

*Step Across This Line*

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SALMAN RUSHDIE was born in Bombay, India, and is considered one of the most distinguished living writers of English. He is known as a spokesman for artistic freedoms against religious absolutism; he drew world attention after the publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses* resulted in a *fatwa*, or death order, being placed against him by Muslims around the world who opposed the book. The fatwa has since been lifted. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and he has been awarded Germany's Author of the Year Prize, the Budapest Grand Prize for Literature, the Austrian State Prize for European Literature, and the Mantua Literary Award. He has also been awarded the Freedom of the City Award in Mexico City and holds the rank of Commander in the Order of Arts and Letters, France's highest artistic honor. He coedited *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947–1997* (1997, with Elizabeth West), and has published three works of nonfiction: *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey* (1987); *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (1991); and *The Wizard of Oz* (1992). His many novels include *Midnight's Children* (1980), which won the Booker Prize and the "Booker of Bookers," given to the outstanding Booker Prize-winning novel in the first twenty-five years of the prize; *The Satanic Verses* (1989), which won the Whitbread Prize for Best Novel; *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), winner of the Writers' Guild Award; *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), which won the European Union's Aristeion Prize for Literature; and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), winner of the Eurasian section of the Commonwealth Prize.

## PART ONE

The first frontier was the water's edge, and there was a first moment, because how could there not have been such a moment, when a living thing came up from the ocean, crossed that boundary and found that it could breathe. Before that first creature drew that first breath there would have been other moments when other creatures had made the same attempt and fell fainting back into the waves, or else suffocated, flopping fishily from side to side, on the same seashore and another, and another. There were perhaps millions of these unrecorded retreats, these anonymous deaths, before the first successful step across the waterline. As we imagine the scene of that triumphant crossing—our volcanic young planet, the smoky, sulphurous air, the hot sea, the red glow in the sky, the exhausted entity gasping on the unfamiliar, inhospitable shore—we can't help wondering about those proto-creatures. What motivated them? Why did the sea so thoroughly lose its appeal that they risked everything to migrate from the old into the new? What urge was born in them that overpowered even the survival instinct? How did they intuit that air could be breathed—and how, living underwater as they did, could they begin to grow the lungs that would allow them to breathe it?

But our extremely pre-human ancestors did not have “motives” in the sense that we understand the term, the scientist in the room protests. The sea neither appealed to them nor did it disappoint. They had no intuitions, but were driven by the imperatives hidden in their uncracked genetic codes. There was no daring here, no heroism, no adventurous, transgressive spirit. These beach-crawlers did not travel from water to air because they were curious, or in search of jobs. They neither chose nor willed their deeds. Random mutation and natural selection were their mighty, impersonal driving forces. They were just fish who by chance learned how to crawl.

But so, in a way, are we. Our own births mirror that first crossing of the frontier between the elements. As we emerge from amniotic fluid, from the liquid universe of the womb, we, too, discover that we can breathe; we, too, leave behind a kind of waterworld to become denizens of earth and air. Unsurprisingly, then, imagination defies science and

sees that first, ancient, successful half-and-half as our spiritual ancestor, ascribing to that strange metamorph the will to change its world. In its victorious transition we recognize and celebrate the prototype of our own literal, moral, and metaphorical frontier crossings, applauding the same drive that made Christopher Columbus's ships head for the edge of the world, or the pioneers take to their covered wagons. The image of Neil Armstrong taking his first moonwalk echoes the first movements of life on earth. In our deepest natures, we are frontier-crossing beings. We know this by the stories we tell ourselves; for we are story-telling animals, too. There is a story about a mermaid, a half-and-half creature, who gave up her fishy half for the love of a man. Was that it, then? we allow ourselves to wonder. Was that the primal urge? Did we come questing out of the waters for love?

Once upon a time the birds held a conference. The great bird-god, the Simurgh, had sent a messenger, a hoopoe, to summon them to his legendary home far away atop the circular mountain of Qâf, which girdled the earth. The birds weren't particularly keen on the idea of this dangerous-sounding quest. They tried to make excuses—a previous engagement, urgent business elsewhere. Just thirty birds embarked on the pilgrimage. Leaving home, crossing the frontier of their land, stepping across that line, was in this story a religious act, their adventure a divine requirement rather than a response to an ornithological need. Love drove these birds as it drove the mermaid, but it was the love of God. On the road there were obstacles to overcome, dreadful mountains, fearsome chasms, allegories and challenges. In all quests the voyager is confronted by terrifying guardians of territory, an ogre here, a dragon there. So far and no further, the guardian commands. But the voyager must refuse the other's definition of the boundary, must transgress against the limits of what fear prescribes. He steps across that line. The defeat of the ogre is an opening in the self, an increase in what it is possible for the voyager to be.

So it was with the thirty birds. At the end of the story, after all their vicissitudes and overcomings, they reached the summit of the mountain of Qâf, and discovered that they were alone. The Simurgh wasn't there. After all they had endured, this was a displeasing discovery. They made their feelings known to the hoopoe who started the whole thing off; whereupon the hoopoe explained to them the punning etymology that revealed their journey's secret meaning. The name of the god broke

down into two parts: “si,” meaning “thirty,” and “murch,” which is to say “birds.” By crossing those frontiers, conquering those terrors and reaching their goal, they themselves were now what they were looking for. They had become the god they sought.

Once upon a time—“a long time ago,” perhaps, “in a galaxy far, far away”—there was an advanced civilisation of free, liberal, individualistic humans, on a planet whose icecaps began to grow. All the civilisation in the world could not halt the march of the ice. The citizens of that ideal state built a mighty wall that would resist the glaciers for a time, but not forever. The time came when the ice, uncaring, implacable, stepped across their lines and crushed them. Their last act was to choose a group of men and women to travel across the ice-sheet to the far side of the planet, to bring news of their civilisation’s death and to preserve, in some small way, the meaning of what that civilisation had been: to be its representatives. On their difficult journey across the icecap, the group learned that, in order to survive, they would need to change. Their several individualisms had to be merged into a collectivity, and it was this collective entity—the Representative—that made it to the far side of the planet. What it represented, however, was not what it had set out to represent. The journey creates us. We become the frontiers we cross.

The first of these stories is medieval: the “Conference of the Birds” by the Sufi Muslim poet Fariduddin Attar. The second is an account of Doris Lessing’s science-fiction novel *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, itself inspired by the doomed journey towards the South Pole of Robert Scott and his companions—but also by Lessing’s own long-standing interest in Sufi mysticism. The idea of overcoming, of breaking down the boundaries that hold us in and surpassing the limits of our own natures, is central to all the stories of the quest. The Grail is a chimera. The quest for the Grail is the Grail. Or, as C. P. Cavafy suggests in his poem “Ithaka,”<sup>1</sup> the point of an Odyssey is the Odyssey:

Setting out on the voyage to Ithaka  
 You must pray that the way be long,  
 Full of adventures and experiences.

. . .

Be quite old when you anchor at the island,  
 Rich with all you have gained on the way,  
 Not expecting Ithaka to give you riches.

<sup>1</sup> Translated by John Mavrogordato in *Poems* by C. P. Cavafy (Chatto & Windus, 1951).

Ithaka has given you your lovely journey.  
 Without Ithaka you would not have set out.  
 Ithaka has no more to give you now.

