Textual Practice

'Representing the very ethic he battled': secularism, Islam(ism) and self-transgression in The Satanic Verses

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'Representing the very ethic he battled': secularism, Islam(ism) and self-transgression in *The Satanic Verses*

This essay examines the ethics of historical representation in Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in order to probe his claim that the novel explores religious belief from a secular point of view, and is undertaken 'in good faith'. In so doing, the essay attempts to traffic between the discrepant secular and Islamic readings of the novel using a contrapuntal methodology which brings these perspectives into a productive crisis that opens up a space for other readings of the text that do justice to both its secular and literary dimensions, as well as the Islamic materials on which the novel draws heavily. The essay subsequently addresses one of the central objections articulated by the novel's Muslim critics – that it is a work of 'bad history' – in order to evaluate whether or not it was indeed written 'in good faith'. The reading of the novel that emerges suggests that it is ethically problematic in this respect because its violations of the historical record pertaining to the Prophet Muhammad and early Islam deliver an interpretation of Islamic history that is complicit with the very Islamist understandings that Rushdie professes to be challenging.

Keywords

Almost a year after Ayatollah Khomeini's 'unfunny Valentine' propelled him into hiding, Salman Rushdie published a defence of himself and his novel, *The Satanic Verses*, entitled 'In Good Faith'.[1] In its wide-ranging discussion of the issues raised by the controversy – the respective limits of freedom of expression and religious freedom, the role of the imagination and the writer in speaking truth to power, and the respective value of secular and sacred texts to name a few – this essay (and, subsequently, the Herbert Read Memorial Lecture later published as 'Is Nothing Sacred?') can be seen as a mirror which reflects those concerns back upon the novel itself.[2] It has therefore provoked much comment in the voluminous archive of academic and journalistic responses to *The Satanic Verses* and the ensuing controversy. Significantly, the essay's central claim – that *The Satanic Verses* is 'a secular man's reckoning with the religious spirit', that is written 'in good faith'[3] – has not received the critical attention it deserves, a lack that speaks to the problematic which I seek to address here, namely the divergence and incommensurability of secular and non-secular interpretations of the novel.

In the polarized context of a controversy in which the very principle of freedom of expression was perceived to be under threat, readers approaching *The Satanic Verses* from a secular perspective – whether critical or supportive of Rushdie, and with few exceptions – took as axiomatic the view that it is entirely legitimate to subject religious discourses to criticism and satire regardless of the manner in which it is undertaken;[4] for these readers, the question of Rushdie's 'good faith' does not even arise since the ethical confirmation of his integrity lies in the a priori validity of the novel's speaking of a (profane) truth to (sacred) power, which is one of the ways that western secularism has historically defined itself. As such, secular perspectives on the novel accept Rushdie's claim at face value – that the novel was *self-evidently* a genuine and serious critique of Islam, not a vehicle to 'insult and abuse' its Prophet – precisely because the legitimacy of subjecting religious discourses and personalities to critical examination – regardless of one's motives or intentions – does not need to be established and therefore defended.

On the other hand, many of those readers encountering the text (or, in most cases, the controversy) from a non-secular point of view – principally Muslim, but also some from other faiths – rejected Rushdie's claim because for them the legitimacy of secular discourse is superseded by the primacy of the religious discourses that determine and shape their faith. This does not, of itself, preclude the possibility of acknowledging and even accepting criticism – many Muslim participants in the debate argued that they did not object to criticism of Islam and its Prophet *as such*, but rather the manner of it[5] – but, nevertheless, from this perspective

the ethical validity of secular criticism of religious discourses requires explanation and cannot be taken for granted.

Moreover, one of the many incommensurabilities determining the controversy was between the *grounds* on which secular criticism might offer such an explanation, and those by which Muslims might have understood or accepted it. In other words, part of the difficulty in translating the controversy into a mutually productive dialogue lay in the fact that the explanations put forward by Rushdie and his secular champions were not acceptable – or even recognizable – as such to their Muslim interlocutors because the respective axioms of moral judgment concerning 'the relative value of the sacred and the profane', were divergent and irreconcilable.[6] Therefore, Muslim (non)readers by and large rejected Rushdie's claim to have written the *The Satanic Verses* in good faith, also without further examination.

This, then, is the problematic within which any attempt to address the *ethical* validity of Rushdie's endeavour must take its place, for that is what is at stake in his claim to have written 'in good faith'. In attempting to examine whether Rushdie's novel offers testimony to support his case, one must situate any reading within the space vacated by these polarized critical paradigms and attempt to traffic between them. Is it possible to do justice to the secular impulse behind Rushdie's reckoning with religious faith *and* judge his efforts in terms of Islamic traditions of interpretation and moral judgment, that is, in terms other than the secular imperatives of modern literary criticism itself? This requires a methodology capable of utilizing the critical protocols and insights of secular literary criticism whilst simultaneously subjecting that criticism to the pressure of an opposing perspective that might, for instance, read the same text not only from a radically different perspective, but also from very different foundational principles – and, in so doing, also subject this *other* perspective to the same pressure as well.[7] This dual task, which, following Edward Said, I shall call 'contrapuntal criticism', seeks not to resolve or 'transcend' these divergent paradigms in some superordinate synthesis but rather to bring both into 'crisis' in the name of a critical agenda that seeks to explore the ethics (as opposed to just the politics) of a cross-cultural text.[8] This is important because *The Satanic Verses* – that 'love song to our mongrel selves'[9] – breathtakingly traverses (and travesties) multiple cultural boundaries, transgressing the boundary between the secular and the non-secular in particular. In that sense, it is a text that *demands* a contrapuntal criticism because it is a work that brings the secular and the non-secular, the sacred and the profane, into contact and crisis. Indeed, the validity of Rushdie's claim to have written in good faith rests, as I shall show, on whether or not the novel is a genuinely contrapuntal text that effectively brings secular and non-secular experiences into a productive *mélange* or

