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Salman Rushdie and the “war on terror”

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My aim here is to explain the topicality of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* in the midst and aftermath of the so-called “war on terror”. The principal merit of the novel is that it sees fundamentalism not only in militant Islamism but also in the West’s unselfconscious belief in its own social and economic practices. It engenders a kind of migrant sensibility that moves between and casts doubt on fixed cultural and ideological positions. Alas, the extraordinary torrent of literary writing and punditry about 9/11 and the subsequent “war on terror” has often failed to combine a vehement critique of Islamism with an equally penetrating appraisal of other forms of fundamentalist belief. Indeed, the enduring significance and salutariness of *The Satanic Verses* has not been matched by the tendentiousness of Rushdie’s own media-based analyses of Islam, terrorism and western power. The article is also therefore a defence of literature as an efficacious form of political engagement.

Keywords: fundamentalism; migration; Islam; authority; literature

I

In his *Al Qaeda and What it Means to be Modern* the political philosopher John Gray argues that “[t]he conflict between Al Qaeda and the West is a war of religion” (116). This is not, however, as is usually assumed, because the so-called war on terror has been the setting for a “clash of civilizations” between Christianity and Islam. Instead, Gray’s point is that the West’s crusading universalism, its leaders’ fanatical faith in the West’s social, political and economic superiority, is no less religious and even fundamentalist than the millenarian fantasies of bin Laden.¹ The West’s belligerent response to the terrorist attacks of September 2001 has intensified a dispute between rival modernities. Rather than see the “war on terror” in conventional terms as a contest pitting an enlightened and forward-looking civilization against the medieval forces of fanaticism and religiosity, Gray proposes that we see it, counter-intuitively, as a tussle between competing and similarly exceptionable ways to be modern. By describing al-Qaeda and Islamic fundamentalism as modern phenomena Gray certainly does not wish to vindicate them or exonerate them from their crimes; he does not take a different view from, say, the Algerian novelist Yasmina Khadra’s harrowing *The Swallows of Kabul* (2005), which portrays the sheer hellishness and brutality of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Indeed, it is precisely the zeal and millenarianism of the Islamic fundamentalists that for Gray is the mark of their modernity. Al-Qaeda is modern not just because it uses satellite phones and laptop computers or because the creation of spectacular media images is a key part of its strategy but because of its vanguardism, its western-style universalism and its ideological certainty.² Its western equivalents are the social engineers of the IMF who labour, with catastrophic results, to install free markets in every last corner of the

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globe (Gray 43). Its closest precursors, as Gray points out (2), are the revolutionary anarchists of late 19th-century Europe portrayed in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*.³

"I have always dreamed," he mouthed, fiercely, "of a band of men absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers, and free from the taint of that resigned pessimism which rots the world. No pity for anything on earth, including themselves, and death enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity". (74)

The mark of fundamentalism is not so much religious faith as an eschatological belief, found in Conrad's terrorist, in the shock troops of al-Qaeda and also in the apostles of neo-liberalism, that the world can be entirely remade in one's own image.

The reason for the great value and pertinence of Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses* is that it provokes criticism not just (as is well known) of fundamentalist Islam but also (an aspect of the book that is often overlooked, lately even by Rushdie himself) of the West's unselfconscious and even crusading faith in its own practices and values. My purpose in this article is to demonstrate the timeliness and effectiveness of the book's double-edged critique. I want also to show how the enduring salutariness of the novel in the midst and aftermath of the so-called "war on terror" has not been matched by the comparative tendentiousness of Rushdie's recent media-based analyses of Islam, terrorism and western power. Another of my aims has consequences for our understanding of the extraordinary torrent of literary writing which has taken as its subject the terrorist attacks of September 2001 and their consequences. It is to note not just, as Sabina and Simona Sawhney have done, the similarity between Rushdie's recent articles and "many mainstream media responses to the events of September 11" (433) but also to argue those articles' dissimilarity to the less partisan, as well as more critical and, crucially, *self-critical*, ways in which literary texts like *The Satanic Verses* can dramatize these issues.

Two recent books by old confreres of Rushdie, Martin Amis and Christopher Hitchens, are laudably and even exhilaratingly critical of the "de-Enlightenment" (Amis 13) represented by the theocratic zealots of the Taliban and al-Qaeda (and, in Hitchens's case, because he doesn't discriminate, those of all religious faiths). "The argument with faith is the foundation and origin of all arguments", writes Hitchens in *God is Not Great* (12), echoing Marx. But I do not think it is a mere debating point to observe that Hitchens did not pursue this argument so rigorously with the occupants of the Pentagon and the White House or with their no less blind faith in the beneficence of American power in the Middle East and Central Asia. "The study of literature and poetry, both for its own sake and for the eternal ethical questions with which it deals, can now easily depose the scrutiny of sacred texts that have been found to be corrupt and confected" (283). Again, quite so; once more, however, one must tender the qualification that some literary texts will banish more than merely religious dogma. One does not need to endorse Terry Eagleton's convoluted defence of religious conviction in his *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (2009) to agree with him that both Hitchens and that other campaigning atheist Richard Dawkins (2007) tend to pull their punches when it comes to another, comparably inflexible and authoritarian system: their "campaign against fundamentalism has been signally unmatched by an equally forthright critique of global capitalism, a system which breeds so much of the anxiety and sense of humiliation off which fundamentalism feeds" (Eagleton 65). The passionate defence of reason offered by both Dawkins and Hitchens, while certainly preferable to the credulousness and fanaticism of fundamentalist religious belief, is nevertheless blind to the various secular fundamentalisms that create the conditions for religiosity to flourish. The rise of religious fundamentalism, as Gilbert Achcar (2008) has shown with regard to radical Islam,

is partly a response, albeit a misguided and profoundly destructive one, to the inequality, purposelessness and nihilism of late capitalism. Fundamentalist movements offer meaning where there is none, hope where it has been extinguished by poverty, and a sense of direction to those disregarded millions whom capitalism has rendered superfluous. This is an eruption of irrationality, in other words, that can be rationally explained.

