continuation of a structural power. The notion of bordering is both a defining characteristic of, and space of, tension between the ideal of hospitality and its "performance as practice" in contemporary and social reality[2]. Borders furthermore create dialectical construction within hospitality and, as such, it is through these borders that hospitality exists: a notion of bordered space such as "home" and "away"; embodied borders such as "self" and "other"; borders of social identity such as "host" and "guest"; or "hostility" and "friendship". Therefore, it is through borders that hospitality maintains its ascendency. In other words, hospitality would not be, either as practice or moral virtue, but for the contested space brought about by border transgressions. But there remains an implicit need to establish boundaries in host-guest relationships and define who is known and who is "the other": it should be a clearly expressed relationship, where each party is defined in the context of "self" and "other" with mutually understood boundaries. The interaction of hospitality helps reinforce the inclusion and the exclusion while mediating exchange between the two. This inclusion/exclusion ritual in the hospitality context endures as airport staff routinely targets some "profiles", the demonised and "dangerous other", for in-depth questioning before the nation lays open its hospitality to them. This view of hospitality also brings into sharper focus the rhetoric of equality and equalitarianism in the

[2] Cfr. Rossello 2001.

pseudo-equity where people only from certain countries are demonised for overstaying their visas (Sheringham - Daruwalla 2007: 37).

Frontiers in *translation* mark the interface of empire and excess. There is a strong sentiment within postmodern thought to lodge this translation activity at the margins of liminal excess, to investigate this dynamic of translation, and articulate its relation to the perpetual interplay of normalisation and excess. Normalisation implicates, in fact, a fundamental outside, even if, as Judith Butler contends, a universal presumption can only be challenged «from (its own) outside» (Butler 1996: 49) to summon up the figure of the foreigner, the stranger; it is to affirm – as Montaigne said – that «nous pensons toujours ailleurs». Sometimes, it is even difficult to differentiate an exile from an immigrant. Nabokov was both an immigrant and an exile, but to him, such a distinction was unnecessary, as he often maintained that the writer's nationality was a «secondary importance» and the writer's art was his «real passport». Writes he:

> I have always maintained, even as a schoolboy in Russia, that the nationality of a worthwhile writer is of secondary importance. The more distinctive an insect's aspect, the less apt to the taxonomist is to glance first of all at the locality label under the pinned specimen in order to decide which of several vaguely described races it should be assigned to. The writer's art is his real passport. (Nabokov 1967)

We can also think about Paul Celan, and the figure of the artist that emerges in this case, is really baffling: Celan is loudly proclaimed as one of the greatest if not the greatest "German poet" of the century – since Rilke, or Trakl – when in fact he was a naturalised French citizen of Jewish-Bukovinan descent who never lived in German soil, though he wrote (nearly) all his life in his mother's language, German. The correspondence with his wife shows that Celan was a superb writer in French, and had he decided to write at least some of his work in that

language (or even translated his work in French), no doubt the French could and most likely would have claimed him as one of their own – as they did, for example, with Samuel Beckett, Tristan Tzara, Eugene Ionesco, and, more to the point, Cioran and Gherasim Luca. That he did not do this is of course essential but needs to be analysed and contextualised within the complex relationship he entertained with his mother's tongue and his harsh hysterical scriptures against poets attempting to write in a language other than the mother tongue. Celan, a proficient multilingual poet, returned to this theme several times, the strongest formulation being reported by Ruth Lackner, to whom he said: «Only in the mother tongue can one speak one's own truth, in a foreign language the poet lies» (Chalfen 1991: 148). Later, in 1961, he formulated the quandary again, as an answer to a questionnaire, "The Problem of the Bilingual", from the Flinker Bookshop in Paris:

> I do not believe there is such a thing as bilingual poetry. Double-talk, yes, this you may find among our various contemporary arts and acrobatics of the word, especially those who manage to establish themselves in blissful harmony with each fashion of consumer culture, being as polyglot as they are polychrome. Poetry is by necessity a unique instance of language. Hence never – forgive the truism, but poetry, like truth, goes all too often to the dogs – hence never what is double. (Celan 1986: 23)

And yet despite the evident multiculturalism and multilingualism, throughout his life, Celan saw himself as part of "German" literature, wanted his work to be a visible presence in that country, wanted it to have an impact on German letters. Unfortunately, this desire is more ambiguous, and may be closer to a sort of love/strife dynamic. Celan was always alert, too much afraid, but also worried that someone somewhere was preparing an attack on him. The fear and profound mistrust in Germany, even after the defeat of the Third Reich, has often been read as misplaced and ungrounded, and thus as nothing more than paranoia and a symptom of the incipient psychic

disorder that was to darken his later days. But Celan knew whereof he was speaking when he called the new Germany a "landscape of fear". And yet he would return again and again to read his work in Germany. A wounded and psychologically exhausted Celan would return to Paris from these various expeditions into Germany.

