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T(r)opology of memory: Rushdie's Midnight's Children.

Abstract I: In the body of cultural memory, traumas, scars and traces gradually develop into places and figures (*topoi* and tropes) of discourse. The blueprint of *Midnight's Children* is the staging of individual and social memory as a means to redeem the past of the oppressed through the manipulation of official history. Allegory is the informing trope of this reworking of memory within the stream of history. It is a preposterous, humorous allegory, issuing in a broadly human comic epic, which is primarily about Rushdie's native India but also contains an ironic picture of the West. The remaking of cultural memory here appears as a synaesthetic as well as a hyper-medial intercultural affair.

Abstract II: Nel corpo della memoria culturale, i traumi, le cicatrici e le tracce pian piano divengono luoghi e figure (*topoi* e tropi) del discorso. Il filo conduttore de *I figli della mezzanotte* è proprio la messa in scena della memoria individuale e sociale, come mezzo per redimere il passato degli oppressi attraverso la manipolazione delle storia ufficiale. L'allegoria è la figura dominante in questo tentativo di riappropriazione della memoria nel flusso della storia. Si tratta di un'allegoria ostentata e umoristica che produce un'epica comica dell'India di Rushdie ma che contiene anche un ritratto ironico dell'Occidente. La revisione della memoria culturale qui appare come un'operazione sinestetica oltre che ipermediale e interculturale.

1. Places and figures of memory

There is a fine passage at the beginning of Haydin White's *Tropics of Discourse* that can help us introduce our subject:

> When we seek to make sense of such problematical topics as human nature, culture, society, and history, we never say precisely what we wish to say or mean precisely what we say. Our discourse always tends to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them; or, what amounts to the same thing, the data always resist the coherency of the image which we are trying to fashion of them. (White 1978: 1)

Memory certainly belongs to this set of problematic topics that White refers to. It is problematic above all because it is strictly connected to the living body, to its fleeting needs and drives: human, all too human, is Mnemosyne, the mother of the muses, of imagination and history; astute and stubborn in her resistance to any conceptual framework we can devise in order to capture her. It will not behave differently in the present occasion. So let us, from the outset, bear in mind this "resistance to theory" (De Man 1986: 3-20), this deconstructive or self-ironic intention that inhabits memory all the way back through its subconscious roots, and affects all discussion about it. All act of intentional recollection does in fact inevitably slip from our grip into brute organic materiality on the one hand, and pure imaginative evasion on the other. Or more exactly, memory consists of this unconscious slipping, call it the sliding of chronotopes (single compositions of place and time) through the interplay of its figures. We can say that memory is the moving ground or the implicit frame of all human interaction, and therefore the problems relating to its functioning imply and magnify most of the biggest issues of the so-called human sciences, especially in this present age of extensive cultural mutation. Memory and imagination, consciousness and culture, history and fiction, in fact, form a single whole that the Greeks personified in the figure of Mnemosyne, at once the mother of the art-inspiring muses and the mother history (Clio), that is the Goddess presiding to that complex of disciplines we call the "humanities", and that today appear to be threatened by the speed of technological progress and by the overbearing interests of the free market, often scarcely coinciding with the well-being of human kind. For this reason, the text of our cultural memory should be all the more attentively preserved, perused and regenerated in all its recesses and in all its speech registers, genres and tropes. This is the general aim of the interesting European research project, called ACUME, a network to which I belong: it pursues the study of the European cultural memory form several points of view and in many disciplines (1). In a talk I gave in Cyprus (2), a few years ago, on the narrative of Sebald, an exile within the European framework, I discussed memories as tropes provided with a temporal index; now I shall move in the opposite direction considering the figures of speech as traces of cultural events or behaviours that have become habitual, sedimented in customary language, as the typical modalities (topoi and tropes) of its use. In a word, I shall probe here the possibility of charting a *t(r)opology* of cultural memory, as the basis of both historical and fictional narrative.