'hotch-potch' (to use Rushdie's own terms), which enables a secular sensibility to inhabit and thereby empathize with, and understand, religious experience, albeit imaginatively and temporarily, or whether, in fact, it subordinates the singularity of the one (religious experience) to the dominating perspective of the other (secularism).

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In 'In Good Faith' Rushdie writes,

> I still believe – perhaps I must – that understanding is possible, and can be achieved without the suppression of the principle of free speech. What it requires is a moment of good-will; a moment in which we may all accept that the other parties are acting, have acted, in good faith.[10]

Here, Rushdie not only defends his motives, but also acknowledges the integrity of his opponents. It is an ethical gesture in so far as it seeks to transform a 'bad' situation into a 'good' one: the recognition of each other's 'good-will', Rushdie hopes, might transform mutual incomprehension and rancour into productive exchange and dialogue ('understanding is possible').

But how is one to assess the integrity of the gesture itself? Making a claim of this kind is not in itself a guarantee of its validity. Moreover, the gesture is doubly charged; it is at once an attempt at reconciliation and an avoidance of compromise – it both reaches out to the 'other' but does not give any ground; instead, it seeks to set the problem to one side. It is also both defensive and offensive (in the sense of 'attack'). On the one hand, it responds to the charge that his intention was simply to 'insult and abuse' the Prophet Muhammad and Islam. At the same time, Rushdie challenges his Muslim opponents to live up to *their* claim that Islam is not above or beyond criticism by acknowledging his novel as a serious and genuine critique. At no point, however, does he concede the possibility that the manner of this critique might indeed justify their complaint.

As it stands, therefore, Rushdie's claim remains open to (conflicting) interpretation and rests on the vexed question of the novel's 'manner' or 'style' in relation to Islam and its Prophet. *The Satanic Verses*, therefore, offers the only testimony by which one might arbitrate between his claim on the one hand, and those of his Muslim opponents on the other. Whilst acknowledging that *The Satanic Verses* resists definitive readings, the critical task I want to pursue here is an examination of the novel in relation to one (out of several) of the Muslim charges against Rushdie, one

that he himself responds to in 'In Good Faith', namely that *The Satanic Verses* is a 'work of bad history'.[11]

Throughout the many paratexts surrounding *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie demonstrates two particular equivocations with respect to the relationship of his novel to history. On the one hand, he acknowledges the proximity of his fiction to the historical record, 'almost everything in those sections – the dream sequences – starts from an historical or quasi-historical basis'.[12] On the other hand, he distances his novel from history, his fiction from the – 'partial and ambiguous' – facts,

> The section of the book in question . . . deals with a prophet who is not called Muhammad living in a highly fantasticated city . . . this entire sequence happens in a dream, the fictional dream of a fictional character . . . and one who is losing his mind, at that. How much further from history could one get?[13]

In 'In Good Faith', he clarifies his position by dwelling at length on the relationship between 'fiction' and 'fact'. Beginning with an insistence on the 'fictionality of fiction' as a riposte to the allegation that *The Satanic Verses* is a 'work of bad history',[14] he then goes on to state that

> I was not attempting to falsify history, but to allow a fiction to take off from history . . . the point is not whether this is 'really' supposed to be Muhammad, or whether the satanic verses incident 'really' happened; the point is to examine what such an incident might reveal about what revelation is.[15]

As Jerome de Groot has pointed out, such concerns have been germane to historical fiction since its inception, but Rushdie's particular formulation might be said to be 'postmodern' in so far as it self-consciously argues that the significance of historical 'facts' do not emerge self-evidently, but rather through the (fictional and non-fictional) *use* of that past for particular ends.[16] This problematizes the very distinction between 'fact' and 'fiction' in so far as the idea of 'facticity' being a sufficient ground for historical knowledge is called into question. Instead, facts must be 'fashioned' (the root of 'fiction', *fingere*, means 'to fashion') – whether by the historian or the novelist – into a 'meaning' through formal techniques of representation that invariably involve some form of narrativization, even when that narrativization is not outwardly apparent.[17]

This, however, raises ethical questions concerning the validity of using the past for ends which are, to use Rushdie's own words, 'tangentially historical' by means of the deliberate tampering with its material traces for it is accepted by both Rushdie's critics, and by Rushdie himself, that he 'plays'

with the historical record. Such questions are, however, foreclosed almost immediately when Rushdie apparently repeats the same point on the next page, 'Fiction uses facts as a starting-place, and then spirals away to explore its real concerns . . . to treat fiction as if it were fact is to make a serious mistake of categories'.[18] On closer inspection, however, this is a totally different construction of the relationship between fact and fiction, for instead of blurring the distinction between them it emphasizes their categorical difference. This articulates a more 'empiricist' notion of history in which facts are facts, and historiography and fiction occupy radically different, even opposed, discursive terrains.

