

**IN THE HEAT OF COMBAT: INSURRECTIONAL MOMENT
AND POLITICAL TIME IN MOHSIN HAMID'S *THE
RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST* AND HARI KUNZRU'S
*MY REVOLUTIONS***

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1. In a discussion about *Lord Jim*, Fredric Jameson attempts to define what an act is and he wonders: “When does the act happen, how much preparation is necessary, how far do you have to go in it before it suddenly ‘takes’ and becomes irrevocable, is it then infinitely divisible, like the sprint-lengths of the hare, or of Zeno’s arrow [...]?”¹ To identify and to register the moment of the act, it is necessary to assess the degree of change it induces, since an act “retroactively changes the coordinates into which it intervenes”². The works under scrutiny in this essay address the moment of individual action in a historical time of violence: they portray acts when they, as Jameson would have it, “suddenly [‘take’] and [become] irrevocable”. *My Revolutions*, by Hari Kunzru, and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, by Mohsin Hamid, two novels published in 2007, feature characters pressed into joining political actions, in contexts that can be seen as historic turning points (the 1970s and 9/11). Both books provide an interrogation of how action is performed—reacting to a problem, implementing a move, assessing its consequences. Through their study, this essay purports to show how contemporary fiction provides insight into the moment of individual action as *kairos*, understood as crisis or decisive moment in the Greek sense of the term. This essay considers the notion of moment as bearing a degree of intensity as well as an awareness-raising quality able to trigger change.

2. *My Revolutions* is the third novel of Hari Kunzru, a British novelist of Pakistani origin. The main character is involved in terrorist movements of Marxist inspiration in London, starting from the year 1968³. His involvement ends in 1974, when he flees and escapes justice, after he realizes he cannot cope with violence any longer. The novel begins at the end of the year 1998 when his past catches up with him, prompting him to confess his crimes: the text thus offers a reflexive and

1 F. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 262.

2 S. Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, 152.

3 The author got his inspiration from the “Angry Brigade”, a terrorist group responsible for a series of bomb attacks between 1970 and 1972 in Britain.

retrospective point of view on this historical period. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is the second novel of Mohsin Hamid, a Pakistani writer: it is a short narrative set in the period immediately following 9/11. The novel consists of the lively monologue of a Pakistani man directed at an American in the city of Lahore. The reader is led to think that one or the other character is going to die in an assault of one on the other, the lack of other viewpoints contributing to uncertainty and mounting suspense⁴.

3. These texts both feature and reflect upon the idea of the moment of action, more precisely the core moment of conflict between groups or individuals, seen as a moment of ultimate commitment, the “heat of combat”. Both texts stage insurgents, characters who rebel against their present existence and who try to connect their intimate revolt with the political movements of the time (Marxist revolution in the first, Muslim fundamentalism in the second). The notion of political movement echoes that of moment, as spasm, somersault, living organism, opposed to motionlessness or *stasis*: according to etymology, the word *moment* comes from Latin *momentum*, meaning weight, itself a contraction of *movimentum*, meaning *movement*. Political movements in general, and revolutionary ones in particular, can be compared to currents, intertwined yet distinctive within the flow of history. From a rhythmic point of view, moment, like movement, can be stopped but also repeated, and this essay will scrutinize its temporary, recurring, sporadic aspect. Each novel features an individual political act, as well as the decisive moment it represents. Thanks to the narrative strategies and the ideological questions they raise, the novels articulate this tension between individual decision and collective project. In this study, moment is repeatedly pictured as this *locus* where the time of individual insurrection intersects with historical time. We posit that both novels interrogate what lies beneath this collision (individuals imagine or prepare their “entry” into history) and demonstrate its essential unpredictability (novels contain a criticism of political utopias as aporias). This paper identifies three narrative strategies that best describe how these novels work towards reflecting upon the category of moment. The first one refers to imminent disclosure, with plots relying on the trope of waiting, the second aims at differing action and the third defines refusal as decisive political moment.

4 Readings of the novel point out the possible interpretation of the fictional situation as that of imminent assassination: “The suggestion that the American might himself be armed and hostile while the ostensibly peaceful narrator may have turned to Jihadi violence informs an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and impending violence” (A. Hartnell, “Moving through America: Race, Place and Resistance in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*”, 337); “Tension threatens to become violence: quite possibly, the monologue ends seconds before a murder” (M. Scanlan, “Migrating from Terror: the Postcolonial Novel after September 11”, 274); the novel “begins with what looks eerily like a hostage situation” (A. Mukherjee, “Postcolonial Emergence and Global English”, 285).

