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Salman Rushdie Gets Religion

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The protagonist of *No Longer At Ease* by the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe is a young man named Obi Okonkwo who has recently returned to Nigeria after taking a degree in English literature at Oxford University. Obi's interview for a civil service position turns into a discussion about books, during which Obi remarks offhandedly that Graham Greene's novel about Africa, *The Heart of the Matter*, is "nearly ruined by the happy ending." This statement puzzles Obi's interlocutor, because that book ends with a suicide. But Obi knows what he's taking about: he's just trying to rethink the notion of tragedy. The Western tragic hero has the advantage, in Obi's view, of dying and thus escaping suffering: "Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly forever."

Salman Rushdie surely would appreciate this theory. Long after the general public has lost interest in his personal drama, Rushdie still lives in hiding, moving from place to place under the direction of Scotland Yard, continually reminded by the Iranian government that his death sentence will not, indeed cannot, be revoked. (Only the late Ayatollah Khomeini, they claim, could have revoked his own *fatwa*, or judgment.) Condemned to live in perpetual uncertainty, secrecy, and fear, Rushdie has some claim to be considered as Obi Okonkwo's kind of tragic figure.

But while his situation has not changed–while, so to speak, its instability has remained constant–Rushdie himself may have changed quite radically. Having been vocal throughout his career about his lack of religious belief, Rushdie on Christmas Day 1990 announced that he had become, for the first time in his life, a believing Muslim. This announcement surprised and dismayed Rushdie's strongest supporters, most of whom believe, as he had believed, that religion in general (and Islam especially) is a perniciously regressive and oppressive force in society. The lawyer Francis Bennion–who resigned in anger from the Salman Rushdie Defense Committee, saying that "Rushdie is not worth defending"–was not alone in thinking that Rushdie's conversion meant that he had "surrendered to would–be murderers."

Such an interpretation is patently absurd, since it depends on the ignorant assumption that to accept Islam is to accept the beliefs and actions of Khomeini and his followers. (Bennion called Islam "that bigoted creed that holds its followers entitled to murder a novelist for what he has written in a novel," thus confidently summing up in a single sentence the character of a religion whose eight hundred million adherents are riven by numerous controversies–including this one.) In "Why I Have Embraced Islam," the final essay in Rushdie's new collection (*Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*, Viking/Penguin, 1991), he appeals to the larger community of Muslims throughout the world, quite clearly not to Teheran. But little else is clear from that essay, the most notable feature of which is that it makes no attempt whatsoever to answer the question its title promises to answer. It describes with warmth and gratitude a meeting that Rushdie had on Christmas Eve 1990 with six Muslim scholars, but does not say whether that meeting had any influence upon his decision. It says that he had been moving towards religious belief for several years, and that *The Satanic Verses* is a mirror of his internal conflicts, but it does not say how, when, or (again) why he resolved those conflicts in favor of religious belief.

It would be presumptuous to attempt to answer such a private question, especially with so little information available. But a careful reading of the two books that Rushdie has published since his going underground–*Imaginary Homelands* and his so–called children's novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (Viking/Penguin, 1991)–certainly provides some of the necessary context for thinking about the question. And that is what I want to do.

II

Hundreds of articles and several books have already appeared about Rushdie's case. Among the more useful of the books is Daniel Pipes' *The Rushdie Affair* (1990), largely because of its author's knowledge of Islamic and Arabic culture. Pipes is able to explain, for instance, that one of the reasons so many Muslims in the Arab world condemned Rushdie's book without having read it is that its very title appears to be deeply offensive. The Arabic word used to translate "Verses" is *ayat*, which specifically refers to the verses of the Qur'an (cognate words have been used in the Turkish and Persian translations as well); therefore, to Muslim ears the book's very title appears to claim that the Qur'an is inspired not by God but by Satan. In fact, Rushdie's title refers to verses that, according to an early Islamic tradition, were indeed communicated to Muhammad by Satan, but were ultimately removed by God's command. (The verses allowed the continued worship of three Meccan goddesses, and thus compromised Islam's rigorous monotheism.)