This equivocation between postmodern and empiricist registers in relation to history accounts for the attenuated sense of responsibility he demonstrates in relation to his writing. On the one hand, he celebrates with Promethean enthusiasm the Romantic notion of an absolutely free imagination, but on the other hand, as a secularist and materialist, he recoils from the metaphysical implications implicit in such an idealist sacralization of aesthetics.[19] As a result, he feels compelled to exhibit some kind of responsibility to material reality, and this he does by observing and acknowledging the notion of historical facticity whilst, at the same time, minimizing his responsibility to the 'facts' by placing it as merely a point of departure from which the unrestrained imagination might take flight.

Such equivocations stand *in lieu* of the ethical questions that arise when the very notion of 'facticity' is thrown into doubt, and Rushdie's occlusion of them is symptomatic of the relative paucity of ethical consideration within postmodernism generally about the responsibilities attendant upon historical representation, which stands in stark contrast to its extensive consideration of such epistemological issues as the grounds of historical knowledge, and the limits of representation and textuality.[20] Ironically, these are considerations that are made visible in the first place by postmodernism's critique of historical empiricism. The ethic of historical empiricism, which aims for totality, comprehensiveness, objectivity, and fidelity, attenuates ethical self-awareness by reducing 'good' historical practice to a matter of method.[21] Every stage of historical practice – the selection and deselection of sources; the authorization or otherwise of such sources; the indexing of 'evidence' according to its 'value'; the inclusion or exclusion of evidence in the account; the formal organization of the material in a 'faithful' representation; and, crucially, the key concept of 'empathy' – throws up questions that are insistently ethical but which are nevertheless trumped and flattened by methodological concerns. The selection of a 'good' source, for instance, involves more than just weighing up its reliability or trustworthiness; it also involves asking questions about what purpose the source might serve, and for whom; is it morally acceptable to use such a source, and if not, why not?

To what ends might the 'evidence' be legitimately put? What is a 'good' reading of the evidence? Is it acceptable to fill in the gaps through specu-lation – to insert one's own voice in place of the silence? To what extent might an educated guess suffice, and at what point should one refrain from going further? These are all moral, as well as epistemological, ideo-logical, or political questions.

To the extent that postmodernism has rendered the processes of his-torical fashioning visible, it has exposed the historian and novelist to such moral dilemmas because it invites reflection on the correct relationship, within historical practice, between means and ends. But it has consistently foreclosed such questions by focusing relentlessly on the epistemology and politics of representation, but rarely, if ever, on the ethical responsibilities attendant upon the act of historical *writing*. Linda Hutcheon suggests that 'if the archive is composed of texts then it is open to all kinds of use and abuse', and if this is true (and I think it is) then surely one question that arises concerns the point at which that abuse denies the very historicity of the archive itself?[22] This is a question of degree not of kind (as suggested, for example, by the empiricist emphasis on the categorical separation of 'fact' from 'fiction'): if postmodernism enables historical 'play' by decon-structing the foundations of historical empiricism, to what extent can one play with the facts before the representation becomes not a 'historio-graphical metafiction', nor even a historical fiction, but merely a fantasy? That is, how far is it possible or desirable to depart from what is 'conven-tionally accepted' before the critique is negated by the *extent* of the dis-tance?[23] How much can the conventional archive be violated, before the violation itself becomes the issue rather than the critical re-vision of the his-torical record? Such questions invite us to dwell on degrees, extents, and limits, which are all part of the vocabulary of ethical practice but are seldom present in the lexicon of both empiricist and postmodern theoriza-tions of historical practice.[24]

In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie does not always violate the conventional historical record relating to the first years of Islam. Indeed, it may well be the relative proximity of his account of the formation of Islam to the orthodox sacred history that precipitated such emotional turbulence in contemporary Muslim (non)readers. Nevertheless, there are some clear transgressions of the orthodox narrative and some less obvious play with the available historical evidence, and the question thus arises as to whether these uphold or under-mine his claim to have written 'in good faith'. Might the ambiguous position he adopts in relation to history when defending the novel be indicative of a profound, and barely acknowledged, discomfort about the integrity of his (ab)use of the sacred history of Islam and its Prophet?

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If we accept the argument that the historical archive is not a residuum of data consisting of transparent 'facts' that in turn yield up a singular and 'objective' narrative about the past, that 'facts' are constructs that are semantically unstable and polysemous, and these in turn deliver a multiplicity of possible narratives, then how might we judge the integrity of any given historical narrative? We can no longer assume that it turns on the question of misrepresentation, for there is no objective standard against which to measure a writer's (in)fidelity to a given set of facts.

In this context, Rushdie's deviation (or otherwise) is, in itself, not the issue. The task is not to judge Rushdie's responsibility to his 'evidence', and therefore his good faith, in terms of the extent of his departure (or otherwise) from some putatively unproblematic and uncontested historical 'truth' about the life of the Prophet. Rather, the task is to ascertain and interpret how Rushdie 'works' the material he draws upon, as Keith Jenkins would put it, and to what purpose.[25] To that end, there can be few better episodes to examine than the incident which gives the novel its title, known to Muslims as the affair of the *gharaniq*, or the high-flying cranes, for it perfectly illustrates the postmodernist argument about historical 'facticity' – that facts themselves, and not just the interpretations of those facts, are contentious, not least because the fact cannot speak for itself.

