

## Death Sentences: From Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* to the Sign's Last Sigh. An Exercise in (Mis)communication(s).

DAVID A. WALTON  
Dpto. de Filología Inglesa  
Universidad de Murcia  
30071 MURCIA

### ABSTRACT

*The "object" of this paper is paradoxical. It attempts to show (communicate) how Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* may be read from a "Lacanian" point of view: how a number of "Lacanian" concepts can be useful to thematize various levels of (mis)communication and (given the assumptions of the textual strategy employed), the inevitability of wider-ranging forms of (mis)understanding. It also suggests that the so-called interpretation of the object text is just as much an allegory of the method used: the subject-object binary tending to break down. This results in an ambivalent relation: is "Lacanian" criticism interpreting *The Moor*, or, is *The Moor* a parabolic form of Lacanian theory? This interpretive/theoretical dialectic is further problematized by the theoretical system's challenge to both the ontological certainty of the object of interpretation and the ontological stability and epistemological value of the interpretive scheme itself.*

KEY WORDS : (mis)communication, epistemology, hermeneutics, Lacanian theory, Salman Rushdie, the sign.

### 1. (MIS)COMMUNICATING COMMUNICATIONS<sup>1</sup>

"What do we mean by communication? The oldest meaning of the word, in English, can be summarized as the passing of ideas, information, and attitudes from person to person. But, later, communication came also to mean a line or channel from place to place". So begins Raymond Williams' study entitled, *Communications* (Williams, 1976:9).<sup>2</sup> Although this highly generalised definition may still seem relevant to the 1990's the theoretical basis upon which this paper rests will render the model of communication as the transmission and reception of ideas highly problematic. This, to put the matter into the context of linguistics, is the result of what might be called the post-Saussurean revolution of the sign. Here the language-referent model was challenged by the semiotic paradigm<sup>3</sup> which put the stress on language as a self-enclosed relational system; a change of emphasis which would send reverberations well

beyond the **specialized domain** of linguistics - notably (and **significantly** for this essay) **in** the **discourses** of the human sciences, especially those of textual theory and psychoanalysis. The latter **discourses**, **in their** so-called post-structuralist forms, would not only come to challenge the **transmission** model but **also contest** the idea of **definable** unproblematical spaces. Thus, the **theoretician** who **provides** the interpretive **dynamic** "**behind**", or "**in**", this essay was able to rewrite Descartes cogito ergo sum as: "I think where I **am** not, therefore I **am** where I do not think" (Lacan, 1977:166).

## 2. REALITY, COMMUNICATION AND SUBJECTIVE SPACES: ERECTION AND CASTRATION

This questioning of subjective **positioning** has ontological, epistemological and hermeneutic consequences. Ontologically definitions can no longer be caught within the fixed **frame** associated with positivistic forms of **thinking** (positivistic **because** positivism cannot be **reduced** to an **unproblematic** homogeneous discourse). The lack of a fixed centre<sup>4</sup> from which to establish categorical definitions **attacks** the basis, not only of the dominant social sciences model of knowledge and **communication**, but **also** that of the **idealist** following in the Cartesian tradition: "I think, therefore I **am**" cannot be the **starting-point**, or a final (safe) refuge **in** the self, **because** the "self", according to the **Lac(k)anian** system (or the way **in** which it can be **systematized**<sup>5</sup>) is a sign: i.e. the product of language. Language, **part** of what **Lacan** calls the "symbolic order", offers the positions of perceiving subject or perceived object which are **constantly** subject to **alternation** or change. (I write **Lac(k)anian** to **indicate** that my version of **Lacan** is, for theoretical and practical reasons, **deficient** - full of "lack".) If I **feel** empowered on the one hand by my position as subject, I can, on the other, just as easily be displaced or disempowered (**symbolically** castrated) by becoming the object of someone **else's** discourse. **Although** the (anti-)hero of the novel to be **discussed** is born with a **terrific** erection he will be subjected to thoroughgoing castration from this point of view. **The** subject, then, may **feel** empowered on the one hand or, on the other, "de-centred" - that is, ousted from a privileged place and consigned to the margins or to a place of **insignificance** or **relative weakness**.

Epistemologically, this renders knowledge about the self or the world **highly indeterminate**. Freud's ideas had split the subject by **emphasizing** the **irrational**, potentially destructive forces of the unconscious which required those **working in** the tradition of psychoanalysis to adopt a model of **communication** which **took** into account hidden latent possibilities; **Lac(k)anian** thought has **further** complicated the theoretical **landscape** (to adopt a topographical metaphor) by **requiring** the **critic** to consider the self **in terms** of a **semiotic** system. As I **shall** try to show, this semiotic approach **throws systems** of human communication into utter **disarray**. In epistemological **terms** **Lac(k)anian** theory **tends** to **question** the reliability of **claims** to knowledge: communications do not **serve** to communicate easily decipherable messages, but to scramble them. **Lac(k)anian** critics, of **course**, seem to be in a privileged position - but even this, according to the consequences of the controlling concepts, is an illusion.

