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A Line of Yoricks. Salman Rushdie's Bastard Legacies between East and West

East, West

> But I, too, have ropes around my neck, I have them this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, *choose*, *choose*. I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoes, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose.
>
> (Salman Rushdie, *East, West*)

Since the beginning of his career Salman Rushdie has unflinchingly sustained and translated his otherwise all-too-dangerously unsteady location between East and West as an empowering gift, both in fictional and critical terms: the gift of "inventing new parents … [and] giving birth to fathers and mothers".[1]

In his short story "Yorick", Rushdie's reconstruction of a whole hybridized genealogy of Fools seems to respond, for all its ludicrous overtones, to a similar generative and translational dynamic. [2] Accordingly, this paper discusses the text as a complex palimpsest of literary, linguistic and cultural traces, echoes and influences, locating the author's storytelling between and beyond two of the most exemplary texts of the Western canon: *Hamlet* and *Tristram Shandy*. Moving to and fro between Shakespeare and Sterne, Rushdie's revisionary virulence heightens, parodies and exploits to the full the carnivalesque, 'motley' character of Shakespeare's fool and his equivocal heir, Parson Yorick. At every level the palimpsestic interplay of uncertain filiations and precarious affiliations contributes to disrupting a linear, univocal transmission of names, meanings, families, stories and texts. Although Rushdie's short story seems firmly anchored to the literature of the West, the West itself is furtively and obliquely re-inscribed by the author's stereoscopic vision, becoming a hybrid parchment of spurious fragments and bastard characters.

Originally published in 1982, "Yorick" was slightly revised and reprinted in 1994 in *East, West*, a single collection of nine separate stories, six of which had already been published and re-arranged *a posteriori* in the tripartite symmetrical structure of the book: "East", "West", and "East, West".[3] As usual with Rushdie, the emphatic repetition of East and West in the three sections of the text, however, works as a false track for the readers naively expecting to find clear demarcations and passages from one section

[1] Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Pan Books, Picador edition, 1982), 108.

[2] "Yorick" was published twice: originally in *Encounter*, 59.3-4 (September/October 1982), 3-8, and then in a slightly revised form in Salman Rushdie, *Est, West* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994, repr. London: Vintage, 1995), 63-83. Quotations all refer to the latter edition; references will henceforth be included in the text.

[3] Although this symmetry is "more seeming than substantial" from a strictly chronological point of view (see Stefano Manferlotti, "Salman Rushdie's Short Stories", *Textus* 11.1 (1998), 39), it responds to Rushdie's need to assemble the previous stories as gradual steps towards a more coherent design for his collection.

to the next. Instead of neat signposts and partitions, each story ambiguously resists a safe anchorage to a single section. Rather, they oscillate between the location and the dislocation of commonplaces, of real and imaginary landscapes, and of broken, scattered memories. Each tale, endowed with its own peculiar physiognomy, contributes to exploring the interstitial and translational process that has marked Rushdie's existential and literary formation as a migrant writer, sharing the crucial questions of all his work: "home, exile and change among them".[4]

As the author himself revealed in an interview, his divided yet unresolved position between East and West was somehow condensed in the very punctuation of the title: "'I said to people when I started thinking of calling the stories East, West that the most important part of the title was the comma. Because it seems to me that I am that comma – or at least that I live in the comma'".[5] The comma in the title marks the space of the interval, the interstices between different localities and temporalities, creating a "third space" from the interruption and disruption of the migrant's life caught between past and future, memories and expectations, desire and frustration, home and the world.[6] In addition to the mute eloquence of that piece of punctuation, the very wording of the title helps to elicit complex questions of geographical and cultural belonging, for it ironically echoes two much abused expressions of Englishness. 'East, West' is, indeed, the beginning of the familiar saying "East, West – Home's best", but also the opening line of one of Kipling's most controversial ballads, "The Ballad of East and West": "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet". The less well-known lines that follow seem however to work as a counterstatement: "But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,/ When two strong men stand face to face/ tho' they come from the ends of the earth!".[7] As Florence Cabaret suggests, the line "may point either to the irreconcilable nature of the two territories or to their possible merging thanks to the relationships between people from the two areas", so that Rushdie's truncated quotation of the ballad's infamous beginning may allude to the deep ambivalence and impossible choice lying at the heart of the whole collection.[8]

As to "Yorick", the short story obviously belongs to the section entitled "West", but its textual location undergoes the same estranging process of dislocation and radical fragmentation as the whole of the collection. One might almost hazard the suggestion that it is the story's all too familiar title that spurs its author's iconoclastic response, arraying a whole series of defamiliarising strategies against its canonic weight. In this respect, Rushdie's "Yorick" may also be interpreted as a caricature of the author's own "eagerness to dis-locate and relocate famous texts of English culture",[9] so that the very name of Yorick literally entitles the story to being included in a book provocatively called *East, West*. If at first glance

[4] Anonymous, "Homeless Is Where the Art Is" (1994), in Michael Reder, ed., *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississipi, 2000), 163.