The real adversary is not religious fundamentalism therefore, which is certainly *an* adversary, but is rather, simply, fundamentalism, shorn of all qualifying or restricting adjectives and understood to mean not literalist theism but uncritical faith generally. "Enlightenment thinking fosters the development of a critical spirit", according to Tzvetan Todorov (55), one that should not be constrained arbitrarily. *The Satanic Verses* is valuable and timely therefore, not just because it rebukes the dogmatism and credulous literalism of the fundamentalist worldview (which is salutary enough) but because it hauls the similarly doctrinaire worldviews of British and American elites over the coals as well. The subject of Khomeini's *fatwa* carries no torch for the fundamentalists, of course; Rushdie's novel's critique of those elites' imperial arrogance, of their unequal societies and of their oppressive institutions is no more motivated by sympathy for fundamentalism than contemporary criticism of unlawful incarceration at Guantanamo and torture at Abu Ghraib entails approval of the zealots who flew planes into the World Trade Center. A fallacy almost universally accepted in the months after the attacks stipulated that any attempt to understand their causes was tantamount to sympathy for the perpetrators. Yet if that were true it would at a stroke debar the writing of history; A.J.P. Taylor's authorship of *The Origins of the Second World War*, for example, would make him a fascist. What *The Satanic Verses* allows us to appreciate is the necessity for a comprehensive criticism of all purportedly or professedly "fundamental" truths, all dogmas that resist the democratic process in which doctrines and practices are pulled down into the realm of history where they can be questioned, criticized, contrasted with alternative points of view, even refuted and overhauled.

II

The Satanic Verses was composed amidst – and is in large part preoccupied with – the race riots, strikes and state violence of Mrs Torture's 1980s. London is represented there with none of the optimism of recent portraits such as *White Teeth* or *Brick Lane*; estranged as Ellowen Deeowen, "Babylondon" or, *à la* Orwell, Airstrip One (Rushdie 459), London is "a city that had lost its sense of itself and wallowed, accordingly, in the impotence of its selfish, angry present of masks and parodies, stifled and twisted by the insupportable, unrejected burden of its past, staring into the bleakness of its impoverished future" (320). *The Satanic Verses* is preoccupied not with Islam but with the varied experience of migration to this complex metropolis. It aims to arouse the far-sightedness, self-knowledge and critical disposition that for Rushdie and for Paul Gilroy can be instilled, serendipitously, by the experience of migration (Rushdie 85–86). Fundamentalisms of whatever kind, whether religious, political or nationalistic, are potential choices for the migrant, though ones that the novel labours to present as misguided and harmful.

The Satanic Verses is on one level a modernistic and hence self-conscious and irreverent novel that makes known the unreliability of texts in order to mock the putative inviolability of the Qur'an. It therefore strikes at the foundations of states such as Pakistan and movements such as Islamism that claim their legitimacy from the authority of the holy book. Readers of *Shame* or *Midnight's Children* will already have been aware that Rushdie's salient targets have included the cupidity and mediocrity of South Asia's postcolonial elites in addition to the ideologies and myths with which they seek to hold their people in thrall.

In a characteristically blunt aside, the narrator of 1983's *Shame* tells how "[s]o-called Islamic 'fundamentalism' does not spring, in Pakistan, from the people" but "is imposed on them from above" by autocratic regimes (251). In *Shame* it is the novel's ironical and digressive quality, its manifest partiality and the untrustworthiness of its narrator that discourage the reader's faith in the authority of texts and therefore promote scepticism about the supposed inviolability of the Qur'an. What is original about *The Satanic Verses* is not, therefore, its critical exploration of the ways in which a literalist view of the Qur'an is used to uphold secular forms of power. Rather, the critique to which *Shame* subjects South Asia's postcolonial elites is also deployed here against the British state. Disproportionate focus on the novel's critique of Islam obscures the fact that *The Satanic Verses* was partly written from a position outside – or at least in opposition to – the norms and precepts of "the West". In other words, its protests against British and also American complacency and xenophobia are every bit as bracing as its protest against Islamic fundamentalism.

The starting point of the book is Rushdie's liberal conviction that, whatever else it might have resulted in, imperialism, by drawing different peoples and situations into contact with each other, has banished forever the complacent belief that only one way of looking at things exists. Truth is not singular, in other words; it is not the preserve of unquestionable authorities, whether secular or religious, but is instead multiple, complex, as well as susceptible to interpretation and criticism:

History has become debatable. In the aftermath of Empire, in the age of super-power, under the "footprint" of the partisan simplifications beamed down to us from satellites, we can no longer easily agree on *what is the case*, let alone what it might mean. Literature steps into this ring. (Rushdie, *Step Across This Line* 66–67)

