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### The Impossibility of Reading in the Information Age: Warnings of Militarality Spoken in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*

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# **The Impossibility of Reading in the Information Age: Warnings of Militarality Spoken in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh***

Robert P. Marzec

Yesterday our lives were rich and various....Then the atrocity happened; and now we are just its things, we are bit players in a story in which we don't belong. In which we never dreamed we might belong. We have been flattened; reduced.—

Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*

What does it mean to read? What is required of this activity? A good a definition as any, perhaps better than most others, comes to us from Paul De Man. In his exploration of *Remembrance of Things Past* De Man notices that Proust's text presents the act of reading as a staged event. The reader is made highly aware of reading as performance, and gains access to a certain critical suspicion: the text and its narrative come to the foreground in such a way that a self-evident interpretation is impossible. The reader develops an awareness of the complex workings of metaphor, and from this comes to the realization that a text is different from the "undifferentiated mass of facts and events" (57). What one reads, then, are those "distinctive elements susceptible of entering into the composition of a text" (57). The words on the page tender a different significance: they are not to be taken passively, but understood as a particular—as an individually-crafted and thus ideologically informed—composition. From this critical awareness De Man offers an origin from which all conscious acts of reading are unavoidably launched: "Reading has to begin in this unstable commixture of literalism and suspicion" (58). "Reading" consequently names an act that calls for discussion, and not blind belief, nor even a conscious belief that would impose its standards without question on the text being read. We might take the teleological risk and refer to this conscious activity as the reading of reading itself. De Man finds Proust's novel of such value because it opens a pathway to the movement of reading, which is also the movement of language: "Everything in this novel signifies something other than what it represents, be it love, consciousness, politics, art, sodomy, or gastronomy: it is always something else that is intended. It can be shown that the most adequate term to designate this 'something else' is Reading" (77). Reading thus can be said to designate the human activity of reaching out for understanding, but with the realization that absolute and unquestionable understanding is in fact the death of reading, and the death of thinking itself. There is, therefore, a warning tacitly proffered in De Man's "something else." We would do well in the current historical period of what I will refer to here as militarality, to acknowledge the full force of his analysis: a passive act of reading that ignores this something else and embraces instead a belief in absolute understanding is another name for forced acceptance, and forced acceptance is part of the very essence of a military ontology.

Reconstellating the question of reading (and reading is always a question), De Man's work can be productively extended to consider more fully the stakes involved in our contemporary occasion of a world that offers an increasingly limited number of platforms for debate, but the chance to passively accept around every corner. Much critical work has appeared in the last decades of theoretically-informed scholarship revealing the ideological underpinnings of national agendas, transnational corporate-capital incursions, ethnic passions, racial antagonisms, gender restrictions, religious fantasies, and other restraints that cripple the possibilities for an egalitarian and diverse human world of co-existence. Little attention, however, is paid to the key ontological transformation informing the essence of textuality in the age of militarality, other than to note disparagingly in some cases that humans now live in a story-less sound bite culture. Although the military origins of internet development are well documented, many maintain the conviction that because the world-wide web (a problematic term considering that the majority of people on the planet cannot afford and do not have access to a computer, as Jim McGuigan and others have pointed out) <sup>1</sup> has grown so far beyond its original intention that it can now be described more appropriately as a heterotopia that is "revitalizing" citizenry (Rheingold 14). Moreover the connection in the modern age of the military to communications, capitalism, industrialism, technology, and the general transmission of information is now considered by many to be the endemic "problem" of "technological determinism" that plagued first generation medium theory (Moores 46; Meyrowitz 73; Urry 40). It is problematic, to say the least, to dismiss such connections, especially when one considers the influence a statement by a prominent

media personality can have against a novelist that directly challenges a nation's military activities. I have in mind the reaction by neo-liberals and conservatives alike to Salman Rushdie's *The Jaguar Smile*—a memoir of his time in Nicaragua: "A prominent radio interviewer, in a live broadcast, greeted me with the question: 'Mr Rushdie, to what extent are you a Communist stooge?' The *New Republic* gave the book an immensely long and rude review, perhaps the most vitriolic I'd ever received. It turned out to have been written by one of the most important figures in the Contra leadership" (xv). This is not to mention the fact that every time Rushdie is mentioned in the popular press the first "hook" line inevitably introduces him as "the author of the controversial *Satanic Verses*" and solidifies that book's identity solely in terms of the *fatwa*.

The twenty-first century's first, most effective mass-produced sound bite of militariality was of course the image of the smoking twin towers of the New York World Trade Center coupled with the name of Iraq in bold letters alongside pictures of Saddam Hussein. Generated by the American media, this framed image, despite the fact that there was no connection between the attacks on the World Trade Center and Iraq, did more to solidify Iraq with Al Qaeda in the minds of Americans than any of the numerous statements made by the Bush Administration that argued this connection. It would be an understatement to say that the daily representation of this image on nightly news programs, which lasted well over a year in the lead up to the war in 2003, contributed significantly to the mass mobilization of the American citizenry for war. This image, even when the connection was posed as a question by the media, was designed to act as a "media conflagration," to recontextualize a phrase of Paul Virilio's (51). By media conflagration Virilio had in mind the shift from actual war to its continuation elsewhere in the world as an always impending threat in the form of mass produced propaganda films, video surveillance, and detection equipment by the British and the Americans after World War I. Virilio would develop this idea half a decade later along the lines of an explicitly Einsteinian schema of social development by referring to the transmission of reports, statistics, data, etc., as the transformation of knowledge into an "information bomb" (199). The difference between information and war, in other words, has been erased; it is now the age of the "information war" where the "'shock effect' always wins out over the consideration of the informational content" (143).<sup>2</sup> The elements unfortunately missing from Virilio's discussion, important for my analysis here, are the relations between war and reading, war and the formation of subjectivity, and the reciprocal relation between all three. Let us first examine the effect of this erasure of the separation of war and information, before turning to a discussion of reading, subjectivity, and Rushdie's novel.