[5] Ibid.

[6] As Homi K. Bhabha acknowledges in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), ix, Salman Rushdie's writings have had a strong impact on his elaboration of the concept of the third space as the space opening a possibility of cultural hybridity.

[7] Rudyard Kipling, *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 234.

[8] Florence Cabaret, "From Location to Dislocation in Salman Rushdie's *East, West* and Rohinston Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag*", in Martha Dvořák and W. H. New, eds, *Tropes and Territories. Short Fiction, Postcolonial Readings, Canadian Writing in Context* (Montreal and Ithaca NY: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 172-73.

[9] Ibid.

the text may strike the readers as a fanciful sort of extravaganza, yet at a deeper level it entertains a paradigmatic relationship with Rushdie's authorial project of assembling new and already-printed material under this title: "Yorick" shares not only the same revisionary agenda as all the other stories (in line with Rushdie's life-long exploration of geographic, linguistic, national, and cultural boundaries), but also the conception of the whole text as a fragmented assemblage of distinct tales. As such it urges its readers to make what Cabaret terms "a double reading" – one that is both metonymic (as each short story stands for the whole) and metaphoric (as thematic and symbolic motifs incessantly shift from one story to another). [10] From this perspective, the palimpsestic mélange of intertextual fragments in "Yorick", each resonating with a characteristic narrative regime and a different stylistic imprint, may also work as a caricatural *mise en abyme* of the writerly and readerly effect of the collection as a whole, made of fragmented and partially overlapping stories. It is worth noting that the main difference between the first version of "Yorick" and the one included in the collection concerns the segmentation of the text, apart from a few cases of semantic change. The earlier version is divided into five sections of much the same length; whereas the latter provides many more disjunctions and intervals in the layout, even isolating single paragraphs – like the opening monologue with its abrupt digressions, or the part that is interrupted by impatient readers/spectators, the list of a monstrous banquet and so on. In a way, even the paratextual re-arrangement and re-location of "Yorick" in *East, West* seem to suggest a further dramatization of its cultural displacement and textual dismemberment.

[10] Idem, 169. The caricature of this fragmented reading in "Yorick" is further illustrated in a note at the end of Cabaret's paper (175).

Imaginary Homelands

If the reprinting of "Yorick" in *East, West* is coherent with the overall design of the collection, at the same time it is equally significant that the story should first have been published over a decade earlier, only one year after the 1981 Booker Prize winning-novel, *Midnight's Children*, and the same year as the seminal essay on "Imaginary Homelands" that would lend its suggestive title to Rushdie's first collection of essays and criticism in 1991. In this essay, conceived as the author's own intervention in the worldwide debate still going on around his ground-breaking novel of the previous year, Rushdie begins to come to terms with his vocation as a "literary migrant" and to vindicate the right "to choose his parents", [11] invoking for himself the same empowering gift he had conceded to Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of his first family saga. In the case of Indian writers in English the creative process cannot escape the tense, ambivalent confrontation with "a

[11] "Imaginary Homelands" (1982), in Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 21.

second tradition", which may be consciously exploited and reinterpreted as a means of enriching the writer's own cultural inheritance and as a pre-text for a continuous process of transnational crossover and revision. Indeed, it is by virtue of what Rushdie calls "the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group" that he feels most confident in claiming for himself the same artistic freedom as that enjoyed by Western writers:

> Art is a passion of the mind. And the imagination works best when it is most free. Western writers have always felt free to be eclectic in their selection of theme, setting, form; Western visual artists have, in this century, been happily raiding the visual storehouses of Africa, Asia, the Philippines. I am sure that we must grant ourselves an equal freedom. (20)

The power of choosing one's parents and the freedom to happily raid the treasures of Western literature lies at the heart of "Yorick", which assembles motifs and echoes from the most popular Shakespearean tragedy, *Hamlet*, with the ironical modes of the most eccentric novel of the English canon, *Tristram Shandy*, a novel ambiguously divided *avant la lettre* between modernism and postmodernism.[12] It is not accidental that Western critics have often indicated the latter text as a possible source of inspiration for the rambling digressions of *Midnight's Children*, even though Rushdie has always downplayed its influence in favor of stronger ties with the millenarian tradition of Indian oral storytelling.

