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SPECIAL ISSUE: EDWARD SAID—INTELLECTUAL, CULTURAL CRITIC, ACTIVIST

## **Edward Said, Salman Rushdie and spectres of humanism**

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*Edward Said's last published work, which went to press weeks before his death in September 2003, was *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004). I want to read this book not as the summation of Said's fifty years of engagement with literary and cultural studies and with the plight of the Palestinians but as an engagement with a problematic that has been at the centre of his writings, and by extension at the centre of Salman Rushdie's creative output. Said refers to the book (which began as lectures at Columbia and Cambridge) as his re-engagement with the 'relevance of humanism' at a time when the 'setting' of humanism is being dramatically transformed, especially in the wake of 9/11 since when, in one view, 'Islamist' extremism has confirmed the location of humanism only in the enlightened West where the practitioners of humanism feel that true humanism has been violated by unruly intruders with their 'disreputable modishness ... uncanonised learning'. This narrow affirmation of an exclusivist humanism is what Said sets out to challenge as he did in his 1978 masterpiece *Orientalism*. After examining an ambivalence, an 'increasingly global predicament' as James Clifford termed it, in that book between Said's commitment to humanism and the subject matter's antihumanism (*Orientalism* as discursive representation without agencies), something that Said himself has subsequently acknowledged, this paper looks at Salman Rushdie's engagement with Islam in the context of Said's own redefinition of humanism as a universal critical practice.*

**Keywords:** Edward Said, Salman Rushdie, scholastic tradition, Arabic hermeneutics, blasphemy

Edward Said's last published work, which went to press weeks before his death in September 2003, was *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004). Edward Said's impact on literary and cultural studies has been so huge that there are now many scholars who are Said authorities. I am certainly not one of them although Said's works, without necessarily citing them in every instance, have been the haunting spectre behind my writings on postcolonial theory, diaspora

and multiculturalism. I cannot claim any degree of mastery of the Said bibliography which is, in a direct way, an admission of scholarly inadequacy in respect of the subject matter addressed here (2009). With this confession, I turn to his posthumously published work because as W. J. T. Mitchell observed in his excellent homage to Said, "any continuation of the conversation with Edward Said would have to include the question of humanism and its many discontents" (2005, p. 99).

For the past few years I have been reading the Salman Rushdie Archive and annotating his major works. In the Archive deposited in the Woodruff Library of Emory University, there are marginal comments on Edward Said by Rushdie, including a transcript of an interview with Said. The 1986 transcript was included in *Imaginary Homelands* (Rushdie, 1991, pp. 166-184). The occasion for the interview was the publication of Said's *After the Last Sky*, a collaborative venture with the photographer Jean Mohr, the title itself taken from a poem, "The Earth is Closing on Us", by the Palestinian national poet Mahmoud Darwish (1999). The themes that interest Rushdie, and which forms the basis of his questions, are: the insider/outsider problematic when the history of Palestine has turned the Palestinian Arab insider into an outsider, the Palestinian interiority as a function of an outsider's discourse, the matter of exile and diaspora, of landless people and their notions of a homeland, the idea of excess for the exile as public intellectual because he is "obliged to carry too much luggage" (1991, p. 176), the problems of narrative ordering when existence itself is discontinuous, and related matters. To transform these themes into an historical narrative—the themes disrupt a uniform, teleological narrative—on two occasions Said specifically refers to *Midnight's Children*. "It is like trying to find the magical moment when everything starts, as in *Midnight's Children*", and again, says Said, "that is the central problem. It is almost impossible to imagine a single narrative: it would have to be the kind of crazy history that comes out in *Midnight's Children*, with all those little strands coming and going in and out" (1991, p. 179).

Rushdie turns to Said again in his later collection of essays, *Steps Across the Line* (2002). In the section entitled 'Columns' there is a brief defence of Said's autobiography *Out of Place* ("October 1999: Edward Said") which begins with the opening sentences of Said's book: "All families invent their parents and children, give each of them a story, character, fate, and even language. There was always something wrong with how I was invented" (as cited in Rushdie, 2002, p. 282). Rushdie called the autobiography a great memoir (reading *Joseph Anton* one detects some intertextual indebtedness to Said's autobiography there) and makes it clear that since inventions and blurrings are part of memory and recall, the criticism of Justus Reid Weiner, resident scholar at the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs, that there is no historical record that Edward was actually born in Jerusalem or that his father owned a house there (a title search shows names of other owners) has a subtext: Said cannot claim to have been driven out of his homeland to Cairo after the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict because his family was never in Jerusalem in the first instance. Of course in extended families and in Arab clans (even Christian ones) ownership is never straightforward, and documents do not have the same auratic value. But that is not the point because other evidence of his school days in eastern Jerusalem is certainly available. What Weiner wishes to deny Said is the right to claim any association with Palestinian refugees because he wasn't one, and therefore by extension also

weaken his own work as a strong defence of the Palestinian cause. I do not know the details of the case but I am interested in the filiations, the lines of connections, of flight, between Rushdie's reading of the memoir and his earlier interview and the case for humanism that Said makes in his last published work.

I want to read *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* not as the summation of Said's forty-year engagement with literary and cultural studies and with the plight of the Palestinians but as an engagement with a problematic that has been at the centre of his writings, and by extension at the centre of Salman Rushdie's creative output. Said refers to the book (which began as lectures at Columbia and Cambridge) as his re-engagement with the "relevance of humanism" (2004, p. 6) at a time when the 'setting' of humanism is being dramatically transformed, especially in the wake of 9/11 since when, in one view, Islamist extremism has confirmed the location of humanism only in the enlightened West. This narrow affirmation of an exclusivist humanism is what Said sets out to challenge, but first he reflects on his own path-breaking work, the 1978 masterpiece *Orientalism*.