Imminent disclosure

4. In *My Revolutions*, the protagonist takes part in extreme-left groups as a young man. In 1968, he joins pacifist hippies protesting against the Vietnam War and stands on the front line when a demonstration outside the U.S. embassy in London is suppressed. He is then jailed. Later on, he bonds with more radical groups, affiliated for instance with the FPLP (a terrorist Palestinian group of Marxist-Leninist obedience), responsible for bloody actions such as the bombing of West Germany's embassy in Copenhagen in 1975. The novel is based on flashbacks: it begins in 1998, as the main character is about to celebrate his fiftieth birthday in a suburban house where he lives under a false name. Such an opening sets protagonist and reader on an equal footing, since both are aware of the failure of revolutionary movements in Western Europe: it encloses revolution in a fixed, confined time frame, and denies all teleological readings of history; on the contrary, the novel, from the outset, claims an intellectual overview aimed at understanding “objectively” what has happened and failed. The novel focuses on assessing the persistence of history in the individual, of historicity on the level of individual *ethos*. Mike, the former revolutionary, left the country to escape justice in the 1970s, before resurfacing a few years later. But someone from his past comes knocking at his door and tries to use his story to threaten a British M.P. who had trodden the same path thirty years before. This “spectre of Marx” blackmails him into unveiling his true identity—a disclosure that threatens his secure life. The insistence of the past in the present structures the narrative, which can be read, on a primary level, as a manhunt. Flashbacks are organized so as to conjure up the feeling of a noose tightening around the protagonist. *My Revolutions* starts at what is the farthest point of the narrative, as the hero is about to disclose his deception to his wife. From the outset, the novel is bathed in an atmosphere of imminence: “what’s about to happen” (2), “what will happen to [her]” (4).

5. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as well, the uncertain identity of the protagonist and of his interlocutor induces the notion that a revelation is about to be made. A man of American citizenship is called out by a young man named Changez, in an outdoor restaurant in Lahore: “Excuse me sir but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you” (1). Apparently this opening leads to an encounter between two characters; in fact it initiates an exclusion, since the American character has no say as such in the text—as in *La Chute*, by Albert Camus, which is the main intertext of the novel. The monologue includes, although indirectly and partially, some of his reactions, but the lack of an alternative viewpoint makes it difficult to understand the nature of the narrator's interaction with the American. The text consists of embedded narratives, each of which describes an aspect of

the background of Changez—his student years at Princeton, his hiring by a prestigious audit firm and then his reaction, apparently unexpected, to the 9/11 events, which prompted him to leave the U.S. to go back to Pakistan. Each episode of his life is narrated within the ominous context of a probable conflict with his silent and silenced interlocutor. The reader is led to wonder whether the American is a secret agent who came to murder him, and whether the Pakistani is a terrorist, reluctant as he might be, whose goal is to eliminate the American character. Like in *The Arabian Nights*, the narrative consists in postponing death, by maintaining a bond between two individuals who entertain one another in the—apparently—most mundane and playful way. Each chapter gives way to more suspicion and gradually introduces a feeling of imminent outburst: “I see I have alarmed you” (1) ; “I can see you quite clearly as you stand there with your hand in your jacket” (60); “Once more I am raising my voice, and making you rather uncomfortable besides” (102) ; “Surely you can no longer feel the need to hold back” (123) ; “You, sir, [...] seem ready to bolt” (176). Such notations actualize the narrative, by conferring to the plot its urgency and suspense. The textual structure reinforces the tension: the American character’s reactions get constantly postponed and modified, made visible only through the prism of the protagonist's point of view, until the final effect, which consists in avoiding disclosure of death altogether—everything remains suspended, even the end. But refusing to make the crisis explicit is compensated by inscribing it throughout the novel. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the end is encoded and immanent, and thus “gives each moment its fullness”⁵, as shown in the description of the atmosphere of the present time:

Sometimes I would find myself walking the streets, flaunting my beard as a provocation, craving conflict with anyone foolhardy enough to antagonize me. Affronts were everywhere; the rhetoric emerging from your country at that moment of history [...] provided a ready and constant fuel for my anger (167).

6. Both texts rehearse conflict, wait for it, preview it, through the convergence of individual fantasy and collective ideologies, which influence, consciously or not, the characters’ choices. *My Revolutions* devotes lengthy descriptions of people discussing at length how they enjoy waiting for the long-expected moment of revolution. Waiting leads to *poeticizing* a moment that is full of strategic intensity: “Change is imminent. It’s happening around the world. The slightest pressure will tip the balance in our favour. One spark, a thousand fires burning” (173). The former insurgent looks back at that past with nostalgia: “We were so impatient. We wanted the time to be now” (173). This rhetoric of waiting eagerly, which refers to a *topos* of the revolutionary left⁶, is depicted as

⁵ F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 6.