By portraying the sheer complexity and intermixture of human life, *The Satanic Verses* leaps over the ropes and starts to slug it out with fundamentalism. The novel permits the reader to appreciate the falsity of fundamentalist religious as well as political doctrines that seek to suppress that complexity and intermixture in favour of exclusion, partition and forms of authority based on pure origins. One is tempted to assert that the novel, not just this novel but any successfully multi-voiced and self-ironizing novel, is anti-fundamentalist by definition, which is more or less what Rushdie himself has declared on several occasions.⁴

Largely as a result of its distinctively self-critical form (what Gayatri Spivak has called its "self-ironic modernism" [48]), *The Satanic Verses* unmasks the intrinsic fallibility of texts. What is at stake here is the contestability of doctrines and practices that trace themselves to some sort of unchallengeable origin or scriptural revelation. Origins, as Edward Said argues in his *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, are doctrinaire by definition: they pass themselves off as decisive and incontrovertible dictates, celestial revelations recorded in scripture and brooking no opposition or divergence.⁵ To demonstrate the secular rather than divine source of texts, as *The Satanic Verses* seeks to do, is then to enable the making of what Said calls beginnings: creative interventions in (rather than passive submissions to) an existing body of meanings and practices. *The Satanic Verses* evidences the possibility that modernist literary writing, because it is consistently ironical and multi-voiced, can expose putative "origins" and encourage the disruptive, even subversive practice of criticism. If for Rushdie "men use God to justify the unjustifiable" (Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* 95) then this is because otherwise indefensible ideas and practices must, to appear legitimate, be validated by their descent from some prestigious, unarguable revelation. But *The Satanic Verses* demonstrates the reliance of religious authority on texts, which if nothing else are historical documents, contaminated as they are by the interests and biases of their authors and

susceptible as they thus become to the interpretations and rejoinders of their readers. Religious and political power are shown to have their source *in* history and therefore to be criticizable and alterable *by* history.

For Said, one of the defining features of the literary, and the principal source of literature's value, is its capacity to subvert the dogma of originality. "To speak of authority in narrative prose fiction is also inevitably to speak of the molestations that accompany it" (Said, *Beginnings* 84). Authority, in the case of characters and narrators, is assailed by the events of the narrative and by the rival voices of other characters. In the case of the novelist it is ambushed by the openly fictive nature of the world he conjures. Said imparts an understanding of literature's distinctive value when he adduces the deceptively straightforward proposition that literary texts are more prepared than other sorts of text to confess their fictional nature. In Paul de Man's words, "a work of fiction asserts, by virtue of its very existence, its separation from empirical reality" (17). What Rushdie calls "the fictionality of fiction" (*Imaginary Homelands* 393) permits novels to flaunt their artificiality, their imaginative as well as imaginary quality, and therefore their status as unauthoritative documents that must not be approached with the reverence demanded by purportedly indubitable forms of utterance.

Interestingly, Said begins his account of the modern novel in *Beginnings* by telling his readers that novels only made their appearance in modern Arabic literature in the 20th century, largely due, he thinks, to the fact that the effort to modify or augment the world through writing is inimical to the Islamic worldview (81). Utterly contrary to the view that the Qur'an is complete and inviolable and that therefore to revise it is heretical, one of the principal reasons for reading and studying novels for Said is their capacity to represent, through narrative, characters and societies undergoing processes of development or innovation. The novel is aptly named because its knack of injecting authority with the vaccine of doubt constitutes a creative disruption of (as well as a departure from) the dogma of origins. For the Said of *Beginnings* it is the perhaps surprising figure of Giambattista Vico, the 18th-century Neapolitan philosopher, who sets out most persuasively this conviction that the world of ideas and actions emerges not from the diktats of scripture but from the creative innovations of intellect and labour (347–81). Elsewhere, however, as if to make clear a specifically Islamic tradition of criticism and enquiry, Said frequently adduces the works of the 14th-century Tunisian polymath Ibn Khaldun as equally important statements of the centrality of intelligence and effort (not divine fiat) in human history and as evidence of the compatibility of criticism and creativity with Islamic traditions (Said, *End of the Peace Process* 244–48).

The incident of the so-called "satanic verses" (Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* 123) serves Rushdie as a way of inviting reflection on the Qur'an's sublunary rather than divine origin. As is well known, for the first eight years of the Islamic faith its founder, the Prophet Mohammed, is reputed to have tolerated continued worship of the pagan goddesses al-Lat, al-Uzza and Manat. A series of military victories subsequently made this compromise with polytheism unnecessary. Verses previously received by Mohammed exalting the Goddesses were then deleted from the Qur'an and replaced. The reason given for this expedient switch was that the rogue verses had been recited to Mohammed not by the Archangel but by Satan. The incident serves Rushdie as a demonstration of the way in which religious authority originates not in the incontestable edicts of the Almighty but in the considerably less authoritative wiles of his intermediaries and, crucially, in the shifty and ambiguous medium of writing. To demonstrate the secular rather than divine source of texts, as *The Satanic Verses* seeks to do, is then to detach them from the prestige of divine revelation and to make possible their critique or at least their creative interpretation. In Said's terms it is to substitute the

notion of the text as a beginning for the idea of the text as an origin, “the latter divine, mythical and privileged, the former secular, humanly produced, and ceaselessly re-examined” (Said, *Beginnings* xix).