Poor though you find it, Ithaka has not cheated you.  
 Wise as you have become, with all your experience,  
 You will have understood the meaning of an Ithaka.

The frontier is an elusive line, visible and invisible, physical and metaphorical, amoral and moral. The wizard Merlin is responsible for the education of a boy called Arthur, who will one day draw a sword from a stone and become king of England. (The wizard, who is living backwards through time, knows this, although the boy does not.) One day Merlin changes the boy into a bird and as they fly over the countryside he asks Arthur what he sees. Arthur notices the usual things, but Merlin is talking about a thing that can't be seen, asking Arthur to see an absence: *From the air, there are no frontiers.*<sup>2</sup> Later, when Arthur has possessed Excalibur and his kingdom, he will learn that wizards are not always wise, and the view from the air isn't much use on earth. He will fight his share of frontier wars, and he will also find that there are frontiers that, being invisible, are more dangerous to cross than the physical kind.

When the king's best friend, the king's champion, falls in love with the king's wife, when Lancelot of the Lake trespasses on the territory of the king's happiness, a line has been crossed that will destroy the world. In fact the collection of tales known as the Matter of Britain have, at their heart, not one but two illicit, transgressive loves: that of Lancelot for Guinevere, and its occult mirror-image, the incestuous love of Mordred and Morgana le Fay. Against the power of these line-crossing lovers, the Round Table cannot stand. The quest for the Grail cannot cleanse the world. Not even Excalibur can prevent the return of darkness. And in the end the sword must be returned to water, and vanish beneath the waves. But wounded Arthur on his way to Avalon is crossing yet another line. He's being transformed, becoming one of the great sleepers who will return when the right moment comes. Barbarossa in his cave, Finn MacCool in the Irish hills, the Australian *wandjina* or ancestors in their subterranean resting places, and Arthur in Avalon: these are our once and future kings, and the final frontier they are fated to cross is not space, but time.

<sup>2</sup> From T. H. White, *The Once and Future King*.

To cross a frontier is to be transformed. Alice at the gates of Wonderland, the key to that miniature world in her grasp, cannot pass through the tiny door through which she can glimpse marvellous things until she has altered herself to fit into her new world. But the successful frontierswoman is also, inevitably, in the business of surpassing. She changes the rules of her newfound land: Alice in Wonderland, shape-shifting Alice, terrifies the locals by growing too big to be housed. She argues with Mad Hatters and talks back at Caterpillars, and, in the end, loses her fear of an execution-hungry Queen when she, so to speak, grows up. *You're nothing but a house of cards*—Alice the migrant at last sees through the charade of power, is no longer impressed, calls Wonderland's bluff, and by unmaking it finds herself again. She wakes up.

The frontier is a wake-up call. At the frontier we can't avoid the truth; the comforting layers of the quotidian, which insulate us against the world's harsher realities, are stripped away, and, wide-eyed in the harsh fluorescent light of the frontier's windowless halls, we see things as they are. The frontier is the physical proof of the human race's divided self, the proof that Merlin's utopian sky-vision is a lie. Here is the truth: this line, at which we must stand until we are allowed to walk across and give our papers to be examined by an officer who is entitled to ask us more or less anything. At the frontier our liberty is stripped away—we hope temporarily—and we enter the universe of control. Even the freest of free societies are unfree at the edge, where things and people go out and other people and things come in; where only the right things and people must go in and out. Here, at the edge, we submit to scrutiny, to inspection, to judgment. These people, guarding these lines, must tell us who we are. We must be passive, docile. To be otherwise is to be suspect, and at the frontier to come under suspicion is the worst of all possible crimes. We stand at what Graham Greene thought of as the dangerous edge of things. This is where we must present ourselves as simple, as obvious: I am coming home. I am on a business trip. I am visiting my girlfriend. In each case, what we mean when we reduce ourselves to these simple statements is, I'm not anything you need to bother about, really I'm not: not the fellow who voted against the government, not the woman who is looking forward to smoking a little dope with her friends tonight, not the person you fear, whose shoe may be about to explode. I am one-dimensional. Truly. I am simple. Let me pass.

Across the frontier the world's secret truths move unhindered every

day. Inspectors doze or pocket dirty money, and the world's narcotics and armaments, its dangerous ideas, all the contrabandits of the age, the wanted ones, who do have something to declare but do not declare it, slip by; while we, who have nothing much to declare, dress ourselves in nervous declarations of simplicity, openness, loyalty. The declarations of the innocent fill the air, while the others, who are not innocent, pass through the crowded, imperfect borders, or make their crossings where frontiers are hard to police, along deep ravines, down smugglers' trails, across undefended wastelands, waging their undeclared war. The wake-up call of the frontier is also a call to arms.

This is how we are thinking now, because these are fearful days. There is a photograph by Sebastião Salgado that shows the wall between the United States and Mexico snaking over the crests of hills, running away into the distance, as far as the eye can see, part Great Wall of China, part gulag. There is a kind of brutal beauty here, the beauty of starkness. At intervals along the wall there are watchtowers, and these so-called sky-towers are manned by armed men. In the photograph we can see the tiny, silhouetted figure of a running man, an illegal immigrant, being chased by other men in cars. The strange thing about the picture is that although the running man is clearly on the American side, he is running towards the wall, not away from it. He has been spotted, and is more afraid of the men bearing down on him in cars than of the impoverished life he thought he had left behind. He's trying to get back, to unmake his bid for freedom. So freedom is now to be defended against those too poor to deserve its benefits by the edifices and procedures of totalitarianism. What kind of freedom is it, then, that we enjoy in the countries of the West—these exclusive, increasingly well-guarded enclaves of ours? That is the question the photograph asks, and before September 11, 2001, many of us—many more, I suspect, than today—would have been on the running man's side.

Even before the recent atrocities, however, the citizens of Douglas, Arizona, were happy to protect America from what they called "invaders." In October 2000 the British journalist Duncan Campbell met Roger Barnett, who runs a towing and propane business in Douglas, but also organizes wetback hunting parties.<sup>3</sup> Tourists can sign up for a weekend hunting human beings. "Stop the invasion," the billboards in Douglas say. According to Campbell, Barnett is a legendary character in

<sup>3</sup> From an article in the *Guardian*.



these parts. He thinks it would be a “hell of an idea” for the United States to invade Mexico in return. “There’s a lot of mines and great beaches there, there’s farming and resources. Think of what the US could do there—gee whizz, they wouldn’t have to come up here any more.”

Another citizen of Douglas, Larry Vance Jr., thinks Mexicans are like the wildebeest of Africa: fair game for predators. “Where a native population has been diluted by invaders it runs into a bloodbath. We abhor violence but we realise that people have the God-given right to defend themselves.” Perhaps the running man in Salgado’s picture is being chased by Mr. Barnett’s thrill-seekers, who are in no doubt that they are the defenders of the right, or by supporters of Mr. Vance’s organization, the Cochise County Concerned Citizens—that’s four C’s, not three K’s. The Mexican view of things is different, as Campbell reminds us: “‘We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us,’ is the much-used remark by Mexicans who have made it. To an extent this is true: the settlement of the Mexican-American war of 1846–48 meant that, for the sum of \$18,250,000, the whole of California, most of Arizona and New Mexico and parts of Utah, Nevada, Colorado and Wyoming passed to the US.” But history, as they say, is made up of interviews with winners, and nobody’s asking the wall-jumpers and wetbacks for their world-view right now. And if, in the aftermath of terrorist horror, many more of us are prepared to accept the need for a border gulag-world of sky-towers and man-hunters; if, being afraid, we prefer to sacrifice some of what freedom means, then should we not worry about what we are becoming? Freedom is indivisible, we used to say. We are all thinking about dividing it now.