The present paper suggests the same generative, translational matrix for Rushdie's short story and his acclaimed novel of 1981, a matrix that uncannily resembles and dissembles Rushdie's intertextual abuse of his literary predecessors: the narrative plotting of the narrator-protagonist's parental, national and cultural inheritance in terms of a family saga – a saga that will prove vulnerable to a plurality of beginnings and hybrid affiliations. In other words, the precarious condition of the migrant facing a perplexing plurality of legacies is explored, or better, translated by Rushdie into a narrative of disputable conceptions and dubious ties that simultaneously intertwine both the genealogical and literary level. Whereas the novel develops the theme of individual and collective belonging into a fabulous epic historiography of post-Independence India, the short story comprises the question of the migrant writer's second tradition within a farcical palimpsest of surrogate parents and multiple ancestors. In both cases, the narrative is initiated as a series of spurious false starts leading finally to the disintegration of the protagonists and the dissemination of their equivocal heirs. As Saleem has to choose between too many parents, so too Rushdie's "Yorick" has to confront the influence of too many predecessors competing for authorial recognition.

[12] On the controversial location of Sterne's writings see David Pierce and Peter de Voogd, eds., *Laurence Sterne in Modernism and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam and Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1996), in particular Carol Watts, "The Modernity of Sterne", 19-38.

Spurious Beginnings and Double Plottings

> But there are other mothers-to-be, other future fathers, wafting in and out through the silence.
> (Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*)

The very incipit of Rushdie's short story "Yorick" makes all too clear that his rewriting of *Hamlet* is inspired and in a way authorized through the same material source as Sterne's is for *Tristram Shandy*'s Parson Yorick. No sooner has Sterne's narrator introduced the Parson's name, than he immediately hastens to explain: "as appears from a most ancient account of the family, wrote upon strong vellum, and now in perfect preservation".[13] The document is itself a palimpsest and as such the most apposite support for the intertextual play that characterizes the novel at large, serving explicitly to authenticate the Danish origin of Yorick's name – which is tantamount to authenticating the Parson's descent from *Hamlet*'s famous jester. The passage introducing Rushdie's precious family record is not however limited to a parenthetical remark as in Sterne, but is elaborated and structured as a sort of dramatic 'aside' to the readers/spectators, in terms which exasperate Tristram's self-complacent and rambling accents as well as his irrepressible penchant for self-interruptions and digressions. Rushdie's tale opens with a hyperbolic, almost hysterical monologue:

> Thank the heavens! – or the diligence of ancient-time papersmiths – for the existence upon our earth of the material known as *strong vellum*; which, like the earth upon which I have supposed it to exist (although in point of fact its contacts with *terra firma* are most rare, its natural habitations being shelves, wooden or not wooden, some dusty, others maintained in excellent order; or letter-boxes, desk drawers, old trunks, the most secret pockets of courting lovers, shops, files, attics, cellars, museums, deed-boxes, safes, lawyers' offices, doctors' walls, your favourite great-aunt's seaside home, theatrical property departments, fairy tales, summit conferences, tourist traps), … like the earth, I say again in case you have forgot my purpose, this noble stuff endures – if not for ever, then at least till men consciously destroy it, whether by crumpling or shredding, … , by actions incendiary or lavatorial, _ for it's a true fact that men take an equal pleasure in annihilating both the ground upon which they stand while they live and the substance (I mean paper) upon which they may remain, immortalized, once this same ground is over their heads instead of under their feet; and that the complete inventory of such strategies of destruction would over-fill more pages than my ration, … so then to the devil with that list and on with my story; which, as I had begun to say, is itself the tale of a piece of vellum – both the tale of the vellum itself and the tale inscribed thereupon. (63-64)

The passage opens and closes with the reference to the *strong vellum*, celebrated as a noble and enduring material; yet its solidity is soon disrupted by the two long digressions *à la Sterne* that intervene in between. The

[13] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, ed. by, Graham Petrie (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1985), 52-53.

first provides a humorous inventory of unsteady dislocations from *terra firma*, by enumerating all sorts of possible arrangements for such documents. Whereas the second only embarks on a preliminary discourse but is abruptly interrupted because a list of destructive human energies would prove excessively encumbering. Located within such a discouraging framework of interminable caveats, the strong vellum turns out to be precariously balanced between preservation and deterioration, transmission and censorship, destruction and recreation, and what comes to the fore is not so much its noble resistance but its physical vulnerability to all sorts of location and dislocation, change and abuse. In this way the parchment is literally and figuratively unravelled as a palimpsest of erased sources and traces that juxtaposes "both the tale of the vellum itself and the tale inscribed thereupon". By pointing to its multilayered texture, it not only bears testimony to the family narrative but also to the parallel tale of the manipulations to which any text as a physical object is always exposed. Here, as in Sterne's novel, the focus is on the palimpsestic quality of the text, indeed of any text, and thus on the controversial issue of origin and originality. Rushdie's short story opens ironically with the vulnerable legitimacy of its familial and literary source, amplifying Sterne's parodic use of the XVIIIth century narrative cliché of providing material evidence into a palimpsest that even suggests a global network of economic transactions. The latter point is elucidated by Adelaine La Guardia Nogueira as follows:

> The materiality of writing is recalled by the word *vellum*, as a whole economic history of writing involving East and West is synthesized in such reference, for the *vellum*, a parchment originally made from calf skin, came as a substitute to the papyrus made in the East, after an embargo of the product by the Greek City of Pergamon. Destruction, therefore, is not restricted to the writing practices but affects the whole economy which involves and controls the writing and reading activities.[14]

If Rushdie shares the same authorial preoccupation as Sterne with regard to the 'worldly', material circumstances involved in writing and reading, both authors also have in common their deconstruction of familial genealogies and thus their questioning of any naive assumption of literary origin. If we turn to *Tristram Shandy* and the passage that introduces the character of Parson Yorick, the focus soon shifts from the strong vellum to the expectations that such a name may elicit in the readers' imagination. Gradually the initial scenario of a perfect preservation of Yorick's lineage is undermined by the risk of alteration and fragmentation attending the very transmission of family surnames, even in the most entitled cases:

> *YORICK was this parson's name*, and, what is very remarkable in it, … it had been exactly so spelt for near, – I was within an ace of saying nine hundred

[14] Adelaine La Guardia Nogueira, "Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Rushdie's 'Yorick', and the Dilemmas of Tradition", in Aimara da Cunha Resende, ed., *Foreign Accents: Brazilian Readings of Shakespeare* (Newark and London: University of Delaware Press and Associated University Presses, 2002), 144.

years; _ but I would not shake my credit in telling an improbable truth, however indisputable in itself; _ and therefore I shall content myself with only saying, _ *It had been exactly so spelt, without the least variation or transposition of a single letter, for I do not know how long*; which is more than I would venture to say of *one half of the best surnames in the kingdom*; which, *in a course of years, have generally undergone as many chops and changes as their owners* …. But a villainous affair it is, and will one day *so blend and confound us all together*, that no one shall be able to stand up and swear, 'That his own great grandfather was the man who did either this or that'.(52-53, emphasis mine)

But such a remarkable preservation of every single letter in the name of Yorick very soon appears hard to sustain, for readers are explicitly alerted to the need to check the case in the authoritative source for *Hamlet*'s storyline, the *Historiae Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus, where no such a name is actually to be found. Sterne's narrator cunningly leaves the task to his readers: "I have not the time to look into Saxo-Grammaticus Danish history, to know the certainty of this; – but if you have leisure, and can get easily at the book, you may do it full as well yourself"(53-54). For his own part, he prefers to further insinuate a suspicion of corruption and ambiguity for his Parson due to the destabilizing effect of the capricious climate of England upon "the cold phlegm" and "exact regularity" of the Danish descendants of the jester. In other words, it is the transplantation of Yorick's family to the "unsettled island" of Albion – a transplantation concomitant with the supposedly authentic facts reported by Saxo-Grammaticus – that has proved fatal for the preservation of the familial/national features. The result is Parson Yorick's eccentric and erratic characterization in open contradiction to his avowed extraction: not only did he seem not to have retained "one single drop of Danish blood in his whole crasis; in nine hundred years, it might possibly have all run out"(54), but he was endowed with "as mercurial and sublimated a composition, – as heteroclite a creature in all his declensions; – with as much life and whim, and *gaité de cœur* about him, as the kindliest climate could have engendered and put together"(55). By virtue of this parodic interplay, the originality of Sterne's Yorick is ambiguously alleged on the basis of its hybrid and composite nature, simultaneously encouraging and discouraging Tristram's authorial claim that his Parson shares the same Danish ancestry as Shakespeare's fool.[15]

There is no space here to discuss all the intertextual threads Sterne weaves into his 'motley' characterization of Parson Yorick: not only as one of the putative 'fathers' of *Tristram Shandy* and the only protagonist and first person narrator of *A Sentimental Journey*. His notorious name also proved a rewarding, even if equivocal, mask for his very author, the parson Laurence Sterne, who, soon after the clamour of his first novel, hastened to publish his *Sermons* under the pseudonym of Mr. Yorick in order to exploit to the full the confusion of life and fiction in his artful self-fashioning of a provocative print identity. In more than one sense, Parson Yorick