Broadly speaking, *The Satanic Verses* deals with political questions about authority, freedom and democracy. Indeed, the narrative method of Rushdie’s fiction is a way of dealing with and drawing attention to the problem of political power. Its aim, in Said’s terms, is to molest and discredit the authority of ruling myths. Hence Rushdie’s characterization of *The Satanic Verses* as a “migrant’s-eye view of the world” (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 394), for it is the migrant’s experience of multiple points of view that potentially makes him or her profoundly sceptical of the dogmatic certainties of the powerful. This theme of migration is inseparable from Rushdie’s modernism, since it is the migrant’s capacity to compare different cultures, ideologies, forms of life and so on that endows him or her with the modernist’s appreciation of the fallibility and the vulnerability to criticism of ruling myths and of the texts from which they derive their authority. The migrant’s perspective, in other words, is perforce a disenchanted one, which is why, Rushdie writes, “those of us who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have perhaps had modernism forced upon us” (12).⁶

Much critical attention has been devoted to *The Satanic Verses*’ portrayal of the founding of Islam in what it calls the city of Jahilia (Arabic for ignorance and the term used in Islam to refer to the Arabian Peninsula before the revelation of the Qur’an). Yet the relationship between *The Satanic Verses*’ modernistic self-subversion and its critique of the authority of the Qur’an should not be allowed to obscure the fact that most of the novel’s digressive and intricately interrelated sub-plots are centred upon its two protagonists, not least because they are dreamed by one of them: the Bombay movie star Gibreel Farishta. Gibreel’s delusion that he is Gabriel, the Angel of the Recitation, is an element in the novel’s broader critique of virtue, authority and celebrity. His dream of the fanatical Indian prophetess Ayesha and her doomed pilgrimage to Mecca recalls the earlier tale of the brothel in Jahilia where the prostitutes are all named after the Prophet’s wives, including his favourite, the prophetess’s namesake. The serious (rather than merely offensive or gratuitous) critique at the heart of the latter episode is brought out by the sustained indictment of religious indoctrination in the description of Ayesha’s pilgrimage. This caravan of the sick and dying comments reflectively on the religion of “submission”. Both are seen as rule bound, fixated with discipline, cold hearted and credulous; Ayesha’s self-serving revelations (the Archangel sings to her “‘to the tunes of popular hit songs’” [497]) are a parody of Mohammed’s. The point, therefore, to which we shall return in greater detail, is that these digressions in the narrative are omens, lessons and deterrents: dramatizations of the decisions and dilemmas faced by the migrant.

In the account of Islam’s inception it is the temptations of rule-bound religious doctrines that are explored and discredited. The tale of Jahilia or Mecca dramatizes the rivalries, challenges and compromises that accompanied the founding of Islam. It humanizes the Prophet, represents his struggle to convert followers from their existing loyalties and beliefs, and describes the process of the Qur’an’s recital and composition. New readers might be surprised to discover that the accounts of, for instance, the persecution of the new religion’s followers and of its ability to take strength from that persecution are, contrary to the novel’s reputation, actually remarkably sympathetic (125). But pitted against the received account of Islam’s lightning triumphs, against the dogma of the Qur’an’s incontestability, and against the prevalent (though probably heretical) veneration of the Prophet, are depictions of a vulnerable new religion assailed by the hostility of the authorities and compromising with polytheism, of the illiterate Mohammed’s scribes altering the Angel’s words, and of

the Prophet's all-too-human (as opposed to divine) personality. The revelation of the Qur'an to Mohammed and the consequent inception of Islam is shown to be warped and skewed by worldly expediency, by the human failings of Mohammed himself, and above all by the untrustworthy, ambiguous and finally profane medium of writing.

Since the Prophet himself was unable to read or write he was attended by a number of scribes whose task it was to record the revealed verses. It was then Caliph Othman bin Affan, Mohammed's third successor, whose committee gathered the extant written versions and interviewed the Prophet's followers in order to produce the authorized Qur'an. Not least among the hazards attendant on these processes are the vulnerability of the Creator's intentions to the Chinese whispers of multiple and frequently unreliable amanuenses and especially the exposure of those intentions to the cryptic and equivocal medium of language. These are, of course, the inescapable perils of writing itself, personified by a "bum from Persia by the outlandish name of Salman" (101), the Prophet's "official scribe" (365) who knowingly alters his master's verses and in so doing reveals the gulf between writing and authorial purpose, as well as the unreliability of texts and the inadvisability of taking them at their word:

Here's the point: Mahound [Mohammed] did not notice the alterations. So there I was, actually writing the Book, or re-writing, anyway, polluting the word of God with my own profane language. But, good heavens, if my poor words could not be distinguished from the Revelation by God's own Messenger, then what did that mean? What did that say about the quality of the divine poetry? (367)

These are the essential questions posed by the novel. By casting into doubt the orthodox belief that the Qur'an is the flawless, unmediated and therefore unassailable word of God, it thus exposes the holy book to the kind of interpretation, interrogation and evaluation that, incidentally, are for many Islamic scholars indispensable elements in the decipherment of its message. Here at the origin of Islam, then, is a conflict between revealed and imaginary literature: between the fundamentalist idea of the sacred, inviolable "Rule Book" (385) and the more obviously literary conception of the text as a text: a profane document susceptible to as well as imploring, encouraging, even necessitating interpretation and criticism. Texts in general ought to be viewed as arguable and incomplete, including, Mohammed's scribe's forename hints, the novel we are reading.