Think for a moment about this image of a running man, a man who has nothing, who is no danger to anyone, fleeing the land of the free. For Salgado, as for myself, the migrant, the man without frontiers, is the archetypal figure of our age. Salgado has spent many years among the world’s displaced peoples, the uprooted and the re-rooted, chronicling their border crossings, their refugee camps, their desperations, their ingenuities: creating an extraordinary photographic record of this most important of contemporary phenomena. The pictures show that there has never been a period in the history of the world when its peoples were so jumbled up. We are so thoroughly shuffled together, clubs among diamonds, hearts among spades, jokers everywhere, that we’re just going to have to live with it. In the United States, this is an old story. Elsewhere, it’s a new one, and it doesn’t always go down well. As a migrant

myself, I have always tried to stress the creative aspects of such cultural commingling. The migrant, severed from his roots, often transplanted into a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of a new community, is forced to face the great questions of change and adaptation; but many migrants, faced with the sheer existential difficulty of making such changes, and also, often, with the sheer alienness and defensive hostility of the peoples amongst whom they find themselves, retreat from such questions behind the walls of the old culture they have both brought along and left behind. The running man, rejected by those people who have built great walls to keep him out, leaps into a confining stockade of his own.

Here is the worst-case scenario of the frontier of the future: the Iron Curtain was designed to keep people in. Now we who live in the wealthiest and most desirable corners of the world are building walls to keep people out. As the economics Nobel laureate Professor Amartya Sen has said, the problem is not globalization. The problem is a fair distribution of resources in a globalized world. And as the gulf between the world's haves and have-nots increases (and it is increasing all the time) and as the supply even of essentials like clean drinking water becomes scarcer (and it is getting scarcer all the time) the pressure on the wall will build. Think of Lessing's ice, inexorably moving forward. So if we send representatives to tell the future who we were, what story will they have to tell? A story, perhaps, of a jewelled people, sitting tight on their treasure hoards, "wearing bracelets, and all those amethysts too, and all those rings on their fingers with splendid flashing emeralds, [and] carrying their precious walkingsticks, with silver knobs and golden tops so wonderfully carved," and waiting for the barbarians, as Cavafy tells us—Cavafy again, that Borgesian mythomane who is also one of the great poets of miscegenation—

Because the Barbarians will arrive today;  
Things of this sort dazzle the Barbarians.

At the frontier there has always been the threat, or, for a decadent culture, even the promise of the barbarians.

What are we waiting for all crowded in the forum?  
The Barbarians are to arrive today.  
Within the Senate-house where is there such inaction?

The Senators making no laws what are they sitting there for?  
 Because the Barbarians arrive today.  
 What laws now should the Senators be making?  
 When the Barbarians come they'll make the laws.

...

Why should this uneasiness begin all of a sudden,  
 And confusion. How serious people's faces have become.  
 Why are all the streets and squares emptying so quickly,  
 And everybody turning home again so full of thought?  
 Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.  
 And some people have arrived from the frontier;  
 They said there are no Barbarians any more.

And now what will become of us without Barbarians? —  
 Those people were some sort of a solution.

“What will become of us without Barbarians?” J. M. Coetzee’s novel, also called *Waiting for the Barbarians*, offers a dystopic gloss on the Cavafy poem. Those who spend their time on guard, waiting for the barbarians to arrive, in the end don’t need any barbarians to come. In a dark variation of the ending of the “Conference of the Birds,” they themselves become the barbarians whose coming they so feared. And then there are no solutions.

“Why should this uneasiness begin all of a sudden?” It’s not so long since the American frontier was a location of freedom, not unease. Not so long since Sal Paradise took off into Mexico with his pal Dean Moriarty to begin that part of his life you could call his life on the road. To re-read *On the Road* now is to be struck, first of all, by how well it has lasted: its prose sprightly, leaner and less prolix than expected, its intense vision still bright. It’s a celebration of the open road, and of the open frontier as well. To cross into another language, another way of being, is a step towards beatitude, the worldly blessedness to which all dharma bums aspire.

I have always mentally paired *On the Road* with another classic modern fable of the U.S.-Mexican border, Orson Welles’s great film *Touch of Evil*. The Welles picture is the dark flip-side of the Jack Kerouac book. Like the novel, the film takes the openness of the frontier for granted: its story is made possible by the frontier’s unpoliceability. However, the movie’s bums are not of the dharma variety. Its characters are not blessed, or even seeking enlightenment. Welles’s frontier is fluid, watchful, constantly shifting focus and attention: in a word, unstable. In the famous

opening take, when minute after minute passes without a cut, the inhabitants of Welles's transit zone engage in a cryptic dance of death. The frontier's everyday life may look banal, meaningless, and above all continuous, but it begins with the planting of a bomb and ends with the radical discontinuity of an explosion. This frontier is anonymous, denaturing; it strips humanity bare. Life, death. Not much else matters, except, maybe, alcohol. Marlene Dietrich says it best when she delivers the flawed hero's epitaph as he floats face down in a shallow canal. "He was some kind of a man. What does it matter what you say about people?"

*Some kind of a man.* This crooked policeman had some good in him somewhere. A whore loved him, sort of. So what, he's dead. A man steps across a line, he suffers the penalty. This man got away with it for a long time and then did not get away with it. What else is there to say? The frontier watches the come-and-go of life. It does not judge. Another man, the dead man's antagonist, a Mexican lawman, comes to this border town with an American blonde. He, too, has crossed a line: the frontier of the skin, of racial difference. The blonde is his transgression, his crime against the natural order, in which such women are off limits to such men. She is therefore also his weakness. He is an honest man, but when his wife is attacked—drugged, framed—he stops being a lawman, puts down his badge, and becomes merely a man fighting for his woman. The frontier has stripped him of the law, of civilisation. This is normal. The frontier strips you down and then you are what you are and you do what you do. This is how it is. What does it matter what you say about people?

The world-weariness—the *word*-weariness—of all this is profoundly at odds with the eager, voluble world of the Beats, and the related world of the rest of literature, in which there is nothing more important than what you say about people, except how you say it. Gravel-voiced, shoulder-shrugging Marlene Dietrich saying good-bye to dead Orson echoes and invokes an older American idea of the frontier, that laconic world where actions spoke louder than words, the Boot Hill, OK Corral, Hole-in-the-Wall, outlaw frontier of which we perhaps still think of most often when we combine the words "American" and "frontier," the westward-moving front-line, first of Natty Bumppo and later of Davy Crockett—but also of John Ford and monosyllabic John Wayne. The West as it has come down to us is a myth of a largely pre-literate, almost pre-verbal world, a world of "kids"—Sundance, Cisco—who barely even needed names, and of "Bills"—Wild, Buffalo—for whom an epi-

that was enough, and at least one Bill, or Billy, who managed to be a Kid as well. Yet these men's reputations were constructed by writers, whose names we have not remembered: fabulist Boswells to the Wild West's desperado Johnsons, print-the-legend glamourizers who called themselves reporters. What does it matter what you say about people? Plenty, it turns out, if you're in the legend business. The American frontier affected to despise words, but it was a landscape built of words. And it's gone now, but the words remain. Animals, as they pass through landscape, leave their tracks behind. Stories are the tracks we leave.