Hermeneutically, interpretive acts must **always take** into account that there **is** no way out of the **symbolic** system (**and its uncertainties**) which **make** the **act** of interpretation possible. **Hence during** the course of the paper I introduce a number of orthographic **puns** to **remind** the

reader of the **gaps between the desire for understanding** or closure (e.g. **IDentity**) and how the self is caught in the Other, or the alterity of **language** (e.g. **allEGOrY**).<sup>6</sup> There is no form of meta-commentary that can put the interpreter above the duplicitous nature of the sign, and hence the **orthographical** glues... I mean, clues. If Descartes ultimately **fell back on the cogito argument**, then the **Lac(k)anian**, like the **deconstructionist**, can only **fall back on one certainty**: that the nature of the sign is **indeterminate** - which (in terms of **arriving at certainties**) is not to concede the **interpreting self** (or the system of **interpretation**) very much. These uncertainties engendered by the **Lac(k)anian system** will be **explored** through a reading of Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Lust Sigh*. It might also be noted **here** that the novel is so **full of possibilities** for **Lac(k)anian forms of analysis** that this paper is a **mere scratch on the surface**.

### 3. DEATH SENTENCES

#### 3.1. Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* and the Lac(k)anian "spool" of crITicism. An allEGOrY.

The main protagonist of Rushdie's novel, *The Moor's Lust Sigh*, afflicted with a **premature ageing disorder** and a **deformed right hand**, is **Moraes Zogoiby** (called the "Moor") whose life is dominated by two women: his mother (Aurora) and a **lover** (Uma), **significantly** described by him as "the **two great super-powers**". These two "powers", he tells us, were thought to look **alike**, but, he continues, "I never saw it, couldn't see it at all" (Rushdie, 1996:3). These particulars **seem tailor made** for the classical Freudian critic whose interpretive **strategies could hardly forbear linking** these details to the Oedipai **scenario** (it is worth noting that his mother's **name** refers to the **sunrise** - so essential to life - and that his **girl-friend's name** includes a contraction of mother "ma"). The fact that Rushdie has the mother **murdered** in mysterious **circumstances** and the girlfriend die in a **fake** suicide attempt both tend to invite the **simplicities** of a "vulgar" Freudian reading - as **does** the detail that the Moor is bom with an erection which **impedes** his passage into the world (and thus there is a **literal erotic attachment** to the mother). The deformed hand, though, can be read as a displaced symbol of castration at **birth**. These details **indicate** how suggestive **this text** is to a Freudian approach, **but this paper will only concentrate** on a **number of features** which **may** reflect on the thematics set out in the **introductory paragraphs**. These features, however, can be read with relation to the symbolic **empowerments** and **disempowerments** which will be **important** to the reading of *The Moor's Last Sigh* offered **here**.

However, back to the **Lac(k)anian system** and Moor's mother. The mother is described as an **eminent twentieth-century painter** who dominated cultural life in Bombay, and who was **known** for her **portraits** of her only son, the Moor. So it could be said that the Moor is represented through the mother's **gaze** which is fundamental to the way his **IDentity** emerges **throughout the novel**.<sup>7</sup> One of the ways this could be read is to see **this** from the point of view of the entry into **what Lacan called** the symbolic order, where the **subject** is forced to see itself through the **signifying system**: i.e. see itself from the position of the Other (i.e. through the **linguistic, cultural (symbolic) systems** which precede the subject's **entry** into them). Of course, this **works** both ways (we are **all constructed in the discourse** of the Other): if the Moor is represented, so can he be **said** to represent the **representor because**, as he says: "What then can

the humble clay **usefully** say about the **hands** that moulded it? Perhaps simply this: that *I was there. And that during* the years of sittings **I made a kind of portrait** of her, too. She was looking at me, and **I was looking right back**" (*The Moor's Last Sigh* (Rushdie, 1996:219)). The **two gazes** are locked into the position set up by the symbolic order: at one level, subject and object (which is reversible **here**); at **anOther level** the **positionings** of **mOther** and son, with the prohibitions which this relation **entails**. (**Later** I'll suggest that a displaced form of incest brings about the rupture between mother and son.)

So from the very **beginning** it is possible to **thematize** the events according to the Lac(k)anian symbolic register. **Take** the following paragraph which describes the mother:

"To be the offspring of our daemonic Aurora," I was told when young by the Goan painter V. (for Vasco) Miranda, "is to be, truly, a moderm Lucifer. You know: son of the blooming morning." By then my family had moved to Bombay, and this was the **kind** of thing that passed, in the **Paradise** of Aurora Zogoiby's **legendary** salon, for a **compliment**; but **I** remember it as a prophesy, **because** the day **came** when I was **indeed** hurled from that fabulous garden, and plunged towards **Pandaemonium**. (Banished from the natural, what choice did I **have** but to embrace its opposite? **Which** is to say, **unnahiralism**, the **only** real ism of these back-to-front and jabberwocky days. Placed beyond the Pale, would you not seek to **make** light of the Dark? Just so. **Moraes** Zogoiby, expelled from his story, tumbled towards history.) (Rushdie, 1996:5)