Pipes is also able to point out that the absence of a novelistic tradition in Islamic countries seems to have confused many clerics, who challenged the book for being factually inaccurate–as though Rushdie had tried to write a historical chronicle but, whether intentionally or inadvertently, had got things all wrong. There is, of course, a great tradition of storytelling in the Arab world, but that tradition is clearly distinguished from historical narrative in a way that the Western novel often is not. Still, it has to be said that overall, Pipes' understanding of the literary questions surrounding *The Satanic Verses* is not very acute; and in my view it is precisely the literary questions that ultimately provide the key to understanding the religious dimensions of Rushdie's thinking. Pipes' account–like most of the accounts I have read–focuses, for obvious reasons, on Rushdie's and his book's relation to the Islamic world. But their relation to British intellectual and literary culture is, in a very different way, equally vital.

It would certainly be a mistake to think of Rushdie as a British writer; but it would be scarcely less of a mistake to think of him as an Indian one. He was born in Bombay in 1947, two months before India's independence, into what might be called a Muslim home. I say "might be" with cause; Rushdie himself doesn't seem to be sure. In 1985 he wrote, "I was brought up in an Indian Muslim household, but while both my parents were believers neither was insistent or doctrinaire." In "Why I Have Embraced Islam," however, he tells a different story: "Although I come from a Muslim family background, I was not brought up as a believer, and was raised in an atmosphere of what is broadly known as secular humanism." This "atmosphere" may be a reference to Bombay itself, which Rushdie calls the "most cosmopolitan, most hybrid, most hotch–potch" of Indian cities; one gets the distinct impression that Bombay's cultural smorgasbord–its strong British governmental (and architectural) presence, its blend of Hindu and Muslim cultures, its Babel of languages, and (especially important to Rushdie) its diverse and energetic film industry–shaped Rushdie's character far more than his family did. The cacophony of voices, the welter of images, that dominate Rushdie's expansive and extravagant novels seem clear testimony to that.

In any case, Rushdie's father, who had taken a degree in law from Cambridge University before returning to India permanently, prepared his son to follow a similar path. Rushdie was educated in British schools in Bombay until he was thirteen, then left India to attend Rugby. After Rugby came Cambridge, where he read history, saw "five or six movies a week," and became involved in acting. Rushdie had not wanted to attend Cambridge; his father had "bullied" him into it. It is therefore not surprising that after graduation Rushdie left England–but not, as he would have hoped, for India, for while he was studying abroad his family had fled the difficulties of Muslims in India and had resettled in Pakistan. Rushdie worked for a time writing, producing, and acting for Pakistani television, but was quickly frustrated by strict censorship: for instance, he was forced to remove the word "pork" from a production of Edward Albee's play *A Zoo Story*, even though the reference to pork was disparaging. A television executive sharply told him that "pork is a four–letter word." So after only a short stay in Pakistan, Rushdie returned to England, where he dabbled in acting, got a job writing advertising copy for a London firm, and eventually found the time to write his first novel, *Grimus*. In his own words, *Grimus*, "to put it mildly, bombed"; but he was now a writer, and after the publication of *Midnight's Children* in 1981, a highly respected and much–praised one. The world of the London intelligentsia was hereafter his world–insofar as he had one at all.

What is the moral of this story? There are in fact several, but one demands our attention. All of Rushdie's experiences have conspired to make him his "mongrel self, history's bastard," a man without a country and without a culture. The quoted phrase is actually spoken by the protagonist of *Midnight's Children*, Saleem Sinai, but Saleem, like Gibreel Farishta in *The Satanic Verses*, looks, acts, and thinks a lot like Rushdie himself. Both Saleem and Gibreel sing the same song, a popular movie tune whose Hindustani words Rushdie (in an essay) translates thus:

O, my shoes are Japanese
These trousers English, if you please
On my head, red Russian hat
My heart's Indian for all that

But what does it mean for one's heart to be Indian? Increasingly, Rushdie complains in a number of essays, the Gandhi family dynasty (which now may be at an end) and its Congress Party have fostered the belief that to be a true Indian one must be a Hindu and speak Hindustani. Rushdie, of course, is no Hindu; and his first language was Urdu (now the official language of Pakistan), which, though almost identical to Hindustani, is written in Arabic script and uses many Arabic and Persian words. And his English education, including the rather "posh" Oxbridge accent he picked up there, further distances him from anything that might be called "truly" Indian. "I've been in a minority group all my life," he writes, "a member of an Indian Muslim family in Bombay, then of a 'mojahir'–migrant–family in Pakistan, and now as a British Asian." One could indeed find no better example than Salman Rushdie of that peculiarly modern figure, the culturally homeless, the deracinated and hence atomistic individual–the monad bouncing through the cosmos with no hope of finding a resting place, no hope (in Walker Percy's term) of achieving "reentry."

