

POSTMODERNISM, HISTORY AND SATIRE: DAVID FOSTER AND SALMAN RUSHDIE

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On Saturday, 16th December, last year, Salman Rushdie was involved in a car crash near Milton on the south coast of New South Wales. Rushdie 'veered on to the wrong side of the road in a hired Statesman, bounced off a sewage truck travelling in the opposite direction, and came to a halt against a tree. He and his two passengers were treated at Milton Hospital for cuts and abrasions and Salman's broken arm.¹ This accident provides a number of elements to ponder, the most obvious being the moment when Rushdie faced death — not at the hands of an assassin — but in the mundane and even humiliating prospect of collision with a truck used for transporting human excrement.

A few weeks after the accident, *The Canberra Times* reported that Rushdie's writing meant nothing to the truck driver, Jake Strybis, 51, of Shoalhaven.² Mr Strybis seemed to enjoy the ironies of the incident, describing how the local police had asked him whether he had Muslim connections, 'because that bloke over there is Salman Rushdie'. He admitted that he had never read Rushdie's novels preferring Australian writers such as Judith Wright, Xavier Herbert and, giving a little promotion to a local, Frank Moorhouse. Rushdie probably will find some way to use this material in future fictions, but I prefer to regard this incident as an affect of his entry into the imaginary territory of David Foster. Foster's latest novel *The Glade Within the Grove* is set only a crow's flight from Milton, in the hinterland behind the coast near the New South Wales/Victorian border.³ Indeed, Mr Strybis, with his laconic attitude to world controversy, might have been a character from *The Glade*, possibly a coastal contact of those timber jinker drivers, the MacAnaspie family.

No doubt unbeknown to Salman Rushdie, David Foster has publicly criticised him on several occasions. In his contribution to Andrew Sant's *Toads* he used Rushdie's predicament as an example of the choice offered the writer between a significant life and a significant art:

The most eminent of my contemporaries — I consider the man a rival not a colleague — was put under sentence of death recently, by some he had spied upon, and had to run for cover. Now I have not heard one voice in the literary community raised against his cowardice. They, presumably, would do the same. Yet, had Rushdie refused to run and hide what a book he would thereby have created. History as Yeats would surely remind us, does not recall those who flee, but those who stand firm. Thus, in the end, the literary life cannot even defend itself (74).

In a recent article in *Southerly* he presented Rushdie as a prime example of the moral, physical and spiritual decline of the literary artist who concentrates on art as intellectual sport: 'If he hadn't taken his 20 pieces of silver, in the form of that million dollar advance for *Satanic Verses*, noone would ever have heard of it' (13).

In Foster's view, it seems that Rushdie's failing is not that he offended people, but that he has refused the opportunity for a history-making martyrdom, or even that he has made profit from writing. It would be astonishing if Foster objected to the novelist being offensive, as his own work does its best to offend Australian readers.

I admire both novelists, and I admire them for qualities which I think they share — a determination to use the novel as an intellectual medium which reflects on the large questions about contemporary civilisation. Rushdie and Foster are satirists, both intent on addressing the great issues of history, politics and religion, and indeed the prospects for a human future. Rushdie is most often interpreted within a postmodernist or postcolonial framework; yet when it comes to genre, he is most obviously a satirist. In *The Satanic Verses*, the poet Baal describes his role as follows:

'A poet's work...to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep.' And [the novel goes on] if rivers of blood flow from the cuts his verses inflict then they will nourish him. He is the satirist, Baal (97).

This possibility was, of course, more than fulfilled by responses to the novel.

Rushdie declared himself a satirist quite clearly in *Midnight's Children*, turning his narrator not only into a parody of Ganesh the elephant-headed Hindu scribe, but letting readers know that Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* was another, Western, model. It is fairly common for educated readers of postmodernist texts to comment that Sterne seemed to be a postmodernist before his time in his playful self-consciousness about the textual nature of writing. (Some of us would say the same of Furphy.) It may surely be as valid to see Rushdie as writing a contemporary form of Sterne's satire.