Said turns, with characteristic openness and self-reflection, to James Clifford's memorable 1980 review of the book (later included in his own influential 1988 book *The Predicament of Culture* [pp. 255-76]). In his review Clifford, in Said's paraphrase, had noted "the conflict between my (that is Said's) avowed and unmistakable humanistic bias and the antihumanism of my subject and my approach" (2004, p. 8). *Orientalism* was an essentialised project (the representation of the East because they didn't know how to represent themselves within rational, Enlightenment categories) which required methods critical of the "totalizing habits of western humanism", methods which as any reader of Said's magisterial work knows, is indebted to Foucault's foundational works on discourse and power. As Clifford reads *Orientalism*, Said wishes to have it both ways, but it is a posture which is symptomatic of an 'increasingly global predicament' where humanism finds itself ambivalently located in an overpowering but pervasive critical and cultural theory where agency is progressively located within systems which are primarily functions of the two great founders of discursivity, Marx (on capital) and Freud (on psychoanalysis). Said confesses that Clifford gets it right because he too was the product of the 60s and 70s theory of the death of the subject, and of grand narratives. But the ambivalence that Clifford detects also points to Said's own insistence on humanism as the "achievement of form by human will and agency" because it is "neither a system nor impersonal force like the market (Marx) or the unconscious (Freud)" (2004, p. 15) with the proviso that Said never saw humanism primarily, emphatically and unquestionably as totalising. If the orientalists brought a narrow perspective, the fault was not with humanism but with its instrumental application, the same kind of distinction that Kant made in his memorable letter "What is Enlightenment?" Said makes his position clear in the following passage which, although a little long, must be cited in full.

I believe then, and still believe, that it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism and that, schooled in its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan and text-and-language bound in ways that absorbed the great lessons of the past from, say, Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer and more recently from Richard Poirier, and still remain attuned to the emergent voices and currents

of the present, many of them exilic, extraterritorial, and unhoused ... For my purposes here, the core of humanism is the secular notion that the historical world is made up of men and women, and not by God, and that it can be understood rationally according to the principle formulated by Vico in *New Science*, that we can really know only what we make or, to put it differently, we can know things according to the way they are made ... historical knowledge based on the human being's capacity to make knowledge, as opposed to absorbing it passively, reactively, dully. (2004, pp. 10-11)

Following his hero Giambattista Vico, the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher, Said addresses humanism in this fashion because so many of the liberal practitioners of humanism feel that true humanism has been violated by unruly practitioners (races, nations, the multicultural, the multilingual) who have brought "disreputable modishness ... uncanonised learning" (2004, p. 18) to the gates of humanism.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that the subtext of the critique is of course 'Eurocentrism', in itself a key pillar of European faith. Eurocentric humanism is based on principles of withdrawal and exclusion, not on participatory democracy. It is a humanism of secrecy which disavows its own principles of *sapere aude*; it is a humanism that fails to see that its principles have always unearthed historical injustices because the past is not fixed, it is not canonical or canonised, it is an uncompleted history. To know that uncompleted history or to complete the project of a true modernity, humanism has to be delinked from Eurocentrism and made into a feature of the human mind itself, not just the European mind. The move here is to dehistoricise humanism, that is, to shift proprietorial claims to it, so that, shall we say, Bhishma's lengthy oration on his death bed in the Book of Drona in the great Hindu epic the *Mahabharata* is humanistically and intrinsically interesting because it is a profound meditation on the ritual of battle, on blood sacrifice and on the idea of the nation itself.

Bhishma's meditation is of course in Sanskrit. To read it well requires us to know the language and to understand how the mind expresses questions of ethical responsibility, precisely the overriding issue in the *Mahabharata*, in itself, at one level, a document of civilisation which is also a document of barbarism—something that a critical humanism will always know. And this is deeply, unquestionably and profoundly at the heart of humanism. How do we understand Bhishma's predicament, how do we read it sensitively, comparatively, both on its own terms and in terms of our global responsibility? How do we get around Saul Bellow's condescending phrase, "I'll read Zulu writing when you can show me a Zulu Tolstoy" (or was it Proust?). For the practice of this new humanism the aesthetic becomes important. Said quotes a passage from Richard Poirier's *The Renewal of Literature* in which he had written, "language is also the place wherein we can most effectively register our dissent from our fate by means of our troping, punning, parodistic echoings, and by letting vernacular energies play against revered terminologies" (as cited in Said, 2004, p. 29). The quotation reminds us that Said's humanism is not the diametric opposite of the decentering of origins in favour of beginnings found in poststructuralist/posthumanist thought, and especially in Derrida who, referring to one's ethical responsibility, had emphatically stressed, in a manner not dissimilar to Said's, that "one must be just without being noticed for it" because ethical responsibility requires a

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<sup>1</sup> See Said in *Representations of the Intellectual*: "Giambattista Vico, who has long been a hero of mine" (1994, p. 45).

messianic impulse without a Messiah who is only "the name of a possibility" (1997, p. 107-108).