But this kind of homelessness is not without its compensations. (For some people, it should be noted, the other, more literal kind is not without them as well: a couple of years ago Frank Lentricchia, a Marxist literary critic from Duke University, said in a lecture that he envied–yes, envied–"the moral authority of homelessness." If you think about that for a while it starts to make a perverse kind of sense. The homeless, being by definition the most oppressed people in our society, cannot oppress anyone else; they are by virtue of their class affiliation unable to sin.) Rushdie's cultural homelessness confers moral authority without asking its possessor to exchange any material prosperity. It is a kind of inexhaustible currency, and Rushdie has not been reluctant to spend it.

In *Imaginary Homelands*, he uses it to make pronouncements about Indian, Pakistani, Middle Eastern, and British politics; about literature from a variety of Third World countries; about movies; about American culture; about the place of religion in the modern world; and on and on. Many of the pronouncements have an *ex cathedra* quality, and their author is not afraid of the sweeping generalization. To take just one example: in an essay called "In God We Trust," Rushdie characterizes the 1980s in America as "a time of Falwells and book burnings," and claims that "the religious fundamentalism of the United States is as alarming as anything in the much–feared world of Islam." He does not say why he is so alarmed; presumably his audience of highly cultured Britons would not need to be told. But the evidence he cites to support his belief in the imminent collapse of American culture is telling. It is drawn from two sources: the short stories of Raymond Carver, and the movie *The Falcon and the Snowman*. Apparently it does not occur to Rushdie to ask whether these are reliable sources for any sort of cultural interpretation, much less universal judgments about a country as complex as this one.

How can Rushdie get away with this sort of thing? There are in my view three reasons. First, he is writing for a politically monolithic audience, for whom anti–capitalism and anti–Americanism are automatic and reflexive. Second, as a member of the oppressed classes, he has the "moral authority"–at least within this monolithic audience–to pass judgment on those persons, classes, societies, and nations that qualify as oppressors.

The third point is a little more complicated. It may be illustrated by Rushdie's first real brush with controversy, an episode that occurred in 1982. Soon after the great success of *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie wrote and narrated a BBC television documentary called "The New Empire Within Britain." It concerned the waves of African and (especially) Asian immigrants that were then, and still are, transforming Great Britain's society, and accuses white Britons of widespread racism. The program outraged British conservatives, some of whom (including the current Foreign Minister, Geoffrey Howe) claimed that Rushdie had equated Britain with Nazi Germany. In his preface to *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie calls the accusation a "smear" and claims that "the piece repeatedly insists that the situation in Britain is *not* comparable to life under Nazism." And this is true. Sort of. Here are two of the passages in question:

> Britain isn't South Africa. I am reliably informed of this. Nor is it Nazi Germany. I've got that on the best authority as well. You may feel that these two statements are not exactly the most dramatic of revelations. But it's remarkable how often they, or similar statements, are used to counter the arguments of anti–racist campaigners. . . . If the defence for Britain is that mass extermination of racially impure persons hasn't yet begun, or that the principle of white supremacy hasn't actually been enshrined in the constitution, then something must have gone very wrong indeed.
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> Let me repeat what I said at the beginning; Britain isn't Nazi Germany. The British Empire isn't the Third Reich. But in Germany, after the fall of Hitler, heroic attempts were made by many people to purify German thought and the German language of the pollution of Nazism. . . .But British thought, British society, has never been cleansed of the filth of imperialism. It's still there, breeding lice and vermin, waiting for unscrupulous people to exploit it for their own ends.

So Rushdie does not quite equate Great Britain and Nazi Germany. But in the first passage he implies that Great Britain will become Nazi Germany (mass exterminations have not *yet* happened), and in the second he compares the two nations to the disadvantage of Britain. In short, he may deny the conservatives' charge by appealing to the letter of his text, but the spirit of his comments remains perfectly apparent. This, then, is the third reason he can get away with making extravagant claims about his political enemies; he often manages, by the strictest definition, to make no claims at all.