[15] I have already focused upon Sterne's provocative, deconstructive re-reading of *Hamlet*'s jester in "L'avventura eccentrica di Yorick nel *Tristram Shandy*", *Annali-Anglistica* 32.1 (1989), 125-50, where I also discuss clear traces of Rabelais and Cervantes in Yorick's 'heteroclite' crasis.

may be seen to embody the "multilaminated" nature of Sterne's pioneering self-conscious fiction,[16] comprising different layers of translation from one source to the other, from one text to the other, from the gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet* to the novel's humorous black page – the page arranged by Sterne as the typographic illustration for the famous epitaph quoted from the tragedy, "Alas poor Yorick!", that marked the tragicomic end of Tristram's beloved mentor.

While adopting and accentuating the palimpsestic texture of Sterne's presentation of Parson Yorick, Rushdie's own rewriting of the Danish family saga still maintains a characteristic and original position. To begin with, his short story retraces the trajectory backwards again from the eccentric XVIIIth-century text to the remote, turbulent times of the Danish kingdom represented in *Hamlet*. What is more relevant, his reconstruction does not translate the tragic play into a local, postcolonial setting, as is the case of most contemporary appropriations of Shakespeare. Refusing any binary divide of the West/Rest axis, Rushdie seems more interested in disclosing, to the utmost degree, the fruitful impurity and dense intertextuality already at work in both his Western predecessors, thereby mapping and relocating a network of cross-references for his journeying to and fro between *Tristram Shandy* and *Hamlet*. This explains why the first Yorick we meet in Rushdie's text is not the Shakespearean jester but the "velluminous history" in the possession of his equivocal Shandean heir –

a move coherent with the palimpsestic arrangement of the tale, where the more recent layers are also the first to be critically unravelled. As Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan and Ana Sáez Hidalgo point out, the intertextual interlacing of the short story "even goes beyond the idea of literature about literature and becomes literature out of literature in a new sense", inverting the linear direction of literary tradition and proceeding backwards from the texts temporally closer to the present age to those that are more remote.[17] After his mocking exhibition of the strong vellum, Rushdie's narrator flamboyantly introduces the literary layers that have been superimposed upon his "ancient" and "dusty" parchment:

> Yorick's saga, of course; that same ancient account which fell, near enough two hundred and thirty-five years ago, into the hands of a certain – no, a most uncertain – *Tristram*, who (although Yseult-less) was neither triste nor ram, the frothiest, most heady Shandy of a fellow; and which has now come into my possession by processes too arcane to detain the eager reader. Truly, a velluminous history! – … Here, dusty-faced and inky-fingered, lurk beautiful wives, old fools, cuckoldry, jealousy, murder, juice of cursed hebona, executions, skulls; as well as a full exposition of why, in the *Hamlet* of William Shakespeare, the morbid prince seems unaware of his own father's real name. (64)

Here, the self-complacent linguistic exuberance of Rushdie's narrator suggests an irrepressible sense of relish in so luxuriant and varied a banquet

[16] For "multilaminated" see Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 21. It is applied to Rushdie's rewriting of Shakespeare in Parmita Kapadia, "Transnational Shakespeare: Salman Rushdie and Intertextual Appropriation", *The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 3.2 (Spring/Summer 2008), 5.

[17] Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan and Ana Sáez Hidalgo, "The Fooler Fooled: Salman Rushdie's Hybrid Revision of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through 'Yorick'", in Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia, eds., *Native Shakespeares. Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2008), 81.

of different stylistic tastes, each mimicking the flourishes and punning acrobatics that were prominent features of the vellum's author/proprietor predecessors. The image of a linguistic banquet seems particularly suitable for Rushdie's entanglement of a familial and literary saga descending from a professional royal fool, "a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy" and "whose gibes, gambols, songs and flashes of merriment … were wont to set the table on a roar".[18] On the other hand, a taste for the voracious, promiscuous, carnivalesque heteroglossia of language is typical of Rushdie himself, who has explicitly recognized the cannibalistic drive at the heart of his storytelling. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai boasts he is "a swallower of lives" (9); and if the narrator of the fabulous epic novel has to swallow the world in order to make meaning out of a single life; analogously, the narrator of "Yorick" has to ingurgitate a whole line of Yoricks, a whole tradition of literary and critical issues, in order to initiate his tale. This explains why the short story introduces Yorick's saga with a stylistic palimpsest that gluttonously swallows up words, phrases, and even critical interpretations, mostly derived from the rich inventiveness of Elizabethan prose and Shakespeare's masterful parody of its pedantry,[19] together with Sterne's own digressive variations on learned wit. Rushdie's command of fragmented mimicry revels in misquoting and misnaming, turning the arms of equivocation, peculiar to the Shakespearean fool, against the very authors who had mastered them before him.