⁶ Projects of social reformation in 19th century revolutionary movements developed alongside a rhetoric of waiting

wishful thinking in *My Revolutions*. As revolutionaries are pictured as impatient children, revolution appears to be triggered by an undefined subject (“change”, “it’s”, “one spark”). This image implies a diffuse collective action, imprecise and disembodied; in other words, as Simone Weil once put it, “a miracle which dispenses solving problems. The best proof [revolution] is viewed as a miracle is that one waits for it to fall from the sky; [...] the question of who is going to do it is beyond the point”⁷. The novel stages this waiting room of action as counterproductive since it ends up devaluing the future itself. It exhausts every individual bit of energy in the rhetoric of revolution: the revolutionaries are intoxicated by their utopia, which is consumed in the present moment made of waiting and procrastinating. Waiting for change is loaded with excessive hope invested in the future, and political passion requires individuals to surrender entirely to a political cause seen as history’s great move forward. One can read, for instance, that revolution requires to “give oneself up to history” (219). It is not surprising then that this intense desire for explosion should be compared to sexual intercourse, thus reactivating the traditional cliché between the art of war and the art of love. Acting out is made possible during these periods that are propitious to transgressing traditional laws:

If you believe in free love [...] as the release of libidinal energies from any restraint, any check whatsoever, the barrier between desire and action becomes terrifyingly thin and permeable. I take my desires for reality because I believe in the reality of my desires (110).

Adorned with an aura of magic, the expected moment of change induces in its believers an ability to accept the arbitrary and the coincidental.

7. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* also locates imminence within a zone of potential transgression: change can only be imagined if roles trade places. By giving voice to the oriental subject and to him only, the novel aims at silencing the rhetoric triggered by 9/11. It does so literally, by denying a voice to the American character, even as his mute, spectral presence retains its intimidating potential—he can, at least virtually, fire a gun. The writer consistently plays on that ambivalence and manages, by accusing no one distinctly, to escape the Manichean tone that has sometimes defined post-9/11 Western political discourse. None of the characters is completely innocent, and the text is punctuated with terms that refer to the encounter of both men in a zone of twilight, where

(see for instance the poetry of Eugene Pottier in France), whereby a secular temporality of expectation replaced religious eschatology.

7 L. Jenny, *Je suis la révolution*, 118. (My translation: “[U]n miracle dispensant de résoudre des problèmes. La preuve qu’on [...] considère [la révolution] ainsi c’est qu’on attend qu’elle tombe du ciel ; [...] on ne se demande pas qui la fera”.)

it is impossible to know the truth: “Perhaps it has to do with the cloudy sky above, through which one occasionally glimpses a gash of moon, or perhaps it is the darkening shadows in the warren of alleyways slipping away from here in all directions” (155). The narrative unfolds towards dusk and both characters seem to be swallowed by darkness. This crepuscular poetics shatters the very temporal meaning of imminence, since it inscribes it within the predictable, cyclical time of the night/day rotation:

At dusk, it is unknown whether imminence means that what was expected has already come. Hasn't it already announced itself? To announce one's coming, incidentally, isn't it already to be here one way or another? It is unknown whether waiting prepares the coming of what is to come, or if it recalls the repetition of the same, of the thing itself as ghost.⁸

Imminence indeed borders with repetition and immanence: it introduces a temporality of truth that is indirect, contrapuntal. As the narrator of *La Chute* remarks: “Truth, like light, is blinding. Lying, on the contrary, is like a beautiful dusk, it highlights every object”⁹. In both novels, locating characters in the shade provides a convenient context for their characterization as traitors and liars: Changez once “betrayed” his country for the love of another (and for the love of a woman, whose first name, Erica, echoes “America”); Mike betrayed his Marxist group to escape their morbid violence and his own death.

Differing action

8. As Laurent Jenny noted in *Je suis la révolution, Histoire d'une métaphore*, “few words have assumed as assiduously as [the word revolution] binaries as radical as death/rebirth, hope/disillusion”¹⁰. This dichotomy is made clear when the protagonist voices his doubts upon the moment of action, its *here and now*, but also its *thereafter*.

Were we about to storm the building? [...] This was it, our Winter Palace. This was 1917 [...]. Then they charged us with the horses [...]. I realized this was as far as we were going to get. We were a temporary crowd, a mass of disparate people. When threatened, there was nothing to hold us together;

8 J. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, 68. (My translation: “A la tombée de la nuit, on ne sait pas si l'imminence signifie que l'attendu a déjà fait retour. Ne s'est-il pas annoncé déjà ? S'annoncer, d'ailleurs, n'est-ce pas déjà être là de quelque façon ? On ne sait pas si l'attente prépare la venue de l'à-venir ou si elle rappelle la répétition du même, de la chose comme fantôme”.)