It is **significant** that the Moor's life with his mother and his **later** rejection is described in **Christian terms**. **First** he **inhabits** a paradise, "a fabulous garden". This can be related to the Lac(k)anian pre-symbolic stage of undifferentiated being and plenitude. Continuing the Christian story the division from the mother **is** described as a **fall** into hell, which is a **banishment** from the "natural" - this could be read as referring to the division from the pre-linguistic world **dominated** by primal **needs**, or the Lac(k)anian pre-symbolic. With the division from the **mother/paradise** the Moor **asks**, "what choice did I **have** but to embrace its opposite?" **That is**, "**unnaturalism**". The embracing of the opposite can be **seen** as an **alLEGORY** of the **subject's entry** into the symbolic order of **differences** - a **kind** of "**unnatural**" state which divides the subject from itself, its pre-symbolic "natural" **condition**.<sup>8</sup> It may be noticed **also** that the Moor **is** now beyond "the Pale", i.e. placed beyond a **limit** or boundary. Thus the protagonist, **in** being **thrust** from the mother, has crossed a limit from which there can be no return. Of course, he **is** a **grown** man when this **occurs**, and this is why I say it **is like** an **alLEGORY** of the **entry** into the symbolic register.

This **thematization** or **alLEGOrization** can be **brought out further** with **reference** to the **phrase** which follows the word "**unnaturalism**" - "the only real ism of these back-to-front and jabberwocky days". **Here** it **might** be noted that what is on the other **side** of the **limit** (i.e. beyond **total union** with the self and mother) is the "ism": the suffix which points to "**back-to-front** and jabberwocky **days**". The jabberwocky was, of course, a poem in **Lewis Carroll's** *Through the Looking Glass* characterized by **nonsense** syllables and meaningless speech - a kind of poetic gibbensch. This can be related to what **in Lac(k)anian theory** **is** called the "unary" **signifier**. This can be **described** as a **sound** which a young pre-symbolic child can produce but is **meaningless** (it's a **signifier** with no **signified**)<sup>9</sup>. However, once the child **begins**

to **distinguish** between things, sounds are no longer forms of meaningless gibber but **parts** of a symbolic **code**. Once a child can distinguish between only two things verbally, this is a **pivotal** event: the **child** has a **binary** pair of **signifiers** and the entry into the symbolic order of language has **begun**.

So when subjects **enter** the symbolic they are plunged into a set of pre-determined relations, but are **also confined** to speech or language which **seems** "back-to-front". This can be **seen** as the **failure** of the symbolic to be able to articulate (adequately) need and satisfy **desire**. The Moor descends from "pure", undifferentiated (**biological-libidinal**) being (the "Real")" into a **kind** of hell (Pandemonium) where he is, as he says, "expelled from his story" (the pre-symbolic world of undifferentiated being and satisfaction), and "**tumbled** towards history": i.e. a **structured discourse** in which he is caught and subject to the **cultural/linguistic positions** implied by the symbolic order and the losses and **lacks** that the entry into this order entails. From this point of view it is interesting to note that the novel is presented as a manuscript which the Moor has nailed to "a gate, a fence, an olive-tree, **spreading** it across this landscape of [his] last journey" (Rushdie, 1996:3); **something tending** to emphasize the purely *textural* nature of the subject's (**his**)story.

The Moor, then, can be said to come into **existence** as a purely textual phenomenon (another **Lac(k)anian allEGORy** of the entry into the symbolic) **because** the story **cannot** be read until the manuscript has **been finished** (nailed up) and the Moor has died. (The novel could be said to begin with not so much the Moor's last sigh, but his last written *sign*.) As Lacan said in one of his **seminars** (speaking of Oedipus' death): "**I am made man in the hour when I cease to be**" (Lacan, 1988:155). This could be read in at least two ways. One, the entry into the symbolic effectively cuts the subject off from the pre-symbolic Real, and so (in **Lac(k)anian** terms) a **kind** of "death" is enacted: to **become** "me" I **alienate** myself from myself - **leave** my pre-symbolic undifferentiated self (or as **Lac(k)an** might say, I can only find myself in the field of the **Other**).<sup>10</sup> (In this context it may be of interest to note that there may be, in the **ghostly** echo of the Moor's **name**, **Moraes**, "more ash" - given its pronunciation according to the Portuguese phonetic system; the Moor being of Portuguese extraction.) This leads to point **two**, that my sense of identity or "self" is not **entirely** dependent on me. "**I am** made", not only **because** "I", as a personal **pronoun** is a product of the symbolic (which **structures** "me" - which includes the **unconscious**<sup>11</sup>), but that "I" am not the object of **my making** (my **manipulations** of the symbolic), in so far that my identity is **also** dependent on how I **am seen** as an object by others. As I **shall** suggest below, life and death only **have** meaning with relation to the symbolic. The death of the body is a **return** to the Real which could not be the subject of (**his**)story were it not **captured within** the symbolic register. **Textual/symbolic** death is only **possible with** the **utter annihilation** of **all references** to a subject - as **sign**, as memory - a total **aphanisis** or **fading** (Lacan, 1979:207) **within** the system of representation.