Such coyness marks a recurrent pattern in Rushdie's thinking, and is characterized by a favorite locution of his: "is and is not." Saleem Sinai "is and is not" an autobiographical character; the Brick Street in which some passages of *The Satanic Verses* are set, Rushdie told a reporter, "is and is not" London's real Brick Lane. Furthermore, the narrator of *The Satanic Verses*–who, Rushdie says, is "occasionally" Satan himself–invites us to infer that the character of Mahound, to whom the sacred text of a new religion is dictated, "is and is not" Muhammad, and the city which becomes the home of this new religion (Jahilia, meaning "ignorance") "is and is not" Mecca. One need not multiply examples; Rushdie employs his remarkable linguistic powers to produce scathing critiques of whatever or whomever he happens to dislike, but when his critiques are challenged, he insists upon the fictionality of his discourse. The storyteller, or more broadly the artist, in this view, stands between What Is and What Is Not. Rushdie in 1990 described *The Satanic Verses* as a novel of "dissent": "It dissents most clearly from imposed orthodoxies *of all types*, from the view that the world is quite clearly This and not That. It dissents from the end of debate, of dispute, of dissent."

For Rushdie, then, what makes the novel special is its commitment to dialogue, its nonjudgmental presentation of many voices. Thus the novelist cannot be held personally responsible for the words, actions, or opinions of any of his characters; he is in effect the conductor of a verbal orchestra, who plays none of the instruments himself.

This dialogical quality of novels is vitally important to Rushdie because it provides a socially necessary counterbalance to the monological tendencies of religious belief. Religion–here comes another of those sweeping *ex cathedra* pronouncements–"seeks to privilege one language . . . one set of values . . . one text above all others." The novel, on the other hand, "insists upon the freedom to portray and analyze the struggle between the different contestants for such privileges." The novelist is to a considerable extent, then, the guardian of freedom in Western societies, or so one would conclude from this statement by the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, which Rushdie quotes approvingly: "Impose a unitary language; you kill the novel, but you also kill the society."

Rushdie's commitment to the sustenance of dialogue is in many ways admirable; for instance, his analysis of the novel's voices is quite similar to that of the greatest theorist of the novel, the Russian genius Mikhail Bakhtin, whose ideas arose as an alternative to the Stalinist monologue of the 1930s. Furthermore, it is certainly true that the novel has often played an important role in countering narrow cultural pieties and thoughtless prevailing opinions. One thinks of the galvanizing effect of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on American public opinion about slavery, or (at about the same time) Charles Dickens' eloquent protests against child labor practices in England. But isn't it possible that the novel, rather than being the virtual creator and sustainer of freedom, is largely a beneficiary of such freedom? Mightn't the claims of Rushdie and Fuentes be a little extravagant?

There are other, potentially more serious, problems with Rushdie's picture of the novel's social role. First of all, we should note that Stowe and Dickens did not merely present to us a series of equally valid voices; they made us hear voices we had chosen not to hear, voices whose speakers had a moral claim upon us. When David Copperfield speaks for children abused by factory owners, when the black characters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* speak of their suffering, their words convict us and convict their abusers. In such books evil actions are placed under severe moral judgment, and the perpetrators and defenders of such actions do not speak with the same authority as their victims. Significantly, Rushdie himself boldly passes moral judgment in his fiction; Indira Gandhi, for instance, comes in for scathing chastisement in *Midnight's Children*, as does the Bhutto family of Pakistan in his third novel, *Shame*.

In some contexts Rushdie freely admits that he does engage in such judgments; in others he puts on his is–and–is–not coyness, and insists that his *characters* are passing judgment. But we can accept that demurral and still have some questions: Who decides what voices are to be represented, and in what proportions? Who chooses to give full verbal and narrational representation to the opponents of the Gandhis and the Bhuttos, and not to those leaders themselves? The novelist may or may not hold the opinions of his characters, but in deciding who will be heard and who will not, he or she exercises judgments that can be questioned, that can be "portrayed and analyzed" like any other claims, including those of "religion."