What exasperated Rushdie and his defenders about the novel's critics was precisely their unwillingness to view *The Satanic Verses* as a novel. They stressed this time and again not because they believed that it was *only* a novel or that its essentially imaginative nature meant it need not affect our attitudes towards scripture (as though, as Stephen Jay Gould says about science and religion, literature and faith belong to "non-overlapping magisteria"). Instead, the fallibility, contentiousness and incompleteness of literary texts and therefore their enthusiastic susceptibility to criticism constitute literature's distinctive challenge to the unreflective certainties of the literalist mindset. "How could the two characters Gibreel (Gabriel) and Saladin fall from the sky and still be alive?" asked the ingenuous Professor Syed Ali Ashraf, Director-General of Cambridge's Islamic Academy in 1988 (Appignanesi and Maitland 26). To even ask such questions is to betray one's unresponsiveness to the kind of imaginative interrogation of which sometimes only literature is capable of inciting.

III

Interpretation, interrogation and evaluation (in short, criticism) comprise the disposition that the novel presents as a potential consequence of migration. Satan, in the epigraph from

Defoe, is not just a dissenter but a vagabond “without any fixed place, or space”. The fall that so puzzled Professor Ashraf is a metaphor for this condition. At the start of the novel Gibreel and the actor and Anglophile Saladin Chamcha descend to England from the exploded jumbo jet *Bostan* (Farsi for paradise). The novel’s dominant theme is migration or rather, as Shailja Sharma has shown, different models or styles of migration. More specifically, the novel’s preoccupation is with the possibility that the experience of migration might (though there is no guarantee that it will) give rise to the “devil talk” of dissent: to the kind of sceptical disposition that subjects religion, as well as other sources of entrenched and illegitimate power, to criticism. Without question, much of the novel is deliberately provocative; referring to Mohammed as Mahound, for instance, recalls a disreputable tradition of slurs going back to the medieval *chansons de geste*. Yet even here the epithet serves a critical purpose, since it is part of the novel’s utility that it transforms “insults into strengths” (Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* 93). That which is conventionally rejected as errant and sinful – in a word, Satanic – is explored in order to see how it contrasts with and perhaps calls into question the supposedly virtuous and authoritative discourses of the powerful. What we are given is what Rushdie has called “the devil’s version of the world [...] the version written from the experience of those who have been demonized by virtue of their otherness” (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 430). Hence the growth of Chamcha’s “goaty, unarguable horns” (141) emphasizes firstly the racist denigration of immigrants as “devils” and, secondly, illustrates the ways in which that identity can be embraced and refashioned so that it signifies not inferiority or “otherness” but rather the virtues of intellectual and practical resistance. Devilishness is here a synonym for dissent, for the interrogation and alteration of dominant ideas.

The novel begins, therefore, with its two protagonists tumbling and entering a condition of migration or weightlessness which for Rushdie is universal and even existential. One would be tempted to liken the at times salutary experience of migration in Rushdie’s work to the exilic outlook propounded by Edward Said (“Reflections on Exile”), were the word exile not used in *The Satanic Verses* as a way of summarizing the experiences of those unwilling expatriates who refuse to allow the fact of displacement to grant them insight into the provisionality and contestability of their loyalties and beliefs. Illustrating this state of unasked for and resented banishment is a brief but particularly compelling portrait of “the Imam”, a figure resembling but not identical to a very prescient subject of Rushdie’s ire, the Ayatollah Khomeini in France after his expulsion from Najaf in the late 1970s:

Who is he? An exile. Which must not be confused with, allowed to run into, all the other words that people throw around: émigré, expatriate, refugee, immigrant, silence, cunning. Exile is a dream of glorious return. Exile is a vision of revolution: Elba, not St Helena. It is an endless paradox: looking forward by always looking back. (Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* 205)

Significantly, fundamentalist Islam is equated explicitly in the figure of the Imam with a refusal to learn migration’s salutary lessons. The Imam is like Napoleon on Elba, craving an imminent restoration, not like the deposed emperor on St Helena, doomed to abide and therefore forced to confront his new habitation. Moping in his rented flat behind closed curtains, emerging infrequently for strolls with his entourage, the Imam broods upon the wickedness of this land that has given him sanctuary and fixes his mind on the prospect of homecoming (205–06).

Yet the fetish of assimilation is shown by *The Satanic Verses* to be as defective a form of migration as the Imam’s refusal to adjust. Whereas the latter is uncritical of his native soil and contemptuous of his new habitation, the Indian migrant Saladin is, conversely, disdainful of his homeland and besotted with a clichéd and Romantic vision of England. In

contrast to Gibreel (who sings an irreverent ditty about the fusion of cultures as he plummets from the *Bostan* [5]) and with his lover Zeeny Vikal (who has written a “book on the confining myth of authenticity, that folkloristic straitjacket which she sought to replace by an ethic of historically validated eclecticism” [52]), Saladin is determined “to become the thing his father was-not-could-never-be, that is, a goodandproper Englishman” (43). Even before his relocation to London, he prays for the England cricket team “to defeat the local upstarts” (37) of India. The Imam’s holy land is Iran and his restoration there the exclusive object of his thoughts; Saladin too, like his namesake, has a holy land, which in his case, as his wife observes, is England (175). Dedicating himself “with a will bordering on obsession to the conquest of Englishness” (256), he is even, she recalls, a passionate advocate of what his author once called that “crazy war” over the Falkland Islands, for Rushdie at that time the indication par excellence of jingoism and fatuity (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 159). Saladin dreams of sleeping with the Queen and marries Pamela Lovelace because her voice “stinks” “of Yorkshire pudding and hearts of oak, that hearty, rubicund voice of ye olde dream-England which he so desperately wanted to inhabit” (180).