[18] The verses are quoted from the gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet* (V, 1, 178-79 and 184-85, Arden, ed. by Harold Jenkins (London and New York: Routledge, 1989). Significantly, Sterne's Parson Yorick is described in the same eulogistic terms in the initial chapters of *Tristram Shandy* devoted to his tragicomical end.

[19] The echoes of Elizabethan witticisms and of tools used in critical editing are analysed in Guerrero-Strachan and Hidalgo, "The Fooler Fooled", 80; and in Kapadia, cit., 7.

Thus, Sterne is mocked for his most "uncertain" *Tristram Shandy* through a couple of telling attributes that comprise a network of dubious intertextual and intratextual associations with the fatal name of his protagonist. From the medieval romance of *Tristan and Isolde* to the woeful fate lamented by Walter Shandy for the truncated form of his heir's name (the pitiful fall from the noble 'Trismegistus' to the most dishonorable 'Tristram'), the adjective *triste* points to a Latin quotation in the novel (*Quod omne animal post coitum est triste*) that recapitulates the unhappy circumstances both of the protagonist's and of the whole book's conception: as a critic has put it, "the joke is that poor Tristram is sad for the rest of his life, not because of his own but because of his parents' coition".[20] And Tristram's impaired virility is also insinuated by the reference to "ram" that may represent Rushdie's Indianized inflection of Sterne's own lubricious play with "bulls" and "cocks".

[20] Christopher Ricks, "Introduction" to Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 19.

The text of *Hamlet* undergoes a similar misreading, or mis-editing: significantly, in order to begin his story, Rushdie's narrator freely plunders the very ending of the tragedy, turning the solemn final words of the faithful Horatio into the literal starting point of the "dusty-faced and inky-fingered" characters still legible upon his parchment. If the act of storytelling was crucial in the play in order to restore Hamlet's "wounded name", Rushdie's retelling aims to open up and grotesquely anatomize the very

wounds that equivocation and intertextual migration may inflict upon names and legacies. Thus the action of his "Yorick" is set in motion by the need to elucidate the secret plots lurking behind the fatal, albeit unconscious, oblivion of his own father's name by the "morbid prince" _ Hamlet's Oedipal slippage from his father's true name, Horwendillus, to his own. The narrator does not miss the chance to dramatize the sensational impact of such critical insights upon his audience of unruly spectators:

> What's this? Interruptions already? Did I not tell you, have I not just this moment set down, that the bardic Hamlet, that's to say Amlethus of the Danes, is quite mistaken in believing the Ghost's name to be Hamlet too? – An error not only unusual but unfilial, not only unfilial but downright *unsaxogrammatical*, one may say, for it is contradicted by no less an authority than Saxo-Grammaticus's *History of the Danes*! – But were you to be silent and hear me out you'd learn it was no mistake whatsoever, but rather the criptic key by which our tale's true meaning may most swiftly be unlocked. (64-65)

As the tale unfolds, Rushdie's narrator seems more and more determined to recklessly embrace the Shandean role of "philologist cum story-teller",[21] and it becomes almost impossible to disentangle the literary plot from the family plot ensuing from his endless virtuoso self-editing practice. Thus, he not only pretends to comply strictly with the authoritative text of Saxo Grammaticus, where the King's name is actually Horwendillus and not Hamlethus, but while vindicating such philological exactness for his ingenious interpretative key for Hamlet's unconscious misnaming of his father he also pretends to reconstruct a more surprising, parallel lineage omitted by Shakespeare _ the "Line of Yoricks" descending from the king's jester and a bride mischievously called Ophelia. Again the narrator gleefully claims his right to duplicate and reinterpret names and characters from the tragedy, Ophelia's *name* being provocatively misattributed to the female branch of the jester's dynasty:

> I repeat :
> Horwendillus. Horwendillus Rex … – Still more questions? – Sir, of course the jester had a wife; she may not feature in the great man's play, but you'll concede that a woman's a necessary apparatus if a man would make a dynasty, and how else? – answer me that? – could the antique Fool have produced that Line, that veritable Monologue of Yoricks of whom the ill-named Tristram person's *parson* was but one single syllable? Well! You don't need ancient vellum to see the truth of THAT, I think. – Good Lord; her *name*? Sir, you must take it upon my word. But where's the puzzle? Do you imagine that this 'Ophelia' was so blasted uncommon a name in a land where men were called such things as Amlethus, Horwend&c., yes, and Yorick, too? So, so. Let's go on.
> Yorick espoused Ophelia. There was a child. Let's have no more disputes.(65-66)