When Salman Rushdie declares that "the most precious book I possess is my passport", we obviously understand roughly that art is also the only available passport; that only through literature a genuine return for the exiled writer is possible. For many writers and exiles, the attachment to one's own land remains a trauma, and this attachment can become unreasonable and even unjustified, as the narrator's of Rushdie's novel *Shame* refutes:

> We know the forces of gravity, but not its origins; and to explain why we become attached to our birthplaces we pretend that we are trees and speak of roots. Look under your feet. You will not find gnarled growths sprouting through the soles. Roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in places. (Rushdie 1983: 90)

The debunking of the tree metaphor makes it clear that human beings are different from trees and should be rootless and entirely mobile. This is indeed a radical idea, which, in a way, the novel dramatizes, just as its protagonist Omar Khayyam is destroyed after he returns to his native place. But human beings are not always rational animals: in *Shame* the narrator himself cannot help but feel shamefaced, while admitting, «And to come to the 'roots' idea, I should say that I haven't managed to shake myself free of it completely. Sometimes I do see myself as a tree, even, rather, grandly, as the ash Yggdrasil, the mythical world-tree of Norse legend» (*ibid*.: 92). As Ha Jin sustains, what is fundamental here is the playfulness manifested in the metaphor of the ash Yggdrasil, which, existing in the domain of Scandinavian mythology, has little to do with the narrator's native place, but which is transplanted into his being through artistic

imagination. Thus, art has become his way of reconciliation and transcendence. The question is always how to survive as an artist - while making one's art thrive - and how to rearrange the landscapes of our envisioned homes. The dichotomy inherent in the word "homeland" is more significant now than it was in the past. Its meaning can no longer be separated from home, which is something the migrant should be able to build away from his native land. Therefore, it is logical to say that your homeland is where you build your home. We should also bear in mind that, no matter where we go, we cannot shed our past completely – so we must strive to use parts of our past to facilitate our journeys. Connections are not connections *through* identities but *despite* differences. Isn't culture after all, a space of continuous conflict, where the issue of identity is permanently negotiated? Isn't one of the most subtle strategies of domination, *denomination*, as Derrida teaches us, when he admits that to give names is very close to dominate? Even literature itself is a political space, and the very space of the text could be understood as a time of gathering:

> gatherings of exiles, émigrés and refugees; gathering on the edge of 'foreign' culture; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafés of city centres; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other world lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present. (Bhabha 1994: 139)

Rushdie gestures towards the political backdrop of border troubles, such as those attending the long division of territory of East Bengal from West Pakistan, before the former became Bangladesh. The very figure of Rushdie's diasporic "translatedness" is crystallised in his conceptualisation of Pakistan as a second "home", irrevocably bound to the metaphor of the border because it lies, spatially and chronologically, "between" his first home (India) and his current home

(England), an interstitial space which never quite resolves the question of cultural borders for his "midnight's child": where does he really belong to? The answer could be that we seldom inhabit the same home-world for long stretches of time. Even if our own situation remains relatively stable, situations are changing around us all the time. As Rushdie points out in *Imaginary Homelands*, social migration, cultural displacement, cross-pollination, and influences «from beyond the community to which we belong» all serve to expand «our narrowly defined cultural frontiers» and challenge «our narrow sense of being-at-home» (Rushdie 1991: 19-20). Consequently, crossing into the boundary zones of home-life commits us to *translation* activity. Translation makes it possible for us to move from the familiar "partial" ground of our home-space into more abstract territory. In the process, Rushdie notes, we are exposed to «new angles at which to enter reality». Rushdie's writings are to be valued for the way they celebrate exposure to influences that open our home-worlds to the wild pollens and fragments of different memories, meanings, and descriptions. The power of literature and other cross-pollinating sources to increase our exposure to new experiences of meaning serve also to expand our capacity to translate intangible features of our private home-worlds into more tangible articulations. As we assimilate translations born from exposure to the *wild*, we can use these to forge new inroads – perhaps even new styles – of reciprocal belonging.

The main idea behind most of the writings of Rushdie is that whenever we cross a significant boundary, we step into an unsetting in-between zone, where we have to abandon accepted structures and truths. Yet this liminal zone can also open up possibilities for inner transformation, leading to the birth of a new sense of fellowship. In *The Satanic Verses,* a novel about frontier-crossing, *transgression* is the key to the issue of diasporas' identity: in juxtaposing the re-imagination of the rise of Islam and the representation of the black immigrant community in London, Rushdie traverses the frontiers of fact, fiction and antagonistic cultures and identities with his deferred/different cultural translation of the "authentic" English/Islamic culture. In this dialogic form, the novel represents a palimpsest vision of metropolitan culture.