Let me hasten to say that I am not criticizing Rushdie for scolding the Bhuttos or the Gandhis–or even for arguing that British society is disfigured by an unconscious residual racism. All of these critiques are at the very least defensible, and sometimes compelling. What I am saying is that there is something fundamentally disingenuous and perhaps downright dishonest about using a dialogical aesthetic to avoid taking responsibility for one's own convictions. If Rushdie were able to purge his writings of his beliefs, leaving nothing but a chorus of conflicting voices without *any* pattern or order, the achievement would be nothing to brag about; but it happens to be impossible. And I don't think Rushdie even believes in it.

> For instance: after making his absolute distinction between monological religion and dialogical fiction, Rushdie writes this:
>
> While the novel answers our need for wonderment and understanding, it brings us harsh and unpalatable news as well.
>
> It tells us that there are no rules. It hands down no commandments. We have to make up our own rules as best we can, make them up as we go along.
>
> And it tells us that there are no answers; or, rather, it tells us that answers are easier to come by, and less reliable, than questions.

Are these statement not claims? Are they not putative descriptions of How Things Are and what to do about it? "We have to make up our own rules as we go along"–that sounds suspiciously like a commandment to me. Has Rushdie, in this essay or in his novels, really escaped the kind of claim–making that he finds so dangerous in religion?

It is a point of some importance that on the very page that these statements appear, Rushdie appeals to the authority of Richard Rorty, for Rorty has been striving for more than a decade to convince philosophers to see their role in exactly the same way that Rushdie sees the novelist's role. For Rorty, philosophers are, whether they like it or not, storytellers, purveyors of more–or–less comforting, interesting, and stimulating fictions. In Rorty's view, the most complex and logically rigorous philosophical argument ultimately says no more than, "Listen to the story *I'm* telling and see if you don't like it better than the one *you've* been telling." People who think this way Rorty calls "liberal ironists," because they are tolerant, open–minded, and skeptical even about their own views; and Rorty thinks that if we all become liberal ironists the world will be a happier place. Why? Because liberal ironists–like Nietzsche and Jacques Derrida–are blissfully free from that arduous quest for Truth that has for so many centuries made philosophers irritable sourpusses and religious leaders hideous tyrants. As one contemporary Nietzschean puts it, "The good news is that there is no good news"; or, as a character in Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* puts it, "I have understood. And the certainty that there is nothing to understand should be my peace, my triumph."

Where there is neither good news, nor Truth, nor anything to understand, what remains is storytelling. Not everyone agrees that these are the conditions, of course; the British scientist Stephen Hawking, for instance, goes to the opposite extreme, claiming that science is not far from producing a complete and accurate Theory of Everything that will effectively bring to a satisfying end "humanity's intellectual struggle to understand the universe." But Salman Rushdie, in reviewing Hawking's book (*A Brief History of Time*) is both skeptical of and horrified by this prediction. He compares Hawking's theories to the work of Italo Calvino, an Italian postmodern novelist ("a word–juggler, a fantasist"), and argues that "the real value of the ideas of the new physics and of quantum mechanics is precisely the same as that of Calvino's stories, namely, that they make it possible for us to dream new dreams, of ourselves as well as the universe." For Hawking, the job of the scientist is to come to know Everything; for Rushdie, the scientist does the same thing that the philosopher does, the same thing that the novelist does; they all tell stories, because stories are all we have.

This conviction inspires and drives Rushdie's most recent work of fiction, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Which means that we have Rushdie to thank for what may well be the world's first postmodern children's book.

III

H*aroun and the Sea of Stories* was written in confinement, and as the fulfillment of a very important promise. Rushdie explained to James Fenton that while he was writing *The Satanic Verses* his son, Zafar,

had said it was wrong that I didn't write books that children could read. And we made a deal that I would be allowed to finish the book I was writing on condition that the next book I wrote would be one he might enjoy reading. That was the deal, and–then all this happened, and I was unable to do just about anything for him. And there was this (at the time) nine–year–old boy suddenly deprived of his father, and I thought there's only one promise to him I can keep, and in this situation I have to keep it. There was no way in which I could not keep it.

Haroun bears a moving dedication to Zafar—

Z embla, Zenda, Xanadu:
A ll our dream–worlds may come true.
F airy lands are fearsome too.
A s I wander far from view
R ead, and bring me home to you.