Said feels most comfortable with literary texts and it is in literature that he finds the most exciting and productive ways in which the Eurocentric assumptions about humanism may be challenged. As late modernists, and those of us not constrained by ideological absolutism, including that of religion, know only too well literatures do not exist only within national contexts, nor are they generically stable. Which is why a nationalistic humanism no longer provides all the critical tools; but religious enthusiasm too has its dangers. The coupling of nationalistic humanism with religious enthusiasm by Said is conscious because both produce intolerance and an inhumane world view. So a critique of Eurocentrism in so far as it challenges forms of absolutism, and recognises the "contradictory, even antinomian and antithetical currents running" (2004, p. 45) in our complex world, is also a challenge to anti-secular and anti-democratic politics in the name of religion. These currents find their expression in the aesthetic domain, and for our purposes, in literature where the turn to philology is a legacy of the humanist enterprise. This philological turn need not be a Dr Casaubon-like (in *Middlemarch*) reactionary learning that would lead to the key to all mythologies. What this turn requires is attention to detail and an openness to the language of the text; if done well it leads to what Said calls 'heroic first readings' by us in response to a recognition of authorial heroism.

I wish to turn to Said's spectres of humanism by bringing into dialogue Said and the writer with whose interview and review essay we began this presentation. The writer in question, Salman Rushdie, is also ambivalently located in postmodern minor narratives and a humanist understanding of deep structure, the former the world of surfaces, of the collapse of the high and low, the latter the wish to know, the wish to dismantle Eurocentric assumptions and deconstruct orientalist representations. I wish to advance the dialogue by two moves. The first is through a critical deployment of Said's references to a specifically Arabic hermeneutics to Salman Rushdie's own engagement with Islam's holy book. And second, embedded in the first, is through a form of textual criticism that engages with vernacular resistance. Both moves grow out of Said's own understanding of humanism as an inclusive critical practice.

Said very correctly critiques a humanism that locates itself centrally within a Western intellectual tradition that refuses to admit an unruly multicultural mob knocking at its doors. Humanism in this reading is defiantly canonical and dismissive of any alternative splitting of reason. Humanism here can only be practised by people who can locate themselves unproblematically in an essentialist Western tradition or who can be easily assimilated into it, notably someone like Said himself. Said's critique, as we have already outlined, is strong, principled and in the end unarguably sensible. What is less obvious is his critique of those exclusive institutions such as religion that refuse critical engagement with an alternative humanism finely attuned to modern realities. What is Said's take on the sacred which, after Vico (one of his heroes), is unknowable and therefore inconsequential because it is not 'man' made? To Islam, it may be argued, and persuasively I think, Said continues to bring an uncritical, perhaps even a romantic, vision, primarily because he separated the secular from the sacred. And this poses a serious problem because the primacy of the sacred in Islam as a social formation as well as a belief system is non-negotiable. For Said

the two has to be differentiated and it is sufficient to show that Islam, as a social formation rather than as a religion, is woefully misunderstood by the West (and by China and India too, let us add).

The role of humanist criticism with reference to the Islamic sacred cannot be ignored and the question one asks is: What then of an Islamic humanism incapable of addressing the 'constructedness' of its holy book, a text which too had an historical beginning and is therefore made by us and is part of the larger humanist project? Let us, therefore, turn to a model of critical thinking that Said advances in the few paragraphs in which he places a schema for heroic first reading on Islamic principles. Said's interest here is in presenting another humanistic heroism with its 'own built-in constraints and disciplines' which can be placed in dialogue with our received ideas about humanism. Let us follow Said's synopsis of what he has called this "common enterprise" (2004, p. 68), an enterprise little known among Eurocentric scholars but, I suggest, certainly known to Orientalists who didn't think it merited attention.

The Qur'an, Said correctly points out, is in Islam the 'Word of God' which, by virtue of its unmediated, unwritten utterance, can never be known fully. But it has, miraculously (some of these modalities are my own not Said's) come to us as a written text and must therefore be subjected to some kind of literal paraphrase with the explicit proviso that others have already attempted a paraphrase. What is then established is a continuum of witnesses in the act of reading which makes any reading dependent on the chain of witnesses. Reading therefore becomes systemic and is called *isnad*, the common goal of which (as the product of interdependent witnesses) is to arrive at the *usul* (the text's ground or essence). There is a 'model' reader here, a reader willing to commit himself to finding the 'truth', the act itself called *ijtihad* (a word that derives from the same root as *jihad* or holy war). So in this sense, although Said himself does not tarry here, the effort has the sense of religious piety, and linked to the question of 'permissibility'. To whom is *ijtihad* available is another matter; is it available to everyone or as the scholar Ibn-Taymiyya (1263-1328 CE) says only to the *as-salaf al-salih* (pious forerunners) who should be followed? Although this reading has been challenged, it remains the dominant mode of interpretation in Islam. Said adds, quite correctly, that it is wrong to say that alternative positions have not been advanced in Islam but what this paradigm of interdependent witnesses points to is the limits to what is permissible. To understand a text's rhetorical and semantic structures, one works within a certain law, within the requirements of jurisprudence; in short there is an ethics of responsibility in interpretation from which it follows that "one cannot just say anything one pleases and in whichever way one may wish to say it". We are reined in by this "sense of responsibility and acceptability" (2004, p. 69).

Said's example is given as an instance of the need for a critical dialogue between textual paradigms, the point here being that an Islamic hermeneutic is not unlike a humanist hermeneutic as both work from similar principles. What is not taken up is the question of textual authority and the extent to which an Islamic hermeneutic has sealed itself off from the principles of Western humanist textual criticism. The equivalent of the system of interdependent readings or *isnad* in the Western tradition began with the scholia tradition of annotations. The agential noun form of the word 'annotate' (from the Latin *annotāt-*, participial stem of *annotā-re* or *adnotā-re* to put a note to; the latter from *ad* to + *notā-re* to mark'),

annotator, meaning “one who annotates or writes notes to a text”, first appeared in 1663. Two citations later, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED 2nd ed.) cites the early orientalist Henry Thomas Colebrooke’s observation on Sanskrit textual annotators (1808): “A crowd of annotators whose works expound every passage in the original gloss”. Colebrooke’s reference to “a crowd of annotators” points to an annotating principle which was the dominant form of textual criticism in pre-colonial India. The annotator in this reading of his craft was an interpreter if not a co-author of the text, written or oral. The defining feature is a different, anti-auratic reading of text and author, both of which were seen as collective products of culture. The Indian epics stand out pre-eminently in this respect but so do two of the great annotations of the *Bhagavadgītā*, the Hindu revealed or *śruti* text—the *gītābhāṣyas* of the *advaitic* Śankara and the *viśiṣṭādvaitic* Rāmānuja—where commentaries immeasurably transformed the ‘original’ text (which of course had undergone its own internal annotations, interpolations and variant readings before, as a fixed religious document, it arrived at its final form around the time of Christ (Gambhirananda, 2000; Sampatkumaran, 1985).