Consider the structural effect of the information age upon the nature of textuality. The sound bite (which is an element of not only political speeches, film, TV, and media representation in general, but certain book-texts that have come to be of importance to neo-liberals and neo-conservatives alike) triumphs through an astonishing erasure of narrative, an erasure that has become one of the major phenomena of our time. A sound bite is a statement designed not for conscious reading but for speed, and for mass consumption. The quicker its velocity and its reach, the better. No one has to ask what a sound bite means. Indeed, that is the entire point of the very structure of the sound bite. The sound bite does not stage its contextual construction. It is language distilled into the form of a commodity fetish—the form of writing brought into existence by the economy of late capitalism. Thinkers such as Horkheimer and Adorno warned of the rise of apparatuses that have reduced the richness of cultural texts for purposes of mass consumption. In such cases the complexities and self-deconstructive contradictions of a text such as *Robinson Crusoe* can be overlooked and its argument for rugged individualism and entrepreneurship propagated. But in the time of militariality this relationship between the reduction of a complex text and mass consumption has undergone a shift that has taken it to the next stage of its development. We are now witnessing the production of a form of textuality designed from the ground up according to the structure of a sound bite. This is an event far different from what Foucault warned of when he spoke of the power of truth discourses and their connection to regimes of domination: the production of normalized sexuality, for instance, came about not because of a reduction in diverse textual production but through an increase in heterogeneous speech and narration, through a "steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex" and an "implantation of polymorphous sexualities" (Foucault 18, 12). Similarly, when Edward Said spoke of the truth discourse of "orientalism" he made it a point to foreground the fact that the formation of an orientalist attitude came in part through the complex and extensive constitution in long textual narrations of the so-called orientalist identity. These constitutions were part of and formed a large "constellation of ideas"

(*Orientalism* 5). In other words, though these constitutions were "consumed" they were not discrete entities having their own power of influence. Said would go on to show, in *Culture and Imperialism*, that even an orientalist text offers its readers a highly nuanced textuality, that one can highlight a text's richness and creativity (such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Austin's *Mansfield Park*) while also mapping its imperial affiliations.

In each of these cases, reading is still a part of a text's invitation and opens a passage to the "something else" that De Man underlined (even a text that openly supports the colonization of distant lands such as *Robinson Crusoe* encourages its readers to ask fundamental questions about exploration and territorialization). It directs our attention to the assumptions underlying the metaphors, statements, and stories made available for consumption. Reading is an acknowledgment of the artificial (artifice) crafting from out of an "undifferentiated mass" of what finally becomes a *particular selected textuality*, and not a self-evident set of words that describe a true state of affairs. In the act of reading, the attentive thinker recognizes that a composed text imposes limitations on reality, and that reality itself is brought to presence in the act of composition and through the ontological forces operative in existence. If reading demands an awareness of this "something else," then it must be said with as much emphasis as possible that the sound bite is not a statement that can be read. It does not foreground reading as an act. Its very materiality closes off everything other than itself. It erases the possibility for human consciousness to see the "something else" at work. When challenging the dominance of Hegelian logic Marx once made the important point that life "is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life." We must take this observation seriously and in relation to our current socio-political environment, and not understand it solely in terms of the reductive base/superstructure model that came to serve as the primary means of understanding this statement. In making his statement Marx had in mind the material conditions of the working class, a condition that the Hegelian unmaterialized consciousness overlooked. Emphasizing the impact these conditions had on the formation of consciousness does not necessarily make them an axiomatic base; rather the statement comes as a strategy in the struggle to transform the working class (an identity that poses no threat to the reigning order and the functions it assigns to people) into an active and differently conscious proletariat—a new term, as Jacques Rancière points out, designed to dispute the functional terms of the dominant order (Rancière 36-37). However, what we are witnessing today is not only a transformation of the materiality of working conditions (as Jeremy Rifkin has noted), but of textuality as well. If the very materiality of the texts offered for human consumption is undergoing this change, then the very materiality of consciousness and by extension thinking itself is in the midst of a fundamental transformation. This means that human consciousness, in being restructured to receive sound-bite information, is at the same time being made to surrender the ability to read.