To reflect on memory is to enter the mirror, or the matrix, of wonderland, to move into its interstices without ever reaching out into the "real" world. My discourse will inhabit this interstitial order, which is in fact the order of meta-discourse. In the field of language meta-discourse is to discourse what memory is to perception: the former never grasping the latter although always aiming at it. Memory represents past perceptions and feelings with an inevitable time gap, a temporal index that is translated into bio-logical traces and codes, scars and inscriptions of the individual and the social body, which gradually develop into places and figures (*topoi* and tropes) of discourse, which act as the preconditions for the work of anyone who is about to play his part in history, in the double role of subject/object, actor/spectator, servant/master. It is precisely this divided subject of memory that is portrayed, with great awareness, in the best contemporary novels, in which the meta-narrative, far from being a mere mannered affectation, is also an index (a meme) of the groundlessness and the contingency of the *literary vision* of the world (as contained in the root metaphor of the book-of-the-world) in an age when literature is compelled to abdicate its role of queen of the cultural transmission in favour of the new media. It seems to me that the so-called post-modern fiction of the last few decades more than anything else shows symptoms of this change from a literary to a multi-medial culture, and that now we should therefore begin to speak of a post literary or inter-medial fiction.
This inter-medial, as well as multiethnic and nomadic, subject is dealt with great mastery, breadth of cultural implications, wealth of figures of thought and speech (variety of topics and dialects stretching from folklore to myth) in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which I have therefore chosen as a case study for my inquiry into the tropology of memory and as an instrument for the definition of single and collective identities. Saleem Sinai, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, tells us at a certain point that his life is linked to the history of India in four different ways:

> I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term 'modes of connection' composed of dualistically-combined configurations of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. This is why hyphens are necessary: actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world. (Rushdie 1995: 238).

This is a rather theatrical and almost ridiculous formula (and there are quite a few in this theatrical and apparently "infantile" narrative, recalling G. Grass's *The Tin Drum*), but it does reveal the overall design of the novel and, its fundamental configuration. And if its plot is an unreliable recollection of the life of Saleem Sinai and of that of India after its independence, that is a political allegory, this formula reveals the novel's rhetorical strategy which develops through the constant movement of Saleem's account between the past and the present,

and between the activity of writing and a pretended spoken report to Padma, the impatient listener:

> While I, at my desk, feel the sting of Padma's impatience. (I wish at times for a more discerning audience, someone who would understand the need for rhythm, pacing, the subtle introduction of minor chords which will later rise, swell, seize the melody […]) Padma says: 'I don't want to know about this Winkie now; days and nights I've waited and still you won't get to being born!' But I counsel patience; everything in its proper place, I admonish my dung-lotus, because Winkie, too, has its purpose and its place. (Rushdie 1995: 102)

Padma, this coarse but faithful indigenous nurse, is the naive fictional listener of this unreliable narrator, whose words are actually intended for an educated and cosmopolitan reader. That between writing and speaking is a tension woven into the very fabric of this novel which is positioned programmatically not only between east and west, but also between literature and the new media, and using for example the metaphor of the living transistor in the event of Saleem's acquiring of telepathy, thus making it the central device in the plot and the magic means for calling the Conference of the Midnight's Children:

> By sunrise, I had discovered that the voices could be controlled – I was a radio receiver, and could turn the volume down or up; I could select individual voices; I could even, by an effort of will, switch off my newly-discovered inner ear. It was astonishing how soon fear left me; by morning, I was thinking, 'man, this is better than All-India Radio, man; better than Radio Ceylon! (Rushdie 1995: 164)

The connecting thread of *Midnight's Children* is the staging of memory, as an act of mediation between opposite political instances, between different languages and media, and as a chance to redeem the past of the oppressed through the manipulation of official history. But it is an imperfect remedy, a medicine and a drug causing hallucinations. The great theme of the novel is in fact that of the fallible individual memory as a *necessary error*, an instrument of testimony and political commitment:

> As I wrote the novel, an whenever a conflict arose between literal and remembered truth, I would favour the remembered version. This is why, even though Saleem admits that no tidal wave passed through the Sundarbans in the year of the Bangladesh war, he continues to be born out of the jungle on the crest of that fictional wave. His truth is too important to him to allow to be unseated by a mere weather report. It is memory's truth he insists, and only a madman would prefer someone else's version to his own. (Rushdie 1992: 24-25)