The episode of the *gharaniq* concerns the Prophet's temptation by a (satanically inspired) revelation conceding that the three principal deities worshipped by the pagan Meccans could be accepted as divine intermediaries of Allah. It occupies an interstitial space within the archive of early Islam, part of a vast apocryphal store of narratives about the Prophet's sayings and conduct (*hadith*) that forms the basis for the Prophetic biographies (*sira*). Early Muslim annalists such as al-Waqidi (c. 747–823 CE), ibn Sa'd (784–845 CE) and al-Tabari (838–923 CE) mention it in their accounts, but it was rejected as inauthentic by the compilers of the two canonical compendia of *hadith*, Bukhari (810–870 CE) and Muslim (818–874 CE). However, the great medieval *hadith* scholar al-Asqalani (1372–1448 CE) accepted its authenticity.[26] It is thus a contested fragment that stands both within and to one side of the historical record – an indeterminacy that Rushdie exploits in his novel.

The way Rushdie works this episode is to cast doubt on the divine origin of the Qur'anic revelation. All possible interpretations of Rushdie's use of this episode lead to this conclusion for we are told that 'God isn't in the picture' when the *gharaniq* verses are revealed.[27] Thus, these verses are either an expression of the Prophet's innermost desire, 'we all know how my mouth got worked' (p. 123); or they are a conscious political expediency in order to gain some tactical advantage, 'a dream of power' (p. 111); or they demonstrate that the Prophet was incapable of

distinguishing the authentic verses of Allah from the inauthentic whisper-
ings of Satan *because there is no such distinction* ('both times, baba, it was
me', (p. 123) says Gibreel, referring to the 'authentic' divine verses in
the extant Qur'an and the repudiated 'satanic' verses); in which case, as
Aravamudan argues, the logic of metonymy extends this doubt to the
entirety of the revelation (if it is not possible to authenticate this verse,
then what about the next, or any other?).[28] If we extend the metonymic
logic further, then the entirety of the Qur'an can be seen as 'satanic'
rather than 'divine'.

But are these the only readings that such an episode might yield? The
episode is rendered by Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari as follows:

> [The Prophet] longed in his soul that something would come to him
> from God that would reconcile him with his tribe. With his love for
> his tribe and his eagerness for their welfare, it would have delighted
> him if some of the difficulties which they made for him could have
> been smoothed, and he debated with himself and fervently desired
> such an outcome. Then God revealed (Sura 53) ... and Satan cast
> on his tongue, *because of his inner debates* and what he *desired* to
> bring to his people, the words: 'These are the high-flying cranes;
> verily their intercession is to be hoped for.'[29]

Notice how the Prophet's personal desire and motivation is openly
acknowledged as the basis for his temptation, and is not psychologized
in the modern sense as a displacement of some ulterior cause; nor does
it cast doubt on the authenticity of the Prophetic experience. Instead of
the incident illustrating the Prophet's duplicity or casting doubt on the rev-
elation, the story may instead have been seen as a parable highlighting the
ethical basis of the Prophet's temptation, i.e. to make things 'smooth' for
his tribe (the pagan Quraysh) because of his love for them and their
welfare (and of the early Muslims). A desire for reconciliation – and com-
promise – lies beneath the temptation, one that is undertaken for honour-
able motives according to the story, not because of devious calculation and
political expediency. What Tabari and his early Muslim readers almost cer-
tainly would *not* have done is deploy a modern rationality – religious or
otherwise – that invariably translates ethical and ontological issues into
epistemological ones, and the experience of faith simply into a question
of belief.

Modern Muslims find the *gharaniq* episode blasphemous and offen-
sive because they have, to a greater or lesser extent, absorbed
post-Enlightenment secular rationality through colonial and thence
post-colonial educational systems that have largely transformed the
ways in which they encounter their own religious traditions. As such,

they refute the incident itself by suggesting that there are no historical grounds for its authenticity. This counter-argument is articulated in terms of historical empiricism, both through the insistence that *The Satanic Verses* is a work of 'bad history', and the explicit distancing of 'fact' from 'fiction'.[30] In so doing, Rushdie's modern Muslim antagonists demonstrated a shared conceptual and discursive space with their opponent by arguing on the grounds of in/authenticity whilst concurring that the episode 'works', from both points of view, to undermine the existence of Allah.

Regardless of the 'authenticity' of the episode, it is likely that Tabari, Waqidi and other early Muslims would not have seen the same blasphemous implications in the incident because they are only apparent from the vantage point of a secularism they could not possibly have inhabited. Rather, the early Muslims accepted that humans were tempted by *shaitans*, who sensed their inner desires and exploited them, and they would have accepted too that the Prophet would not have been exempt from such temptations, not least because the Prophet's temptations are alluded to elsewhere in the Quran itself.[31] Nor could they possibly have understood the episode to be implying the non-existence of Allah. For them, the temptation of the Prophet by a *shaitan* would simply be the unremarkable and *prima facie* evidence that human affairs are subject to divine and supernatural power.