It is the reader, not Saladin himself (who remains convinced of Britain’s “hospitality” “in spite of immigration laws, and his own recent experience” (398) of police brutality), who is soon awoken from Saladin’s “dream England” by the realities of British racism and, related to this, by the cynical commercialism of the Thatcher years. Thatcher’s England is “a peculiar-tasting smoked fish full of spikes and bones” (44) that the young Saladin forces down as proof to himself of his capacity to ingest the country in all its unpalatableness but on which, however, readers tend to choke. Voiceovers, particularly his part in *The Aliens Show*, a sitcom about extraterrestrials, are the actor Saladin’s most regular assignments; they exhibit his talent for imitating his hosts in addition to, as Zeeny points out, his employers’ racist reluctance to discompose their patrons with the sight of a non-white face (60). What is apparent to Rushdie’s readers though not, it seems, to his protagonist is the fact that Thatcher’s England, with its insularity, its violent antipathy to newcomers and its rising class of shysters and con men, clashes with its own complacent self-image; it does not represent “the England he had idolized and come to conquer” (270).

The target of this profoundly political novel is not just the sacred text whose authority it endeavours to subvert but also the repressive and racist institutions of the British state; *The Satanic Verses* shows that neither of these options merits the approval of Britain’s minorities. Religious fundamentalism is an important element of the novel only in so far as it can be shown to constitute one (mistaken and unattractive) mode of living for immigrant communities and, more generally, for all of us who are confronted and challenged by a new consciousness of the multiplicity and relativity of cultures. Saladin’s uncritical veneration of a mythical England is shown to be no less misguided. The novel is, after all, set in Thatcher’s London

that tortured metropolis whose fabric was now utterly transformed, the houses in the rich quarters being built of solidified fear, the government buildings partly of vainglory and partly of scorn, and the residences of the poor of confusion and material dreams. (320)

What must not be obscured by the allegations of blasphemy, therefore, are the novel’s depictions of England’s deplorable inequality; of Saladin being assaulted in the back of a police van (158–59); “of black youths hauled swiftly into unmarked cars” (451); of “Brickhall” Magistrates’ Court where “the police will be trying to fit up a fifty-year-old Nigerian woman, accusing her of assault, having previously beaten her senseless” (183); of the Thatcher government’s senseless misadventure in the Falklands (allegorized in the

experiences in Argentina of Rosa Diamond who, like Britain, “did not know how to look her history in the eye” [153]); and of Hal Valance, the media mogul who cancels Saladin’s show in deference to the racist tastes of the British public and who personifies the cynical hypocrisy of the Thatcher-era magnate who loves his country so much he is ““going to sell the arse off it”” (268): indeed, all the instances of violence, abuse, corruption and two-facedness that the novel shows happening “in places which the camera cannot see” (457).⁷

IV

Critics sometimes forget that Rushdie has always been equal parts novelist and pundit. In his literary, critical and political writings he has consistently encouraged political dissent and intellectual disagreement. Since the long reclusion of the *fatwa*, however, and particularly since the terrorist attacks of September 2001, a propensity to pull his punches has been more evident.⁸ Rushdie had initially rejected the popular view that the *fatwa* threw into relief a “clash of civilisations”:

Let me say this first: I have never seen this controversy as a struggle between Western freedoms and Eastern unfreedom. The freedoms of the West are rightly vaunted, but many minorities – racial, sexual, political – just as rightly feel excluded from full possession of these liberties; while, in my lifelong experience of the East, from Turkey and Iran to India and Pakistan, I have found people to be every bit as passionate for freedom as any Czech, Romanian, German, Hungarian or Pole. (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 396)

Yet Rushdie has seemed willing of late to endorse precisely that opposition. He has, justifiably of course, deplored fundamentalist denunciations of his work as “a war against independence of mind, a war for power” (Rushdie, *Step Across This Line* 232). But it is with rather less justification and with, it must be said, rather less independence of mind that recent op-ed pieces have dismissed criticism of the “war on terror” as part of an irrational “anti-Americanism, which is presently taking the world by storm” (398). While Rushdie is still prepared occasionally to remind his readers that “‘fundamentalism’ is a term born in the USA” (287) and that it is the right of human beings and their works of art “to [...] prevail over the whimsical autocracy of whatever Olympus may presently be in vogue” (281), there are to be found in his recent writings dispiritingly uncritical references to “decent men like Mr Blair” (311) and the “statesmanlike” General Powell (400). Instead of a stirring defence of criticism, the “spineless” opponents of the bombing of Afghanistan are told that it “had to be done” (399) and that their unfavourable appraisals of American foreign policy are examples of “sanctimonious moral relativism” (392). Rushdie rails against “cultural-relativist liberals” for lining up alongside “hardline fundamentalists” in their hatred of Bush’s “*pax Americana*” (297). In other words, Rushdie’s laudable plea for “independence of mind” has morphed of late into a plea for the nation that he now sees, to say the least contentiously, as freedom’s embodiment and promulgator. The spread of what he calls, euphemistically, American “culture” ought not to be resisted, he reasons, if “in the world as it actually exists, rather than in some unattainable Utopia, the authority of the United States were the best current guarantor of that ‘freedom’” (297).

