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## Matter of Paradise

“The jungle closed behind them like a tomb, and after hours of increasingly weary but also frenzied rowing through incomprehensibly labyrinthine salt-water channels overtowered by the cathedral-arching trees, Ayooba Shaheed Farooq were hopelessly lost; they turned time and again to the buddha, who pointed, ‘That way’, and then, ‘Down there’, but although they rowed feverishly, ignoring fatigue, it seems as if the possibility of ever leaving this place reduced before them like the lantern of a ghost; until at length they rounded on their supposedly unfallible tracker, and perhaps saw some small light of shame or relief glowing in his habitually milky-blue eyes; and now Farooq whispered in the sepulchral greenness of the forest: ‘You don’t know. You’re just saying anything’.” (*MC*, 360)<sup>1</sup>

The four characters of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* are swallowed up by the jungle at the moment when the main protagonist Saleem Sinai alias the buddha has absorbed an overdose of history in the shape of the Pakistani civil war. What takes them in are the Sundarbans – the jungle at the mouth of the river Ganges. The forest “which is so thick that history has hardly ever found the way in” (*MC*, 359). The forest – *foris* – the outside.<sup>2</sup> The Sundarbans, the non-place.

*Place* is a familiar word which makes our life more focused. We carry it with us permanently and make use of it as we go along. With its help we make the world our own. A place is a space perceivable to our senses, it has its specific

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* (London: Picador, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “Scapeland”, in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. A. Benjamin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 215.

features: the way it looks, feels, smells. It also has some action(s) contained in itself (a church is a place of worship, a meadow is a place for a picnic, etc.) which makes it graspable to the mind. These give the place some relative stability and uniqueness when it comes to differentiation – there are no two places alike. But with the change of scene this meaning of place may waver.

There is a *desert*: a stretch of sand or stones which unwinds indefinitely in all directions. Wherever you go the desert looks (and feels and smells...) the same. A place in the desert is like any other place in the desert. The circumstances inflict on the space the process of homogenization. But difference remains, even if it is only the matter of perspective: “here” and “there” are not just conjecture, they are not only illusory, they are grounded in the experience of seeing.

The reference standard which makes a “desert place” possible is the *horizon*, the background against which the observer can measure himself and the objects of his perceptions. The horizon “rectifies” the desert place, makes it obvious and divisible for the eye, reassures the grasp of spatiality.

*Jungle* presents itself differently in that respect. It closes upon the intruders. It grows: “The leaves in the heights of the great nipa palms began to spread like immense green cupped hands, swelling in the nocturnal downpour until the entire forest seemed to be thatched” (*MC*, 361). The jungle is the incomprehensible tangle of vegetation where all places look the same and where all standards of measure are irretrievably lost. In its proper sense the jungle is not a place.

What is cut off by the cocoon of the jungle is not only the ruler of the horizon. Two other standards, or rather a double-standard, cease to provide consciousness with data, or at least their influence is vastly limited: neither the sun nor the moon can be counted on to regulate natural life. The measured time flows over its mould making its presence both more and less felt. All the creatures are either transparent or “almost entirely colourless owing to the absence of direct sunlight” (*MC*, 362). And with that, time becomes more monochromatic too, moments that constitute periods of time get dangerously alike and indistinguishable. Time appears to lose its clockwise technological manageability, its density changes, the process of congealing begins: “entire hours or days or weeks” pass “dissolving into each other” (*MC*, 361, 363).