This example of contrapuntal analysis shows how placing divergent readings in counterpoint can simultaneously contest Rushdie's use of Islamic history *and* the refutations of his Muslim critics, thereby bringing the opposition itself into crisis: Rushdie and his Muslim critics are shown to possess more common ground than they might each acknowledge. Far from being opposed to one another, their understandings of this pivotal episode converge whilst their rhetorical opposition is maintained by the exclusion of other, subaltern possibilities. However, this does not furnish sufficient evidence for an assessment of Rushdie's 'good faith', not least because, in this instance, he sticks quite closely to the recorded script – and he can hardly be faulted for drawing the same blasphemous conclusions from the episode as his Muslim opponents, namely that the episode casts doubt on the divine origin of the Qur'an.

Elsewhere in *The Satanic Verses*, however, he deviates quite markedly from the conventional historical accounts of the Prophetic *sira* and the social, religious and political milieu he inhabited. Take this passage from the 'Return to Jahilia' section of the novel in which, 'Gibreel appeared to the Prophet and found himself spouting rules, rules, rules, until the faithful could scarcely bear the prospect of any more revelation, Salman said, rules about every damn thing' (pp. 363–4). This is the satirical climax of the novel, the point at which its critique is most sharply

focused. It operates through a mode of comic exaggeration, and deliberate, highly provocative *violation* of the historical record precisely in order to signal, as obtrusively as possible, its violations. The passage, which in its totality is a long one (pp. 363–8), proceeds to enumerate a long series of prohibitions, a couple of which are genuine, but most of which are completely fabricated, bizarre and absurd, the excessiveness of such legislation – signalling a totalitarian view of life – mimicked by narrative excess.

Muslim critics – and a few secular Muslims, such as Talal Asad – have pointed out the numerous errors in detail in this long passage, which is, in fact, far more radically blasphemous in the conventional sense than the title incident which it reprises; for this is the passage in which Salman inserts his own little 'errors' into the Qur'anic text, and the implication that the extant text is not the literal word of Allah but rather a human corruption is much more apparent.[32] However, my interest here is in the way the satire initially proceeds from a *secular* rather than theological basis; or, rather, in how the theological doubt that it eventually articulates emerges out of a critique of the allegedly excessive legalism of Islam/Submission. The semantic development as well as the chronological progression of the passage moves from Salman's doubts about 'rules' to his eventual tampering with the Qur'anic verses. At first, Salman 'began to notice how useful and well-timed the angel's revelations tended to be ... All those revelations of convenience' (pp. 364–5). *En passant*, he notes with distaste the new rules on marriage and rehearses a long list of other 'rules' showing how women are kept subservient in the new religion of Submission/Islam. But the passage ends with a theological rather than legal critique: 'if my poor words could not be distinguished from the Revelation by God's own messenger, then what did that mean?' (p. 367).

It seems, therefore, that Salman's theological doubts are consequent upon a more primary concern with Islam/Submission's *secular* presence: its political and legal aspects. Rushdie's critique here rests on his apprehension of, and distaste for, what he sees as Islam's excessive and stultifying legalism, which leaves 'no aspect of human experience ... unregulated, free' (p. 364). This is the basis of what he takes to be the totalitarianism of contemporary Muslim societies. Ironically, however, he shares this view of Islam – albeit from a totally different perspective – with the Islamists whom he attacks, for Islamism has, since its inception in 1920s Egypt, been little concerned with theology and more concerned with Islam's secular dimensions: the state and the law.[33]

This is not necessarily a problem. In order to attack something, in order to satirize it, one must share the same terms of reference as the target, and the architecture of the novel, with its narrative about the Imam (Khomeini), clearly signals that modern Islamism – or 'fundamentalism' as it was then known – is one of Rushdie's principal concerns. The

problem, however, arises in the way that the passage suggests that Islamic legalism is *directly* derived from the Qur'anic revelation, or, to put it more accurately, that the revelation is itself excessively and fundamentally lega-listic, full of 'endlessly proliferating rules' (p. 365). This is an abuse of the historical past in so far as it conflates both theological and secular cri-tiques, thereby widening the scope of the attack to encompass both *Islam* and Islamism, and, in fact, renders any possible distinction between the two impossible through an essentializing gesture which contends that Islam, at its moment of origin, is in fact inherently Islamist.

In fact, there are relatively few legal verses in the Qur'an. Of the 6000 or so verses, only about 500 have legal content, and 'these prescriptions cover a limited range of human affairs'.[34] According to Montgomery Watt, during his time in Medina, the Prophet instituted extensive legal reforms only with respect to 'social security, marriage and inheritance'.[35] In presenting it otherwise, Rushdie seems to be making three distinct slip-pages in the 'rules, rules, rules' passage. The first is between *ahadith* and revelation. The former are reports about the Prophet's pronouncements, actions, behaviours, likes and dislikes, responses to certain situations and so on. These constitute an extensive collection of anecdotes that cover a wide range of social experience. This is clearly what Rushdie has in mind when characterizing the comprehensiveness of Islamic legalism, for the *hadith* became a principal source for Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and what is now known as the *Shari'ah*.[36] However, Islamic jurisprudence only began 'towards the end of the Ummayad period', that is, some 200 or so years *after* the death of the Prophet.[37] In other words, the *sunna* or example of the Prophet, as recorded in the *hadith*, did not become codified as law in any legal sense until well after the formative period of Islam. Rushdie therefore not only misrepresents the origin of the *Shari'ah* in rev-elation, but also anachronistically posits it as having been operational during the Prophet's lifetime.