Foster, too, claims to belong to a tradition which encompasses Sterne and Furphy, with Joyce as his inspiration. That is, regardless of Foster's opinion about Rushdie, these two contemporary writers are working within the same satiric traditions — it is a wonder of the English language that writers of Indian and Australian birth may claim Irish literary forebears. Both writers, too, have distinguished themselves as stylists in non-fiction writing, even if Foster in full flight reads more like Jonathan Swift than Sterne. I would like to speculate that this interest in the essay, which both writers use to comment on contemporary society, indicates a particular kind of attitude to writing, in which fiction is valued as a means to explore intellectual ideas that cannot be pursued within non-fiction genres. Satire, it seems, offers a fictional mode which allows an extension of this philosophical, political and social commentary.

Any enquiry into the place of satire in contemporary literary theory and criticism encounters a notable absence. There has hardly been an important critical study of satire in English since the 1970s, when the term was applied pretty well exclusively to eighteenth century practice. In fact, satire has often been dismissed

as one of the museum genres of the past — despite the obvious evidence that it has become one of the most practised modes in contemporary writing. Some of us were taught a set of rigid rules for satire, based on statements by Henry Fielding or Alexander Pope, about it being an attack on folly and vice with some sort of corrective aims. Yet, the evidence of the texts we are reading suggests that satire has no such reforming ambitions — the foolishness and evils they attack are much too complex for solution. Instead, the contemporary satire, and I would want to call it the postmodernist satire, is distinguished more by exuberant excess, and by anger and despair.

A recent study of the American novel, by Steven Weisenburger, begins by noting that the work of the US writers pre-eminently known as postmodernists — Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, William Gaddis — are most accessibly read as satires. This seems an obvious point, yet even devotees of Bakhtin, such as John Docker, can be found studiously ignoring the evidence that the satire is alive in serious fiction while they go off to scour the popular culture for signs of the carnivalesque. In Australia, however, the satire is possibly less practised, less recognised and less understood than in America and in Britain. A Peter Carey novel, such as *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, seems to be a satire in that it adopts the ploy of the grotesque narrator and journeys into worlds which seem to have an allegorical relationship to the society in which we live (not to mention the overt reference to Sterne, again). In the end, though, *Tristan Smith's* very abandonment of a recognisable world undercuts any satiric power; for anger cannot be sustained against token enemies, and a cutting intellectual anger is necessary to push the postmodernist satire beyond game-playing. The passionate anger appropriate to satire saves the great postmodernist novels from the frequent charge that postmodernism has no relationship to the political world. Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Marquez's *Autumn of the Patriarch*, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, David Foster's *Mates of Mars* or *The Glade within the Grove* all address questions about the survival of some sort of human civilisation, albeit with national inflections.

At their best, these satires demand to be regarded as connected to the political world by the sheer force of their passion. But they are also novels which are conscious of their own textuality; to put it more directly, they revel in language, and the sheer multitudinous nature of words. Rushdie's difficulties have arisen out of his interest in the power of texts. In *The Satanic Verses* his namesake, Salman the scribe, deliberately edits and rewrites the work of the Prophet in a direct challenge to the sacredness of the text. Rushdie challenges text-based religion with the enquiry: 'How can you trust texts when you know how they are written?' And with it, of course, comes the self-reflexive query to the reader — 'how can you trust me?' Fundamentalist religion turns language into sacred truth — anathema to the postmodern sensibility, which knows about the gap between the word and the thing itself, or the sign and the signifier.

Yet, Rushdie himself believes in the power of texts — why else would he go on writing them? And his return to religion as a subject in *The Moor's Last Sigh* cannot be seen only as a return to his Indian origins, anymore than his religious

vacillations in the past years can be seen as mere expediency. One of the quests in Rushdie's novels is for some kind of religious answer; one which will satisfy a rational thinker who is committed to secular politics. Perhaps, the Bible bashers and defenders of the Koran have got it at least partly right — words may be the way to the truth.