The stubborn attachment of Saleem Sinai to his errors of memory constitutes, in fact, the basic condition of his story-telling. The alternative would be silence, amnesia (from which he indeed suffered for a while after a shell shock: 343 ff.) and the eventual drying up of the imagination, the loss of hope in another possible world. It is what Saleem, towards the end of the novel, also calls "sperectomy" (Rushdie 1995: 437), and which he, like all other midnight's children, have to suffer at the time of the Emergency and of the special laws proclaimed by Indira Ghandi in 1977, for the sake of the security and well-being of the nation. A proclaimed state of emergency in order to face economic crisis and political terrorism: an issue that is at least as current today in the West as it was in India in the Seventies. And the whole of Rushdie's book, with its play on baroque allegories, its exaggerations and improbabilities, can be used as a hyperbolic mirror which through the Indian caricature shows the West its own deformed and ailing image.

2. Politcal allegory

In the narrative development of *Midnight's Children*, with the explicit coincidence of the birth of the protagonist and that of the independent India, allegory is the dominant stylistic device from the very beginning:

> I was born in the city of Bombay […] at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence […] I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. (Rushdie 1995: 9)

Rushdie himself, however, repeatedly in his lectures and interviews, seems ready to deny the allegorical nature of his novel. This, for example, is what he declared during a lecture at the University of Aarhus in 1983:

> I didn't want to write a book which could be conventionally translated as allegory, because it seems to me that in India allegory is a kind of desease [….] There is an assumption that every story is really another story which you haven't quite told, and what you have to do is translate the story that you have told into the story that you haven't told." (Rushdie 1985: 3)

And in the novel, Saleem Sinai denounces this self same disease:

> As a people, we are obsessed with correspondences. Similarities between this and that, between apparently unconnected things, make us clap our hands delightedly when we find them out. It is a sort of national longing for form – or perhaps simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes. Hence our vulnerability to omens. (Rushdie 1995: 300)

But this weakness for the allegorical form has also its positive side, in that it constitutes a "national longing for form" (Brennan 1989: 79-117), the forma mentis, the spirit of the place, and the figure most appropriate to Indian cultural memory. Indeed it can become a true obsession for the hidden meaning of events beyond the veil of appearances, an obsession to which Saleem often makes reference in the course of the story. But it also represents the vivifying spark and the ultimate aim of his narrative:

> If my crumbling, overused body permits […] I must work fast, faster than Sheherazade, if I am to and up meaning – yes meaning – something. I admit it: above all things I fear absurdity. (Rushdie 1995: 9)

As you can easily understand, the ailing narrating body craving for meaning is once again an allegory of India.

However *Midnight's Children* is by no means a simple allegory, but it rather amounts to an extended allegoresis, a strategy of narration that is put on display in order to denounce the pretence to truth of any canonical form of national history, and indeed to expose the very same idea of official national history (including that of literature) as an ideological expedient. Rushdie does use allegory in a deconstructive and ironical way, which is in some respects similar to that which Walter Benjamin deemed to be a characteristic of German baroque theatre: that is to say, allegory as a means for exploding the a-temporal perfection of classical form or the suggestive pregnancy of romantic symbol, in order to let appear some traces of the multifarious and inconclusive process of memory and history (Kuchta 1999: 205-224).
Allegory is the trope informing the whole of Rushdie's novel and dominating its plot: an inverted, ironic allegory, or better a hyperbolic allegoresis that is emphatically declared right from the start, and is subsequently accomplished in an equally ostentatious manner through the insisted use of leitmotif and that of synecdoche often assuming the value of a true antonomasia. Some examples of the latter are the exceedingly big, sensitive and fertile nose of Saleem and of his ancestors, which remind the Indian reader of the mythical figure of the elephant-god Ganesh (3); the irresistibly powerful knees of Saleem's god-like rival-twin Shiva; the unnaturally bronze idol-like hair of Saleem's younger sister who is thus provisionally called "the brass monkey"; the astonishing resemblance of Saleem's face to the map of India, etc.
It is in fact Rushdie himself who alerts us about his peculiar use of allegory, suggesting that it might be rather somehow the case of the leitmotif. As one critic observes, "the leitmotif, as described by Benjamin, involves the use of recurring things in the plot incidents or objects or phrases which in themselves have no meaning … but which form a kind of non rational network of connections in the book" (Kuchta 1999: 206) And it is again Benjamin's concept of Allegory that can help us understand the narrative rhetoric of Midnight's Children: "seeking to rehabilitate its debasement in romantic aesthetics,