Colebrooke’s comments on Sanskrit annotations may be conveniently, but incorrectly, dismissed as ‘orientalist’ irony. I consider them as a scholar’s recognition of cross-cultural Indo-European continuity. To him Sanskrit textual annotations are part of the tradition of the classical scholia, or commentaries, and scholiasts, or commentators, who provide us with tools which we now refer to as textual criticism, a rigorous methodology about which, in 1913, the Biblical scholar Alexander Souter wrote in the context of the New Testament recensions, “if we possessed the twenty-seven documents now composing our New Testament exactly in the form in which they were dictated or written by their original authors, there would be no textual criticism of the New Testament” (1913, p. 3). Often the word ‘Enarratio’, “an expository narrative, designed for guidance and education”, would be attached to the work of a scholiast such as Asconius’s commentaries on Cicero (AD 54–57) and of the Eastern Greek scholar Eustathius (c. 1115– c.1195), whose description of the first line of the *Iliad* alone runs to ten pages. The principles of literary scholarship inaugurated by these early scholiasts have become the stock-in-trade of humanist textual criticism. In establishing the text of Homer, for instance, textual variants were noted, different styles were recognised (the story of Dolon in the *Iliad X* was looked upon with considerable suspicion since its style was so different from the rest of that epic), use of words in an author’s entire corpus was seen to be a necessary guide to meaning and nuanced semantics and commentaries in which alternative readings were offered became indispensable.

Textual emendations, allegorical readings, comparative study of manuscripts, the construction of a proto-stemmatic theory of recension are some of scholiast legacy. The tradition so inaugurated was used in biblical scholarship where as early as the fifth century Procopius of Gaza (c. 460 – c.530) began what is known as the catena (which is something like the scholia) where running commentaries on a book of the Bible quoted sometimes verbatim the “opinions of several previous interpreters” (Reynolds & Wilson, 1991, p. 53).<sup>2</sup> I refer to the

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<sup>2</sup> The Greek Bible made its way into the Orient and both in Syriac and in Arabic there were commentaries on it. As a general rule, though, the Arabic versions of Greek texts were of little use when it came to establishing the original Greek text. This negative

humanist scholia tradition and to the foundational principles of textual criticism to point to Said's own blindness even as the insight into the Islamic hermeneutical tradition is canvassed. Although, Said, quite correctly, points to the limits of humanist interpretation (there is a juridical frame of reference that limits what is permissible), the fundamental fact of humanist textual criticism—the text itself as an editorial problem—is not addressed via a western humanist methodology when it comes to the Qur'an. I have quoted Souter's comments on New Testament textual recensions. For Said, one suspects, the textuality of the Qur'an is out of bounds, only the interdependent readings are legitimate points of entry.

Said's references to responsibility, jurisprudence and permissibility in respect of the Islamic hermeneutical tradition functions as a corrective to Swift's parody of 'out-of-control subjective frenzy' in *A Tale of the Tub*. I have a strong suspicion that the 'out of control frenzy' that Said speaks of was directed not so much towards Swift (valuable as he is as an analogy) but to the unnamed Salman Rushdie. I began this paper with Salman Rushdie's interview of Edward Said. I wish to spend the second half by looking at Rushdie as the exemplary humanist in terms of Said's own definition of the heroic humanist who like Said is ambivalently located between postmodern theory and humanist foundationalism, and occupies the position of both the "insider and outsider" (2004, p. 77) in the circuit of ideas. What is a humanist challenge to textual authority? What is his or her relationship to blasphemy in the context of discrepant and mutually exclusive jurisprudence? In writing about Islamic commentarial tradition why was Said silent about both Rushdie and the place of blasphemy in Islam? And what of the work of 'witnesses' who are not pious forerunners?

My point of entry is the stoning of the apostle Stephen in Acts of the Apostles. Chapters six and seven of Acts (the entire book is addressed to one Theophilus) are devoted to the Stephen. Chapter 5 had already introduced us to the Council of Jewish elders who concerned with the proselytising methods of the apostles wanted them killed. They are saved by a Pharisee named Gamaliel who basically argued that the apostles should be left alone. If what they preached came from men, their ideas would disappear; if indeed they came from God then we have no choice but to listen to them, "lest haply ye be found even to fight against God" (5:39). These are the early years of the Christian church (we may want to recall even now that the intertext of *The Satanic Verses* too are the early years of the Islamic church) and we get, along with theology, a schematic sociology of the foundational moments of the Christian Church. Stephen comes into the picture literally out of nowhere because the apostles require someone to look after their finances and the material well-being of their members. There is some

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reading of Arabic contribution, at least in one instance, argue Reynolds and Wilson is unjustified. I quote them at this point:

In Aristotle's *Poetics* the Arabic text, though exceptionally difficult to understand, offers a few readings which the editor must accept and several more which he must consider seriously, a reasonable harvest if the brevity of the treatise is borne in mind. That the *Poetics* should have been translated is a cause of some surprise at first sight; but the explanation of both the Syriac and Arabic renderings may be simply that all writings of 'the master of those who know' were held to be important enough to justify translation. For the most part, however, it was science and philosophy that interested the Arabs. (1991, p. 56)

strife between converts especially in respect of the treatment of widows and it is the latter's material needs which require special redressing. Clearly Stephen is a brilliant accountant, a great debater as well as a miracle-worker. Such a combination in a man can be dangerous and often it is those who have recently acquired freedom who find such a person threatening. So, recently freed Jewish slaves (by the Romans) foment strife. They bribe their own kind who now declare, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God" (6:11). Stephen is caught in a bind: witnesses have declared that he has blasphemed. How does he get out of it? His case is doomed even as he mounts a theological defence in which he retraces God's covenant from Abraham down to Jesus. And yet he makes no critical re-appraisal of the Mosaic 'law' of blasphemy under which he has been condemned. The synopsis has considerable rhetorical power and is even novelistic in its design but its very ingenuity triggers memory of the Old Testament God's own treatment of blasphemy. In Leviticus 24:10–16 we get the incident of the Egyptian-Israelite man who during a quarrel with an Israelite "blasphemed the name of the Lord, and cursed" (24:11). He is taken to Moses for judgement and Moses in turn waits for God to tell him what punishment should be meted out to him. And God replies,

Bring forth him that hath cursed ... and let all that heard him lay their hands upon his head [to testify that he is guilty], and let all the congregation stone him. And thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel, saying, Whosoever curseth his God shall bear his sin. And he that blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he that is born in the land [the foreigner as well as the Israelite], when he blasphemeth the name of the LORD, shall be put to death. (24:14–16)

This is the law as we find it when we turn to the full text of Stephen's defence that follows the accusation. The witnesses (which include jurists) testify, one presumes falsely, before the Council of Jewish elders that "we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us" (6:14). Witnesses declare that he has blasphemed; God had earlier declared that this is acceptable testimony. The defendant's penalty is death by stoning.

As Acts presents it, the charge is of course trumped up. The constructed crime, quite conveniently, is: he had spoken against God and his prophet Moses. And it seems that under the Mosaic code this is as blasphemous as you can get. Stephen's speech, which takes up all but two or three verses of chapter seven, rehearses Jewish resistance to the 'Holy Spirit', their failure to observe God's law and acknowledge the coming of the 'Just One', the promised Saviour, who was in fact murdered by them. The speech, in terms of the failure of the Jews to uphold the austere monotheistic covenant between God and Abraham, reads very much like a synopsis of the Qur'an with the difference that in the latter the covenant gets qualified via Muhammad and not via Christ. Stephen's defence, however, is too much for the jury and witnesses stone him to death as Saul is seen "consenting unto his death" (8:1). Acts begins to read like a novel as we know that this Saul, as Paul, the great Jewish convert, will soon become the ethical voice of Christianity through the letters he will write to the foundational Christian churches and their key players.

In the case of Stephen blasphemy is a useful excuse for punishment. We do not know what the other crime of the part-Israelite was in Leviticus but we may suspect that witnesses there too found blasphemy a very convenient excuse for killing off troublesome people. This is not to say that blasphemy has no historical power or that it has a purely ideological function; rather it co-exists with religion, belief, God and society which is why laws against blasphemy exist in so many countries. This much is clear from the *OED*. The word comes from the Greek βλασφημία via Latin blasphemā, meaning slander, blasphemy. The first meaning is given as “profane speaking of God or sacred things; impious irreverence”. The first *OED* citation around 1225 is from Middle English (þe seouede hweolp is Blasphemie, “that seventh hweolp is Blasphemy”). Caxton (1488) defines blasphemy as speaking “unhonestly of god” and Milton (1659) “blasphemy or evil speaking against God maliciously”. By 1768 (Blackstone) we get a meaning that touches more directly on our subject matter: “blasphemy against the almighty, by denying his being or providence”. The word also has a more common figurative and general meaning. In figurative use we find Bacon 1605 writing about blasphemy “against learning” for which one is punished. The general meaning—slander, evil speaking, defamation is now obsolete—and the *OED* has no citation after 1656: “To speak evil of any man is blasphemy”. Except for the 1768 quote most of these are not particularly helpful. How does one define “unhonestly” (Caxton), or “maliciously” (Milton)? Only Blackstone is clear: blasphemy involves denying God’s being and his role as the guardian of his creation. The *OED* does not help us when it comes to representation of God. Nor does it give us citations that show the consequences of blasphemy. There is no citation from Leviticus or from Acts. When does one cross the line in representing God in art? To what extent can one rewrite or change religiously iconic and culturally endorsed representations of God? This becomes a matter not of epistemology but of law and of legal interpretation which is governed by the social mores of the time. Given our subject matter we need to turn to blasphemy in Islam.

In Islam blasphemy, although more marked, is far less doctrinal, and textual support from the Qur’an is not readily forthcoming. ‘Blasphemy’ in Arabic has two words: *tajdīf*, a more religiously specific term, and *sabb*, a more general word for irreverent attitudes. The first does not occur in the Qur’an, while the second does but without a religious meaning. *Sabb*, meaning ‘revile’, occurs in an ambiguous passage in the Qur’an where God seems to be condoning heresy (*ilhād*) and unbelief (*kufr*) which, along with polytheism (*shirk*) are unpardonable sins in Islam.