The satirist, though, is the last writer one would expect to show the way. Satire is irreverent and funny — it can be vulgar and even disgusting. Its passion most often appears in the form of indecorous anger. In *The Glade* D'arcy Doliveres comments that the satirist Juvenal was, according to Hume, the last great Latin writer of genius (xxvii), and reminds us that it was Apuleis who continued Homer's work in a satire called *The Golden Ass*. It seems clear that the postmodernist doubting of texts (even while they are being written) can be linked to a concern about the loss of religion, and that the satire provides a genre in which these sacred and profane interests can be conjoined. D'arcy Doliveres tells us that Juvenal wrote

in the halcyon days of the Roman Empire, according to Gibbon, when it was under the rule of Nerva, and of Trajan, and of Hadrian, when, stretching to its furthest marches from Berenice to Eboricum, it knew both peace and comparative prosperity without, and utter hopelessness within, which is pretty much my own state of mind these days, and that of my neighbours, as far as I can suss them out. We all bask in the yellow submarine of world-historian Toynbee's Indian summer. What boots it that I fear a moribund god while they, bless them, acknowledge none? 'Of all customs,' says Plutarch, 'first and greatest is belief in gods... you might find communities without walls, letters, kings, houses or money, with no knowledge of theatres or gymnasia: but a community without holy rite, without a god, that uses not prayer, nor oath, nor divination, nor sacrifice, no man ever saw, or ever will see.' Oh dear. We must, however, concede, that of all sedentary barbarians, the white Australian is perhaps the only one for whom a nocturnal cemetery holds no terrors, as yet (xxvii).

At this point I must leave Rushdie to his own devices, because the difference between the two writers is obvious — Rushdie is concerned about the dangers of too much religious belief, particularly in India, where the dream of a secular nation is constantly endangered by rival groups of fundamentalists. Rushdie's intellectual commitment is to the secular ideal, to the liberal tolerance which, as it happens, is a dominant feature of Australian life. *The Glade within the Grove* struggles with the opposite condition — the emptiness within of the prosperous, unbelieving Australian. (It is a crisis, by the way, which Foster's characters debate on the streets of Calcutta in *Plumbum*.) *The Glade's* vulgarity comes from its need to explore the condition of contemporary Australians and to find some kind of sacred meaning for these incorrigibly ordinary people. Its narrative, such as it is, pieces together events in 1968 when a ragbag group of hippies, dropouts, and draft dodgers set up a commune in an isolated valley on the New South Wales/Victorian border. By sheer proximity to the old-growth forests it seems that the communards become part of a cult of tree worship which keeps the women and children forever young and leads several of the men to self-mutilation. This cult,

too, is a revival of a pre-Christian cult known to the Romans — the Phrygian mysteries.

Our unbelieving society demands that such an account must be ironic, postmodernist and, ultimately satirical (just as Rushdie felt bound to satirise the Koran). But Foster indicates that there is a sacred text, not yet published — the 'Ballad of Erinungerah' written by a communard, and found by D'arcy in an old mailbag. While tree-worship may seem the most primitive of non-textual religions, our society is text-dependent, looking always for holy writings. But we are more likely to grant the spiritual high ground to the poem than the novel, and to the lyrical novel rather than the satire. There is a kind of pomposity or, at least, formality of language which we demand of the sacred text.

Foster's language does have formality of one kind. D'arcy Doliveres has immersed himself in the Latin texts of the ancient world, and his digressions are couched in a language which reverberates with the precision and rhythmic balance of the great Latin writers. The novel opens with a description of the forest which is staggering in its beauty. *The Glade* is, like Foster's other novels, devoted to rediscovering arcane vocabulary, but here it is a vocabulary valued for its metrical possibilities, its associative qualities and its sheer abundance. Thus a description of Horrie MacAnaspie's shed demonstrates the way in which excessive detail can move what begins as realism into the realm in which language operates for its own sake:

A bench grinder and a multi-speed drill contest the oil-soaked earth floor with jack hammers, truck hoists, boxes of taps and dies and socket sets, but the *pièce de résistance*, with its distinctive cooling tank, its Napoleonic hat silencer and water jacket atop crankcase and fuel tank base, between two big twenty-two-inch flywheels, on its little undercarriage, with its hardwood shafts fitted with runners for the dray harness, two of its four cast-iron wheels skewwhiff and buried in the dirt, is the MacAnaspie seven-horsepower Sunshine portable two stroke petrol engine, which, by means, of a belt like a Mobius strip, used to drive the chaffcutter in the days before tariffs were used to destroy this country's leadership in world rural technology, when graders ran on chaff and lucerne grew on the flat, and men wore waistcoats and white shirts and short-brimmed hats to do manual labour. The oil can and funnel, the spare diaphragm discs for the carbide, and all the British imperial spanners are long gone from the toolbox cum driver's seat; of the four oil drip-feed lubricators, three appear to be missing; the chain that drives the magneto is hanging off the crankshaft in thin air, while the magneto itself has disappeared: but the bolts look sound, and there's not much rust on the cast iron, and no borers in the wood. Even the hoses on the thermosyphon, to and from the cylinder jacket, from and to the reservoir, are unperished. And if you removed the inspection door, at the front of the crankcase, which would be no trouble, you'd see that the phosphor bronze big-end bearing — in which wear may be taken up by the simple, and patent, expedient of tightening and slackening the nuts that secure the bearing flanges to the crankcase flanges, as distinct from the more usual rigmarole, best undertaken by a qualified fitter — well, it looks

good as new, and the joints seem airtight (68-69).

This passage clearly does more than provide visual description of a machine in a shed; it takes the opportunity opened by the association of the machine, to express the voice of the satirist determined on encyclopedic commentary. This kind of writing does not question the relationship between words and reality, but uses words (in the context of the hardware store or machinery shop, perfectly ordinary descriptive words) in such a way that they become more than signifiers; they become incantations, signs which hold more than their apparent meaning. This happens in the descriptions of the forests too.

Excess is one of the marks of the postmodernist satire; it is the most obvious way in which it breaks the bounds of the realist text. Here, an excess of language becomes part of an aesthetic, but it is not the modernist aesthetic of inwardness and restraint. It shares that delight in words of the great Roman writers, of Swift and Sterne, of James Joyce. Furthermore, one cannot help speculating that Foster wants to achieve the impossible — to sound out the possibilities for spiritual understanding through words. This is not merely postmodernist disbelief in the connection between words and the material world. It is a movement towards abandoning the material world for a spiritual one implicated in language. The Western dichotomy between the body and the soul, the flesh and the spirit, lives on in Foster's *The Glade*, as it did in the fiction of Patrick White. And the act of writing struggles to leave the body behind.

In *The Glade*, however, this struggle finds its fictional and metaphorical place in the decision of the male communards to cut off their own genitals. Surely, no secular Australian reader can be comfortable with this eventuality. The only possible genre in which such a metaphor can be offered is satire. We need to have some way not to take Foster seriously. What a relief that he can make us laugh!

In the end, then, Rushdie and Foster find themselves in the same cultural situation: writing about grand sweeps of history, about the nature of human society in the perspective of the millennium, about the possibility of belief in more than the material world. Rushdie could challenge the authority of the Koran with impunity — so long as he had an audience of unbelieving Western readers. But Foster can't expect that same audience to take him seriously when he proposes that without spiritual belief we are nothing. The only harm that has come to Rushdie in our society — and we should all be relieved at the thought — is a chance encounter with a sewage truck. Rushdie knows too well what can happen when readers take you seriously, but these readers are not part of our postmodern doubting society; they believe in the word and its power.

For the rest of us, schooled in the sophisticated intellectual doubt of the late twentieth century there can be no unified subjects, no grand narratives which explain our predicament. Some of you will remember the late Bob Burns at the Ballarat ASAL conference lamenting the loss of the monstrous novel, in favour of those small novels of domestic detail which dominate contemporary Australian fiction. I would suggest that this is a sign of our postmodern condition — and that

the satire may be the only way in which a novelist can begin to attempt the panoramic view in an age of disbelief.

Works Cited

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Endnotes

1. 'Milton Madness' *The Canberra Times*, Thursday January 25, p.13.
2. *The Canberra Times*, January 25, p.13.