9 A. Camus, *Théâtre, récits, nouvelles*, 1537. (My translation: “La vérité, comme la lumière, aveugle. Le mensonge, au contraire, est un beau crépuscule, qui met chaque objet en valeur”.)

10 L. Jenny, *op. cit.*, 9. (My translation: “Peu de mots ont assumé aussi continûment des antinomies aussi graves”.)

we had neither the guts nor the organization. And perhaps not the imagination either. How many of us would know what to do if we got inside the embassy building? How many would freeze, then run back down the stairs into the world we knew? (35).

The desire to accomplish an act of historic scope—"1917", an event which has crystallized into myth—collides with the logistical momentary issues of a present time seeped in pathos: "How many of us would know what to do?" There is a gap between theory and practice, language and action, fiction and reality, which is made visible by the recurring use of "would". It also recalls the very role of fiction, which consists in picturing what is located just before action, what is not achieved yet. By choosing to set his 2007 novel in the 1970s, Kunzru writes a historical and political novel which highlights some important theoretical issues: it reaffirms that fiction is *praxis*, that is to say that it constitutes a space of tentativeness and provides a testing space for elaborating history. By inhabiting a historical event, the writer draws the contours of a meeting point with history—a crossroads of viewpoints and choices between several potentials. Potentiality, whether it is viewed after the event like in *My Revolutions* or before, like in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, is critical to interpret both novels, which stage individual action as the locus of political time. When the protagonist wonders, "how many of us would freeze, then run back down the stairs into the world we knew?", moment is made visible—or *spatialised*—by the protagonist, who then realizes that to hold back is preferable to such a leap into the future.

9. Paradoxically in a novel which features riots and violence, the characters seem to be incapable of inhabiting the present time. The weight of history and revolutionary myths prevents them from experiencing the present moment, as if each and every moment had to be lived from a distant, external, theoretical viewpoint:

I couldn't tell what was making me so edgy—the sense that things were about to change or the fear that they wouldn't. If there wasn't a transformation, what would I do? I brushed the idea aside. We were living through a historical upheaval, a time of chance (141).

The moment of action is consistently avoided, because the present time seems unbearable:

It's a strange thing to walk out of your front door on your way to a fight. There's something disconnected about it, something about the collision of routine with its opposite that renders the world temporarily unreal (154).

10. Each time a character is involved in violent acts, he experiences them as "unreal", "disconnected", suggesting that the moment of action corresponds to a suspension of time. Both

texts set strategies of detour: instead of confronting violent acts directly, they transform them into metaphors. As a case in point, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the recurrent theme of hunting conjures up the feeling of imminent *agôn*. Eating meat at dinner—hinted at with the oxymoronic “predatory delicacies” (101)—opens the text to images of predation and deadly conflict. In Pakistan, the narrator, who has just returned to his roots, proudly explains that the quality of the meat is far superior to what is consumed on the other side of the border, in vegetarian India, or in the West, where meat is sterilized and sold wrapped in cellophane. In Lahore, eating is equated to getting one’s hands dirty:

Will they provide us with cutlery, you ask? I am certain, sir, that a fork can be found for you, but allow me to suggest that the time has now come for us to dirty our hands. We have, after all, spent some hours in each other’s company already; surely you can no longer feel the need to hold back. There is great satisfaction to be had in touching one’s prey; indeed millennia of evolution ensure that manipulating our meals with our skin heightens our sense of taste—and our appetite, for that matter! I see you need no further convincing; your fingers are tearing the flesh of that kebab with considerable determination. (123)

Carnivory is depicted as satisfying a natural and vital need—similar in this respect to the comparison between the art of war and the art of love in *My Revolutions*. This image echoes the rhetoric of primitive barbarity sometimes used to describe Al Qaeda’s terrorists in the media. In an abrupt reversal, the Pakistani character enjoys peering into the American’s assumed voracity. This scene is loaded with full-fledged postcolonial irony, where the empowerment process taking place in the monologue becomes a means to reconstruct the colonized subject. This excluding gesture could be compared, for instance, to the one implemented by Aimé Césaire in his *Cahier du retour au pays natal*, the 1939 poem which shares with *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* some striking features. It is also a long monologue, which opens up by violently excluding the colonizer and which develops into a narrative about going back to the motherland in a dignified manner. In both books, acknowledging the presence of an “Other” character inscribes the narrative in the present time, even though the impossible dialogue defines “négritude” as untimely and spectral. Both texts inscribe racial subjectivity within modernity: they lodge, as Homi Bhabha would have it, a “time-lag” in modernity’s enunciatory “now”. By doing so, the excluding gesture interrupts colonial modernity (in the case of Césaire) and neo-colonial modernity (in the case of Hamid): “The black man refuses to occupy the past of which the white man is the future”¹¹. The monological form to be found in both texts could be interpreted as forming a bridge between the “now” and the “I” of the