Do not revile the idols which they invoke besides God, lest in their ignorance they revile God with rancour. (6:108)<sup>3</sup>

Arabic scholars, however, have pointed out that even if the two common words for blasphemy do not make their way into the Qur’an, it does not follow that the ‘intent’ of that word (as we understand it in Judaeo-Christianity) is non-existent. They point to Sura 7:180 where the verb *alhada* carries this meaning of the word (Netton, 1996, p. 3).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> All translations are from N. J. Dawood’s *The Koran* (1999).

<sup>4</sup> The next few paragraphs draw upon Netton’s work (1996).

God has the Most Excellent Names. Call on Him by His Names and keep away from those that pervert them. They shall receive their due for their misdeeds. (7:180)

Here 'pervert' is a clear injunction against profanity. However, it is not so much the presence of a single word that is offensive (as is the case with blasphemy in the Bible) but rather the totality of relations across a number of words found in the Qur'an which is important. Thus blasphemy is not simply reviling God through language, but a Muslim's total attitude towards *kufr* (unbelief), *ilhad* (heresy) and *shirk* (polytheism) that becomes important. But above and beyond all this is the figure of Islam's prophet Muhammad. Indeed, such is his extraordinary reverence among believers that, in many ways, it is a lesser crime to 'blaspheme' against God than to doubt Muhammad's role as the ultimate and final prophet before the Day of Judgment. Although he never claimed to be anything other than mortal, Islam stands and falls on the inviolability of his personage. There is a telling Persian adage which makes this clear: *bā khudā diwānā basad, bā Muhammad hoshiyār* ('you may take as many liberties as you like with Allah, but beware of transgressing Muhammad').

There is much in the Rushdie Archive at Emory University that shows Rushdie's fascination with blasphemy, religion, the nature of God and the unquestionable nature of the Qur'an as the unedited word of God: nothing out of place, the words as recited by Muhammad upon the instigation of Angel Gabriel. It is like *śruti* texts of the Vedas, unauthored, unmediated, in need of no amanuensis, although no Muslim would condone this connection with the texts of a polytheistic religion. The archive is large and its entry points many. My task is limited as my aim is to explore the genesis of Rushdie's interest in the Qur'an and, concomitantly, the genesis of *The Satanic Verses* by examining what Said's new humanistic criticism would have looked like had he linked the Islamic hermeneutical tradition of reading the Qur'an with the scholiast tradition of annotation and textual criticism. For the point is that in an inclusive humanism, as Said himself had noted alluding to Vico, the world is made by men and women, and not by God. Did Rushdie, like Stephen in Acts of the Apostles, mean to offer another, synoptic, narrative of a holy book? When did his interest in the genesis of secrecy in Islam begin? Was there a conscious plan to deconstruct the Qur'an itself? And was he aware of the consequences of such an undertaking?<sup>5</sup> In terms of Said's humanism and democratic criticism are these not centrally questions that a humanistic critic would ask? The matter of textual authority is paramount because for the written word text and transmission constitute the two crucial elements of humanist exegesis.

In the Rushdie Archive there is an undated sheet of paper (which we may date November 1987) where we read: "I've been waiting 20 yrs to write about the incident of the satanic verses" [ca. 1987]. If we go back in time "20 yrs" this places Rushdie more or less in his final year at Cambridge University (1965-8). In *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (2012, pp. 38-45) we read that in his final year, "at the ripe old age of twenty", he "found out about the satanic verses" (p. 38). In

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<sup>5</sup> The opening day is Valentine's Day, Tuesday 14 February 1989, the day of Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie: "I inform the proud Muslim people of the world that the author of the 'Satanic Verses' book ... and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its content, are sentenced to death. I ask all the Muslims to execute them wherever they find them" (2012, p. 5).

Part Two of the History Tripos he was expected to choose three subjects from a wide list. He chose colonial Indian History since the Indian Mutiny (1857 – 1947), the first century of American Independence (1776–1877) and for his third, “Muhammad, the Rise of Islam and the Early Caliphate”. Unfortunately too few students chose the last of these papers, which was cancelled. Rushdie, himself godless but after his father “fascinated by gods and prophets” (2012, p. 39), persevered and persuaded a King’s College medieval historian Arthur Hibbert to supervise him. Under his guidance Rushdie read a paper which was not offered again, at least not in the foreseeable future. Hibbert, Rushdie recalls, taught him two things: historical training required one to study events inside history “analytically, judiciously, *properly*”; it also demanded that one should be able to hear the historical subjects speak (2012, p. 40). The summary that he gives about the birth of one of the world’s great religions is written with these principles in mind.

The background to the genesis of Islam is to be located in the battle between a recently urbanised, patriarchal, ruling class and an older, matriarchal nomadic people denied access to wealth and power. Both were polytheists with the difference that the polytheistic gods of the new class had been transformed into kinds of tax-gatherers controlled by the rich families of the newly established city Mecca. Pre-eminent among these gods were the three Winged goddesses Al-Lat, Al-Manat, and Al-Uzza located at the gates through which caravans passed. To them offerings were made. There were hundreds of gods elsewhere and in the centre of the town in a building known as Kaaba (the Cube) there was a nonspecific ‘all-rounder of a deity’ called Al-Lah who would soon be appropriated by a new religion as the supreme, ever-present, omniscient, omnipotent monotheistic God. The revolution against the ruling class took the form of a new religious ideology created by an orphan, one Muhammad ibn Abdullah of the Banu Hashim family, later a merchant who journeyed with his uncle Abu Talib primarily to Syria. Here, as Rushdie’s Cambridge studies showed (and Cambridge one must add has a library with an unparalleled collection on the Orient) this Muhammad came into contact with Nestorian Christians who had adapted many of the Biblical stories to suit their own local conditions. Rushdie mentions the case of the Nestorian belief that Jesus was born under a palm tree in an oasis, which is how the birth of Maryam’s child in sura 19:22–25 is described. Muhammad, an astute and honest merchant, at the age of 25 married Khadijah, an older and much wealthier woman. A man prone to meditation and a desire for solitude, Muhammad would retreat into a cave on Mount Hira in search of peace of mind. It was on Mount Hira that from the age of forty onwards he begins to get visions of the Angel Gabriel from whom he receives the message of God known as the Qur’an. The message led to the formation, initially, of a small group of followers whose leader Muhammad, was both Prophet, a Messenger of God, as well as military strategist. The social dimension of the message grew out of the nomadic values of a matriarchal culture and, in part, because of this the followers of the new religion (not unlike the early Christians whose lives are extensively recounted in the letters of Saint Paul) continued to struggle for social and political legitimacy. Muhammad himself it seems, although a successful merchant, could not break into the closed circle of the Mecca ruling class.