—but, despite its frequent playfulness and fancifulness, it is by no means only a children's book. Many of the jokes are for adults; the novel is sprinkled with references to Rushdie's novelistic mentors, obscure rock groups, Beatles songs (one character is called I. M. D. Walrus), several movies, and Lord knows what else. More important, the key messages of the book–and, as a kind of allegory, the book definitely has messages–are directed at adults, and recapitulate, as I have suggested, some of the arguments from Rushdie's essays.

Haroun is actually a very good story, and I don't want to spoil it for those who haven't yet read it. But a sketch of the plot, or the conflict that generates the plot, is in order. Haroun is the only son of Rashid Khalifa, a great and celebrated storyteller, and his wife Soraya. Rashid's attention to his wife does not quite match his attention to his stories, and he does not notice that she is spending more and more time in the company of Mr. Sengupta, a skinny, petulant, whining government clerk who lives upstairs. Haroun overhears Mr. Sengupta's reptilian murmurings to Soraya: "What are all these stories? Life is not a storybook or a joke shop. All this fun will come to no good. What's the use of stories that aren't true?" This last question sticks in Haroun's mind, and when Soraya runs off with Mr. Sengupta, he throws it like a spear at his father. Wounded by the infidelities of his wife and son, Rashid loses his storytelling power; when he tries to spin a tale, he can only emit inarticulate crow–like squawks.

Haroun feels responsible for his father's loss, and sets out to make things right; but this determination leads him into a series of strange adventures, on Earth and on a hidden, unknown moon called Kahani (Hindustani for "story"). It soon becomes clear to Haroun that the deeper cause of his father's silence is the evil Khattum–shud, who lives on the dark side of Kahani and is, in Rashid's own words, "the Arch–Enemy of all Stories, even of Language itself." "He is the Prince of Silence and the Foe of Speech," and his single goal is to make everyone in the world silent–except for himself. The rest of the story involves Haroun's quest, which inevitably leads him closer and closer to the terrifying tyrant.

Here one of the book's surprises must be revealed, for it is absolutely essential to an understanding of Rushdie's message; when Haroun finally confronts Khattum–shud, he turns out to be none other than Mr. Sengupta, the apparently meek, if sour–tempered, clerk who convinces Soraya of the pointlessness of stories. (One should recall at this point the little old man who hides behind the imposing mask of the Wizard of Oz.) What does this tell us? First, we should note that Mr. Sengupta is a government clerk–Rushdie repeats the point several times–and thus as good an example as you could want of the kind of ordinary middle–class person who has kept the hated Tories in office in England (and the Republicans in this country) for the past decade. And such people, we have been told at least since Matthew Arnold, are Philistines; by which Arnold meant that they cannot understand and hence they despise the products of high culture. Furthermore, Philistines tend to be religious believers–many of them are even fundamentalists!–and they tend to justify their hatred of culture on religious grounds. Let us also recall that for Rushdie high culture is storytelling, and storytelling is high culture.

On the one side, then, we have Culture, Story, Imagination; on the other side, dull–witted, narrow–minded, reactionary tyrants–political *and* religious tyrants–in the apparently innocuous form that we call the bourgeoisie.

When Mike Wallace interviewed Rushdie for *60 Minutes* in the fall of 1990, he said offhandedly that Khattum–shud was of course the Ayatollah Khomeini–at which point Rushdie leaned forward in his chair and said, "I totally reject that interpretation." At the time I had not read the book, and chalked this up to Rushdie's characteristic evasiveness; but now I think he was right to demur. Khomeini is just one person, Khattum–shud a universal principle; one might say that Mr. Sengupta is (to use a Hindu term) one avatar of Khattum–shud, Khomeini another–and Margaret Thatcher another, and Ronald Reagan yet another, and so on *ad nauseam.*

Does Rushdie acknowledge any difference between the Western democracies and Khomeini's tyranny? Anyone who has read the text of the aforementioned documentary, "The New Empire Within Britain," wouldn't hold out much hope. But Rushdie wrote those words before the Thatcher government that he so despised gave him police protection from the terrorists who sought to kill him, and considered Khomeini's judgment on this one British citizen sufficiently repulsive to break diplomatic relations with Iran. Have these actions changed his thinking to any degree?