What is at issue here is less the defensibility or otherwise of Rushdie’s increasingly partisan political writings than the extent to which that partisanship is at variance with the more or less unqualified and unconstrained advocacy of criticism in his literary work and particularly, as we have seen, in *The Satanic Verses*. There the image of the United States as the apostle of freedom is countered by other voices such as that of the young Indian Marxist and filmmaker George Miranda, for whom the United States is “[p]ower in its

purest form, disembodied, invisible" (Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* 56). For Saladin's father it is the looter of India's cultural heritage (70). For Zeeny, who works as a doctor with Bombay's homeless and "who had gone to Bhopal the moment the news broke of the invisible American cloud that ate people's eyes and lungs" (52), it is the perpetrator of the Union Carbide gas leak. The cartoonish and unsubtle, not to mention somewhat snobbish but undeniably critical personification of America for *The Satanic Verses* is Eugene Dumsday, the "humble foot soldier, sir, in the army of Guard Almighty" (75) who disturbs Saladin aboard the *Bostan*. Significantly, the appearance of this pushy and unselfconscious figure precedes that of the terrorist gang who will detonate the plane. Fundamentalism and western power, in other words, are linked and to establish that connection is, as the episode of the *Bostan*'s hijacking demonstrates, to subject both to criticism. Dumsday (the surname, of course, is an indication of his religiosity as well as a punning sneer at his stupidity) is returning from a visit to "'your great nation to do battle with the most pernicious devilment ever got folks' brains by the balls'" (75): Darwinism. Saladin's mockery elicits from Dumsday only a look of uncomprehending reproof: "It was a hard fate to be an American abroad, and not to suspect why you were so disliked" (77). This kind of insight might effectively be described as migratory since it is the view from abroad that makes critical perception possible.

Rushdie's recent positions are exceptionable because they neglect this method and present their readers instead with a restricted choice between western universalism and Islamic fundamentalism, which, of course, is no choice at all because these rival fundamentalisms exacerbate and reinforce each other. As Arundhati Roy has said, "the people of the world do not have to choose between the Taliban and the US government". Such choices obscure the significant causal connections between the partial and invidious hegemony of "the West" and the violent and, it goes without saying, futile and murderous "blowback" of the fundamentalists. The critique of Islamic fundamentalism must additionally acknowledge, as again Rushdie himself once maintained, that "there are other kinds of fundamentalism also" (Appignanesi and Maitland 31), including Christian, as well as political and economic fundamentalism. The face off between violent Islamism and an equally dogmatic faith in the irreproachableness of the West and its social and economic system amounts to what Tariq Ali has dubbed a "clash of fundamentalisms".

A rejection of this clash certainly necessitates a critique of the despotism and mediocrity prevalent in large parts of the Islamic world, as well as a repudiation of the sclerosis represented by fundamentalist strains such as Wahhabism. But it also requires a willingness to think through the more humane elements of Islamic teachings and traditions, as Susan Buck-Morss has argued. Not least among these are Islamic culture's stress on economic justice and its aversion to national divisions, along with its quite staggeringly rich heritage of theological speculation and of artistic and scientific innovation. Islam is not a homogeneous category. As Edward Said has shown, "the labels 'Islam' and 'Islamic' have to be used with some indication of *which* (and for that matter, *whose*) Islam one is referring to" (Said, *Covering Islam* 58). For the late Pakistani intellectual Iqbal Ahmad, Islamism's selective and instrumental use of scripture for political purposes "distorts religion, debases tradition, and twists the political process wherever it unfolds". The idea of jihad, for instance, has ceased to mean a struggle taking place within oneself and society to conquer greed, malice and egotism; its meaning has been unilaterally reduced by the Islamists to warfare. Ahmad bemoans their proscriptiveness; their humourlessness and severity; their ambivalent attitude to modernity (they embrace military hardware and the media while rejecting science and rationality); their rejection of democracy; their scorn for art, pleasure and learning; their violent contempt for confessional differences; their misogyny; and their

sheer obscurantism. The cadres of the Islamist movements wish to divest the cultural life of Islam of its noblest traditions: of its philosophy and science, its pluralism, its aversion to sectarian divisions, its concern for the public interest and its craving for social justice:

they seek an Islamic order reduced to a penal code, stripped of its humanism, aesthetics, intellectual quests, and spiritual devotion [...] They are concerned with power not with the soul, with the mobilization of people for political purposes rather than with sharing or alleviating their sufferings and aspirations. (Ahmad 186–87)

The Satanic Verses is an attack on this kind of Islam, not on Islam per se; witness its author's profound interest in Sufism and, related to this, the close connections between such heterodox Islamic traditions and the importance that the novel attaches to doubt, discussion, criticism and interpretation. It is in fact, as Timothy Brennan points out, "a sincerely religious book, sentimentally devoted to a gentler, more sceptical Islam" (Brennan, "Rushdie, Islam" 273). It desires to tell its readers, as Saladin wants to tell the fanatical hijackers of the *Bostan*, that "unbendingness can also be monomania [...] it can be tyranny, and also it can be brittle, whereas what is flexible can also be humane, and strong enough to last" (Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* 81). Gibreel is relieved when he stops dreaming of the sullen, exiled Imam because another narrative can begin and "because at least it suggests that the deity whom he, Gibreel, has tried unsuccessfully to kill can be a God of love, as well as one of vengeance, power, duty, rules and hate" (216). Rushdie of late has seemed like a western critic of Islam; this was true of *The Satanic Verses* as well, although the novel, even-handedly, was also an Islamic critique of the West.

