

An Honors Project Proposal to the Macalester College English Department:

In 1800, Friedrich Schelling published his *System of Transcendental Idealism* in which he wrote, “Man is an eternal fragment, for his action is either necessary and not free, or free and then not necessary and lawful” (216). Schelling here articulates one of the central problems of the Romantic understanding of the self. That is, the self is split, “an eternal fragment,” with the subjectivity of freedom (or the appearance of such) on one hand and the objective “purposiveness” of nature (or again, the appearance of such) on the other. In 1981, Salman Rushdie contends with a similar split between the subjective and objective self. In his novel *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie constantly informs the reader that the author-protagonist, Saleem Sinai, is also eternally splitting. His skin is cracking and his internal fluids are becoming external. This split is emphasized in the framed structure of the novel. Sinai is both the “free and... not necessary” subject in his narration of his life and the “necessary and not free” (Schelling) object within the stories that he narrates, “mysteriously handcuffed to history, [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country” (3). Vladimir Nabokov’s 1962 novel *Pale Fire* approaches a similar problem, also with a framed narrative structure. Through his stories about John Shade, the poet of “Pale Fire,” his critical analysis of the poem, and his explanations of possible allusions to King Charles II and the mysterious land of Zembla, John Kinbote, the narrator-editor-protagonist, reveals that he is the exiled King Charles. This eternal split between John Kinbote as narrator and King Charles as the object of narration is never unified in the course of the novel, and it is suggested that such a unity may have become impossible.

The project I am proposing is a comparative study of these three split selves: (1) the Romantic understanding of the self as a dialectical (dis)unity¹, an understanding that began developing concretely in western European philosophy and literature in the late eighteenth century to mid-nineteenth century, (2) Saleem Sinai's split self in *Midnight's Children*, and (3) John Kinbote's split self in *Pale Fire*. I want to examine the differences between these three split selves simultaneously through an ontological perspective (i.e. what metaphysical propositions and presuppositions serve as the basis for each instance) and the perspective of contingent political economies. The majority of my research and of the final project will be devoted to an exploration of the role of sovereignty in these different understandings of selfhood.

The project will begin with the argument that ontological modes of self-understanding and self-consciousness are conditioned by political economy. I will support this argument with scholarly works such as John Guillory's *Cultural Capital*, Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*, and John McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel*. Using these writers as a theoretical base, I believe that a comparison between the Romantics, Rushdie, and Nabokov is both justified and helpful for several reasons. The Romantics developed their understandings of self-consciousness immediately in the wake of the rise of modern capitalism, nationalism, and imperialism. Similarly, Rushdie and Nabokov wrote immediately in the wake of the rise of global/ late capitalism and transnationalism (or the beginnings of the dissolution of eighteenth century notion of the nation.) Furthermore, the newness of both global situations makes questions regarding sovereignty of crucial importance. Finally, it is clear that Rushdie and Nabokov's notion of selfhood are influenced by the models of eighteenth century thinkers. However, while this

¹ I use the term (dis)unity because while the subject and the object can move closer to unity, they cannot fully merge without positing something like Hegel's "end of history" or Shelling's transcendental subject.

influence remains, Rushdie and Nabokov also adapt and/or subvert such models. In order to understand these adaptations and subversions, it is critical to understand the original model.

Throughout this examination, the notion of sovereignty will be presented as the most crucial aspect of Romantic self-consciousness that Rushdie and Nabokov subvert in *Midnight's Children* and *Pale Fire*. While the Romantics presented their desire for the creation of self-sustaining personal identity alongside a desire for absolute sovereignty in the realm of politics (seen, for example, in Hobbes' *Leviathan*), Nabokov and Rushdie do not. Rather, their descriptions of self-consciousness appear as the dissolution of political sovereignty and authority is imminent or past. So for example, *Midnight's Children* ends with the Sinai losing his authorial control and being reduced "to specks of voiceless dust" (533) while the unity of the Indian subcontinent and nation seem to spread across the globe. Nabokov ends *Pale Fire* in melancholy, with Kinbote unable to determine his place of residence, uncertain his circumstances will ever allow him to return to Zembla. If you consider the index the end of the narrative, the last entry, "Zembla, a northern distant land," (315) almost mocks Kinbote's desire for sovereignty in this land.

My project will explore the significance of this apparent loss, or perhaps disavowal, of the notion of sovereignty developed by the likes of Hobbes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. By once again returning to the question of political economy, I will examine how transnationalism of both Nabokov and Rushdie affects this question of sovereignty or authority. Or in other words, how can the transnational self be sovereign in any political manner outside the realm of nation-states? If both Kinbote's Zembla and Sinai's united India are fictions, then where is it that one can be sovereign, or authoritative? Similarly, how and why do Sinai and Kinbote spend hundreds of pages making claims of authorship when such claims appear to be

only self-affirming? Rushdie and Nabokov seem to be abandoning the traditional view of sovereignty while simultaneously developing a new notion of ontological and political self-ownership. While many scholars have addressed issues of political liberalism and pluralism, the question of the sovereign self within these systems has yet to be described adequately from a critical perspective. By contributing to a growing body of writing on the status of the individual self within the system of global capitalism, I believe this project will be able to offer a fresh perspective by making the comparison between Rushdie and Nabokov's notions of selfhood and sovereignty with those of eighteenth and nineteenth century Romantics.

Qualifications:

As of Fall Semester 2010, my Cumulative GPA is 3.62. My GPA within the English Department is 3.67. I believe this project will serve as an extension and further exploration of subjects, themes, and texts that I have studied in several Macalester courses, including, *Problems of Philosophy* with Professor Bill Wilcox, *At Home in the World: Indian Diaspora and Global Fictions* with Professor Madhurima Chakraborty, *Twentieth Century British Novel: Diasporic London* with Professor Casey Jarrin, *Philosophy of Language* with Professor Joy Laine, *Postcolonial Theory* with Professor David Moore, *Transnational Latin Americas* with Professor Ernesto Capello, and *Value: the Bad, the Ugly, and the Cheap* with Professor Kiarina Kordela.

Plans for Future Study:

In addition to an Independent Project advised by Professor Casey Jarrin, I will also develop this project by deepening my knowledge of Eighteenth Century literature and philosophy in Professor Neil Chudgar's class, *Eighteenth Century British Literature*.

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