### 3.2. Reading Real to reel.

At the **point** where the Moor is **made** and, **paradoxically**, ceases to be, he, predictably, in the **Lac(k)anian** scheme of things, **suffers the fate** of **all** who **enter** the symbolic: he is caught out by the **Lac(k)anian axiom** that *language is not the property of those who use it*.<sup>12</sup> This is, perhaps, best exemplified by the great **love** of the Moor's life, Uma, who can be used to

allegorize the Lac(k)anian post-Saussurean view of the sign as a **signifier** which can never be **stabilized** into fixed unequivocal meaning:

What was truly **remarkable** was that during that **morning amble** at Mahalaxme the newcomer [Uma] found a way to **spend** a few **private minutes** with each of us in tum, and **after** she **departed**... every one of us had a fiercely held opinion about her, and **many** of these **opinions** contradicted each other utterly and were incapable of being reconciled. (Rushdie, 1996:243)<sup>13</sup>

Uma turns out to be protean: not **just** a signifier with multiple signifieds, but multivalent. She **is also** a gifted artist who **is** intensely disliked by the Moor's mother; **an** abhorrence which is returned - but with a vengeance. **That** vengeance **begins** in the following way. One **day**, during the act of **love**, Uma mentions the mother's hostility and the following scene **takes** place:

I **confess** that at that high **instant** I had no stomach for this talk. An obscenity **sprang unbidden** to my lips. *Fuck her then.* - "What was that you said?" *I said fuck her. Fuck my mother. O.* (Rushdie, 1996:252)

The Moor explains that Uma:

returned time and again to the topic of my mother's hostility, until it seemed to **become** a part of what excited her. - She hates me hates me **tell** me what to do. - And I was expected to reply, and, forgive me, in the grip of lust I **answered** as **required**. *Screw her* I said. *Screw her stupid the stupid bitch.* And Uma: How: **Darling, darling**, how? *Fuck her upside down and sideways too.* O, you can, my only sweet, if you want to, if you only say you want. - *God yes. I want to. Yes. O God.* (Ibid.)

What Uma **does is** to record **these** "obscenities" **onto** a cassette and, without the Moor's knowledge, play them to his **parents**. **This results in** his **banishment from** the family home and disinheritance. **Although** a "vulgar" Freudian reading might see the whole **incident** as a **displacement** of the author's latent oedipal fantasies, it can **also be seen** as an allegory of how language or the sign is never entirely **within** the subject's control. On the **surface** the Moor utters the obscenities to please Uma, but Uma can be said to **return** them to their **forbidden** latent **source**, **converting** them, out of the **context** in which they were **uttered**, into expressions of the **incest taboo**. A Lac(k)anian reading could **bring out both meanings**: Uma's **exploitation** of the words is not **necessarily** a **distortion** of some "original" meaning **because** there **is** no way to **establish** what that **meaning might be**; but **on** the other **hand**, this **structure is like** a parable of how the sign both **represses** and (**indirectly**) reveals oedipal **desire**.

## Death Sentences

Signification could be **alLEGOrized** in the following way:

The Moor	Uma	The Moor's Parents
<p>The Moor utters the obscenities <b>thinking</b> he's <b>satisfying</b> a <b>desire</b> (which <b>becomes</b> a demand) but <b>is</b> unable to fully understand it (Uma's needs are more complex than he thinks). He invests his signifiers with his own <b>meaning</b> but now they <b>become</b> Uma's property.</p>	<p>Uma now possesses the signifiers (the obscenities). It could be (as the Moor thought) that she <b>became</b> sexually aroused while listening to them but she puts them to her own use. The Moor, from a <b>Lac(k)anian</b> point of view, could never satisfy Uma's <b>desires</b>. Uma could symbolize the problems of signification: she is the carrier or medium of the <b>sign</b> always doomed to fail - the bearer of <b>(mis)communication</b>.</p>	<p>The Moor's parents now <b>take</b> possession of the signifiers but do not understand the "defiles" <b>through</b> which the <b>signs have</b> passed (which I've symbolized as Uma). The obscenities, <b>which</b> the Moor uttered to satisfy Uma's <b>desire</b>, now encounter the Name (or the Law) of the Father - the patriarchal law which prohibits incestuous relations and confers <b>meaning</b> on the signifiers. Thus the patriarchal law exercises <b>its</b> authority and the Moor <b>is</b> castigated: <i>i.e.</i> <b>disinherited</b> and cut off from his <b>mother</b>.<sup>14</sup> It is <b>worth noting here</b> that, in <b>conferring meaning</b> on the signifiers, the patriarchal law <b>is</b> no nearer to "<b>truth</b>" or "<b>reality</b>" <b>because</b> the Moor's parents are <b>also duped</b> by Uma, the "defile" through which the <b>signs have</b> passed.</p>