Though many have remarked on the ubiquity of sound bites in today's world, theorists have yet to recognize the enormous impact that sound bite ontology has on restricting the ability of critical inquiry to move beyond its limited disciplinary confines. Said comes close to this when he emphasizes the threat that reading faces when arguing for a return to philology in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*:

[T]he prepackaged information that dominates our patterns of thought (the media, advertising, official declarations, and ideological political argument designed to persuade or to lull into submission, not to stimulate thought and engage the intellect) tends to fit into short, telegraphic forms. CNN and the *New York Times* present information in headlines or sound bites....All the choices, exclusions, and emphases—to say nothing of the history of the subject at hand—are invisible, dismissed as irrelevant. (73)

This observation needs to be extended to consider the relationship between the mediatized event and what Derrida has called "*mondialisation*": the amplification and "becoming-worldwide" of a particular world, its images, statements, and structures, that comes to stand in for a heterogeneity of worlds (79). It would not be an understatement to say, for instance, that the field of postcolonial studies has been significantly annexed from the major arenas of political activity due to its *mondialisation*, to its simultaneous reduction and amplification on the register of the dominant polity. Consider the following statement made about Said and "postcolonial theory" given by the authors in Frank J. Gaffney's 2006 edited collection *War Footing: 10 Steps America Must Take to Prevail in the War for the Free World*. The statement (and the collection as a whole), expresses the current political view of a

large body of American neo-conservatives. But it also provides a striking example of the hostile nature of sound bites. The passage in question appears in a section that characterizes the American academy as a radical institution comprised of professors filled with "contempt" for America and the American war effort. According to the authors of this book, the American academy discourages students from supporting the war, thereby "depriving the country of the contributions of an enormous pool of able young people" (257). Symptomatically the statement made against Said and postcolonial studies appears within the context of this abhorrent transformation of the minds and life potentialities of the nation's student population into mere utility, into, in other words, a "pool" of bodies on reserve<sup>3</sup> whose only reason for existence is to serve the demands of a war-oriented state that considers its actions to be above not only criticism, by the law as well:

Said gained still greater currency and influence in the academy by denouncing professors who supported American foreign policy, comparing them with 19<sup>th</sup>-century European intellectuals who propped up racist colonial empires. The core premise of post-colonial theory is that it is *immoral* for a scholar to put his knowledge of foreign languages and cultures at the service of American power. He secured such a following that, before his death, it was said of him that he "is one of only two academics today (the other is Noam Chomsky) who draws an overflow crowd on any campus he visits and who always gets a standing ovation" (Gaffney 258).<sup>4</sup>

Nothing else but such a skintight riposte could serve to sum up a scholar's lifetime: a career that includes the publication of over twenty books and countless essays, not to mention the publication of articles in journals and newspapers around the world, nor even Said's direct activism with, to mention one instance, the Israeli pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim (the two developed a music camp that brought together children from Israel and Palestine). After such a statement what is there to read about Said, let alone *by* Said? And postcolonial studies? Its innumerable amount of publications and its incredible array of perspectives, found in the work of scholars working across sometimes three and four disciplines, is reduced to what amounts to less than a program line. The work of this sound bite does not end here. It is meant to be taken as a representation that stands for *all* of academia. This entire complex constellation of critical scholarship—the work of Said, of postcolonial studies, and critical inquiry across the board in the academy—drops off the face of existence in three sentences.

I chose this passage not only for its erasure of reading, but also to reveal another aspect about the structure of the sound bite. Characteristic of the sound bite is its nature as a vehicle of mass production, as I mentioned briefly above. To realize in full what this means requires research into the particular sites of a sound bite's appearance, and an attempt, if possible, to locate its initial provenance. For, and it might not be as obvious as it sounds to point this out, a statement that gives nothing to read is a statement that *was* never read, from the beginning. It is merely to be picked up and reprinted in as many sites as possible. Because of its need to be easily and quickly reproduced, and because it must hide itself as artifice, a sound bite reappears with little or no change. The statement made about Said and postcolonial studies is almost an exact replica (most of the phrasing here is word for word) of the information presented by Stanley Kurtz before the U.S. House of Representatives in July of 2003. The authors of *War Footing* have not even felt it necessary to give Kurtz credit for his onslaught against the Title VI program that sponsors the work of area studies in the US. Through this tactical erasure Kurtz's individual view and ideological agenda has been reborn in the pages of this book as indisputable fact, which is the principal function of the sound bite. One would think that the event of carving decrees in stone would be impossible in the postmodern age of fluid, decentered cyberspace, but this is clearly not the case. Scholars would do well to begin to rethink the generally-accepted structure of arguments that end with the affirmation of the essential fluidity of reality and identity in our postmodern (or even post-postmodern) age. For ultimately, such statements as Kurtz's are of a piece with the larger discursive flow that supports the continuation of American foreign policy and brings preemptive war into the normal state of affairs; they are transformed into platforms from which neo-conservatives like Gaffney, Kramer, Woolsey, and their sect launch their aspersions against the kind of critical inquiry offered by Said and postcolonial critics in general.

The danger in the quick and seductive nature of such platforms lies in their ability to serve a runaway agenda that shifts not only individual attention away from a more patient and critical engagement, but lessens the discursive flows that energize such criticism. They function without the necessity of thought—not only the kind of difficult ontological thought that considers the limitations of our discursively constructed historical reality and the alternatives made impossible by this reigning reality, but even the kind of thinking that stems from dominant notions of rationality and logic. In this anti-ontological, non-thinking age Information is the prize. It replaces the human engagement in knowledge-production and careful interpretation. Accumulated panoptically information, vis-à-vis sound bites, flows towards the nation-states with the greatest military investment. The collection of information (and the subsequent illumination/*mondialisation* of selected information) paves the way for mass mobilization. These phenomena, I argue, unconceal the essential ontological connection between militariality and sound bite representation.