The actually existing American frontier was officially declared to have disappeared forever in 1890, when the superintendent of the Census reported: "at present... there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports." Just three years after this somewhat dry funeral oration, the Frontier Thesis was born. At a meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago on July 12, 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner, the 32-year-old son of a journalist and local historian from Portage, Wisconsin, delivered his paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," which would later be called "the single most influential piece of writing in the history of American history," and suffered the traditional fate of the pioneer: that is to say, his ideas were completely ignored. Not for long, however. His star rose rapidly and even though he never delivered the big books based on his ideas about the frontier—books for which he nevertheless signed contracts and accepted advances—he proved a skilful academic careerist, and after being courted by colleges from Berkeley to Chicago and Cambridge, he ended up on the faculty at, if I may mention the word, Harvard.

According to the Turner thesis:

The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development...[which] has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.

Turner characterizes the frontier as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization,” a formulation that will not endear him to a more culturally sensitive modern audience. Less contentiously and more interestingly, he says that “at first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American. As successive terminal moraines result from successive glaciations, so each frontier leaves its traces behind it, and when it becomes a settled area the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics. Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines.” The frontier, he proposes, is the physical expression of Americanness. “The universal disposition of Americans to emigrate to the western wilderness, in order to enlarge their dominion over inanimate nature, is the actual result of an expansive power which is inherent in them.” The frontier is created by this inherent Americanness, but it also creates much of what we recognize as quintessentially American. “The frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people.” And: “The growth of nationalism and the evolution of American political institutions were dependent on the advance of the frontier. . . . Nothing works for nationalism like intercourse within the nation. Mobility of population is death to localism.” And also: “The frontier is productive of individualism. . . . [so that] the most important effect of the frontier has been in the promotion of democracy.”

All this adds up to nothing less than the American character.

To the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier. The people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them. . . . Movement has been [America’s] dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise.

The Frontier Thesis offers a triumphalist vision of America's coming-to-be with which it's easy to take issue, and since Turner first presented it, almost every single one of its ideas and assumptions has been contested. Most obviously, was there ever really such a thing as a "frontier of free land," a virgin territory against which pioneer America measured itself? What, then, of the conquered and even annihilated Native American tribes—even before the coming of political correctness, I found it odd to speak, in the American context, of "Indians"—who were there long before the frontier's inexorable line began to step across their land? Turner concedes that what the settlers found at the frontier was "not tabula rasa," but his evident contempt for the displaced "savages" colours, and damages, his argument, or rather gives it a darker meaning he did not intend. "The American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise." This optimistic formulation sounds almost imperialist now. If the original inhabitants of America were trampled over and brushed aside as the frontier snaked West, then should the rest of the world, that "wider field," now feel apprehensive of America's intentions?

Historians have further reasoned that the great differences between the East of the Puritans, the slavery-tainted South, and the West of gold rushes and railroads make it impossible to sustain any unified theory of frontier development—all of these are better understood as discrete regions, with their own historical dynamics. The frontier's supposed formative effect on the American self is also disputed. The land swallowed by the frontier was by no means handed out in democratically equal parcels to the early pioneers; and as regards the formation of the American character, it was a sense of community, not of rugged individualism, that enabled much of the West to thrive, and develop toward Statehood. A contemporary account suggests that

most migrant wagon trains, for example, were composed of extended kinship networks. Moreover, as the nineteenth century wore on, the role of the federal government and large corporations grew increasingly important. Corporate investors headquartered in New York laid the railroads; government troops defeated Indian nations who refused to get out of the way of manifest destiny; even the cowboys, enshrined in popular mythology as rugged loners, were generally low-level employees of sometimes foreign-owned cattle

corporations. The West has not been the land of freedom and opportunity that both Turnerian history and popular mythology would have us believe. For many women, Asians, Mexicans who suddenly found themselves residents of the United States, and, of course, Indians, the West was no promised land.<sup>4</sup>

So it seems that poor old Turner was a dozen ways wrong. And yet he may, like Sigmund Freud, have been wrong in the right way. Medievalist historians, applying Turnerian frontier theory to the development of eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, have found his ideas useful. The medieval European frontier, pushing outwards from England into Wales and Ireland; and across Central Europe; and clearing the great forests of Russia; and finally in the conflicts with Islam in the Crusader East and the Spanish Reconquista can be seen, to quote one specialist in the period, Professor C. J. Bishko of the University of Virginia, as being clearly “one frontier, a unity not in geographical contiguity but in its expression of the same deep forces of medieval dynamics and basic similarities of aims, techniques and accomplishments.”<sup>5</sup>

Professor Bishko argues,

The frontier created for history not only new lands of European culture, but new peoples—the Portuguese, the Castilians, the Austrians, the Prussians, the Great Russians, peoples who move swiftly to dominate the modern history of their respective countries. It produced a frontier literature in...heroic works like the *Lay of Igor's Campaign* or the *Poema del Cid*.... It created in abundance new types of medieval men and women—the frontier noble, whether he be called bogatyr, caballero, lord marcher or knight; it produced the Military Orders which were so prominent in frontier warfare and colonization;...the frontier churchman, the colonizing bishop or abbot, the missionary, the priest of the lonely frontier parish; the frontier merchant and the frontier townsman; the land speculator and colonial promoter; above all, the frontier farmer, axe-swinging, plow-guiding or stock-trailing. These are the frontiersmen who pushed forward the edges of medieval civilization, with or without the support of their rulers;...these are the men whose warlike or peaceful dealings with non-Europeans first raise for medieval thinkers the great questions of the rights of native peoples and the legitimacy of just war against them—the beginning of the controversies that in the sixteenth century were enlarged to include the

<sup>4</sup> By Stephen Ives and Ken Burns.

<sup>5</sup> “The Frontier in Medieval History,” presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, 1955.



Indians of the New World and led medieval-minded Spanish theologians and jurists to lay the foundations of international law and the rights of non-European man. For many medieval men, who never saw the rising royal capitals, the bustling mercantile cities, the ancient feudal domains or the new books and universities of the medieval renaissance, the medieval frontier represented the chief best hope of life, the call to robust adventure and to the risks and rewards of courage and enterprise. And like so many things medieval, the frontier did not end in 1453, or 1492, or 1500, but passed on into the making of modern civilization.

It is one of the great characteristics of frontiers to be disputed. Give me a line drawn across the world and I'll give you an argument. We can concede the point of almost all of F. J. Turner's adversaries' criticisms—can agree that the frontier was differently formed and meant different things in different parts of America; that much of what went on in frontier society was more oligarchic than democratic; that the country into which it moved was only “free” in the sense that the white settlers refused to accept the previous inhabitants' rights over the land; and that community values, corporatism, and federalism were far more important than Turner allowed—in short, we can reduce great swathes of the thesis to ashes, and still, in the midst of the smoking ruins, something substantial remains standing. The image persists of a line snaking westward across a continent, changing everything as it goes, making up a world. That line acts upon our imaginations as it acted upon the imaginations of those engaged in pushing it onward, and indeed the imaginations of those engaged in resisting its advance. In American literature from Mark Twain to Saul Bellow we recognize the workings of that frontier intellect whose characteristics Turner so eloquently set down, and in the dark side of modern America, in its government-hating militias and Unabombers, we recognize that dominant individualism, working for evil, whose existence he so perfectly understood. Take away the triumphalist note, and Turner's thesis seems to foreshadow much of American history since the closing of the frontier: a history of fluctuations, in which there are periods of energetic engagement with the world, a pushing out of frontiers, an expansion of America's sphere of influence, and then periods of retreat behind the fortress walls of a frontier that no longer possesses the power of movement.