It is at this point that Rushdie comes across the possibility of an act of compromise on the part of the Prophet of Islam. To break into the circle of the Meccan, polytheist, ruling class, might it not be desirable to accommodate some

if their gods into the new religion? A political act of compromise no doubt but might it not be worthwhile, for the moment at any rate? The evidence is tenuous and for the believer totally inadmissible but in the "Hadith, or traditions, about the life of the Prophet" one encounters what "became known as the incident of the satanic verses" (2012, p. 43). The account given, apocryphal to many but to a historian politically very possible, deals with Muhammad's recitation of a verse in his first version of sura 53 ('The Star') which contained the words: "Have you heard of al-Lat and al-Uzza, and al-Manat, the third, the other one? They are the exalted birds, and their intercession is greatly desired" (43). Later (the duration is never known) after yet another encounter with the Archangel, he returns to denounce the verses as a deception played on him by Satan who had appeared to him in the guise of Angel Gabriel. There may be many reasons for this change: his followers may have rejected the compromise; his amanuenses found the qualification contrary to the austere monotheism of the overall message; or any appeasement was a sign of weakness. Thus in the 'revised' version after the first sentence we read in Sura 53, "They are but names that your forefathers invented, and there is no truth in them. Shall God have daughters while you have sons? That would be an unjust division" (44).

A writer teases meanings out of historical and pseudo-historical material, indeed from any kind of narrative. Did the momentary compromise increase Muhammad's chances of getting a seat on the city council as orientalists like W. Montgomery Watt and Maxine Rodinson have argued? Did his religion, for the moment, attract many more pagans who preferred a modified monotheism with their beloved goddesses having a role to play alongside Allah, as angels do? Did the compromise fail because the city's grandees renege on the deal? "It was not possible to say for sure", writes Rushdie and adds, "imagination had to fill in the gaps in the record" (2012, p. 45). Two further points arise: one eschatological, the other proto-feminist. On the first score sura 22:51 reminds us that all prophets have been tempted by Satan at some stage in their careers. There is thus nothing extraordinary about the temptation of Muhammad, who like all other prophets, comes out of this temptation with flying colours. The second point is disconcerting. It was "clear", suggests Rushdie, that "it was the femaleness of the winged goddesses" which was disturbing to the new revelation (2012, p. 45). Being female they would be inferior and could not be children of God, as the angels were.

Sometimes the birth of a great idea revealed things about its future; the way in which newness enters the world prophesied how it would behave when it grew old. At the birth of this particular idea, femaleness was seen as a disqualification from exaltation. (Rushdie, 2012, p. 45)

When Rushdie read about the incident in his final year at Cambridge he was taken in by the remarkable nature of the story. It had great potential for a novelist, something he didn't know then. He filed it away in one part of his brain. "Twenty years later he would find out exactly how good a story it was" (2012, p. 45) concludes Rushdie not without a sense of irony.

The writer, Rushdie notes, agrees to a ruined life and in an inversion of the Faustian contract, "gains, if he is fortunate, perhaps not eternity, but, at least,

posterity" (n.d.-a).<sup>6</sup> This humanist gesture extends to Rushdie's conscious invocation of Dante, Robert Southey (who told a friend that Byron's Don Juan should have been called 'The Satanic Verses'), Voltaire, Defoe (who provides the epigraph to the novel) and, above all, Blake whose cryptic line "without Contraries is no progression" (1988, p. 34) explains many of the notes in the archive.<sup>7</sup> Against the oppositions, against the active-passive, we get the old middle voice, the voice of deferral, the voice of the *différance*. Rushdie's archive does not mention this word, but it is clear that he has the same kind of interest in philology that Said writes about. There are a number of places in the archive where Rushdie jots down derivations of words. In one instance he notes that the word 'babble' comes from the Dutch 'babbelen' (via Latin *babulus*) and has nothing to do with the 'Babel' of the Book of Genesis which quite possibly is from the Assyrian *babilu* meaning 'gate of God.' There is an undecidable aspect to meaning which is not captured in the oppositions of 'compromise/no compromise', 'angels/devils', 'secular/profane', 'black/white' and need to be replaced or rethought through words whose semantic configurations are always in flux and are in a sense 'in process'.