This is the basis for the second slippage, between two different kinds of normativity. Rushdie ascribes a normative *law* to a period when Islamic normativity must have been primarily based on the 'emulation' of the Prophet himself rather than 'rules' derived from the revelation and the *sunna*, which speaks to the relative lack of 'rules' (in the legalistic sense) in the Qur'an itself. As Salman Sayyid has put it, 'the message is manifested in the actions of the messenger. In other words, the Prophet reveals what Islam is, but Islam is also what the Prophet does'.[38] Moreover, the norma-tivity that arises from emulation is qualitatively different to that produced by law. An ideal to be emulated is not the same as a law that cannot be transgressed. It is clear, for example, that the Muslims during the Prophet's lifetime, did not feel compelled to reproduce, in every detail, the example of the Prophet – and nor have Muslims since.[39]

The third slippage in this passage is between Islamic law and 'divine law'. The *Shari'ah* is 'largely man-made, based on exegesis, interpretations, analogies, and extensive borrowing from customary practices ... and existing local Middle Eastern legal traditions'.[40] The suggestion that there are 'rules about every damn thing' (p. 363) has its corollary in the idea that 'the *shari'a* ... is the revealed law of God and is, therefore, the perfect set of rules for human conduct, which needs no supplementation by man-made laws'.[41] These ideas form the basis of Ayatollah Khomeini's notion of rule by jurist, *vilayat-e-faqih*, which, in both Rushdie's fiction and in life, articulates the very antithesis of hybridity. Rushdie is therefore complicit in the ideological framing of *Shari'ah* as 'divine law' by Muslim orthodoxy and Islamists, in particular, although the notion has common currency amongst Muslims and non-Muslims – which explains why most modern Muslim critics did not pick Rushdie up on this point in their readings of this passage; to have done so would have thrown the hegemonic characterization of Islamic law as 'divine' into crisis.

What I am arguing here is that Rushdie's historical violations involve a series of essentializing gestures which suggest that the Islamic religion, at the moment of its origin, instituted the kind of totalitarian Islamic state envisaged by contemporary Islamists and embodied in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The text's architecture, which involves a series of intricate parallelisms that connect the various narratives, also buttresses the essentialism most forcefully articulated in the 'rules, rules, rules' passage. For instance, it is clear that the city of Jahilia is a narrative double of both Mecca *and* Tehran, the description of the latter – 'a mountain looming over a city' (p. 206) – invoking the former, which is overlooked by Mount Hira/ Cone. This link between seventh-century Mecca and late twentieth-century Tehran is reinforced in the passages suggesting that Mahound's/ Muhammad's institution of Submission/Islam in Jahilia/Mecca is maintained by the coercive apparatuses of a totalitarian state, in particular a secret police and network of informers reminiscent of the Shah's SAVAK organization. However, as Watt reminds us, the early Islamic social structure was not 'an impersonal state' and the Prophet 'had no police force. The very idea of such a thing was probably unknown among the Arabs'.[42] Furthermore, whilst the available historical evidence suggests that the dwellings of seventh-century Mecca were 'extremely primitive',[43] the novel's contrary representation of Jahilia as a sophisticated and bacchanalial metropolis (pp. 103, 116), full of 'piazza(s)' (p. 117) and 'enormous palazzo(s)' (p. 376) invites comparison with a putatively wealthy, westernized, and decadent Tehran prior to the 1979 Revolution, 'in which the riots of the starving were brutally put down by Hind's personal police force' (p. 361). Similarly, post-Mahound, the city's 'newly

puritanical streets' (p. 377) reflect the post-revolutionary moralism of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Such essentializing gestures erase 1400 years of Islamic history, and undermine the claim Rushdie makes in 'In Good Faith' that *The Satanic Verses* attacks 'the narrower definitions of Islam' as opposed to Islam as a whole.[44] Indeed, throughout that essay, he displays an insistent urge to distinguish between *some* Muslims and forms of Islam, and the wider generality of Muslims and Islam itself, with whom he says he has no quarrel.[45] In so doing, he hopes to demonstrate that he sees a distinction between Islam as a historical phenomenon in all its diversity and development, and what he sees as the attempt by certain Muslims to place it outside of history, to eternalize it by 'fixing' it forever.[46] However, there is a discrepancy between this later claim that the novel defends 'historical' Islam from the 'fundamentalists' and the textual evidence furnished by the novel itself. The space opened up by this discrepancy illuminates the unwitting complicity between Rushdie and the Islamists he is apparently attacking, for their respective essentializations rest on a mutual *foreclosure* (despite Rushdie's apparent endorsement of them) of the heterodox and subaltern possibilities that exist, and have existed, within the scriptural and apocryphal traditions of 'historical' Islam.