The answer is yes, but only slightly. On Kahani the good guys from Gup, the custodians of the Ocean of Story, tend to resemble Western democracies in their dedication to freedom of speech and their technological sophistication. But the bad guys from Chup, Khattum–shud and his followers, live in the darkness in part because the Eggheads (the scientists from Gup) have found a way to arrest the rotation of Kahani so that the light falls only on their side. Thus the Guppees are only relatively good, because they have sought to retain all good things for themselves and (in current jargon) to "demonize" the Chupwalas–whose badness in turn is not all their fault. In fact, it may be that only Khattum–shud is evil, the rest being his prisoners rather than his followers; and the power to make them prisoners is in effect given to Khattum–shud by the Guppees.

In short, the only people in this world or Kahani who have not rejected or in some measure betrayed Rushdie's commitment to storytelling are the storytellers themselves. They stand alone in a nasty world, having been abandoned by their so–called friends, the so–called decent people–in fact, they resemble no one so much as Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, except that they form a group. There they stand, in the dusty and deserted Main Street, with the bad guys riding into town and the good citizens hiding themselves away, their frightened eyeballs visible from the corners of their windows. "Well, Rorty," says Rushdie, peering at the bright sunshine from under his white hat, "Looks like there's nobody here but us liberal ironists. I mighta known."

IV

Why isn't that last paragraph really funny? Because people *are* trying to kill Salman Rushdie. Because those people have succeeded (as of last July) in killing the Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses*, and in seriously wounding the book's Italian translator. And most of all because, when the storm over *The Satanic Verses* got strong enough, quite a few liberal ironists got out of town. Some British and American intellectuals encouraged Rushdie to withdraw the book, or were highly critical of his "cultural and religious insensitivity"; and even the support some intellectuals proffered might have been cold comfort to Rushdie. What did he make of Norman Mailer's professed desire to be assassinated too, so that "our chiefs in the Western world may be finally aroused by our willingness, even though we are selfish creative artists, to be nonetheless martyred in a cause"? As Midge Decter wrote, there is something rather appalling about the way Mailer and his ilk "preened and strutted in their efforts to share in the cachet of someone else's peril."

Rushdie was faced with another problem as well, perhaps, in strictly intellectual terms, the most serious of all. Rushdie's notorious evasiveness, and his insistence on the strictly limited responsibility of the novelist for the voices that people his work, are both consistent with modern literary criticism's de–emphasis of authorial intention as the chief determinant of a text's meaning (a de–emphasis I happen to agree with). But in the *60 Minutes* interview, when Mike Wallace suggested to Rushdie that Muslims had some reason to be angry with him, since he *had* called Muhammad's wives prostitutes, Rushdie said–no evasiveness here–that he had done no such thing. (And he was right. Gibreel Farishta, one of the two main characters in *The Satanic Verses*, has a dream in which some prostitutes *take the names* of Muhammad's wives in order to drum up business. But everyone from Iranian clergymen to Pat Buchanan said Rushdie had insulted Muhammad's wives.) To which Mike Wallace, whose official postmodernist credentials are no doubt now in the mail, replied, "Well, it's in the eye of the beholder, isn't it?" Rushdie, clearly surprised to hear a seventy–year–old American journalist sounding like a newly–minted Ph.D. specializing in reader–response hermeneutics, stammered self–contradictorily, "Well, yes. . . . But if they say that I called the Prophet's wives whores, *I didn't do it*." Likewise, in the essay in *Imaginary Homelands* that immediately precedes his praise of the novel for its open–ended liberal irony, Rushdie takes pains to point out that the passages of *The Satanic Verses* most offensive to Muslims, which appear in the dreams of Gibreel Farishta, are just dreams, and that

> they are agonizingly painful to the dreamer. They are a "nocturnal retribution, a punishment" for his loss of faith. . . . The first purpose of these sequences is not to vilify or "disprove" Islam, but to portray a soul in crisis, to show how the loss of God can destroy a man's life.

These are not questions, they are answers. These are claims, statements about clear and determinate meaning, from an author who now claims the right to have the last word. Rushdie's recourse to such claims, to such an old–fashioned hermeneutic, strongly suggests that liberal irony is a luxury; it is a philosophy for the safe, the wealthy, and the contented. In moments of crisis, when accurate interpretation of a text *matters*, liberal irony goes out the window.