This connection between the mobilization of information and the political mass mobilization of people can be attested to by recent US Department of Defense activities. A month after 9/11 Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld launched the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI). The OSI is described as "a component of a broader, government-wide strategic communications campaign, specifically [designed] to assist government agencies in crafting policy regarding the military aspects of information operations" (Gaffney 139). The program was shut down, but its advocates make it clear that it should be revived as soon as possible, on the ground that its tight connection between information and militarization can bring about the planned unidirectional metaphysical orientation of warfare with greater speed than any other approach. Extending Foucault's work on governmentality, we can emphasize the "war-footing" orientation of the OSI towards human biopower by using the metaphor of militariality. Like governmentality, militariality extends across the socius of human existence in a capillary fashion that touches upon all sites of social production. Militariality, for instance, sets up a program for direct political warfare and stands against the "far more limited effort known as 'public diplomacy'": "Even when they are well conceived and well executed...public diplomacy strategies will be a long-term effort. This is in their nature, given the reliance they place on such instruments as international media programming, exchange visits of political and cultural figures, humanitarian and development assistance, training future leaders, and so forth. Such efforts take years....And we do not have the luxury of time" (141). The suggestions for a plan of action include the immediate execution of a political warfare strategy, the drafting of legislative vehicles for political warfare, the strengthening of CIA clandestine services, the housing of the primary responsibility for political warfare in the Department of Defense, and the direct use of the Internet as a tool of political warfare (143-45). Thus the ontology of militariality becomes the very basis of human existence. This widespread dissemination/*mondialisation* of militariality, and the co-constituent erasure of reading—is the subject of Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

### **Re-reading *The Moor's Last Sigh* in the Information Age of Militariality**

It is impossible to read a Rushdie novel without confronting the act of reading. Acts of reading are staged in each and every one of Rushdie's texts. To miss this salient fact is to miss one of the fundamental concerns of a major postcolonial, transnational author. It is also to miss the importance of literature as a vehicle for resisting the widespread diminishing of textuality that I outlined above. In Rushdie's staging of reading, the human engagement with representation is foregrounded in such a way that the reader must confront the very performance of reading, thus making all readings repeated acts of re-readings (one "reads reading," so to speak). Rushdie's novels are not only demanding texts; as a strategic resistance to the militarization of language they generate the opening that is required for the constitution of the reading subject. This opening stands in direct opposition to the telegraphed hailing of bodies from the "pool" of the national reserve. In his texts we experience the writer's exertion against militariality, which thus unlocks the possibility of generating a non-military subjectivity through the act of reading. This relation is threaded through on every level of the text, making the language of Rushdie's works a productive counterforce to the transformation of language into information on the register of military worlding. This relation between the constitution of the subject, the act of reading, and the status of the socio-political is woven into the tissue of each novel's textuality. In *The Satanic Verses*, the prophet Mohammed recites the verses of the Koran to the scribe Salman, and when Mohammed has his scribe re-read what he has written down, the prophet does not

notice the changes Salman has made. In reading the novel we thus become subjects that critically read performances of reading, making possible an awareness of the arbitrary construction of reality—not the essentialist appropriation of reality offered by the novel's military custodians, such as the immigration authorities that capture and beat the main character of Saladin Chamcha until he is unconscious. Earlier in the novel when Saladin is transformed into a satanic creature with horns and a tale readers see the full effect of the reduction of a human being into a racially-profiled sound bite, and the power of representation's conversion to the information bomb: "'But how do they do it?' Chamcha wanted to know. 'They describe us,' the other whispered solemnly. 'That's all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct'" (174).

In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem—the novel's narrator, but also the novel's writer—re-reads his work and is shocked to find mistakes in the chronology of events. This provokes Saleem to contemplate the role of memory in the fabrication of historical events that continues the length of the novel. If memory, and thus human consciousness itself, has such a hand in the constitution of history, then history can be re-read and re-made to prepare the way for the information bombs of the present. *Midnight's Children* thus foregrounds the status of the text made available, and the relation between text and fantasy (the fantasy of India as a nation, the fantasy of individual identities, and the fantasy of historical construction in general). Saleem's re-reading wards off the danger of reading become an act of re-fashioning designed to meet the demands of a political collective will. The novel presents us with the worst case scenario of this kind of uncritical, passive reading that accepts whatever information the State presents: the constitution of passive readers (human subjects that forget the very act of reading) culminates in the clash of different political communities (the Indo-Pakistani wars of the novel's climax), when one nation counters the other with not only physical bombs but information bombs that each side propels on the airwaves in order to claim victory over the other: "And on the radio, what destruction, what mayhem! In the first five days of the war Voice of Pakistan announced the destruction of more aircraft than India had ever possessed; in eight days All-India Radio massacred the Pakistan Army down to, and considerably beyond, the last man" (405). *Midnight's Children* reveals in this moment the direct correlation between the end of reading and the beginning of militariality. Despite the series of military events narrated in the novel—events that span from the reign of the British Empire in the early twentieth century, to the brutalities during partition of India and Pakistan in mid-century, to the State of Emergency under Indira Gandhi's reign in the 1970s—the novel's rhizomatic structure and rhetorical maneuvers constitute an aesthetico-political act of writing that embraces what the writer Saleem presents to his readers as the only hope for India's future: the multiplicity that comes into existence through the creation of a text that offers the promise of centerless freplay. The world as it exists does not offer this possibility; one does not encounter this heterogeneity in most of the characters or events of the novel, for the world that these characters live in is the *mondialized* world of militariality. The novel thus stages two versions of textuality at one and the same time: Saleem's rhizomatic writing, which is radically democratic and full of possibility, and the rhetoric of a world growing increasingly under the control of an administered military discourse. One only encounters Saleem's world of radical democracy in the experience of reading. The reading and re-reading of the text itself is the only possibility for unfolding such a reality, one that, in the world order of the novel, can only exist as a possible future. In *Midnight's Children* reading becomes the condition for the possibility of a non-military existence.