Furthermore, it is actually very difficult to pin down the particular Muslims or 'narrower' forms of Islam he has in mind: certainly, Khomeini and the Islamism of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and 'fundamentalists' more generally; but he also arraigns 'Muslim leaders', and 'orthodoxy', and even organized religion of any kind. The very expansiveness of this target, the way it shifts throughout his discourse, its very instability, in fact collapses the distinction he so assiduously tries to maintain between the general and the particular, for it is almost impossible to imagine how anyone could be a Muslim at all without some kind of orthodoxy, or some form of institutionalized practice. In fact, it becomes very difficult to imagine an Islam that Rushdie might approve of; the standard response amongst critics is to suggest Sufism, but it would have to be a de-institutionalized Sufism shorn of its *tariqas*, its rigid hierarchies and spiritual disciplines.[47] Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the only kind of Muslim Rushdie really does not have a problem with is the kind that sees his or her faith in purely secularized terms as a private, individualized spirituality. Despite asserting that his novel dissents against 'imposed orthodoxies *of all types*', Rushdie therefore imposes an orthodoxy himself, namely secular-liberalism and its version of permissible religiosity.[48] However, this orthodoxy – shall we call it 'secular fundamentalism'? – remains invisible to him because it constitutes the ideological ground on which he stands.[49]

The unacknowledged essentialization of Islam, the complicity with Islamism, the inability to see, let alone dissent from, secularist orthodoxy with respect to religious belief and practice: all of these represent the lineaments of Rushdie's ethical failure in *The Satanic Verses*, at least with respect to this particular aspect of the novel. And there is one further ethical failure to note, one that, in some respects, stands above the others. Each of the failures suggested above constitutes a *self-transgression* in so far as *The Satanic Verses* and its author self-consciously set themselves against essentialism (the Untime of the Imam), against Islamism, and against 'orthodoxies of all types'. In each instance, however, the novel not only replicates and reinforces that which it opposes, but it does so without self-knowledge. As a result, its politics is hopelessly compromised (with disastrous results). Some Muslims accused Rushdie of cultural betrayal, but in fact his greatest betrayal was of himself.

Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodernism's politics is invariably compromised because its mode is 'complicitous critique', which 'install[s] and reinforce[s] as much as undermine[s] and subvert[s] the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge'.[50] If that is the case, however, such a politics, if it is to be at all effective – and if it is to have any integrity – must be absolutely scrupulous about its modality, about the means of its critique as well as its ends. As I have shown, such scrupulousness is not evident in *The Satanic Verses*, or any of its subsequent nonfictional paratexts. It is therefore ironic that Salman (the Persian/Rushdie) should argue that the Prophet (Mahound/Muhammad), 'had no time for scruples . . . no qualms about ends and means' (p. 363) because the same could be said of him.

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Notes

1 Originally published in *The Independent*, February 1, 1990, the essay was collected in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta, 1991), pp. 393–414.
2 Salman Rushdie, 'Is Nothing Sacred?' in *Imaginary Homelands*, pp. 415–429.
3 Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', pp. 395, 396.
4 The exceptions include Roald Dahl, in a letter to *The Times*, February 28, 1989; Richard Webster, *A Brief History of Blasphemy: Liberalism, Censorship and 'The Satanic Verses'* (Southwold: The Orwell Press, 1990); Michael Dummett, 'An Open Letter' *The Independent on Sunday*, February 11, 1990; Talal Asad, 'Ethnography, literature and politics: some readings and uses of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*', *Cultural Anthropology*, 5.3

(1990), pp. 239–269; Bhikhu Parekh, 'The Rushdie Affair and the British Press' in D. Cohn-Sherbrook (ed.), *The Salman Rushdie Controversy in Inter-religious Perspective* (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1990), pp. 72–96 and *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006); and (partially) Pnina Werbner, 'Allegories of sacred imperfection: magic, hermeneutics and passion in *The Satanic Verses*', *Current Anthropology*, 37.1 'Supplement: Special Issue – Anthropology in Public' (1996), pp. S55–S86.

5 This was the argument put forward by some of the principal Muslim interventions in the controversy: Shabbir Akhtar, *Be Careful with Muhammad!* (London: Bellew Publishing, 1989); Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn-Davies, *Distorted Imagination: Lessons from the Rushdie Affair* (London: Grey Seal, 1990); some of the contributions collected in M.M. Ahsan and A.R. Kidwai (eds), *Sacrilege versus Civility: Muslim Perspectives on* The Satanic Verses (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1993).

6 Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', p. 395. Werbner, 'Allegories of sacred imperfection', p. S57.

7 There have, to my knowledge, been three major attempts to read the novel from a 'Muslim' critical perspective whilst also acknowledging the novel's grounding in the protocols of western literary aesthetics: Akhtar's, *Be Careful with Muhammad!*; Sardar and Wyn-Davies's, *Distorted Imagination*, and more recently Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and Discourse of English* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005). These place *The Satanic Verses* within the context of postmodernism and approach it accordingly using the methodologies of modern literary criticism. However, they do not subject *both* 'secular' and 'Islamic' perspectives to interrogation, but instead subject the former to the latter whilst deploying the former's critical methodologies. As described below, I shall attempt to move beyond 'singular' readings and attempt to fashion a 'dialogic' methodology that occupies neither ground, but rather a space *between* critical paradigms.

8 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993). For Said, there is a link between contrapuntal criticism and 'secular criticism', but whilst the equivalence between contrapuntal methodology and secularism in Said's work is problematic from the point of view of this essay, the idea of bringing into contact overlapping but discrepant histories and experiences without resolving the contradictions that emerge or imposing a singular overarching narrative is appropriate for the kind of post-secular encounter I am attempting to stage here.

9 Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', p. 394.

10 Ibid., p. 395.

11 Ibid., p. 393.

12 Salman Rushdie, 'Interview with *The Bandung File*', February 14, 1989 [recorded 27 January 1989] in Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland (eds), *The Rushdie File* (London: Fourth Estate, 1989), p. 28.