Benjamin distinguishes allegory from the symbol - the preferred figure of Romanticism - by centering not on the relationship between part and whole but rather on the decisive category of time. While the measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mystical instant, allegory involves a corresponding dialectic between the sign and its historical context." (Kuchta 1999: 207) As it is explained in this dense passage summarizing Benjamin's view, allegory can become the informing trope of the work of memory within the stream of historical change, thus responding to "the decaying process of time in general, and to transitory historical moments in particular, with a melancholy desire to preserve the objects of the past by ripping them from their previous contexts and relocating them within the present." (Kuchta 1999: 207) We can attempt to sum up the whole issue saying that allegory is the trope that helps retrieve or reclaim lost places of memory, both individual and collective, and thus reconstruct the past in its critical moments. In the words of Benjamin: "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' […] It means to seize hold of memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger." (Benjamin 1999: 247) Allegory, thus understood, is a trope of memory in a state of emergency, when the risk of its being cancelled reaches a peak and when recollection amounts to a political act.

Such is the use of allegory in *Midnight's Children*, where the work of memory appears as a kind of land reclamation, both in the sense of the recovery of a submerged past and in that of the construction of a half-fictional homeland for the future, as Rushdie explains to us in one of the plainest statements of his poetics:

> exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our political alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be able of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (Rushdie 1992: 10)

And further on in the same text he points again to this kind of reflection on memory, which underpins all his novels:

> (in spite of my original and, I suppose, somewhat Proustian ambition to unlock the gates of lost time so that the past reappeared as it actually had been, unaffected by the distortions of memory) what I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory, so that my India was just that: 'my' India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions possible versions. (Rushdie 1992: 10)

On several occasions, in fact, Rushdie has commented again on the purposes of his rewriting of Indian history and cultural memory. In an interview he gave to the New York Times, for instance, we can read as follows:

> Q.: Were you aware in writing these India books that the clearing you were making was in such virgin territory? I mean that no one had mined the myths of contemporary India. - A.: Yes. It was amazing. It seemed to me that if you had to choose a form for that part of the world, the form you would choose would be the comic epic [my italics] (4). It seemed like the obvious, the most natural form. And it seemed amazing to me that when you looked at the literature that had been produced about India, it seemed dated and delicate, and I wondered why these dainty, delicate books were being written about this massive, elephantine place? It was as if you'd seen an area of cultivable land and the richest soil in it had never been cultivated. You know that everybody is trying to grow crops in the stony ground around the edges and this wonderful prime soil is just left there. (Kaufmann 1983)

In this long passage you can appreciate Rushdie's "cultural" perceptivity and find both an apt commentary on the function of place memory in narrative and on the narrative genre to which Ruhdie's works in general belong: a broadly human, rich, inclusive comic epic, primarily about his native East but also intended as an inverted picture of the West. That is, an effective staging of the difficult cultural relationship between the first and the third world, as politically engaging as one can expect from a gifted émigré writer, and on the purpose of which Rushdie further comments in an essay entitled *Outside the Whale*, intended as an echo of George Orwell's well known *Inside the whale*, which was a far cry against political commitment:

> Outside the whale is the unceasing storm, the continuing quarrel, the dialectic of history. Outside the whale there is a genuine need for political action, for books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world. Outside the whale we can see that we are all irradiated by history, we are radioactive with history and politics; we can see that it can be as false to create a politics-free fictional universe as to create one in which nobody needs to work or eat or hate or love or sleep. Outside the whale it becomes necessary, and even exhilarating, to grapple with the special problems created by the incorporation of political material, because politics is by turns farce and tragedy, and sometimes [...] both at once " (Rushdie 1992: 100).

The latter, farce and tragedy at once, is the case of *Midnight's Children*.