These highly-conscious engagements with textuality continue in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The novel opens with the character of Moraes Zogoiby (nicknamed "Moor") nailing the written narrative of his life across a route that leads him from Bombay to Spain. The written word is "crucified," hammered in with "sharp exclamations of two-inch nails" "upon a gate, a fence, an olive tree" and "spread across the landscape" (3). Here the materiality of language is underscored from the beginning. Words take on a confrontational character; the reader literally faces the material presence of the text within the body proper of the text. The modern split between physicality and the immaterial abstraction of representation collapses as "exclamations" become "nails." In this collapse the traditional representational essence of language can no longer be taken as a starting point, imbricating the reader (which is also to say the act of reading) into an entirely different set of questions about the nature of the text and its crucifixion on the transnational landscape. The reconstellation of language and materiality also comes to the fore in the "landscapes" painted by the novel's highly-resistant character Aurora Zogoiby. Like Saleem Sinai from *Midnight's Children*—a character who engenders the vast

heterogeneity of India (Hindu/Muslim, East/West, Past/Present, India/Pakistan, etc.)—Aurora is an artist that paints the complex and unending variety of Indian existence and history. Her rich and expansive postcolonial, poststructuralist paintings are read and re-read extensively by Moor, as if they were each novels unto themselves.

However, the possibility for multiple platforms of human existence is entirely shut down in the end of this most pessimistic of all of Rushdie's novels. Despite the potential for a heterogeneous polity marked in the paintings of Aurora Zogoiby, the textuality of the novel comes increasingly under the control of the *mondialized* world of war. The world presented in the novel is the world of hyper-capitalism, its internecine and overt wars, and the war-waging ideology of religious (specifically Hindu) fundamentalism. These two metaphysical forces inform the consequent rise in other religious and ethnic passions; they generate increasing economic oppression and exclusion, greater inequality, and escalating famine. Union leaders and members that attempt to resist capital's inherent unequal distribution of wealth and resources are beaten; unwanted communities of people are exterminated; water resources are poisoned. The cut-throat politics of entrepreneurship reaches such a pitch of intensity that monopolies become full-fledged military organizations. The exponential growth in arms industry and trade, and the political development of nuclear weapons go hand in hand. Political and military registers combine with the religious. The secular business world cultivates a fundamentalism no less invidious than its religious communitarian counterpart. With the consequent erosion of the Indian Congress and its power to check the expansion of war-lord organizations, the business world and religious fundamentalism step in as the new dominant political administrative orders. These "novelistic" events parallel the contemporary historical occasion in India (and America as well, as evidenced by the War-Footing conservatives). The Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that Rushdie focalizes in his novel has its origins, among other things, in Indian's earlier Hindu extremist movement, the RSS, which was based upon the first paramilitary organization of the German Nazi Party, Hitler's "brownshirts." (It was an RSS member that killed Gandhi.) The novel's Hindu fundamentalist leader, Raman Fielding, is based in part on Bal Thackeray, the then head of the Shiv Sena fascist party based in Mumbai. The BJP makes its demands clear: India must purge itself of all so-called foreign cultural, linguistic, and religious influence.

*The Moor's Last Sigh* foregrounds the extent to which these phenomena contribute to the reduction of the essence of the human subject and the essence of textuality. In such a world the only texts made available for human consumption are those that support the powers that be. The reduction in what is made available for reading is metaphorically tied to the act of breathing in the novel. In the world of the novel people barely have time to breathe (Moor writes: "the world's air [is] hard to breathe...*Suspiro ergo sum*. I sigh, therefore I am...*suspiro*=*sub*, below, + *spirare*, verb, to breathe. *Suspiro*: I under-breathe" [53]), and no time to read. Moor's acts of writing therefore are at best acts of sighing and gasping for existence.

The relationship between the change in the status of language/texts and its affect on the constitution of the subject and her act of reading manifests itself in the character of Moor. Like Saleem of *Midnight's Children*, Moraes Zogoiby is the novel's narrator and writer. As the novel narrows from the rich promise of his mother Aurora's political aesthetic of multiplicity to the violence of business and religious warfare, so too does the essence of language, and by consequence the essence of reading. After the apocalyptic destruction of Abraham Zagoiby's "Cashondelivery tower"—a massive skyscraper that serves as a vehicle for revealing the complicity between monopoly capital, the weapons trade, and the militarization of the polity—the Moor flees to a limbo-zone populated with people whose speech has been reduced to a non-literary, business-oriented jargon: "We were both citizens of the world....Our common language was the broken argot of dreadful American films" (385). Multiple languages and multiple platforms of discursive activity are reduced to a zero-degree historyless cosmopolitanism. Rushdie makes it clear that this transformation in the essence of language should not solely be understood to be the result of the Americanization of the planet. This mass production and worldly dissemination of American films is only a symptom of a larger ontological momentum that is destroying the creative potential of human activity on a planetary scale. Rushdie unconceals this ontology through the use of several structural metaphors throughout the novel. When re-reading his mother's "Moor" paintings, he makes reference to a concealed "sequence": "the tragedy of



multiplicity destroyed by singularity, the defeat of the Many by the One—had been the sequence's uniting principle" (408). And Moor's very subjectivity has been under the sway, since birth, of a temporal force that results in his body living twice as fast as it should (144-45). His condition is the physical manifestation of forces he senses are weighing on human subjectivity around the world: "perhaps a half-life is all we can expect" (145).