“The jungle . . . swallowed them the way a toad gulps down a mosquito”; it “closed behind them like a tomb” (*MC*, 360); the sojourn there is “the time of punishment” (*MC*, 363). The forest is unwelcome. Its unwieldiness estranges. It fills with remorse and apprehension which only deepen the feeling of being out-of-place. It threatens with its monstrosity, its boundlessness. The monstrosity of being completely other.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is also a mirror where “flitting through the night-forest went the wraiths of their hopes” and misdeeds “leading them by the hand

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Vom Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*, Gesamtausgabe, Band 31 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1982), p. 135.

towards a new adulthood" (*MC*, 364) and where their bodies are unnarcisistically reflected in the stuff of the world around them. The monster and the mirror which make us see with both eyes create that way their own perspective. But does it not lead us back to the old Cartesian dychotomy? Not necessarily, the jungle puts forward a certain sleight of hand: we look into the imperfect, tainted mirror. Or even the purposefully curved one. The curved mirror which reflects a thing—as—other distorts the new perspective.<sup>4</sup>

Sight is founded on distance.<sup>5</sup> It works properly only having established a safe space between the watching subject and the watched object, "objectification" of which has the sense of being looked at "disinterestedly". This is the way a Renaissance painter looks at a thing: his disembodied I/eye watches through the window-like easel. The distance abstracts and tames. The curved mirror de-geometrizes space, makes it more tactile and introduces unhygienic proximity in the place of sterile distance: proximity as intimacy with monstrosity. It makes the eye *myopic*. Using Rushdie's own metaphor:

Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves – or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality ... (*MC*, 165–6).

When your nose is pressed against the screen the clear-cut shapes blur and things start to leak into each other. The safety of a perspective is forsaken and what one sees becomes actually *absorbing*:

as they drank they fell deeper and deeper into the thralldom of that livid green world, the jungle sucked it [them] in, and knew what they were like (*MC*, 362).

Yet its osmotic quality is only one side of a double process because, at the same time, the viewer, to be able to see, must remain separate as well.<sup>6</sup> What makes this double-bind possible is the mind's centrality as far as its world of spacial relations is concerned: space neither "vanishes" nor is it radically "short-circuited". It continues to exert its (however altered) influence but the world "changes it place", it is no longer "out there": the mind immersed in space becomes a starting point, a beginning zero of spatiality of the world

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Jay, "Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and the Search for a New Ontology of Sight", in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. M. Levin (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 170.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1978), p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Eye and the Mind", in *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. J. M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 162–3.

which is all around and not only in front of the viewer. The eye turns its inside out.<sup>7</sup>

The changing status of vision is bound to influence our structures of temporality. The time of numerical consecution, the time of calendar “before” and “after” is the time in which the eye made itself comfortable: the ineluctable spatiality of our everyday experience makes us think of the time in front of us and time behind us.<sup>8</sup> These are the categories of the disinterested eye. But with the collapse of it the mind finds itself resting on the slippery footing of the present surrounded by time and, once again, being its own vantage point: it does not mean that the path leads nowhere, it means that the path is not a path at all. Spatial metaphors become of no use in the jungle: the curved mirror teaches the *ego* the art of surrender – while still being palpable for itself it is overcome by the willingness to let things be. But can such a double gesture be accomplished? And what happens if *over-exposure* takes place?

It is said that looking in a mirror long enough one is faced with the physiognomy of the devil, the negative principle of chaos, the formlessness of the universe. That looking incites the mind and puts its powers on edge. Exposure makes it feverish, overexposure makes it burn. Overexposure to the curved mirror incinerates the mind. The mind burns and in the ashes, the ashes of non-place, a new positive quality can be glimpsed: the *landscape*.<sup>9</sup>

Ever since Aristotle vision has been connected to form.<sup>10</sup> In fact, production of form was considered to be the only task of vision. But there is always something un-formally unsettling in an object appearing this way: it makes itself contingent, there is some kind of opacity ingrained in it. The object cannot lodge itself comfortably in the looking subject. Vision seems to desire reaching beyond form. But what if “form simply *is* that which presents itself to vision, ‘allows itself to be seen’, how can there be vision which is not, somehow, of form? We seem to be trying to see nothing”.<sup>11</sup> Is that *nothing* never to be seen? Does vision have to be blind to its own impossibilities? What is not seen can make its appearance just by being taken into consideration. The inside is always the image of the outside and what we do not see has to be considered just for the reason that it influences our seeing, if for nothing else. Then the nothing is inevitably part of what we see and when the mind burns the only things that are left for us to see are the blind spots around which our vision has to organize itself.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>8</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, pp. 205–6.