3. Intercultural memory

The man as well as the writer Rushdie (of whom Saleem Sinai is a mask in *Midnight's Children*) is an important figure not only for postcolonial narrative but for contemporary European narrative as a whole. This depends on his being a translated, hybrid nomadic consciousness that works as a cracked mirror capable of reflecting back to us a kaleidoscope of forms, a range of possibilities and preclusions of our western memory, imagination and world vision. In Rushdie's works we can find pregnant figures of the sweeping cultural and anthropological change that concerns us all today (5). A change we can sum up in the concept of globalisation, which involves, among other effects, also the end of the hegemony of European literature in favour of postcolonial literatures and the discourses of new media. The result of all this is the hybridisation of languages, behavioural codes and categories of knowledge which produces the loss of what we used to call *historical distance*, which again appears today as a mere mythological distance of the subject from events that affect his life and that he reconstructs half-fictionally composing a picture of his own *imaginary homeland* and identity. But borrowing a Hegelian insight, we can keep in mind that the imagination of the *Other* often makes our own reality. The identity of Europe thus appears to us in Rushdie's works in the deforming mirror of an "imagined" India. The present ideological disorientation of Europe looms as a watermark in the memorial reconstruction of a half-fictional country, an India of the mind. As in a distorting mirror, the hopes and the hypocrisies, the scandals and the errors, the failures and the massacres of the recent Indian history return to us the grimace of a European politico-cultural journey fraught with uncertainty.

Rushdie holds a particularly important place in the growth of a political, ideological and cultural awareness in the capitalist and neo-colonial West of the present. In Timothy Brennan's words, "he has done what few writers in any tradition have done: recorded the totality of neo-colonialism as a world system, with its absurd combination of satellite broadcasts and famine, popular uprisings and populist rant, forced migration and tourism. One might say he brings British literature up to date. For he occupies more than any other contemporary writer a special place at the crossroads of the English literary scene" (Brennan 1989: XII-XIII). He possesses in fact a multicultural perspective that we have to acquire if we want to construct a viable European project for the future of the world, different and alternative to that of the US, nation which lacks the direct experience of suffering and the burning sense of guilt that are at the roots of the European historical consciousness, sentiments which only people who have directly suffered the horrors of two world wars can possess.

Although Rushdie's patent first poetic intention is that of fashioning an imaginary motherland, an India of the mind, *Midnight's Children* also belongs to the long standing tradition of the European encyclopaedic narrative, stretching forward from Rabelais and Cervantes through Flaubert, Proust, Joyce, Broch, Musil and Thomas Mann, up to the popular forms of postmodernist pseudo historical best sellers. He therefore also dialogues from a distance with the experimentalism of

our twentieth century avant-guard novelists, and finds a place as a crucial author in the panorama of contemporary narrative. He writes a digressive and polyphonic (hi)story that unites what could have been with what has been, and presents an implausible reconstruction where in the surreal element there looms forth the unrealised possibility. In other words, he writes a story that is in many respects *hyper-textual* as well as *intercultural*: a story where the postcolonial themes meet those of intermediality, and where the redrawing of the map of literature in English meets the relocation of all literature within the context of a multimedia culture. Rushdie challenges, in fact, the literary canon both in a horizontal (geographical) and a vertical (intermedial) sense. His imaginary motherlands have this dual dimension: they are sociological and technological fictions. His alleged "magic realism" amounts to what Nietzsche (1997), distinguishing it from antiquarian and monumental, used to call "critical history".
Saleem Sinai, the imaginary witness of the 'Emergency' of the new India (6), wants to give a meaning to his past experience because what he most fears is absurdity (Rushdie 1995: 9). His response to the question of the possibility of witnessing the past is a history especially depending on smell and taste, what he calls "the chutnification (7) of history" (Rushdie 1995: 459). This is anything but a world vision: Saleem Sinai has no Weltanschaung, no proper idea of history. What he does have, instead, is a sense of smell to follow the tracks, a sense of touch to put memories in brine and a sense of taste to distinguish their different flavours. As compared to the mainstream of European historical thinking from Vico to Hegel, Marx and beyond, Rushdie takes a 180° turn. Recalling Vico's *New Science*, for instance, where, despite all its philological concreteness, one finds the belief in an ideal eternal history, running above the histories of all nations and revealing a common divine plan inherent in them all, we can say that Rushdie's history is instead a material transient history that runs beneath, or in the interstices of the local histories and the contradictory memories of sundry cultural subjects, gathering all their debris, waste and refuse. His history subtends the opacity, the weight of the body, with its deliriums and fevers, the unreliability of its senses, the perishability of its organs and functions. It is characterised by the fallibility and guilt of its narrator, who is the bearer of a decaying memory. He is not only an eye-witness, but rather an ear-, nose- and tongue-witness of the events in which he finds himself collusively and confusedly involved. Like an insect trapped in the great web of information from which he cannot escape. Because he is so entangled in events, and has been since he was born, "mysteriously handcuffed to history" (Rushdie 1995: 9), this narrator is tricky, forgetful, contradictory and unreliable. He lacks the *critical distance* of the ideal eye-witness, who ought to be impartial, objective and balanced: the ideal and fictional subject of the history of science and of history as a science, as well as of all grand narratives which were the vehicles of our world visions.
Saleem is the post-modern subject trapped in the bidimensional picture (*Bild*) of his own consciousness but he tries, by mixing memory and desire, to reconstruct the process of his own entrapment/education (*Bildung*). And if in a certain sense every novel is a Bildungsroman (Moretti 1987), *Midnight's Children* is certainly