The old imperial powers, such as the British, have found it hard to adapt to their new, diminished status in the post-colonial world. For the

British, their empire was a kind of transcendence, a way not only of overwhelming nations, subsuming their frontiers within the larger frontier of the *pax Britannica*, but also of breaking out of the frontiers of the self, casting off the reticence of England and becoming an unbuttoned, operatic people, hot and large, striding across the great stage of the world instead of the cramped boards of home. In empire's aftermath, they have been pushed back into their box, their frontier has closed in on them like a prison, and the new opening of political and financial borders in the European Union is still viewed by them with suspicion. America, the closest thing we have to a new imperial power, is experiencing this problem in reverse; as its influence spreads across the planet, America is still battling to understand its new, post-frontier self. Beneath the surface of the American century, with its many triumphs, we may discern something unsettled, a disquiet about identity, a recurring uncertainty about the rôle that America should play in the world, and how it should play it.

Time, perhaps, to propose a new thesis of the post-frontier: to assert that the emergence, in the age of mass migration, mass displacement, globalized finances and industries, of this new, permeable post-frontier is the distinguishing feature of our times, and, to use Turner's phrase, "explains our development" as nothing else can. For all their permeability, the borders snaking across the world have never been of greater importance. This is the dance of history in our age: slow, slow, quick, quick, slow, back and forth and from side to side, we step across these fixed and shifting lines.

## PART TWO

Uncertainty is not only America's curse. All of us now face the future with varying degrees of foreboding. To a large degree, I want to suggest, this is because of the change in the nature of the frontier that has taken place in our globalized world. From the most intimate of frontiers, that of the home, to the largest, pan-global scale, the new permeability of the frontier has become the overriding issue. Terrorism is the most appalling consequence of the permeable frontier, but terrorism, after all, is only one of the forces in the modern world that expressly reject frontiers in the way of the empires of the last century and the century before. The

twin worlds of business and finance do the same thing, and the concerns of many people about the consequences of the globalized economy don't need to be rehearsed here. Other groups—artists, scientists—have always scorned the limitations that frontiers represent, drawing freely from whatever wells they please, upholding the principle of the free exchange of knowledge. The open frontier, created by the bringing down of walls, has been and remains a symbol of other openesses. But, if I may quote a passage I wrote a couple of years ago in an article about, of all things, rock and roll music,

the music of freedom frightens people and unleashes all manner of conservative defence mechanisms. As long as Orpheus could raise his voice in song, the Maenads could not kill him. Then they screamed, and their shrill cacophony drowned his music, and then their weapons found their mark, and he fell, and they tore him limb from limb.

Screaming against Orpheus, we too become capable of murder. The collapse of communism, the destruction of the Iron Curtain and the Wall, was supposed to usher in a new era of liberty. Instead, the post-Cold War world, suddenly formless and full of possibility, scared many of us stiff. We retreated behind smaller iron curtains, built smaller stockades, imprisoned ourselves in narrower, ever more fanatical definitions of ourselves—religious, regional, ethnic—and readied ourselves for war.

The most precious book I possess is my passport. Like most such bald assertions, this will come across as something of an overstatement. A passport, after all, is a commonplace object. You probably don't give a lot of thought to yours most of the time. Important travel document, try not to lose it, terrible photograph, expiry date coming up soonish: in general, a passport requires a relatively modest level of attention and concern. And when, at each end of a journey, you do have to produce it, you expect it to do its stuff without much trouble. *Yes, officer, that's me, you're right, I do look a bit different with a beard, thank you, officer, you have a nice day too.* A passport is no big deal. It's low-maintenance. It's just ID.

I've been a British citizen since I was seventeen, so my passport has indeed done its stuff efficiently and unobtrusively for a long time now, but I have never forgotten that all passports do not work in this way. My first—Indian—passport, for example, was a paltry thing. Instead of offering the bearer a general open-sesame to anywhere in the world, it stated in grouchy bureaucratic language that it was only valid for travel

to a specified—and distressingly short—list of countries. On inspection, one quickly discovered that this list excluded almost any country to which one might actually want to go. Bulgaria? Romania? Uganda? North Korea? No problem. The USA? England? Italy? Japan? *Sorry, sahib. This document does not entitle you to pass those ports.* Permission to visit attractive countries had to be specially applied for and, it was made clear, would not easily be granted. Foreign exchange was one problem. India was chronically short of it, and reluctant to get any shorter. A bigger problem was that many of the world's more attractive countries seemed unattracted by the idea of allowing us in. They had apparently formed the puzzling conviction that once we arrived we might not wish to leave. "Travel," in the happy-go-lucky, pleasure-seeking, interest-pursuing, vacationing Western sense, was a luxury we in India were not allowed. We could, if we were lucky, be granted permission to make trips that were absolutely necessary. Or, if unlucky, denied such permission, which was just our tough luck.

In *Among the Believers*, V. S. Naipaul's book about his travels in the Muslim world, a young man who has been driving the author around in Pakistan admits that he doesn't have a passport and, keen to go abroad and see the world, expresses a yearning for one. Naipaul reflects, more than a little caustically, that it's a shame that the only freedom in which this young fellow appears to be interested is the freedom to leave the country. When I first read this passage, years ago, I had a strong urge to defend that young man against the celebrated writer's celebrated contempt. In the first place, the desire to get out of Pakistan, even temporarily, is one with which many people will sympathize. In the second and more important place, the thing that the young man wants—freedom of movement across frontiers—is, after all, a thing that Naipaul himself takes for granted, the very thing, in fact, that enables him to write the book in which the criticism is made.

I once spent a day at the immigration barriers at London's Heathrow Airport, watching the treatment of arriving passengers by immigration personnel. It did not amaze me to discover that most of the passengers who had some trouble getting past the control point were not white, but black or Arab-looking. What was surprising is that there was one factor that overrode blackness or Arab looks. That factor was the possession of an American passport. Produce an American passport, and immigration officers at once become colour blind, and wave you quickly on your way, however suspiciously non-Caucasian your features. To those to

whom the world is closed, such openness is greatly to be desired. Those who assume that openness to be theirs by right perhaps value it less. When you have enough air to breathe, you don't yearn for air. But when breathable air gets to be in short supply, you quickly start noticing how important it is. (Freedom's like that, too.)

The reason I needed that first Indian passport, limited as its abilities were, was that eight weeks after I was born a new frontier came into being, and my family was cut in half by it. Midnight, August 13–14, 1947: the partition of the Indian subcontinent, and the creation of the new state of Pakistan, took place exactly twenty-four hours before the independence of the rest of the former British colony. India's moment of freedom was delayed on the advice of astrologers, who told Jawaharlal Nehru that the earlier date was star-crossed, and the delay would allow the birth to take place under a more auspicious midnight sky. Astrology has its limitations, however, and the creation of the new frontier ensured that the birth of both nations was hard and bloody. My own Indian Muslim family was fortunate. None of us was injured or killed in the Partition Massacres. But all our lives were changed, even the life of a boy of eight weeks and his as-yet-unborn sisters and his extant and future cousins and all our children too. None of us are who we would have been if that line had not stepped across our land.