Much **later** in the novel, when it is too late for a reconciliation with his mother (for she is dead), the Moor is **sent** the **tape** of obscenities by his father (a **structure** of linguistic relations reminiscent of those **Lacan** analyzed in his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" (Lacan, 1976)).<sup>15</sup> On **listening** to the **tape** he believes he has **solved** the **riddle** of Uma's treachery. This is what we might call the "**Phallic function**": he believes he now understands **everything** - has a **mistaken** feeling of power and authority in his attempt to arrest the play of signification by giving it coherent **meaning**. However, from the **Freudian/Lac(k)anian viewpoint** the **riddle** still remains **unsolved** because **although** the Moor **sees deception** he fails to **see** the possibilities of a latent displaced meaning behind his words. The obscenities, from the **Lac(k)anian standpoint**, are not **only** an attempt to satisfy Uma's **desires** (which he can't fully understand or gratify) but, **ironically**, an **unconscious** attempt to satisfy his **own** repressed **oedipal** wishes, **something** also, **according** to the **Lac(k)anian system**, doomed to failure. What the Moor **does** not know (**this** is the job of the **analyst**) is that his **unconscious desires** are **manifesting** themselves through his **speech** - **in this** case in the most obvious and paradoxical way (**in fact**, in an **almost unthinkable** form **in** Freudian terms): what the obscenities mean at the **surface level** is what **they** mean at the **latent level**. But **because** the Moor thinks, or believes, that his

words are satisfying Uma's **desires**, he never considers the possibility that they may be satisfying his **own forbidden** unconscious cravings. **During** the act of love he **utters** his repressed **fantasies** and would **be** said to satisfy them doubly: in the verbal expression of them, and **in** converting U(ma) into a displaced physical **symbol** of his mother.

As suggested above, although the Moor may **have** felt he was **giving** pleasure by satisfying Uma's **desire**, and although the **desire** he understood her to **have** may **have been** satisfied, he was unwittingly satisfying her hidden **desire** to destroy his relations with his **family**. He **is**, as a result of the **mismatch** between what he believes about Uma and what she turns out to **be**, decentred from the privileged place of provider of pleasure and subordinated **as** the victim of **malice**. He **is**, **in** short, not so much a victim of the return of the "Real", but the return of the "reel", made **possible** by this, a **kind** of Lac(k)anian "spool" of criticism.

**Here** is a return of the "reel" (spool) which **can be seen as** the return of the Lac(k)anian "Real" **because**, as Zizek explains: "The role of the Lac(k)anian real is, however, radically **ambiguous**: **true**, it **erupts** in the form of a traumatic return, derailing the balance of our daily lives, but it **serves** at the **same** time as a support of this very balance" (Zizek, 1991:29). This **can be explained** by **observing** that the return of the cassette **is** like a traumatic return (U/Ma's symbolic **return(s)** from the dead). But the Moor **converts** this trauma into the illusion of understanding: his **impotence** **is** converted into a form of potency where he now appears to wield interpretive authority over the sign and thus **restore**, if not a balance over his daily life, a **certain** illusory power over the interpretation of **his** personal history.

At one point, when the Moor **realizes** that he has **been** the victim of Uma's deceptions, he writes: "To give up one's own picture of the world and **become** wholly dependent on someone **else's** - was not that as good a description as any of the process of, literally, **going out of** one's **mind**?" (Rushdie, 1996:267). Yet from the Lac(k)anian perspective **subjects** are **always** in someone **else's** picture of the world, in so far that signification not **only** positions us **according** to its **pre-determined** rules and prohibitions, but that we are never in control of the symbolic system that enables us to represent, but more **importantly**, to be represented.

The Moor, then, **in** not knowing how he was viewed as an **object** of Uma's or his **parents' gaze** (as **dupe** on the one **hand** and obscene mother hater-lover on the other) **is** caught **between** his **sense** of self and how he **is seen** from the **outside**. It could be said, using a **post-structuralist** cliché, **that** he **is** radically "split": his identity **is** the object of representation; and he **is** divided in terms of what he **thinks** (the **rational**) and what **is** beneath his **thinking** (repressed **unconscious** desires). He **is** like the child at the Lac(k)anian "mirror stage" who **mistakes** his self-image for a stable self which **is** beyond him **because** it **is** not entirely dependent on him; it being the product of how he **is** positioned and interpreted **within** the symbolic system of **representation**.<sup>16</sup> It could be said that he identifies with a **misleadingly** coherent **image** of **himself**. However, it **is worth remembering** that even if Uma were not a **deceiver**, the Moor, from the Lac(k)anian point of view, **would** never know **himself** or the **Other**, because the Real (like Kant's *noumenon* - *that* upon which language **is working**) could never be manifested as **itself**: it could **only** be represented **within** the misleading defiles of signification.



#### 4. SENTENCING DEATH: THE SIGN'S LAST SIGH.

I wrote above that the novel can be seen as **emphasizing** that the whole narrative, and all those in it, are essentially caught **within** the symbolic order of textuality. **Indeed**, the Moor's "last sigh" coincides with his abandonment of the text he has **written**, and the novel **ends with a kind of postscript announcing** his death - which, as suggested above, **is** the Moor's last *sign* which **brings** the act of reading into play. (**Actually**, the novel **is** circular in so far that it **begins** where it **ends** in a graveyard just **down** the road from the "Ultimo Suspiro gas station" (Rushdie, 1996:4).)