11 H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 237-8.

speaking subject, who thus achieves a mastery of the present. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, it is only by silencing the interlocutor that representation, as reversed act of terror, is made possible: a monologue becomes a “genteel, cultivated form of terrorism that preempts the voice of the other and serves to dominate him or her”¹².

11. The narrative is filled with scenes of contained violence, which differ the moment of effective violence and highlight the incommensurable differences brought about by the events of 9/11. When a stranger on a parking lot calls Changez a “fucking Arab” (117), his reaction is that of restrained anger:

I am not, of course, an Arab. Nor am I, by nature, a gratuitously belligerent chap. But my blood throbbed in my temples and I called out, ‘Say it to my face, coward, not as you run and hide’. He stepped where he was. I unlocked the boot, retrieving the tire iron from where it lay; the cold metal of its shaft had rested hungrily in my hands, and I felt, at that moment fully capable of wielding it with sufficient violence to shatter the bones of his skull. We stood still for a few murderous seconds; then my antagonist was once again pulled at, and he departed muttering a string of obscenities. [...] [T]his encounter had an intensity that was for me unprecedented, and it was some minutes before I deemed myself fit to drive (117-118).

This excerpt resonates with the whole novel: faced with a total stranger, who nurtures hatred and cultural stereotypes, he engages in a violent discursive fight. Changez’s own attitude quickly recovers its civil and reassuring appearance, even though violence has irrevocably occurred: as philosopher of language Jean-Jacques Lecercle noted,

If there is such a thing as violence in language, the term must be taken literally – not the violence of symbol, but the violence of intervention, of an event the immateriality of which does not prevent it from having material effects, effects not of metaphor but of metamorphosis.¹³

The novel focuses on the effects of 9/11 on the so-called oriental subject by staging xenophobia. It thus challenges the rhetoric based on the binary of barbarism vs civilization that is sometimes used to describe 9/11 and makes of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* an exception in the plethora of artistic productions inspired by the event¹⁴.

12 D. LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 83.

13 J.-J. Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, 227.

14 One commentator noted that the novel fulfilled a “discernibly non-commemorative perspective on the attacks. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is one of the first attempts to reconfigure the attacks through the eyes of a non-westerner whose thoughts and feelings about 9/11 are strikingly ambiguous and finally ambivalent” (Randall 137). “Hamid exposes what has hitherto been largely absent from other 9/11 fiction: namely that 9/11 was not an isolated, irrational act aimed at an innocent nation but rather a direct result of American colonial, economic and military power” (*ibid.* 143). Another critic remarked that the novel, by placing at its center a Pakistani character in Lahore, “forces us to think about what lies behind the totalizing categories of East and West” (P. Morey, “The Rules of the

12. Similarly, in *My Revolutions*, Kunzru describes how revolutionaries rehearse and repeat violent scenes so as to substitute verbal, programmatic violence to real, physical violence. The leader of a group woos the protagonist into producing a logorrhea of insanities in the face of so-called capitalist traitors whom they met at a cocktail party:

[S]he dashed the wine glass out of his hand and screamed at him, 'you pig!' [...]. The music was quite loud and not everyone could hear, but the room was instantly energized. [...] For the next few minutes we shouldered through the party performing small acts of transgression, breaking things, screaming obscenities and feeling people up, until the place was in a state of uproar. (125-6)

Verbal conflict is an apparently inoffensive transposition of war or military offensive as such, but it sets up a semantics of revolution, which insidiously imprints its violence. Kunzru's novel is sprinkled with details signalling the violence of language. They recall Lecercle's "incorporeal semiotics", which refer to "the linguistic work of slogans, which precipitate events, in the temporal as well as the chemical sense of the verb. Slogans [...] actively intervene in the linguistic-historical conjunctures, they are part of it"¹⁵. Moreover, the intensity of the collective moment is made more acute by an effect of mimicry of the group, which devalues action into re-action: "Whatever was up, he'd want to be part of it. It could be going over the top on the Western Front or pushing corpses into a pit, just as long as there was a team element" (33). The strength of the collective movement seems to sweep everything away, and prevents the individual from exerting his free will, dependent as he is on the power of others.