Living a speeded-up life and reality (the pressures of a temporality brought completely under the "shrinking" sway of capitalism), Moor struggles to carve out an existence for himself. Born with a deformed right hand, his only talent is his ability to use his hand as a kind of battering ram. Rushdie parallels the ramming of Moor's fingerless fist with the fundamentalist religious ramming of Hindu communitarianism (the Hindu god "Ram" is telegraphed and the vastly differential nature of Hinduism, not to mention its centuries-long existence, becomes a single "battering Ram"). He allows himself to be co-opted by both of the major cultural forces that define the reality of the novel: religion and capitalism. He uses his skills as a fighter to bludgeon people into submission, and the superpower of his fist, unlike the magical superpower of Saleem Sinai's consciousness, is designed for killing.

The novel locates these forces of manipulation on an ontological rather than an ontic level.<sup>5</sup> The existence of the city of Bombay/Mumbai and its people cannot be thought apart from the narratives—the various plots, themes, metaphors—that have brought this particular military version of reality into being. Increasingly the only narratives offered in the world are those that prepare the way for cultural, economic, political, and religious homogenization. In contrast, the promise of the novel in its opening pages is the unconcealing of even the most marginalized constituency of a culture—in this case the ultra-minority of a Jewish, Catholic, and Spanish ancestry. But we know from the beginning that such a possibility of the ultra-marginalized coming to live a fully-realized existence is impossible in a world soon to be dominated by militariality. Indeed the novel opens with the erasure of a historical people from what would become a dominant western geopolitical/military space: the expulsion of the Moors from Alhambra, specifically the battle that ended with the establishment of Spanish Catholicism as the sole presence in the north-western geopolitical arena of the Mediterranean. That marginalized constituency becomes the center of Rushdie's novel. However, even the most marginal identity comes under the telegraphed and uniforming influence of a military ontology. In the end, Moor's family members are destroyed one by one, either by themselves or by the general war-oriented polity. Most of Aurora's paintings—the last remaining art form that gestured to a different future—are consumed as well.

In the wake of this series of brutal killings, erasures, and bombings—a "catastrophe" that had "become the city's [Bombay's] habit" (374)—Moor finds himself in the unreal space of an "interregnum": "I felt as if I were in some sort of interregnum, in some timeless zone under the sign of an hourglass in which the sand stood motionless, or a clepsydra whose quicksilver had ceased to flow" (404). The location is called Benengeli (the name of the imaginary Moorish author, whom Cervantes credits with the story of *Don Quixote*), a non-space filled with "empty-eyed" "parasites" who spend their days immersed in the commercial consumption of capitalism, "buying clothes, eating in restaurants and drinking in bars, talking furiously all the time, with a curious absentness of manner that suggested their utter indifference to the topics of their conversations" (402). It is a memoryless space of a people uprooted from any connection to a specific habitation: "the air of mystery surrounding the place was in fact an atmosphere of unknowing; what seemed like an enigma was in fact a void. Those uprooted drifters had become, by their own choice, human automata. They could simulate human life, but were no longer able to live it" (402-403). Rushdie makes it clear that this is the new space of a transnational, privileged, cosmopolitan humanity: "I heard people speaking English, American, French, German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and what might have been either Dutch or Afrikaans" (390). Consuming the products offered in a large array of "expensive boutiques—Gucci, Hermès, Aquascutum, Cardin, Paloma Picasso," these automata are no longer merely the planet's tourists: "these were not visitors; they carried no cameras, and behaved as people do on their own territory" (390). They represent the new essence of planetary subjectivity. The violence that led to this empty moment is no longer a force that comes from without, from some historical continuum; the human has internalized this ontology:

was there some more profound movement in history, deeper down, where not even those of us who had spent so long in the Under World could see it?....Just as the fanatical 'Catholic Kings' had besieged

Granada and awaited the Alhambra's fall, so now barbarism was standing at our gates....But a darker time came...we were proved wanting. For the barbarians were not only at our gates but within our skins. We were our own wooden horses, each one of us full of our doom.... [T]he explosions burst out of our very own bodies. We were both the bombers and the bombs. The explosions were our own evil—no need to look for foreign explanations, though there was and is evil beyond our frontiers as well as within. (372)