I stressed earlier (quoting Lacan) that the subject comes to life at the moment when it ceases to be and in this way the Moor's death **becomes**, paradoxically, a **kind** of birth: it is the moment (or the **collection** of **dispersed** moments) when the narrative comes into being (death, being announced both at the beginning and at the end, circumscribes **all** the events). The narrative, between these two chronicles of a death foretold, **is** strewn across the landscape which, **metaphorically**, allows the reader to step into it. The individual reader's **entry** into the (fictional) symbolic order **equals** the narrative beginning (or birth) of the Moor. This moment of fictional death paradoxically **allegorizes** a Todorovian theme being **also** the moment of the possibility of his narrative life: that is, through the act of reading. The longer the Moor prolongs his fictional death (paradoxically through the **narration** of his **entire** life) the longer he can eke out his fictional **existence**.<sup>17</sup>

As **emphasized** above, for the Lac(k)anian the self is an "effect" of language - subjects are a product of the symbolic register, positioned by it and **articulated** through it. The only way to escape subjectivity **is** to abandon the symbolic, to die out of language, and this, in effect, **is** what the Moor *seems* to do. With the **termination** of his last page he effects what *seems* to be a textual (symbolic) death. But this **is** not so **because** it only, paradoxically, returns the reader to *the point of departure* (the phrase itself suggesting both beginning and (euphemistic) death).

How then **would** a symbolic death be possible? **Again** it is possible to turn to Rushdie's novel for a **parabolic model** (the following passage has a "logic" of **its** own within the fictional world of the novel, **because** Uma could be **said** to be "**polyphrenic**" - a self made up of multiple selves). However, appropriately, when Uma **dies**, the Moor writes of her death:

Her face in death seemed to pass through a thousand **changes**, as if the pages of a book were **turning**, as if she were giving up, one by one, **all** her **numberless** selves. **And** then a blank page, and **she** was no longer anyone at **all**. (Rushdie, 1996:281)

To die both biologically *and* symbolically the subject must **become like** the blank page. It is only by **turning** the blank page, by **escaping representation**, that the subject and its multiple selves are **finally** allowed to **rest**. In effect, the subject as biological subject **dies**, but lives on, as long as it is caught within **signification**: the symbolic enables a symbolic life even in biological death. For as long as the subject **can** be **named** it can be subject to the generation of **numberless** selves (**like** Uma and **all** the other **characters** of the novel). Not **until all** textual **references** to it are finally destroyed **and it** disappears from the **realms** of the symbolic and returns to the Real can it finally suffer the *sign's* last sigh. But **in** this novel, **because** of **its**

circular construction, the Moor's last sigh/sign seems to signify his first (and his first his last) in so far that the end is the beginning and the beginning is the end.

## 5. CONCLUSION: GOING ROUND IN (HERMENEUTICAL) CIRCLES. ON BEING OUT OF ONE'S MIND.

*Not only can man's being not be understood without madness, it would not be man's being if it did not hear madness within itself as the limit of his freedom.*  
(Lacan 1977: 215)

Coming back to Raymond Williams, although the implicit theory of language underlying his project of analyzing modern systems of communication was very distinct, he does touch on two factors highly pertinent to the thematics of this essay. The first is a phenomenological issue. "Many people", Williams notes "seem to assume as a matter of course that there is, first, reality, and then, second, communication about it. We degrade art and learning by supposing that they are always second-hand activities; that there is life, and then afterwards there are these accounts of it" (Williams, 1976:11). From the Lac(k)anian point of view adopted here Williams questioning of the "reality" and "communication" division is of great importance. Communication and reality are united in so far that they are attributes of the same thing: the symbolic order.

This first point is linked to the question of what it is this kind of Lac(k)anian interpretation is doing. Phenomenological research has helped to demonstrate that the objects of analysis or interpretation cannot be separated from the theoretical and methodological assumptions of the interpreting subject. This has resulted in a situation where to interpret the "other" has also brought with it a corresponding awareness of the role of the interpreting self. From this standpoint the subject/object opposition begins to break down resulting in forms of criticism where the interpretation of the object text is as much an allegorization of the method used.<sup>18</sup> This, in turn, has links with the following point.

The second factor Williams mentions that has relevance to the thematics of this paper is epistemological. Williams claims that communication begins "in the struggle to learn and to describe". The passing on of this "learning" and description depends on "certain communication models, certain rules and conventions through which we can make contact" (Williams, 1976:11). The Lac(k)anian system (like that of deconstruction) can only serve as a communication model through a certain contradiction: theorists must suspend their Coleridgean disbelief in the duplicitous character of the sign and assign some value to what are perceived as the controlling concepts of interpretation. These concepts, however (as intelligible ideas which provide the conventions through which a "Lac(k)anian" reading is rendered possible) could never (according to the theory of the sign inscribed in these pages) offer the critic a set of conventions which were beyond the radical scepticism which would put them (and everything else) under permanent question - hence the multitude of qualifications in subclauses made necessary by self-defeating sentences which render the style here something of a linguistic assault course.<sup>19</sup> What the dialectical tension between radical scepticism and the suspension of disbelief offers is a form of textual production (and distinctive kinds of description of human subjectivity) which challenges epistemological and hermeneutic practices

that search for or promise authoritative, unproblematic interpretations. The theorist/critic who is convinced by the rhetorical force of the Lac(k)anian critique of the sign is forced to accept that it is not only the interpretation that is unstable (a commonplace in much late twentieth-century cultural criticism) but that the theoretical system itself is not a stable entity with an *a priori* existence before the task of interpretation begins.