one, but in a peculiar sense: a novel of de-formation and amputation, that moves swiftly in the end towards the ultimate maiming of the protagonist's body and soul, which is anticipated and looked forward to in the course of the whole story. And there is a very special, and paradoxical, sense in which this happens because the narrator-protagonist, Saleem Sinai, bearing this multicultural name (Hindu–Jewish–Muslim), appears as an amateur cook of events who smears his hands (trying to make jars of pickles, preserves of memory that inevitably, in the very process of pickling, alter the taste of the 'original' events) and through tactile and olfactory means creates a history in brine (Rushdie 1995: 461). The whole process of recalling, in his hands, leads not to the discovery of truth as an idea (or a vision), but rather to that of truth as a taste (somewhat modified, bitter-sweet, maybe disgusting) of the past (Rushdie 1995: 461). The primacy of vision over the other senses, which characterises the tradition of Western history and fiction, thus seems to be coming to an end. It has imploded in the making of pickled jars, in the *chutnification* of history, in the *pastiche* as the cipher of post-modern perception, memory and invention. In Saleem's narration the acts of history-writing, of story-telling, of recalling and of imagining all undergo a simultaneous sea change. We ought perhaps to understand this poetic process through a revaluation of the metaphor of *taste*, although not the aristocratic, selective taste of the English connoisseur of the Age of the Enlightenment, but the hybrid plebeian taste of the Indo-English of the late twentieth century.

It is the very idea of *imagination* as the creative faculty par excellence (as the mediating instance between sensation and concept, between perception and judgment, between memory and project) that is in fact put to trial, and imploding in the terrestrial plurality and the levelling con-fusion of the senses, which strips the sense of sight of the "natural" and despotic privilege it has always exercised, and from the metaphor of the vision-of-the-world the epistemological privilege, the paradigmatic value, that has characterised the whole of Western civilisation in its intimately literary essence, and the project of modernity as a progressive and continuous process of enlightenment.

Rushdie's *Midnight' Children* is an exemplary text of this postmodern, post-literary civilisation inasmuch as it stands at the meeting point of at least three great cultural traditions and three great religions: Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. It takes on board the advent of the languages of the new media and presents that readjustment of perception and of common sense that Rushdie, with a hyperbolic and theatrical gesture, translates into a baroque poetic, into a carnival of magic events and figures (the tuning up with the all India radios, the magic summoning of the conference of the Midnight's Children, Saleem's sudden transformation into the impassive figure of the Buddha, etc), reconciling the opposite extremes of myth and publicity, of archetype and cliché, of Indian folklore and English literary tradition, of parody and allegory. In a word, he effectively stages the tension between East and West, between past and future, between religion and laicism, in this vast baroque pantomime whose time span stretches from the narrative elephantiasis

of Indian mythology in the remote past to the Babel of the new media in the present.