*The Moor's Last Sigh* discloses the new ahistorical human being incapable of experiencing the act of reading and thus the possibility of alternative texts and realities: the Subject has become the Subject-Bomb. As such the novel provides a directive for thinking the status of a humanity being turned into a mere appendage for the neocolonial age of militarity. Militarity—which we can now define also as the transformation of subjects into targets and bombs (the logical conclusion of the sound bite)—reduces, by definition, the multiplicity of available texts, narratives, and acts of reading, in order to insert everything into frameworks of identification, incarceration, observation, information/fact-gathering, and attack. Reading is erased and replaced by a calculative, teleological activity oriented in advance to a principle of panoptic scanning of territory for purposes of containment, separation, and unquestionable branding. The limitations put on reading and what is made available for reading is not a mere matter of changing one's subjective comportment to a text, as if a text were an object to be constituted for subjects and by subjects. It must be seen as a matter that concerns the very basis of knowledge production, and as such the production of the possibilities made available for a culture, a class, an ethnicity, a gender, a race, a nationality, a historical community. In the age of militarity, information mobilization precedes mass mobilization. Information is accumulated centripetally, and flows towards the states with the greatest military investment. I have already mentioned the status of India's polity as it contends with organizations such as the BJP. But this ontology is not endemic to any one nation, as we saw above with the creation of the OSI. Neo-conservatives operative in the United States do not feel the need to hide the direct connection between information and the militarization of civilization, in either civil or political society. The U.S.'s Department of Commerce, to give one example, which pushed and funded expansion of the internet, has retained overall control of the internet from its earliest days. In opposition to international pressure the DoC stated that it would continue to maintain control of the internet's root servers (the basic directory of the Internet) indefinitely. In 2005 the European Union, in the wake of opposition from EU countries and other nations, began to organize a forum for deciding Internet public policy along the lines of a cooperative model. The forum was designed to bring the issue before the United Nations. U.S. neo-conservatives such as former CIA director R. James Woolsey, and organizations such as "Set America Free," and "Green Patriots" have begun to issue a set of policy statements, "pledges" and "blueprints" to oppose this cooperative model in no uncertain terms:

The Internet has become the most important engine for freedom—in particular, for the free flow of information and ideas—in the history of the world. It has also become an indispensable element in the growth of international capitalism. The Internet, on the whole, works flawlessly, as currently managed—not "controlled"—by a U.S. corporation. It is a perfect metaphor for the Pax Americana in the best sense of the word: an example of a largely benign, generous, and constructive use of U.S. power to benefit the entire planet. The very nature of the Internet requires the current form of entrepreneurial, unstructured, user driven, and rapidly adaptive management arrangement. The surest way to destroy the Internet is to surrender it to international bureaucrats and their multilateral masters. (Gaffney 243-44)

We should consider at length the violence of this metaphorical phrase "war footing" and the power it has on subject formation (thematized in Rushdie's novel as "the barbarians...within our skins" and "the bombers" who are at the same time "bombs") and interrogate the full ramifications of its effect across all sites of cultural production: language use, reading practices, information production, image deployment, consciousness building, and so on. Put bluntly "war footing" reveals the full extent to which thinking is being transformed and reoriented around the *telos* of maintaining war, one of the main axioms of Karl Clausewitz's book *On War: "In War the Result is Never Final"* (19).<sup>6</sup> Though *The Moor's Last Sigh* focalizes the ascendancy and expansion of war as the basis of life in the context of India, Rushdie's novel makes it clear that this phenomenon is transnational by also situating the biopolitical subject of war in a transcontinental setting that includes Europe and Africa, as well as

America. (His next novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, which has its action set in America, England, India, Mexico, and elsewhere, makes the expansion of war as the basis of existence even clearer). The end of the novel, which sees the end of reading in the zero-state of Benengeli, signals the end of human subjects as reading subjects, and the dawn of a new humanity prefashioned as soldier-bombs of the new age of militariality.

## Conclusion: Warning Signs

Rushdie's novels thematize the *mondialized* forces of worlding that increasingly put limitations on the creative and democratic potentials enabled by acts of reading. He warns against the power that these forces have for throwing reading into oblivion and long with it the possibility of enacting a transformative consciousness capable of challenging the limits of the ontological groundplan and its representative regimes of signification. Like the paintings of Aurora the great works of postcolonial literature, narratives that instituted a revision of the master narratives of the colonial era—*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The Satanic Verses*, *Season of Migration to the North*, *Beloved*, *Foe*, *Things Fall Apart*, *The River Between*, *The Devil on the Cross*, *The Shadow Lines*, *The God of Small Things*, *The Inheritance of Loss*, and many others—are massively eclipsed by the onslaught of the so-called Information Age. As mentioned earlier, the continuing eclipse of Rushdie's own *The Satanic Verses* is a case in point: despite the presence of a great number of scholarly articles on the novel, it still continues to be over-written by the sound bite of the "Rushdie Affair." Because of this *The Satanic Verses* remains a novel that for most people cannot be read.

The transformation in the ability to read constitutes a transformation in the very essence of human subjectivity. Sound bite culture is not only about the materiality of what is made available; it is an outward marker of the constitutive materiality of human consciousness itself. One would do well to consider the influence of similar historico-ontological transformations on the Information Age and its armature of a militarized representation: for instance Heidegger's analysis of the transformation of truth from the ancient Greek *aletheia* (truth as an exploration, and thus a healthy criticism, of the logic informing the production of "truth,") to the Roman/imperial *veritas* (truth as "correctness," which means the rise of a politics and philosophy of consent). William V. Spanos, for instance, points out the enormous influence this transformation has had in the formation of America.<sup>7</sup> I do not have the time here to develop this epochal transformation fully, but suffice it to say, this change in the orientation towards that which exists from skepticism to consent (for one is not invited to be skeptical of that which is "correct") constitutes the very basis of a consciousness designed to receive bites of information that do not reveal the grounds of their (artificial) production. Rushdie's texts assert that through the act of reading one opens the event of the critical act of contemplation closed off by the exigencies of the everyday world.