To put this another way, Roman Jakobson has made the point that a "message sent by its addresser must be adequately perceived by its receiver. Any message is encoded by its sender and is to be decoded by its addressee" (Jakobson, 1971:130). The problem here from the Lac(k)anian standpoint (as I have represented it) is that it is not only the message that is unstable, but also the code upon which the message is based. Also, the addresser and addressee are radically undermined because their perception of "themselves" is based upon their immersion in the symbolic order which constitutes the message and code upon which their notions of "themselves" as subjects or objects is based.

So critics can never be sure about the interpretation of the theoretical scheme before textual production begins. This, given the post-structural theory of the sign, would be true of any approach, but as I suggested in the introduction, the case of Lacan seems to provide an allegory of the epistemological, ontological and hermeneutical difficulties that beguile any attempt at interpretation. However, if all is lack, all is not necessarily lost. Lac(k)anian psychoanalysis can help to focus not only on the problems of the textual production of the object, but on the textual production that is necessary before the textual production of the object can begin. The interpreting subject, in this sense, can never really begin the work of objectifying the world "outside" because the theoretical model of language with which it starts both can, and cannot, be taken as "read". That is, it can be taken as read in so far that it has been subject to textual production (reading), but it cannot "be taken as read" (i.e. "certain") in so far that the interpretation of the system could never (in its own terms) be beyond question - it being an inevitable product of hermeneutical acts.

I have just written "in its own terms" which presents me with a double bind: to claim that the system radically calls into question unproblematic communication already assumes that some form of communication has taken place, but the question always remains: is this beyond hermeneutical doubt? Put another way, the plea on the part of the critic to understand the object under analysis is called into question according to a Lac(k)anian critique of the sign. Yet if the symbolic order is unable to satisfy the critic's demands to know the object, neither does it, or can it, satisfy the critic's desire to know the theoretical scheme that is supposed to provide the paradigm for an analysis of the object. Given the ontological instabilities created in the wake of postmodern discourses, Thomas Docherty has called for a certain "humility" *vis a vis* the object of understanding (Docherty, 1996: viii). This involves the location (and if necessary, production) of forms of difficulty. I would extend this "humility" (or what I'd prefer to call "wariness" or a certain hesitancy) to considerations of the conceptual bases of the forms of difficulty that are being produced: the theoretical scheme that gives the subject its position and the possibility of reading is already an object of interpretation. If all this seems to point in the direction of madness, it may be worth recalling that for the Lac(k)anian critic ("I think where I am not..." etc.), like the Moor, there is no way one cannot be out of one's mind.

## NOTES

1. This article started out as a paper written for the twenty-first AEDEAN congress in Seville and a chapter on psychoanalysis in which I attempted to demonstrate to students how some simplified Lac(k)anian concepts may be put into practice (see Gregor and Waiton, 1997). Here I attempt to bring together the differing aims of the source material and put them into the thematics of "communication and culture: texts written in the English language".
2. The book was first published in 1962, but I refer to the revised edition (revised first in 1966 and then slightly extended by the "Retrospect and Prospect" chapter in 1975).
3. My way of mediating the history of linguistics is influenced here by the metaphorical master narrative of Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970).
4. Relevant to arguments of the lack of a fixed centre from which to establish communication is Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences" (Derrida, 1978).
5. I say "Lac(k)anian" for two reasons. Firstly, as is the case with just about every school of thought, there is no common agreement about exactly what the Lac(k)anian system is. Lac(k)anian thought being, like Marxism, Freudianism etc., a collection of "controlling concepts" which thematically unite those in the particular school. However, the content of the controlling concepts is far from fixed and a constant source of disputation. Secondly, this situation is made especially difficult for the "Lac(k)anian" by the fact that Lacan did not seek to be understood without effort: "Writing is distinguished by a prevalence of the *text* in the sense that this factor of discourse will assume in this essay a factor that makes possible the kind of tightening up that I like in order to leave the reader no other way out than the way in, which I prefer to be difficult. In that sense, then, this will not be writing" (Lacan, 1977:146).
6. Tracing the Greek etymology of the word allegory would bring out what I am trying to get at here. *Allos* is "other" and *agoreuo* "to speak" from *agora*, a forum. To speak, to write, to express in any way is to perform within the sign system of the Lac(k)anian Other. Lacan's definition of the Other (and any "other" concept) is notoriously arcane. One may start with "The Field of the Other and Back to the Transference" in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (Lacan, 1979:201f.).
7. Lacan goes into considerable detail about how, on looking at a painting, we are occupying the gaze of others (e.g. the painter or the audience it is associated with). See "What is a Picture?" (Lacan, 1979:105f.; especially 113).
8. For the subject's division in the symbolic see "The Subject and the Other" (Lacan, 1979:204f.).
9. See "The Subject and the Other: Aphanisis" for Lacan's discussion of how the "unary" signifier relates to the "binary" signifier (which heralds the entry into the symbolic) (Lacan, 1979:218).
10. See, for example, chapter 16 of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (Lacan, 1979:203f.). One of the easiest ways of thinking about the Real is to see it as the phenomenal world or that which lacks the lack or that upon which the symbolic is at work (See Lacan, 1979:ix & 53-4).
11. In the Lac(k)anian system the unconscious is structured like a language because it is the discourse of the Other: that is to say, the symbolic structures through which the subject articulates itself (and is articulated by others) these being the unconscious mechanisms which render all forms of discourse possible in the first place.
12. See *Écrits* (Lacan, 1977:12f.).