To overlook the mutual entanglement of "western" and "eastern" experience and the existence of fundamentalisms in each would constitute a "revolt against history" every bit as detrimental as that of Rushdie's Imam (the phrase is, of course, Khomeini's). The Imam's is a revolt directed against the history of progress, science and rights; for him, history was concluded on the day God completed his revelation to the Prophet: "[a]fter the revolution", he decrees, "there will be no clocks" (214). Saladin worries that a return to his origins in India would, similarly, constitute "a revolt against history" (34). That he regrets his sojourn is partly the result of his Anglophilia but partly also a consequence of his more astute realization that a return to his former identity is no longer possible, for his personality and outlook have been irretrievably admixed with other cultures and experiences. He cannot slough off those diverse influences or deny that he is the product of intertwined histories. There can be no revolt against history, which for *The Satanic Verses* is the history of inter-mixtures, a history that demonstrates the assailability of all norms and fixed ideas, whether cultural, religious or political, by other points of view.

Critics ought to attend more to Rushdie's literary than to his political output. To be sure, the lines that separate the two are in his case often blurred. One could imagine few, if any, other popular novelists quoting Frantz Fanon (*Satanic Verses* 353) or digressing into theological speculations about changing conceptions of Satan (323). But notwithstanding this close relationship between his novels and his commentaries, it is fair to say that it is the non-didactic quality of the former that makes them superior forms of critical intervention. There each and every political position is subverted by the patent fallibility of the narrator's voice and by the rejoinders of events, characters and voices: by what Said characterizes as the manifest and unavoidable self-molestation of narrative fiction. In short, Rushdie's novels are more effectively or (what amounts to the same thing) exhaustively critical media than his political commentaries. This is why Aijaz Ahmad's misgiving about what he calls Rushdie's "aesthetic of despair" (155) strikes me as misguided. For what is demonstrated by the discrepancies between Rushdie's literary work and his

recent punditry is that it is empathically not the business of literature to furnish what Ahmad calls “regenerative possibilities” (151). Such tasks might better be left to political discussions, though novels like Rushdie’s can certainly awaken readers to the need for such discussions to take place.

V

What *The Satanic Verses* seeks is a calculated arousal of the intellectual scepticism contingent upon the experience of migration: a scepticism directed towards all voices and discourses that try to pass themselves off as unassailable and invulnerable to criticism. And as Edward Said has said, one does not have to be a migrant to think like one (*Representations of the Intellectual* 46–47). The reader who has perused *The Satanic Verses* with the right amount of attentiveness to its clashing and interweaving voice parts has acquired through literary reading an outlook that is usually only available, through rather more arduous experiences, to real migrants. He or she is conscious that religious, political and economic fundamentalisms are all alike, all inadmissible and all equally mistaken in attributing their authority to some sort of unchallengeable origin. As is indicated by the knowing and ironical form of the novel itself, which is patently “unrealistic” and which draws attention to the inescapable fallibility and untrustworthiness of writing, all texts, even and especially works of scripture, are contestable. Moreover, texts owe their existence to sublunary beginnings not divine origins, to use Said’s terms. And there is no nation or culture, as *The Satanic Verses* shows, so authoritative and incorruptible that it cannot be criticized from other points of view or revealed by the events of the narrative to be contingent, alterable, hypocritical or simply ridiculous. *The Satanic Verses*, then, does not bear witness to the superiority of any particular “civilisation”: not, of course, that of Islam, nor that of Britain’s exclusionary, imbalanced and belligerent society, and certainly not that of the “greater deity” that threatens to consume Malik Solanka in *Fury*: “America, in the highest hour of its hybrid, omnivorous power” (44). “It isn’t right”, declares the proud and arrogant poet Baal, “for the artist to become the servant of the state” (*Satanic Verses* 98). The artist’s role, like that of the devil, is to voice protests, offer objections, state alternative points of view, and combat dogmas and abstractions, for what Gray calls “the proselytising fury of faith” (Gray 115) does not belong to religion alone.

Notes

1. Gray explores this thesis further, in his characteristically confrontational and stimulating style, in *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (2007).
2. On the vicissitudes of the concept of modernity, particularly the way in which the term has been hijacked by social democratic politicians whose faith in neo-liberalism is well-nigh fundamentalist, see Fredric Jameson’s *A Singular Modernity* (8–10). Interestingly, the same point was made many years ago by Raymond Williams in a short meditation on “the meaning of modernization”. “Modernization is, indeed, the ‘theology’ of a new capitalism” (Williams 45).
3. This comparison has now been made many times, though I suspect that Edward Said was the first to identify it (Said, *From Oslo to Iraq* 110).
4. In “In Good Faith” and “Is Nothing Sacred?” (*Imaginary Homelands* 393–429) Rushdie argues that the irony and inventiveness of literature place it at odds with the thought-stopping certainties of religion. “I do not believe that novels are trivial matters. The ones I care most about are those which attempt radical reformulations of language, form and ideas, those that attempt to do what the word *novel* seems to insist upon: to see the world anew” (393).
5. Elsewhere I have given a lengthier account of Said’s argument in his unjustly neglected study of origins and originality (Spencer, “Contented Homeland Peace”). Abdirahman A. Hussein provides an exhaustive analysis (53–146).

6. The essays contained in Howard Booth and Nigel Rigby's *Modernism and Empire* (2000) explore the connections between modernism and a new sense of the relativity of human cultures.
7. See also John McLeod's instructive analysis of *The Satanic Verses*' London setting (147–57).
8. Timothy Brennan's chapter on Rushdie in his trenchant *Wars of Position* bemoans what he sees as the deleterious effect that the so-called *Satanic Verses* affair had on Rushdie's fiction (65–92).

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