Rushdie's garrulous narrator is not content with taking on Shakespeare's jester from the gravediggers' scene, bringing him back to life, as Sterne

[21] On Rushdie's mimicry of Sterne's parodic techniques see Michael Meyer, "Swift and Sterne Revisited. Postcolonial Parodies in Rushdie and Singh-Tor", in Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein, eds., *Cheeky Fictions. Laughter and the Postcolonial* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2005), 123.

had already dared to do in his novels, but he reduplicates this "excavation process" with Ophelia, and endows 'his' Yorick with a spouse all-too-dangerously called by the same name. [22] If the two characters only shared the common ground of the cemetery in *Hamlet*, Rushdie's tale not only restores both of them to life but unites the incredible couple in matrimony in order to ensure Yorick a dynasty. Even if the narrator insists that this Ophelia is not the character buried in Shakespeare's play, he is well aware that for readers familiar with *Hamlet* the confusion is as inevitable as impudent, and his story will accordingly exploit the risks of such equivocation, as embodied to a caricatural extent in the woman's pestilential bad breath.[23]

By continuously alerting his grunting, skeptical readers to the fatally disfiguring and estranging power of names and namesakes, Rushdie's imaginary saga cannot help being literally engrossed in the fissures and crevices of the world that is turned tragically upside down and out of joint in Shakespeare's play. Built as it is upon the airy Shandean foundations of spurious names ("the ill-named Tristram") and dubious surrogates ("the person's *parson*"), Rushdie's plot perversely retranslates the figurative density of the tragedy into the literally coarse and degrading level of a farce and, accordingly, transforms every step of *Hamlet*'s psychosexual drama into ludicrous events "that foreground grotesquely smelling, puking, copulating, and urinating bodies".[24] Hamlet is portrayed as a seven-year-old capricious child, who already muses gravely over his mixed feelings of filial/unfilial attachment to his father's jester and the latter's wife Ophelia. One day, hidden behind an arras in Gertrude's chamber, the boy misinterprets his parents' lovemaking as the king's attempt to suffocate the queen. Obsessed by the scene, he meditates a double revenge using his surrogate father against his royal father. He prompts the venomous suspicion in the fool that his adored wife Ophelia and the King are lovers. Blind with jealousy, Yorick pours real venom into Horwendillus's ear, and when the murder is discovered Ophelia goes mad and dies, while the buffoon is sent to death. When Gertrude marries Claudius, Hamlet, "in his mother-loving passion", accuses the new King of his brother's murder using again Yorick's execution as "the camouflage, the *arras* behind which the Truth was hid". But the ghost of jealousy bearing his own name haunts the prince, making him betray his guilty conscience. At last, Hamlet really goes mad, rejects "his own Ophelia" and "drinks from a poisoned cup"(82). Clearly, the main themes of the tragedy (revenge, madness, and suicide) are not only maintained, but in a way ludicrously mimicked through a comic subplot involving lower-class or marginal characters. In so doing, Rushdie's text duplicates and exacerbates *Hamlet*'s family ties and plots almost to a paroxysm, providing the play with a clamorous prequel.

[22] La Guardia Nogueira aptly underlines the "sort of excavation process" at work in Rushdie's rewriting of *Hamlet* that amplifies the "carnival sense of the world" already present in the gravediggers' scene ("The Dilemmas of Tradition", 140).

[23] As Guerrero-Strachan and Hidalgo explain, Ophelia's bad breath was "an anecdotal – and maybe covertly moral commentary" on her character in late XVIIth-century criticism, but in Rushdie it becomes "somewhat of a *leit-motif*" ("The Fooler Fooled", 81), and, what I find more telling, with grotesque consequences for the story.

[24] *Cheeky Fictions*, 125.

In a way, it seems no exaggeration to argue that the short story's perversely self-proliferating play with all sorts of carnivalesque inversions and torbid mésalliances is prompted from its very beginning by the intoxicating air of linguistic estrangement pervading the whole act of retelling, and thus of Rushdie's writing back to "the great man's play" from the viewpoint of minor, marginal or even suppressed characters. The prevailing atmosphere is thus indelibly imbued with the strangeness and 'newness' of foreign names which enter and unsettle the state and stage of England. The very name of Yorick, together with those of Amlethus, Horwendillus and the duplication of Ophelia, seems to allude not only to the possibility of other sources and versions of the story but also to the suppressed memories of the remote, turbulent times of the island's exposure to Nordic invasions from Jutland. The alternative genealogy of fools reconstructed by Rushdie thus revolves grotesquely around the uncanny "amalgam" of different languages, histories, geographies and cultures that lies at the very heart of Englishness.[25]

[25] For the image of English literature as an amalgam see Stephen Greenblatt, "Racial Memory and Literary History", *PMLA* 116.1 (2001), 48-62 (52). The point is already elaborated in relation to Rushdie's rewriting of Shakespeare in Kapadia, "Transnational Shakespeare", 16.