The decisive moment

13. The recurring image of the circular movement reinforces that process. The political involvement of the protagonist can be read as a whirlpool, a slow but inevitable fall into the void, which is repeated over and over at each stage of the narrative, and which mirrors an episode of the hero's life, between 1974 and 1976, of which he remembers nothing:

By the time I reach the Paris périphérique I've fallen into a trance of headlights [...] Round I drive. [...] My eyes are tired of squinting into the darkness for—what am I looking for? [...] I have no idea of the time [...] So I carry on, round and round, Porte des Lilas, Porte de Montreuil, right shoulder inwards, circumambulating the large stupa at Wat Tham Nok, following the line of chanting monks,

Game Have Changed", 138).

15 J.-J. Lecercle, *op. cit.*, 227.

the tea light in its little clay bowl warming my hands. [...] Round and round. Porte de Charenton. Trudging round the yard at morning exercise. My revolutions: a hundred of us walking, two abreast, inner ring clockwise, outer ring counter-clockwise. Back in the days when Pentonville was the gateway to transportation, the builders constructed an endless double path of flagstones, two snakes eating their own tails, set into the black tar. The regime was designed to isolate prisoners from all human contact. Face-masks, enforced silence. Round and round, a folk dance on a fairground ride. Very important, they thought, never to give the scum a sense of achievement (70).

In this passage, the narrator refers to his trip to France where he once tried to trace a lover, his stay in Thailand, and finally his sojourn in a prison in England. The apparent nonsense of the narrator's actions is represented by a break in the chronology. A series of spiralling moments, which seem to alienate and enclose him, are repeated over and over. The circular move provides an answer to the question of when the imminent revolutionary moment is going to occur. Revolution travels in circles, which is a way to read the word literally, as a closed curved movement. By staging the protagonist in a series of scenes which conjure up a closed circle, the text insists on repetitions (theories and ideologies go on being recycled), on alienation (ideas are hammered in a mind which gradually loses its free-will, hypnotized as he is by the magnetic figures of leaders), and on intoxication (he loses the notion of time and of his own ability to act). Later in the text, the aimless dance of ideas gives way to the possibility of a break:

Round and round [...]. I'm experiencing momentary drop-outs, instants when my mind is completely blank. When I finally turn off the périphérique I have a near-miss as someone unexpectedly pulls out in front of me. Overreacting, I jerk the wheel and scrape the near-side wing against the crash-barrier (95).

Thanks to this development on centrifugal movement, moment is, once again, made into a spatial notion: the movement can only be stopped *in extremis* by a change in trajectory. This metaphor of revolution suggests an uncontrollable move, condemned to exit history. It breaks with all possibilities to last and to become historic, like "1917", clearly framed by a *before* and an *after*—a sequence of events that would help to identify successful revolutions. On the contrary, the character, stuck as he is in a whirlpool—a process emphasized by "r" alliterations—is on the verge of disconnecting from reality, of syncopating ("momentary drop-outs, when my mind is completely blank", or, earlier on, the idea of a "trance"). This moment of dropping out, located on a fine line between inside and outside, seems to fall into the definition of instant provided by Gaston Bachelard: "Time is a reality condensed upon the instant, and it is suspended between two voids [...]. Thanks to a kind of creative violence, time limited to the instant isolates us, not only from

others but also from ourselves, since it breaks with our dearest past”¹⁶.

14. This idea is implemented in the text: violence introduces breaks and discontinuity, thus excluding the possibility of duration. However, the failure of collective action is counterbalanced with the image of individual action, potentially effective and ethically satisfying. Swallowed up in a revolutionary whirlpool, the protagonist manages to stop its dynamic and to block the flow, by refusing to participate further in the terrorist enterprise. While on a mission to gather funds for a new series of attacks, he decides to say no, to denounce his fellow terrorists and to run away: “I wasn’t sure before. It was only when I stepped out on to the pavement that I knew what I was going to do” (254). The refusal, even if it is followed by a journey into darkness, allows him to step back into history again¹⁷. The insistence of the past in the present time prevents the text from closing on an “end of history”. Refusing to collaborate in an extreme and terrorizing political experience is the decisive moment that saves the individual from a vortex, even though it does not mean that his political and moral conscience is safe.