4. Conclusion

Memory is a bridge crossing time and space: an element of socialisation. Above all it is a bridge between time and space and the primary ground of every transfer, of every figure of speech, it is the mother of the muses and the loom where all yarns are spun. But the master of all tropes is this same exchange between space and time: the spatialisation of time and the temporalisation of space which define the horizon of our thought-language (*logos*). As memories are temporal metaphors, so figures of speech are fossilised cultural memories, linguistic traces of habits and customs cancelled-but-conserved (*aufgehoben*) in the collective unconscious. But in the language, the act of recollection marks above all the live relation between the propositional content of a speech act and its occasional utterance, and thus it is not only a relation between the present and the past tense but also between the active and the passive mode of an event. This configuration of the subject (both the agent and the topic) of cultural memory, this transcendental tropology which situates it, in relation to its historical context, constitutes at once the theme and the narrative programme of *Midnight's Children*. We can recall the ways in which Saleem feels himself linked to the history of India: active, passive, literal and metaphorical, in all their possible combinations (Rushdie 1995: 238). Saleem Sinai's apparently far fetched description of his own historical destiny, ironically represents in fact the double articulation of the language of memory, in time and space: memory of the body and memory of places. And the whole novel is a dislocation of the body of Anglo-Indian cultural memory in its foundational modes and tropes. For us Westerners the memory of Saleem Sinai, living in a decaying individual body, reconstructs, in a tragi-comic act of testimony, the body of an imperfect collective memory and the plural consciousness of a huge subcontinent, in the *facies* (his face being the shape of India), in the simpering voice (the *skatz*), and in the imperious gesture of this unreliable resilient story-teller. As Benjamin says, in the act of oral narration, the reported facts get their significance from "a certain accord of the soul, the eye, and the hand of someone who was born to perceive them and evoke them in his own inner self […] soul, eye, and hand are brought into connection. Interacting with one another they determine a practice. We are no longer familiar with this practice. The role of the hand in production has become more modest, and the place it filled in storytelling lies waste. (After all, storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no means a job for the voice alone. Rather, in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures trained by work.)" (Benjamin 1999b: 106-7) Especially this role of the hand, in the manipulation of the past, in the gesture at once clumsy and authoritative of the story-teller, is thematic in the plot of *Midnight's Children*. This authentic hermeneutic reworking of the past through the toil of the living memory is staged in all its

difficulty and imperfection, and the cooperation of the "soul, eye and hand" of the ancient story-teller, as the keeper of the memory and wisdom of a people, reappears in the grotesque guise of a deformed child of modern India who possesses some features of the ancient elephant-like Indian god of poets, Ganesh, who helped Vyasa (their Homer) write the Mahabahrata. This is a re-visiting of the ancient social function of narrative (that of giving advice to a community) and of its essential dignity, which is woven into the destiny of the narrator, whose talent is at one with his life, and who "could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story" (Benjamin 1999b: 107). This story thus appears as the consummation of an individual body-memory, in the act of making itself available to others and thus public, by the dangerous act of testimony in times of emergency, which can redeem the past of the oppressed and give to all of us a "weak messianic hope" for the future. This for Benjamin is also the real task of the historian: in his words, "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' [...] It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." (Benjamin 1999a: 246) And for Rushdie this is also the task of the story-teller, especially in the case of writers who are exiles, emigrants or expatriates: the task of inventing (8) places of cultural memory, imaginary homelands, which, in each separate reader's response, will be capable for the time being of redeeming the senselessness of universal history.

NOTES:

1. The project (see www.lingue.unibo.it/acume) is coordinated by professor Vita Fortunati of the University of Bologna. To her and to my other colleagues involved in ACUME go my thanks for the fertile discussions of this and related topics in a few recent meetings in Cyprus, Rejikiavik and Trento.
2. The Acts of this Conference are forthcoming.
3. The elephant-god who helped the poet Vyasa write the Mahbahrata, the ancient national Indian Epic.
4. James Joyce gave the same definition of his own Ulysses.
5. In connection with this epoch making cultural change, we might want to remember the clear foresight of the Italian poet and film-director Pier Paolo Pasolini, who (like Marshall MacLuhan) used to be derided some thirty years ago by wise engaged intellectuals and professional opinion makers, both of the right and of the left wing, because he was considered exceedingly "primitive" and catastrophist, while he was simply to the point.
6. Both in the sense of a birth and in that of a political crisis.
7. Chutney is a sweet-and-sour Indian sauce.
8. In the double sense of finding them and of creating them. See Ricoeur 1983: 85-129.

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