One of my uncles, my mother's younger sister's husband, was a soldier. At the time of independence he was serving as an aide-de-camp to Field Marshal Claude Auchinleck, commanding officer of the outgoing British army in India. Auchinleck, known as "the Auk," was a brilliant soldier. He had been responsible for the reconstruction of the British Eighth Army in North Africa after its defeats by Erwin Rommel, rebuilding its morale and forging it into a formidable fighting force; but he and Winston Churchill had never liked each other, so Churchill removed him from his African command and packed him off to oversee the sunset of Empire in India, allowing his replacement, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, to reap the glory of all Auchinleck's work, by defeating Rommel at El Alamein. Auchinleck was a rarity among World War II field marshals in that he resisted the temptation of publishing his memoirs, so this is a story that came down to me from my uncle, his aide-de-camp, who later became a general in the Pakistani army and for a time a minister in the Pakistani government as well.

My uncle the general told another story, too, which created a ripple of interest when he published his own memoirs late in life. The Auk, he

said, had been convinced that he could stop the Partition Massacres if he were allowed to intervene, and had approached Britain's prime minister, Clement Attlee, to ask for permission to do so. Attlee, rightly or wrongly, took the view that the period of British rule in India was over, that Auchinleck was only there in a transitional, consultative capacity, and should therefore do nothing. British troops were not to get involved in this purely Indo-Pakistani crisis. This inaction was the final act of the British in India. What Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah would have felt about a British offer of help is not recorded. It is possible they would not have agreed. It is probable they were never asked. As for the dead, nobody can even agree on how many there were. One hundred thousand? Half a million? We can't be sure. Nobody was keeping score.

During my childhood years my parents, sisters, and I would sometimes travel between India and Pakistan—between Bombay and Karachi—always by sea. The steamers plying that route were a pair of old rust-buckets, the *Sabarmati* and the *Sarasvati*. The journey was hot and slow, and for mysterious reasons the boats would always stop for hours off the coast of the Rann of Kutch, while unexplained cargoes were ferried on and off: smugglers' goods, I imagined eagerly, gold, or precious stones. (I was too innocent to think of drugs.) When we reached Karachi, however, we entered a world far stranger than the smugglers' marshy, ambiguous Rann. It was always a shock for us Bombay kids, accustomed as we were to the easy cultural openness and diversity of our cosmopolitan home town, to breathe the barren, desert air of Karachi, with its far more closed, blinkered monoculture. Karachi was boring. (This, of course, was before it turned into the gun-law metropolis it has now become, in which the army and police, or those soldiers and policemen who have not been bought off, worry that the city's criminals may well be better armed than they are. It's still boring, there's still nowhere to go and nothing to do, but now it's frightening as well.) Bombay and Karachi were so close to each other geographically, and my father, like many of his contemporaries, had gone back and forth between them all his life. Then, all of a sudden, after Partition, each city became utterly alien to the other.

As I grew older the distance between the two cities increased, as if the borderline created by Partition had cut through the landmass of South Asia as a taut wire cuts through a cheese, literally slicing Pakistan away from the landmass of India, so that it could slowly float away across the Arabian Sea, the way the Iberian peninsula floats away from

Europe in José Saramago's novel *The Stone Raft*. In my childhood the whole family used to gather, once or twice a year, at my maternal grandparents' home in Aligarh in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. These family gatherings held us together; but then my grandparents moved to Pakistan, the Aligarh house was lost, the gatherings ended, and the Indian and Pakistani branches of the family began to drift apart. When I met my Pakistani cousins I found, more and more, how unlike one another we had become, how different our basic assumptions were. It became easy to disagree; easier, for the sake of family peace, to hold one's tongue.

As a writer I've always thought myself lucky that, because of the accidents of my family life, I've grown up knowing something of both India and Pakistan. I have frequently found myself explaining Pakistani attitudes to Indians and vice versa, arguing against the prejudices that have grown more deeply ingrained on both sides as Pakistan has drifted further and further away across the sea. I can't say that my efforts have been blessed with much success, or indeed that I have been an entirely impartial arbiter. I hate the way in which we, Indians and Pakistanis, have become each other's others, each seeing the other as it were through a glass, darkly, each ascribing to the other the worst motives and the sneakiest natures. I hate it, but in the last analysis I'm on the Indian side.

One of my aunts was living in Karachi, Pakistan, at the time of Partition. She was a close friend of the famous Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911–84). Faiz was the first great writer I ever met, and through his oeuvre and his conversation he provided me with a description of the writer's job that I accepted fully. Faiz was an exceptional lyric poet, and his many *ghazals*, set to music, earned him literally millions of admirers, even though these were, often, strangely unromantic, disabused serenades:

Do not ask of me, my love,  
 that love I once had for you...  
 How lovely you are still, my love,  
 but I am helpless too;  
 for the world has other sorrows than love,  
 and other pleasures, too.  
 Do not ask of me, my love,  
 that love I once had for you.





life poet, or at any rate the story in the form it reached me by the not entirely reliable route of family legend, that has left the deeper impression on me.

As a young boy, too young to know or love Faiz's work, I loved the man instead: the warmth of his personality, the grave seriousness with which he paid attention to children, the twisted smile on his kindly Grandpa Munster face. It seemed to me back then, and it seems to me still, that whatever endangered him, I would emphatically oppose. If the Partition that created Pakistan had sent that mob to get him, then I was against it. Later, when I was old enough to approach the poems, I found confirmation there. In his poem "The Morning of Freedom," written in those numinous midnight hours of mid-August 1947, Faiz began:

This stained light, this night-bitten dawn  
This is not the dawn we yearned for.

The same poem ends with a warning and an exhortation:

The time for the liberation of heart and mind  
Has not come as yet.  
Continue your arduous journey.  
Press on, the destination is still far away.

The last time I saw Faiz was at my sister's wedding, and my last, gleeful memory of him is of the moment when, to the gasping horror of the more orthodox—and therefore puritanically teetotal—believers in the room, he proposed a toast to the newlyweds while raising high a cheery glass brimming with twelve-year-old Scotch whisky on the rocks. Thinking about Faiz, remembering that last, good-natured, but quite deliberately transgressive incident, he looks to my mind's eye like a bridge between the literal and metaphorical worlds, or like a Virgil, showing us poor Dantes the way through Hell. It's important, he seems to be saying as he knocks back his blasphemous whisky, to cross metaphorical lines as well as actual ones: not to be contained or defined by anybody else's idea of where a line should be drawn.

The crossing of borders, of language, geography, and culture; the examination of the permeable frontier between the world of things and deeds and the world of the imagination; the lowering of the intolerable

frontiers created by the world's many different kinds of thought police: these matters have been at the heart of the literary project that was given to me by the circumstances of my life, rather than chosen by me for intellectual or "artistic" reasons. Born into one language, Urdu, I've made my life and work in another. Anyone who has crossed a language frontier will readily understand that such a journey involves a form of shape-shifting or self-translation. The change of language changes us. All languages permit slightly varying forms of thought, imagination, and play. I find my tongue doing slightly different things with my mother tongue than I do "with," to borrow the title of a story by Hanif Kureishi, "your tongue down my throat."