In *Haroun*, as the army of Gup heads into battle, the soldiers argue vociferously with one another about the validity of their cause and the wisdom (or idiocy) of their general; "and such was the freedom allowed to the . . . citizens of Gup, that the old General seemed perfectly happy to listen to these tirades of insults and insubordination without batting an eyelid. In fact, it looked to Haroun as if the General was on many occasions actually provoking such disputes, and then joining in with enthusiastic glee." When Haroun questions the wisdom of this practice, he is treated to a lecture about the virtues of free speech; and soon he discovers that in the end everyone agrees to the General's plans, and in the end they all fight more effectively because they have had the freedom to express themselves. The soldiers/prisoners of Chup, however, whom Khattum–shud forces into silence, break and run at the first opportunity.

For Rushdie, then, free speech and storytelling can liberate the world. Likewise, Richard Rorty believes that open and undogmatic conversation will produce social harmony. Would that it were so. But the assumption which these liberal ironists share is that, at bottom, all people are good and all people have the same values and interests. To put it another way, the ethical foundation of liberal irony is nothing more than an old clichea: If people just sit down and talk about their problems openly and honestly, then all this bad stuff (the threat of nuclear war, international terrorism, global warming) will all go away. But the uproar over *The Satanic Verses* may have suggested to Rushdie that this fundamental assumption does not necessarily hold–that is, that all people are not good, and that some beliefs and values will inevitably compete with one another. Furthermore, it may have suggested to him that when values come into conflict, there is little point in demanding that people resolve the conflict by becoming ironic about what they believe. After all, is the liberal ironist ironic about *his* values–freedom of speech, openness, flexibility, toleration? If so, he cannot be liberal; if not, he cannot be an ironist. And as Anthony Gottlieb has written, in an extremely witty and telling review of Rorty's two recent collections of essays, "The Rortyan vision of heaven on earth, in which people merely tell enlightening tales and abjure the search for truth, sounds like a gathering of tipsy old sea dogs swapping dimly remembered stories of past voyages of discovery. If the earlier explorers had all been Rortyan pragmatists, the sea dogs would have had nothing to reminisce about." In short, liberal irony depends for its existence on the maintenance of a series of stable and consistent values and beliefs that are simply too important to be ironic about. That, in my view, was what Rushdie recognized when, in the controversy over *The Satanic Verses*, he dropped the coy is–and–is–not irony in favor of unequivocal declarations about What Is the Case.

But where do you go from liberal irony, from pragmatic storytelling as the replacement for conviction and belief, once you are forced by harsh circumstances to realize that that way of thinking can't support its own weight? If you are Salman Rushdie, perhaps you come to believe that the forceful but evil convictions of the Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers can only be resisted by equally forceful convictions that stake out different and superior moral terrain. And the only body of belief known to Rushdie that is capable of supporting such convictions is Islam; the Ayatollah's hatred is to be countered by a richer understanding of Islam itself. So in the last words of the last essay in *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie says, "What I know of Islam is that tolerance, compassion, and love are at its very heart. I believe that in the weeks and months to come the language of enmity will be replaced by the language of love."

That belief is touching; but unfortunately it is not justified. Each of the one hundred and fourteen *suras* of the Qur'an begins with an appeal to "God, the Compassionate, the Merciful"; but those *suras* do not always advocate mercy, and those who would execute Salman Rushdie can find ample support for their actions in the sacred book. Whether Rushdie will find the comfort and security in Islam that liberal irony could not offer remains to be seen; but it seems clear that the majority of Muslims want him dead. The words of Shabbir Akhtar, of the Bradford (England) Council of Mosques, are chilling in their eloquence:

> Salman Rushdie, the prodigal son of Islam, wishes to return home. And there should be much rejoicing in paradise over such a sinner.
>
> But there is a distant land from which no one returns. It is not that the Muslim father won't forgive. Rather, Rushdie can't find his way home. For there are sins that permanently rust the heart, corrode the mind, and blur the vision.
>
> . . . There are choices that can seal one's fate–even before death intervenes to end both the dilemma and the choice.

I am aware that not all Muslims would agree with this verdict. But I am compelled to point out–could Salman Rushdie ever be interested?–that in one faith, at least, a joyous welcome for the prodigal is never in doubt.

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