13. Uma **actually** turns out to be a **manipulator**, seductress and **ruiner** of **people's** lives. **The** fact that she **seems** different to the various members of the **Moor's family** is **owing** to her ability to **"take on radically different personae in the wmpany of different people"** (Rushdie, 1996:266). **Despite this**, the passage can **still serve** as an allegory of the sign, but it might be stressed that it's an **allegorization** and not **strictly** descptive of the **fictional complexity** of the **character**.

**The italicized phrases in the following quotations are Rushdie's.**

14. Lacan descnbed need as **having** to pass **through** the **"defiles"** of the signifier to **become** a **desire** (Lacan, 1977:264). For the Name or Law of the Father see "On a **question preliminary** to any possible **treatment** of psychosis" (Lacan, 1977:179f.); and for a simplified **thumbnail sketch** (Lacan, 1979:282).

15. The novel is very suggestive from the **point** of view of an **analysis** of the **instability** of **the** sign, and **I** can **hardly** do **justice** to it **here**. However, an **example**: on Carmen's **wedding night** her husband, Camoens, instead of **consummating** the **marriage**, dresses **himself in** the **bridai gown in** order to escape the nuptial bed and enjoy a **night of same-sex bliss**. Thus, one signifier, the **bnidai gown**, whose **common** signified is that of heterosexual **marital union**, slides across the signifying **continuum** to **become** a token of **gayness** and **transvestism**.

16. For the "mirror stage" see **"The mirror stage as formative** of the function of the I" (Lacan, 1977:1f.)

17. See Todorov's "Narrative Men" in *The Poetics of Prose* where he describes how Scheherazade's **narrative loquacity in the Arabian Nights** preserves her life; the conclusion **being** that **"narrating equals living"** (Todorov, 1977:73f). Foucault **has** reflected on the power of **narrative** to **confer** life and death from an historical point of view. **The narration** of **stories**, exemplified by the Greek epic and which **functions** as a theme and pretext in *The Thousand and One Nights*, was an **attempt** to "forestal I death" or "postpone the day of **reckoning** that would **silence** the **narrator**" (Foucault, 1991:102).

18. Jeffrey **Mehlman** in his *A Structural Study of Autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Lévi-Strauss* has written: "Indeed, whereas the normal tendency or error - of **"psychoanalytic cntics"** is to "use" Freud in order to "explain" a literary text, **I have found** myself more **often referring** to the authors **studied here** as a **means** of **illuminating particularly difficult passages in Lacan**" (Mehlman, 1974:15). See also Zizek who **tends** to **practice** this form of criticism.

19. **Derrida** has **deconstructed** **Lacan's** concept of "lack" on the **grounds** that it canuot **really** uphold the theory of lack. **This is because** **Lacan** has to pnvilege the word lack, which, **far from being** the sign for lack, par exeeiencie, is the pnvileged signifier which renders the **theory** possible. In short, lack canuot be full of lack. **The argument** is **considerably** more complex than I represent it **here** (involving also the **Phallus**); however, see **Derrida's** "Le Facteur de la Vérité" in *The Post Card* (Derrida, 1987:413-496). **Zizek has** offered a defence of the Lac(k)anian lack in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989:154-5).

## WORKS CITED

- Docherty, Thomas (1996) *Altenties: Criticism, History, Representation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1978) *Wnting and Difference* (trans Alan Bass). London: Routledge.
- Demda, Jacques (1987) *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (trans Alan Bass). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, Michel (1991) *The Foucault Reader: In Introduction to Foucault's Thought* (ed. Paul Rabinow). London: Penguin.
- Gregor, Keith & Walton, David (1997) *Critical Approaches to Literature in English: a practical guide*. Murcia: Diego Marín.
- Jakobson, Roman (1971) "Shifters, Verbal Categoines, and the Russian Verb" in *Roman Jakobson, Selected Wntings* (vol. 2). Paris: Mouton, The Hague.
- Kuhn, Thomas (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lacan, Jacques (1976) "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'". *Yale French Studies*, 48, 38-42.
- Lacan, Jacques (1977) *Écnts: A Selection* (trans Alan Shendan). London: Tavistock.
- Lacan, Jacques (1979) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*. London: Penguin.
- Lacan, Jacques (1988) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mehlman, Jeffrey (1974) *A Structural Study of Autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Lévi-Strauss*. Ithaca: Comell University Press.
- Rushdie, Salman (1996) *The Moor's Last Sigh*. London: Vintage.
- Todorov, Tzvetan (1977) *The Poetics of Prose*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Williams, Raymond (1976) *Communications* (3rd ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Zizek, Slavoj (1989) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.
- Zizek, Slavoj (1991) *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.