The greatest writer ever to make a successful journey across the language frontier, Vladimir Nabokov, enumerated, in his "Note on Translation,"<sup>6</sup> the "three grades of evil [that] can be discerned in the strange world of verbal transmigration." He was talking about the translation of books and poems, but, when as a young writer I was thinking about how to "translate" the great subject of India into English, how to allow India itself to perform the act of "verbal transmigration," the Nabokovian "grades of evil" seemed to apply.

"The first, and lesser one, comprises obvious errors due to ignorance or misguided knowledge," Nabokov wrote. "This is mere human frailty and thus excusable." Western works of art that dealt with India were riddled with such mistakes; to name just two, the scene in David Lean's film of *A Passage to India* in which he makes Dr. Aziz leap onto Fielding's bed and cross his legs *while keeping his shoes on*, a solecism that would make any Indian wince, and the even more unintentionally hilarious scene in which Alec Guinness, as Godbole, sits by the edge of the sacred tank in a Hindu temple *and dangles his feet in the water*.

"The next step to Hell," Nabokov says, "is taken by the translator who skips words or passages that he does not bother to understand or that might seem obscure or obscene to vaguely imagined readers." For a long time, or so I felt, almost the whole of the multifarious Indian reality was "skipped" in this way by writers who were uninterested in anything except Western experiences of India—English girls falling for maharajahs, or being assaulted, or not being assaulted, by non-maharajahs, in nocturnal gardens, or mysteriously echoing caves—written up in a coolly classical Western manner. But of course most experiences of India

<sup>6</sup> In *Lectures on Russian Literature* (1981).

are Indian experiences of it, and if there is one thing India is not, it is cool and classical. India is hot and vulgar, I thought, and it needed a literary “translation” in keeping with its true nature.

The third and worst crime of translation, in Nabokov’s opinion, was that of the translator who sought to improve on the original, “vilely beautifying” it “in such a fashion as to conform to the notions and prejudices of a given public.” The exoticisation of India, its “vile beautification,” is what Indians have disliked most. Now, at last, this kind of fake glamourising is coming to an end, and the India of elephants, tigers, peacocks, emeralds, and dancing girls is being laid to rest. A generation of gifted Indian writers in English is bringing into English their many different versions of the Indian reality, and these many versions, taken together, are beginning to add up to something that one might call the truth.

*In dreams begin responsibilities.* The way we see the world affects the world we see. As our ideas of female beauty change, so we see different sorts of women as beautiful. As our ideas of healthy living change, so we begin to look at the things we eat differently. Our dreams of our own and our children’s future shape the everyday judgments we make, about work, about people, about the world that either enables or obstructs those dreams. Daily life in the real world is also an imagined life. The creatures of our imagination crawl out from our heads, cross the frontier between dream and reality, between shadow and act, and become actual.

Imagination’s monsters do the same thing. The attack on the World Trade Center was essentially a monstrous act of the imagination, intended to act upon all our imaginations, to shape our own imaginings of the future. It was an iconoclastic act, in which the defining icons of the modern, the world-shrinking airplanes and those soaring secular cathedrals, the tall buildings, were rammed into each other in order to send a message: that the modern world itself was the enemy, and would be destroyed. It may seem unimaginable to us, but to those who perpetrated this crime, the deaths of many thousands of innocent people were a side-issue. Murder was not the point. The creation of a meaning was the point. The terrorists of September 11, and the planners of that day’s events, behaved like perverted, but in another way brilliantly transgressive, performance artists: hideously innovative, shockingly successful, using a low-tech attack to strike at the very heart of our high-tech world. In dreams begin irresponsibilities, too.

I am trying to talk about literature and ideas, but you see that I keep

being dragged back to catastrophe. Like every writer in the world I am trying to find a way of writing after September 11, 2001, a day that has become something like a borderline. Not only because the attacks were a kind of invasion, but because we all crossed a frontier that day, an invisible boundary between the imaginable and the unimaginable, and it turned out to be the unimaginable that was real. On the other side of that frontier, we find ourselves facing a moral problem: how should a civilised society—in which, as in all civilisations, there are limits, things we will not do, or allow to be done in our name, because we consider them beyond the pale, unacceptable—respond to an attack by people for whom there are no limits at all, people who will, quite literally, do anything—blow off their own feet, or tilt the wings of an airplane just before it hits a tower, so that it takes out the maximum number of floors?

The evil that men do lives after them,  
the good is oft interrèd with their bones.

It is not surprising that the word “evil” has been used a great deal these past months; perhaps too often. The terrorists became “the evil-doers,” their leader became “the evil one,” and now comes the discovery of that unusual phenomenon, an “axis of evil,” on which the president of the United States is threatening to make war. It’s an oddly contradictory word, “evil,” too freighted with absolute meaning to be an appropriate description of the messy relativity of actuality, too debased by over-use to mean as much as it should. Thus the comedy website *SatireWire.com* reveals that

bitter after being snubbed for membership in the Axis of Evil, Libya, China and Syria today announced that they had formed the Axis of Just as Evil, which they said would be way eviler than that stupid Iran–Iraq–North Korea axis. Cuba, Sudan, and Serbia said they had formed the Axis of Somewhat Evil, forcing Somalia to join with Uganda and Myanmar in the Axis of Occasionally Evil, while Bulgaria, Indonesia and Russia established the Axis of Not So Much Evil Really As Just Generally Disagreeable. Sierra Leone, El Salvador, and Rwanda applied to be called the Axis of Countries That Aren’t the Worst But Certainly Won’t Be Asked to Host the Olympics; Canada, Mexico, and Australia formed the Axis of Nations That Are Actually Quite Nice But Secretly Have Nasty Thoughts About America, while Spain, Scotland, and New Zealand

established the Axis of Countries That Sometimes Ask Sheep to Wear Lipstick.

“That’s not a threat, really, just something we like to do,” said Scottish Executive First Minister Jack McConnell.

I wish, myself, that the president had not promised to “rid the world of evil”—that’s a big project, a war he probably can’t win. “Evil” is a term that can obscure as well as clarify. For me, the greatest difficulty with it is that it dehistoricizes these events, depoliticizes and even de-personalizes them. If evil is the devil’s work, and in this deeply religious administration one must assume that many people in high places think it is, then that, to my unbeliever’s way of thinking, actually lets the terrorists off the hook. If evil is external to us, a force working upon us from outside ourselves, then our moral responsibility for its effects is diminished.

The most attractive thing about the Shakespearean attitude to evil is its emphasis on human, not divine, responsibility for it. “The evil *that men do*,” Mark Antony says, and that’s the only kind that interests Shakespeare. The conspirators in *Julius Caesar* are obsessed with omens and auguries. “Never till now,” says Casca, “Did I go through a tempest dropping fire. / Either there is a civil strife in heaven, Or else the world, too saucy with the gods, / Incenses them to send destruction.” And that’s not all. “Men all in fire walk up and down the streets. And yesterday the bird of night did sit, / Even at noon-day, upon the market-place, / Hooting and shrieking. When these prodigies / Do so conjointly meet, let not men say / ‘These are their reasons, they are natural’; / For, I believe, they are portentous things / Unto the climate that they point upon.” The conspirators talk themselves into believing that the omens and portents, the signs from the gods, justify, even necessitate, their crime.