15. In a flashback located in the middle of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the narrator recalls the moment of September 11. He describes it as being disconnected from the present time. Changez is in Manila on a business trip and he follows the event on the TV screen of a hotel room. His remote location in an Eastern country—also plagued by Muslim fundamentalism—emphasizes the process of rupture with his adopted culture that is America and facilitates his betrayal. The reaction to the event is represented by a smile¹⁸, for which the narrator himself was not prepared: “Then I smiled” (72), and later on: “I was caught up with the symbolism of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees” (73). The reaction is to be understood as collective: symbols and images suggest a pressing demand to affiliate oneself with one side or the other. The protagonist is drawn, against his own will yet irresistibly, towards terrorism. This is the meaning of the title: *reluctance* defines his relation to the majority, but his sense of belonging does exist¹⁹. This complex chain of reactions is facilitated by what Paul Virilio calls a “splitting of time’s personality”²⁰, caused

16 G. Bachelard, *L’Intuition de l’instant*, 13. (My translation: “Le temps est une réalité resserrée sur l’instant et suspendue entre deux néants [...]. Par une sorte de violence créatrice, le temps limité à l’instant nous isole non seulement des autres mais de nous-mêmes, puisqu’il rompt avec notre passé le plus cher”).

17 Even if such a re-entry into history is not without flaws. The materialistic contemporary period is the object of a satirical treatment, where individuals seem to have banished political engagement from their lives: “a topsy-turvy world all right, a mirror world of flash and spin and graphic design. Politics was just life style. Even the scandals seemed to be about home improvement [...] this was the opposite of carving out a Utopia” (224).

18 Incidentally, the untimely element which haunts the narrator in *La Chute* is also non-verbal: he thinks he heard a fit of laughter when the woman jumped in the Seine, and the sound keeps haunting him throughout the narrative.

19 The word “fundamentalist” is polysemic: it also refers to the financial “fundamentals” of the companies that Changez has to audit. “Focus on the fundamentals” is the mantra of his auditing job.

20 P. Virilio, *Un Paysage d’événements*, 64. (My translation: “dédoublément de la personnalité du temps”).

by the co-existence of the present time of our immediate life and the “telepresent” time of mass communication. This splitting already has profound consequences upon the individuals’ abilities to express themselves politically and to decide. This feature of the contemporary world has been explored in recent fiction. As a case in point, Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* also features a young man who is becoming a “reluctant terrorist”, acting on impulses triggered both by his “real” world—the conflict in Kashmir, a personal love affair—and by transnational images of a seemingly mounting Muslim threat that have become ubiquitous. Political opinions are voiced across the globe thanks to TV channels, are interpreted instantly and can trigger reactions anywhere²¹.

16. Similarly to *My Revolutions*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* describes individuals stuck in a moment of shock, and their instinct tells them to join a collective action. The hero confesses he cannot resist the collective attraction: “I could not escape the growing importance of tribe” (117). The comparison between a Cold War event—terrorism in Europe in the 1970s—and 9/11 becomes particularly significant. Both terrorist movements, even though they feature apparently opposed figures, namely the reactionary fundamentalist and the left-wing protester, are grounded upon the same belief that “a more violent intervention is needed to shake the masses out of their ideological numbness, their hypnotic consumerist state”²². Both texts highlight the present moment as in need of an epistemic shift. For Hamid’s narrator, watching the bombing on his TV screen is a moment that “opens itself up to experience, but that also resists it”, as Derrida would have it. It stages:

[A] certain *unappropriability* of what comes or happens. The event is what comes and, in coming, comes to surprise me, to surprise and to suspend comprehension: the event is first of all *that which* I do not first of all comprehend. Better, the event is first of all *that* I do not comprehend. [...] There is no event worthy of its name except insofar as this appropriation *falters* at some border or frontier.²³

This novel problematizes such an impossibility to appropriate the event: the narrator’s smile stands for that very moment of bewilderment, since it replaces speech and conscious elaboration, but it is also an untimely provocation to the narrator—and to the reader. This reflex spurs an inner change: this smile is a point of entry into his inner self and, for the first time, his feeling of betrayal and guilt. The monologue, from that memory of 9/11 on, becomes an act of introspection and conveys an intransigent judgment on what America has made of himself, on what he has “become” (152). On a business trip to Chile, someone touches upon the story of the Janissaries, young Christians

21 S. Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*, 374. The novel relies heavily on the ubiquitous quality of images, like those of training camps across the Muslim world. Incidentally, Rushdie’s 2005 novel provides continuous questions about images and representation, as it is partly set in Los Angeles and features numerous cinematographic references.

22 S. Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, 9.

23 G. Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, 90. (Italics in the text).

who were made slaves as children in the Ottoman empire and who became the best and most faithful elite soldiers because they had no memory of ever belonging to another culture. This notion shatters him, and it is described as the “final catalyst” (146) to the personal, intimate change which he had only sensed since then: “[It] added considerable momentum to my inflective journey” (146). The weight of the decisive moment gives rise to a personal ethics:

I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire at a time when it was invading a country with a kinship to mine and was perhaps even colluding to ensure that my own country faced the threat of war (152).