13 Salman Rushdie, 'Open Letter to Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi' n.d. in *The Rushdie File*, p. 44.

14 Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', p. 393.

15 Ibid., p. 408.

16 Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London: Routledge, 2010).

17 See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

18 Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', p. 409.

19 See the ambiguities and ambivalences that resonate throughout Rushdie's defence of literature and the imagination in the light of the *fatwa* in 'Is Nothing Sacred?'

20 The notable exceptions relate to the problems involved in representing the Holocaust and other historical traumas, particularly the work of Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felman, and J.M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello novels. To be clear, I am not suggesting there is a dearth of ethical consideration within postmodernism in general, but rather within postmodern *historical* theory and practice.

21 Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 14–15.

22 Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 77.

23 The phrase is from Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, pp. 73–74.

24 Beverley Southgate has a chapter entitled 'Fiction, history and ethics' in her book *History Meets Fiction* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2009), but it is concerned with fiction's ability to undertake 'ethically oriented history' as opposed to my concern with the ethics of representation. As far as I am aware, none of the major postmodern theorizations of history discuss the ethics of representation, and there is not even a single reference to ethics in the index of major introductory works on history and postmodernism, such as Richard Jenkins's, *The Postmodern History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997) and Alan Muslow's, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* (London: Routledge, 2000).

25 Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*.

26 I thank Dr Muhammad Mansur Ali, *hadith* scholar and Research Fellow at Cardiff University's Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK (Islam-UK) for this point.

27 Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (Delaware: The Consortium Inc., 1992), p. 111. All subsequent references are inserted in the text.

28 Srinivas Aravamudan, '"Being God's Postman is No Fun, Yaar": Salman Rushdie's, *The Satanic Verses*', *Diacritics*, 19.2 (1989), p. 12.

29 Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 6, trans. M.V McDonald and annotated by William Montgomery Watt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 108–109, my emphasis. See also A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul-Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 165.

30 It is little known that in the very early stages of the Muslim campaign against *The Satanic Verses*, the protestors wrote to Penguin requesting that the novel be

prefaced by a statement clearly indicating its status as a fictional work. Penguin refused. See Paul Weller, *A Mirror for Our Times: 'The Rushdie Affair' and the Future of Multiculturalism* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 17.

31 See, for instance, *The Quran*, trans. Tarif Khalidi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 17:73–75 and 22:52.

32 Asad, 'Ethnography, Literature and Politics', p. 253; Sardar and Wynn-Davies, *Distorted Imagination*, p. 160; Robin Yassin-Kassab, '*Maps for Lost Lovers* and Writerly Responsibility' *Qunfuz*, February 6, 2008, http://qunfuz.blogspot.com/2008/02/maps-for-lost-lovers-and-writerly.html (accessed 6 September 2012).

33 Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 20–21, 49–95.

34 Sami Zubaida, *Law and Power in the Islamic World* (London: IB Tauris, 2003), p. 12.

35 W.M. Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 293.

36 Zubaida, *Law and Power*, pp. 10–11.

37 Ibid., p. 17

38 S. Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*, 2nd edn. (London: Zed Books, 2003), p. 53.

39 See Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, vol. 7, book 65, hadith 300, (Medina: Islamic University, n.d.), p. 228, in which the believers eat a type of lizard in front of the Prophet even though he refuses to join them because of his dislike of the meat. See also hadiths 362, 363, p. 262: the Prophet's dislike of garlic is clearly another instance where Muslims have not felt obliged to demur to his likes and dislikes.

40 Zubaida, *Law and Power*, p. 10.

41 Ibid., p. 2.

42 Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, pp. 238, 271.

43 F.E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 25.

44 Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', p. 396.

45 This gesture anticipates the 'good Muslim/bad Muslim' trope which has permeated post-9/11 public discourse in the US, Britain and Europe. See Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Doubleday, 2005) and Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

46 Salman Rushdie, 'One Thousand Days in a Balloon' in *Imaginary Homelands*, pp. 435–437.

47 Timothy Brennan, 'Rushdie, Islam and postcolonial criticism', *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), pp. 271–276 (273); Aamir Mufti, 'Reading the Rushdie Affair: an essay on Islam and politics', *Social Text*, 29 (1991), pp. 95–116; Sara Suleri, 'Contraband histories: Salman Rushdie and the embodiment of blasphemy', *The Yale Review*, 78.4 (1989), pp. 604–624; Andrew Teverson, 'Fairy tale politics: free speech and multiculturalism in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 47.4 (2001), pp. 444–466; Robert Spencer,

'Salman Rushdie and the "war on terror"', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 46.3–4 (2010), pp. 251–265 (262).

48 Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', p. 396 (original emphasis).

49 Sara Suleri sees Rushdie's blasphemy as an act of cultural fidelity to 'the metaphors that Islam makes available to a postcolonial sensibility' ('Contraband Histories', p. 607). Nevertheless, whilst Rushdie may well be attempting to 'desecrate' Islam in order to renew its 'cultural materiality', that gesture itself – separating Islamic 'religiosity' from its 'culture' and 'civilization' – speaks to a more fundamental fidelity to the logic of secularism. Despite the brilliance of their readings, both Suleri and Mufti overlook Rushdie's essentializing gestures, as does Robert Spencer's recent defence of *The Satanic Verses* ('Salman Rushdie').

50 Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism*, pp. 1, 2.