In transgressing cultural frontiers, Rushdie no doubt productively turns the neurosis into an impetus for making the newness. But in *Step Across This Line*, Rushdie returns to the theme of crossing frontiers, the central issue of our time: «how to preserve our freedom to cross physical, artistic, economic and intellectual borders without succumbing to "our" enemies, who can cross borders too, to destroy our freedom?». Can we «fight back without becoming the enemy's mirror image, without becoming», in Rushdie's words, «the suits of armour our fear makes us put on?» (Rushdie 2003: 354-356, 367-369). Rushdie resorts to Vladimir Nabokov, whom he considers the greatest writer ever to make a successful journey across the language frontier, and enumerated meticulously Nabokov's "three grades of evil" that can be discerned in the strange world of verbal *transmigration*. He then explores the diversity of frontiers in life and advocates for frontier-crossing as the best evidence of freedom's existence. Already the imperative in the title "Step Across this Line!" entreats the reader's not to be repelled by artificial lines. In the deepest core of human desires lies the crossing of lines, exploring, inventing, criticising, that is to say moving freely, in mind or body. Frontiers are therefore quite inevitably part of any human existence; mankind not only creates them, be they imaginary or physical, but also suffers from their consequences – above all the political ones.

«The curse of human race is not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike». These are the words of Niccolò Vespucci, protagonist of Salman Rushdie's latest novel, *The Enchantress of Florence,* a traveller from Florence who crosses the ocean to find the Emperor Akbar, and relay to him a great and secret story. A yellow-haired *trickster* who hides away in pirate ships and creates death. Vespucci is a cosmopolite who

> could dream in seven languages: Italian, Spanish, Arabic, Persian, Russian, English and Portuguese. He had picked up languages the way most sailors picked up diseases; languages were his gonorrhoea, his syphilis, his scurvy, his ague, his plague. (Rushdie 2008)

His story is an international epic, one that connects the Italian metropolis of the Mughal court in a sparking mesh of love, secrets, and political intrigue. Akbar's favourite wife, Jodha – in Rushdie's account a perfect but purely imaginary consort – is this "Other" kind of person, who considers travel as pointless, because it removed (you) from the place in which (you) had a meaning ... and it spirits (you) away into fairylands, where (you) were, and looked, frankly absurd. Jodha sits in the Mughal court pulling Akbar home from his journeys of conquest – and the power she has over the emperor is her extraordinary sexual artistry. Rushdie uses also his cross-borders story to talk about the choices a woman – such as Jodha – might make in a man's world and the consequences of those choices. But what is of most importance is the kind of "skinlessness" out of which Rushdie draws his writing, and which represents the best way of being in the world. I personally consider *The Enchantress* as the most implicit treatment of Rushdie's eternal themes on exile, displacement, nomadism, border-crossing, and the dense web of connection binding East and West. As Rushdie admits, with the Renaissance Italians, such as Macchiavelli or Vespucci are caught in the intrigue of their times. Akbar, philosopher and proto-democrat, dreams outside his era of a "culture of inclusion", where liberty, equality and brotherhood are the rule. Rushdie deconstructs in this way, the myth of the European culture. He states that the idea of humanism, which people constantly say is the great creation of the European Renaissance, is also present in the philosophies - the metaphysics, and ideas – that are being explored in India at those times. These things are not merely creation of the West. The West does not have the monopoly on these virtues; neither by the way, does it have the monopoly of brutality. Both worlds are also savage. Rushdie's Akbar, like Marguerite Yourcenar's Hadrian, does think the unkindly thoughts that history obliterates. Rushdie holds an ongoing dialogue with other writers: one is occasionally reminded of the exchanges between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*; of Pamuk's border-crossing protagonist in *The White Castle*; and of the musings on art and reality in his *My Name is Red*, in which the experiments in realism of Akbar's court painters are cited. There is also

a resounding echo of the Indo-Persian storytelling tradition, with its lush images, forked progressions and digressions, its obliterations of boundaries between magic and reality. Akbar feels that the lands of the Occident are «exotic and surreal» to a degree incomprehensible to the humdrum people of the East[3]. In Rushdie's deft reversal of the orientalist gaze, Mughal India, the East, is often portrayed as more tolerant, philosophical and progressive than Europe. But as Akbar learns from his storytelling kinsman, in one sense at least, West and East are not as distant as they seem: "The curse of the human race is not so much that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike"; thus the real becomes undisconnectable from the unreal and the inscription of several polyphonic voices is made fairly possible.

[3] Cfr. Hussein 2008.

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