The Information Age is marked not only by homogenization and the violent reduction and incorporation of differences; it is also marked by the transformation in representation itself, and the reading of representations. The very ontological status of language—language as *différance*, as exploration and critique of the known, as unfolding to/unto the new as non-known and not-yet-existent, as radical creativity offering the promise of an uncolonized future—is threatened today unlike ever before. Teleological discourses such as Fukuyama's "End of History" are not the only forces menacing language and reading. As I have tried to show in this essay Information Production—the *primary activity* of those nations and corporations in the position of orchestrating planetary reality in the twenty-first century—is not created for purposes of reading. Information about geographical areas and geopolitical territories is generated for purposes of organization. It is the organization of peoples, the orchestration of (diminishing) global resources, and the military-political territorialization of locations that now marks the use of language. In some cases this connection is direct, as in the case of the World Bank's recommendation for eradicating literary studies in Tunisia's university system in favor of teaching English for purposes of global capital market needs (Judy 15). In such cases reading shifts out of the realm of deconstruction, of encountering alterity, even of the liberal phenomenology of understanding. Reading, as that concept is known generally today, now lies firmly in the realm of assault: reading about a people is an activity that attacks a people. This event signifies the disruption of both the modern and the postmodern historical eras. It is thus more proper to refer to the early

twenty-first century as the age of post-reading. Whereas in former eras reading named an activity that demanded thought, perhaps even a thinking that verged on an epistemic encounter with the grounds governing the relation between words and things. Today "reading" is a panoptic eye that scans its surroundings for purposes of assigning sites of productivity, utility, and, in growing instances, incarceration. The sound bite culture of the *mondialisation*/worldwidening of militariality is only one sign of the coming to an end of the human potential for the act of reading. If reading eventually becomes impossible in the manner described, then how are we to retrieve this human activity? In the information age of post-reading, in which the planet's citizens are in a state of permanent alert, hyperactivity, and epileptic terror, where are we to locate the potential for reading and the time it takes to read? Rushdie's novel details the consequences of not exploring these questions and stands as a warning sign for conscious readers to push for authentic acts of re-reading that are the basis for avoiding a "flattened" and "reduced" existence.

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<sup>1</sup> "That there is a yawning gulf between the information-haves and the information-have-nots is no fantasy, in spite of the repeated claims...that access to the technology is becoming increasingly egalitarian due to mass-marketisation....The poor in [rich] countries and, to a much greater extent, in the most deprived parts of the world are, nevertheless, excluded from cyberspace which may not necessarily be worth entering in any event, depending on how one sees its use value. As Ray Thomas remarks, 'For the foreseeable future most of the world's population will not have easy access to a telephone, let alone digital services'" (McGuigan 184).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note the presence of a critical element in heavily mediatized spaces, such as the internet—specifically the dialogic nature of blogs and the effect they have on the transformation of the polity and its attitude toward war. However, the question of the efficacy of such criticism remains to be seen, especially in relation to its status and power (in Foucault's sense of the term) as a node within a much larger network containing more dominant, war-oriented venues that have a greater chance of reaching a larger audience. In these early stages of the blogosphere's development it is still too soon to say whether or not this aspect of the internet has a real chance of leveling out the playing field. Virilio, for one, reads the internet as part and parcel of the information war. See Virilio. See also McGuigan.

<sup>3</sup> I have in mind Heidegger's characterization of the transformation of the essence of human subjectivity in the "age of the world picture" into "standing reserve." See *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 115-154.

<sup>4</sup> The quote from within the passage is from Martin Kramer, "Congress Probes Middle East Centers," personal blog, June 23, 2003. Available at <http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/200306023.htm>. Contributors to this collection include R. James Woolsey (former director of the CIA), Kenneth R. Timmerman (executive director of the Foundation for Democracy in Iran), Andrew McCarthy (former assistant to Paul Wolfowitz and a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies), Anne Korin (co-director of the Institute for the Analysis of Global Security (IAGS) and co-chair of the Set America Free Coalition), Caroline Blick (senior Middle East fellow at the Center for Security Policy in Washington), Timothy Connors (director of Manhattan Institute's Center for Policing Terrorism (CPT)), Cliff Kincaid (president of America's Survival, Inc. (ASI)), among others. Gaffney himself is the founder and current president of the Center for Security Policy, and served as assistant secretary of defense for international security policy under Ronald Reagan.

<sup>5</sup> These terms of Heidegger's are still valuable, despite the prominence of Derridian and Foucaultian versions of poststructuralism. By "ontic" Heidegger meant "that which exists; that which is present." Ontological, on the other hand, refers to "that which presences," to, in other words, the grounds informing and governing what comes into existence, to the way of thinking that brings about the particular reality holding sway.

<sup>6</sup> "If we do not learn to regard a war, and the separate campaigns of which it is composed, as a chain of linked engagements each leading to the next, but instead succumb to the idea that the capture of certain geographical points or the seizure of undefended provinces are of value in themselves, we are liable to regard them as windfall profits....One could almost put the matter this way: just as a businessman cannot take the profit from a single transaction and put it into a separate account, so an isolated advantage gained in war cannot be assessed separately from the overall result" (Clausewitz 139-40).

<sup>7</sup> For Heidegger's most far-reaching discussion of this transformation, see his *Parmenides*. For a full development of this transformation in our contemporary occasion, see Spanos, *America's Shadow*. In terms of the effect this transformation has had on land relations in the postcolonial context, see my *An Ecological and Postcolonial Study of Literature*.

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