Equivocal Coda: Bastard Slippages from Clocks to Cocks

For all its biting, rambunctious overtones, the most disruptive character of Rushdie's "Yorick" is its retelling or reinterpretation of the most famous tragedy of the Western canon in terms of a family saga of migration and linguistic displacement; a saga that begins with the dubious names of the parental/authorial couples and ends with a legacy of cultural mélange and incessant cross-pollination that goes well beyond the apparently farcical denouement of the short story. Significantly, the only survivors the story admits _ out of the fatally morbid entanglement of royal and surrogate parents _ are the offspring of Yorick and Ophelia,[26] allowed to "wander the world" eastwards and westwards, disseminating the fool's irreverent seeds right up to the Rushdian heir of the "sorry" line:

[26] It may be worth noting that the only characteristic the text discloses with regard to Yorick's heir is the baby's "proboscis"(70), a telling detail not only for its explicit Indian connotation but also for the centrality of noses (and smells) in Sterne and Rushdie.

> Yorick's child survives, and leaves the scene of his family's tragedy; wanders the world, sowing his seed in far-off lands, from west to east and back again; and multicoloured generations follow, ending (I'll now reveal) in this present, humble AUTHOR; whose ancestry may be proved by this, which he holds in common with the whole sorry line of the family, that his chief weakness is for the telling of a particular species of Tale, which learned men have termed *chanticleric*, and also *taurean*.
> And just such a COCK-AND-BULL story is by this last confession brought quite to its conclusion.(83)

The very end of the tale echoes the notorious, nonsensical conclusion of *Tristram Shandy*. Significantly, in Sterne's novel the last words are spoken by Parson Yorick, responding to another of Mrs. Shandy's most untimely questions with a pun on the impotence of Walter Shandy's bull. As such,

for all its mockingly inconsistent connotation, the reference to a "cock-and-bull-story" opens up a number of cross-references to bastard innuendoes in-between Sterne and Rushdie's fiction. For readers familiar with the eighteenth-century text, the final insinuation of "a cock-and-bull story" also seems to corroborate the mark of illegitimacy for the sad heir of the Shandies, transferring the incrimination of impotence from the bull to the male proprietor of Shandy Hall, thereby suggesting a radical disruption of the familial lineage. As an intriguing essay has recently argued, the bastardy motif also marks the "clock-ridden" inception Rushdie's major novel shares with *Tristram Shandy*.[27] In the case of the latter, what is still worthier of note is the paronomasia linking the word "cock", which closes the story with its gross sexual allusion, to the infamous "clock" of the initial bed scene, supposed to have set Tristram "a-going" and thereby contributing to a sort of equivocal circular frame for the whole act of Tristram's storytelling. [28]

It is perhaps not accidental that the heir to this Western line of Yoricks, Rushdie's narrator, does not miss the opportunity to point to a similar slippage from "clocks" to "cocks" at the end of his short story where he coins the words *chanticleric* and *taurean* in order to translate "a cock-and-bull story" in more elevated, learned terms. If *taurean* is the equivalent to bull according to its Latin etymon, *chanticleric* obliquely refers to the famous cock of the "Nun's Priest's Tale" from another capital work in the English canon, *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer's cock is called Chanticleer and his crowing was stouter "[t]han the loudest abbey clock".[29] Far from being a far-fetched, peregrine instance of pedantry,[30] the cock/clock rhyme from the most famous collection of tales in English literature represents the last pregnant trace gleefully disclosed by Rushdie's hybridized palimpsest of Yoricks.

[27] See Catherine Pesso-Miguel, "Clock-ridden Births: Creative Bastardy in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*", in Christian Gutleben and Susana Onega, eds., *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi 2004), 17-52. The paper suggests Parson Yorick is indeed the true father of Tristram Shandy.

[28] I have slightly rephrased the expression "'set a-going' (like a clock)" nicely suggested by Walter Göbel and Damian Grant ("Salman Rushdie's Silver Medal", in *Sterne in Modernism and Postmodernism*, 88). For an intriguing discussion of the paronomasia of cock/clock see Pesso-Miguel, "Clock-ridden Births", 20-21.

[29] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Portable Chaucer*, sel., trans., and edit. by, Theodore Morrison (New York: Viking Press, 1949), 201.

[30] For Rushdie's coinage see Guerrero-Strachan and Hidalgo, "The Fooler Fooled", 81.