17. He then takes the ultimate decision, against the grain of the prevailing capitalist logic: “I told the vice-president that I refused to work any further” (152-3). Later on he makes his refusal explicit: “It was right for me to refuse to participate any longer in facilitating this project of domination; the only surprise was that I had required so much time to arrive at my decision” (156). Like in *My Revolutions*, refusal is equated to awareness, and moment coincides with Bachelard’s phenomenological definition of instant: “Conscience is consciousness of the instant; and consciousness of the instant is conscience”²⁴. Such moments create the right conditions for a personal *kairos*, set at a crossroads between the long run of history and a specific geopolitical location which can make it look like an accident, something surprising but which has been there all along: “Each action necessarily relies on the continuity of life’s future. In a truly creative evolution, there is only one law, according to which any attempt to develop stems from an accident”²⁵.

18. But like in *My Revolutions*, refusal is not in itself sufficient to provide the novel with a rationale or moral. The narrator, once refusal is formulated, does not account for his actions nor does he become a hero: uncertainty prevails and both novels feature anti-heroes throughout. The reader hesitates between interpreting his return to Pakistan as a retreat to his roots or a conversion to the toughest fundamentalism. The hermeneutic richness of the narrative comes from the nature of the monologue itself, “both discourse and representation of discourse, act of defiance towards the language [...] and act of trust, since [the narrator] consistently uses it, as a proof of the complex relation between words and morals”²⁶. As the end closes in, the narrator confesses his paranoia and

24 G. Bachelard, *op. cit.*, 49. (My translation: “La conscience est la conscience de l’instant et la conscience de l’instant est conscience”).

25 *Ibid.*, 23. (My translation: “Chaque action mise nécessairement sur la continuité du devenir vital. Dans une évolution vraiment créatrice, il n’y a qu’une loi générale, c’est qu’un accident est à la racine de toute tentative d’évolution”).

26 J. Lévi-Valensi, *Albert Camus, La Chute*, 119. (My translation: “à la fois parole et représentation de la parole, acte de défiance envers le langage [...] et acte de confiance, puisque [le narrateur] ne cesse de s’en servir, mise en évidence des rapports complexes entre les mots et la morale”).

his feeling of being observed: “Since then, I have felt rather like a Kurtz waiting for his Marlowe. I have endeavored to live normally, as though nothing has changed, but I have been plagued by paranoia, by an intermittent sense that I am being observed” (183). But as in the Conradian novella, it is the deviation from his original mission—in other words, what Kurtz “has become”, like Changez—which is troublesome. By tightening the noose around both characters, the narrative stages a journey towards the heart of darkness and towards the “horror” that can only be located outside the text. According to such an interpretation, Pakistan is alluded to as this space of darkness which has created the conditions of existence of 9/11. The personal secrets disclosed as the embedded narratives succeed one another, converge towards the constitution of a tormented, ambivalent, and thus human mind, since one cannot be sure about the exact part played by the narrator.

19. Both novels stage unsatisfying collective actions and depict individual moments of crisis which also are moments of opportunity, thus echoing the double meaning of *kairos*:

[A] turning point in the historical order : opportunity presented, opportunity seized upon and missed, the qualitative change and transition in the lives of individuals and nations, and those constellations of events which made possible some outcome that could not have happened at any other time.²⁷

The refusal to take part in terrorism in *My Revolutions* and the refusal to be a traitor in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* can be seen as ethical despite and beyond the doubts that they stir. Refusal, placed against the grain of collective movements, represents this reluctance to join the flow which drowns the individual in the collective. In both books, refusal becomes an act of political commitment because it involves a radical risk, “a step into the open, with no guarantee about the final outcome”²⁸. The personal, insurrectional moment becomes a milestone inscribed in the course of personal, yet also political, time. It is interesting to note that both moments of refusal are staged in the middle of the novels, not as their outcomes: thus they are pivotal times without being ends in themselves. Narrative constructions based on flashbacks highlight this individual *kairos*. Contrary to the writing of history, one could say with Paul Ricoeur that the broken chronology constitutes “a deliberately multidimensional configuration which is more fitted to a vision of time devoid of overview or internal coherence” (120)²⁹. By focusing on individual *kairos*, both novels perform a

27 J. E. Smith, “Time, Times and Qualitative Time”, 52.

28 S. Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, 152.

29 P. Ricoeur, *Temps et récit : II : la configuration du temps dans le récit de fiction*, 120. (My translation: “Une configuration délibérément pluridimensionnelle [qui] convient mieux à une vision du temps privée de toute capacité de survol et de toute cohésion interne”.)

movement of detachment from the present, towards acquiring a historical perspective on the present moment.

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