To read the transcript of the so-called smoking gun Osama Bin Laden videotape, the notorious “giggling” video in which he laughs about his crimes and the deaths of his own men, is to be struck by the similarities between the mind-set of Al-Qaida and that of Caesar’s murderers. The tape is full of talk about prophetic dreams and visions. Bin Laden himself says: “Abu al-Hasan al-Masri told me a year ago: ‘I saw in a dream, we were playing a soccer game against the Americans. When our team showed up in the field, they were all pilots!’ He said the game

went on and we defeated them. So that was a good omen for us.” Or, again: “This brother came close and told me that he saw, in a dream, a tall building in America.... I was worried that maybe the secret would be revealed if everyone starts seeing it in their dream.” At this point, on the tape, another person’s voice is heard recounting yet another dream about two planes hitting a big building. Dreams and omens are murderers’ exculpations. Shakespeare knew better. It is again Casca, portent-ridden Casca, who speaks. “The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in the stars, / but in ourselves, that we are underlings.” He’s talking about the need for a coup. But after the assassination, we forget the final clause; it is the first part of the couplet, the part about responsibility for one’s own actions, whose truth we are made to feel. “The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in the stars, / but in ourselves.” It is Shakespeare’s genius to put in the mouth of an assassin the very thought that will damn him afterwards. Shakespeare doesn’t believe in the devil’s work. In the last scene of *Othello*, when the Moor finally learns how he has been duped by Iago, he says, “I look down towards his feet; but that’s a fable.” No cloven hoofs protrude from the villain’s hose. “If that thou be’st a devil, I cannot kill thee.” The world is real. There are no demons. Humans are demonic enough.

The evil that men do, in Shakespeare, is always a kind of excess. It has to do with the denial of limits, the willingness to cross any moral frontier. Goneril and Regan, Lady Macbeth, Iago: for them, the end justifies everything. *By any means necessary*. Whereas Hamlet is the opposite: a man so beset by moral qualms that it takes him an eternity to act. The great question of action and the frontiers of action—*how far can we go? How far is too far, how far is not far enough?*—is at the heart of Shakespeare’s world; also, now, of ours.

The problem of limits is made awkward for artists and writers, including myself, by our own adherence to, and insistence upon, a no-limits position in our own work. The frontierlessness of art has been and remains our heady ideology. The concept of transgressive art is so widely accepted—“if it isn’t transgressive, it isn’t underground”—as to constitute, in the eyes of conservative critics, a new orthodoxy. Once the new was shocking not because it set out to shock but because it set out to be new. Now, all too often, the shock *is* the new; and shock, in our jaded culture, wears off easily. Like the children in the Disney movie *Monsters, Inc.*, we don’t scare as easily as we used to. So the artist who seeks to shock must try harder and harder, go further and further, and this esca-

lation may now have become the worst kind of artistic self-indulgence. In the aftermath of horror, of the iconoclastically transgressive image-making of the terrorists, do artists and writers still have the right to insist on the supreme, unfettered freedoms of art? Is it time, instead of endlessly pushing the envelope, stepping into forbidden territory and generally causing trouble, to start discovering what frontiers might be necessary to art, rather than an affront to it?

The British writer (and lawyer) Anthony Julius addresses such questions in a new book, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*. Dealing mainly, but not only, with the visual arts, he valuably reminds us of the word's arrival in English in the sixteenth century, "freighted with negative scriptural overtones," and its rapid acquisition of other layers of meaning: "rule-breaking, including the violation of principles, conventions, pieties, or taboos; the giving of serious offence; and the exceeding, erasing or disordering of physical or conceptual boundaries." He examines the transgressive art of Edouard Manet in the 1860s—in *Olympia*, a picture of a whore to which Manet gave a name often used by the whores of the period, he visited the frontier between art and "pornography," which literally means "whore-painting," and another new word hailing from the same epoch, crossing the boundaries between the nude (an aesthetic, unerotic idea) and the naked woman, gazing out of the picture with frankly erotic intent. In *Dead Christ with Angels*, Manet questioned the resurrection, and the painting caused great offence. Even *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* was accused of "transgressing the laws both of perspective and morality." Now that time has installed Manet and his great contemporaries as the art world's blue-chip masterworkers, we have one answer to those who would reimpose limits on art: which is, that one age's pornography is another's masterpiece. In 1857, after all, *Madame Bovary* had so outraged conventional, decent people that Gustave Flaubert was prosecuted for writing it. Guardians of the frontiers of public morality should always beware, lest history make them look like fools.

Julius rightly credits the twentieth-century French writer Georges Bataille with the formulation of much of our modern idea of the transgressive. Interestingly, however, Bataille believed that the breaking of taboos was both a necessity and a "reinscription" of the violated border. "Transgressions suspend taboos without suppressing them." Julia Kristeva amplifies this: "The issue of ethics crops up wherever a code must be shattered in order to give way to the free play of negativity, need, desire, pleasure and jouissance, before being put together again, although

temporarily.” Here, then, is a second possible answer to the would-be censors in our new, more timorous age: artworks, unlike terrorists, change nothing.

On the five defences of art, Julius is excellent: the First Amendment defence; the “aesthetic alibi”—“art is a privileged zone in which the otherwise unsayable can be said”; the “estrangement defence” (it is the job of art to alienate us from our preconceptions, by making the familiar strange and the unquestioned problematic); the “canonic defence” (works of art exist in a tradition of such works and must be judged and understood in relation to that tradition); and the “formalist defence” (that art has its own, distinct mode of existence and is not to be confused with cognate, but distinct works of the imagination, such as propaganda and polemic). As someone who has had some experience of transgression and its consequences, I have at different times employed all these defences, as Julius is kind enough to note. He concludes, however, that “the aesthetic potential of the transgressive has been exhausted.” In this I am not sure he is right.

Even before the attacks on America, I was concerned that, in Britain and Europe as well as America, the pressures on artistic and even intellectual freedoms were growing—that cautious, conservative political and institutional forces were gaining the upper hand, and that many social groups were deliberately fostering a new, short-fuse culture of easy offendedness, so that less and less was becoming sayable all the time, and more and more kinds of speech were being categorized as transgressive. If it was important to resist this cultural closing-in before 9/11, it’s twice as important now. The freedoms of art and the intellect are closely related to the general freedoms of society as a whole. The struggle for artistic freedom serves to crystallize the larger question that we were all asked when the planes hit the buildings: how should we live now? How uncivilized are we going to allow our own world to become in response to so barbaric an assault?

We are living, I believe, in a frontier time, one of the great hinge periods in human history, in which great changes are coming about at great speed. On the plus side, the end of the cold war, the revolution in communications technology, great scientific achievements such as the completion of the human genome project; in the minus column, a new kind of war against new kinds of enemies fighting with terrible new weapons. We will all be judged by how we handle ourselves in this time.



What will be the spirit of this frontier? Will we give the enemy the satisfaction of changing ourselves into something like their hate-filled, illiberal mirror image, or will we, as the guardians of the modern world, as the custodians of freedom and the occupants of the privileged lands of plenty, go on trying to increase freedom and decrease injustice? Will we become the suits of armour our fear makes us put on, or will we continue to be ourselves? The frontier both shapes our character and tests our mettle. I hope we pass the test.