<sup>9</sup> Lyotard, “Scapeland”, p. 212.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 7.2.

<sup>11</sup> John McCumber, “Derrida and the Closure of Vision”, in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, p. 239.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 163.

The incinerated mind reveals a landscape: a place with its destiny and destination wiped clean. Forms that make a place consumable and domesticated are destroyed by the heat. What is left over then? (The landscape cannot be just “empty” – it is not a form of negativity.) “That element in the datum which has no destiny”: matter.<sup>13</sup> The landscape demonstrates the pure actuality of the world. What gets exposed is “an excess of presence”,<sup>14</sup> the basic and evident uncleanness of the world. A glimpse of untamed matter, landscape demonstrates the world.

But the mind “never burns enough”, being as we are we always owe landscape a debt<sup>15</sup>: de-monstration never reaches the point of assimilation. Materiality of the world can be revealed, but it can never be grasped. The blind spots must remain blind and blind as they are they constitute the very condition of vision: that what consciousness does not see is, in fact, what makes it see.<sup>16</sup> What constitutes the blind spot of consciousness in the presence of the exuberance of the matter is its own *corporeity*. In the ashes of the mind this is the blind spot that remains, “an absence which stands as a sign of a horrifying presence”<sup>17</sup> that cannot be investigated. Then it is not only in the sense of being without destiny that the landscape blinds the eye; the innocent eye is indeed blind but its blindness has also a further meaning: the eye cannot see itself, it cannot turn upon its own materiality.

The jungle is a place where narratives are unwound: the narratives of the past that “flowed so freely that they seemed to be an aspect of the monsoon” (*MC*, 364). They fill the ears. But how are they possible in the aftermath of the blinded vision? How is a description feasible in the world void of both topography and history? A tale cannot be told without a framework of how, where and when. The problem is that the landscape’s power to dissolve seems not to allow a narrative to take place.<sup>18</sup> Yet speaking happens as the afterburn of the landscape experience. The stories are told as if speech was the world’s inevitable quality, one of the ways of its being present. As appearing in the world is the compelling need of every creature, human beings seem to have the irresistible urge to speak in order to reveal what would otherwise remain hidden and invisible.<sup>19</sup> What cannot be seen exposes itself to language.

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<sup>13</sup> Lyotard, “Scapeland”, p. 214.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. C. Lefort, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 248.

<sup>17</sup> Lyotard, “Scapeland”, p. 217.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>19</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, p. 98.

Language endeavours to unveil the area of blindness, to make it present to the ear (then eye) and what cannot be seen finds its way into language. We are able to speak of nothing; the invisibility is penetrated by the gift of language: it is metaphor that reaches forth. Using it with care we can accomplish an impossible translation, a carrying-over between two different existential modes. What cannot be seen can appear to the ear by means of similarity of relations, by means of analogy.<sup>20</sup> The invisible takes hold, however tentatively, of the domain of the senses.

The opposition between the landscape and the narrative is also the opposition between showing and telling. Or not the opposition maybe, but incongruity: showing and telling are two different tenses. But then is not this difference purely formal, operational? After all, it is the narrative that establishes a hold on time: it can make time pass, loop, fold upon itself, catch up with itself or even escape itself.<sup>21</sup> A narrative takes time but what does time matter to the narrative?

Yet, in a sense, it does. No description of landscape can make it present to the eye, language can never achieve a complete translation into vision. In description, language tries to be equal to, make do for the mind's momentary absence. But, for obvious reasons, it is always too late for an accomplishment of this kind. And not only is it a matter of time – the medium itself is “unwieldy”: words can never achieve the immobility and plenitude of blinding objects of contemplation. As words are always slippery and awkward, our debt to the landscape is never paid.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104–6.

<sup>21</sup> Lyotard, “Scapeland”, p. 216.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.