A belief incapable of being metamorphosed (or to use Rushdie's own neologism 'metaphorphosed'), a belief marked by "one one one ... [a] terrifying singularity" (Rushdie, n.d.-a), leads to melancholia since the singularity destroys the very idea of contraries (after Blake). The imagination is hedged in and finds little room to manoeuvre because with the loss of multiplicity, paradoxically enough, comes the death of God. The legacy of Muhammad is to leave behind a God who is dead because he and his message become more powerful than God. Notes Rushdie, "objective information about him [Muhammad] is forbidden ... there is a saying: 'you can say what you like about God but be careful with Muhammad'" (1989).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In *Joseph Anton* (2012) we read, "Throughout the writing of the book [*The Satanic Verses*] he had kept a note to himself pinned to the wall above his desk. 'To write a book is to make a Faustian contract in reverse, it said. To gain immortality, or at least posterity, you lose, or at least ruin, your actual daily life'" (2012, p. 91). The title of the novel, *The Satanic Verses*, when translated into Urdu (*Shaitāni Āyat*), into Farsi (*Āyat-e-Shaitāni*) or into Arabic (*Āyat al-Shaitāniyya*) gives rise to disturbing hermeneutic possibilities since the word for verse (*āyat*) is used to refer to the *suras* in the Qur'an itself. The unease one has is that such possible readings may trigger a very different kind of reception of the title of Rushdie's book in speakers of these languages. These associations are certainly not available to speakers of other languages such as Hindi where the translation is *śaitāni kāvya* or Sanskrit where the translation is *asurim śloka*.

<sup>7</sup> On a single sheet (Rushdie, n.d.-a) a list of 'contraries' is placed under the headings "Chamcha" and "Gibreel". So under Chamcha we get: Devil-angel, Translated ('metaphorphosed'), Reason, West (deracinated), Pale, Quiet (introvert), Doubt, Secular, Compromise, Day, Dreamless, Conquering (sullen), Shaitan, whereas under Gibreel we are given: Angel-devil, Translating ('metaphorphosed'), Fantasy, East (racist!), Dark, Loud (extrovert), Certainty, Religious, Extreme, Night, Dreamfilled, Conquered (madness), Gibril. Each of these items has its corresponding contrary (as in Blake). It is interesting that on the same page Ally is also mentioned like a mediating (feminist?) principle and linked to the pagan goddess Allāt (Al Lat) with items such as "process", "life", "hard", and "struggle", under her name.

<sup>8</sup> Photocopy of an interview in *The Sunday Times*, 22 January 1989, some three weeks before the fatwa.

*The Satanic Verses* negotiates the difficult terrain of literary representation in Islam and after René Girard's work shifts the focus from 'effects' to textuality as it examines the place of allegorical readings in literature, the nexus between the novel and belief and the need to overcome the mediator (on the part of both the narrator and the character) before a new form of knowledge can come into being (1976). In a note in the archive Rushdie referred to 'freedom of thought' in the same manner in which Said had referred to a humanist criticism that would be the property of everyone and not simply that of Europe. Rushdie continued, "I find myself thinking that one day the Muslim world will realise, as post-Enlightenment Europe has realized, that freedom of thought is precisely freedom from religious control. And I hope that the Muslim world will come to accept the truth of what I've been saying all these years—that the row over The Satanic Verses is, at bottom, an argument about power, about who has power over the Story" (n.d.-b).

I turn to Said's published lectures on humanism with which I began this essay. The penultimate chapter of the book is an essay on Auerbach's magnificent *Mimesis*, "an exile's book" (2004, p. 97), which Said says, embodies "the best in humanistic work that I know" (p. 85). Throughout the lectures Said singles out Auerbach as the exemplary humanist critic and thinker, an example of a humanistic practitioner of the highest order, a writer whose work is the "hallmark of philological hermeneutics" (2004, p. 92). The influence of Giambattista Vico too is clear: each age has its own method for "seeing and then articulating reality" (2004, p. 91) and since human beings make their own history authors enter into dialogues with each other across historical divides (2004, p. 91). In the first, and for many the most brilliant, essay in *Mimesis* ('Odysseus' Scar') Auerbach argues that Homer conceals nothing; there is no devious design in the epic poet, he is simply a harmless liar. Biblical stories and let us add Qur'anic narratives too are a different matter. Their narrator, the Elohist, or the Islamic Prophet is a political liar who presents his stories as historical truth and invests them with psychological depth and moral values. There is something terribly 'tyrannical' about this narrator who presents God's gift of death to Abraham as an absolute covenant between man and God. And yet in Stephen's retelling he supplants the Elohist and becomes the Homeric narrator who conceals nothing.

Like Homer Rushdie too seems to conceal nothing. *The Satanic Verses* is an instance of a heroic reading, one that confirms Said's own definition of a humanistic critique that is not simply the property of the West. It uncovers an alternative tradition of textual witnessing, in this instance, a critical extension of the tradition of interdependent readings called *isnad*. The *usul*, the truth, uncovered here disrupts the tradition through an extraordinary effort, through an *ijtihad* that is not culture-specific but draws on a humanistic universalism. It is arguable that in the case of Rushdie he crossed the juridical lines of permissibility and in that sense abrogated his right to engage with a great and honoured holy text. But this is exactly what Stephen had done in his re-writing of the grand biblical narrative in his legal defence. My point is that Rushdie engages in pushing humanistic boundaries, precisely the challenge posed by Said's lectures on humanism, and by Auerbach's own discussion about how Christianity shatters the "classical balance between high and low" (2004, p. 106). Regrettably when it came to Islam Said himself did not push these boundaries to the same extent, preferring to leave his observations simply as an Islamic hermeneutical paradigm that Western critics have ignored. There are many

moments in Said's reading of Auerbach when the Qur'an (which like the New Testament has also been prefigured in the Old Testament) could have been used as another proof text. Apart from a reference to Goethe's interest in the Persian poet Hafiz and in the idea of absolute submission on the part of the Muslim, Said does not push the insights of Auerbach towards an understanding of the Islamic text. It is an act which would have demonstrated how a post-orientalist critique actually works. Rushdie did not ignore the paradigm but showed that for the Islamic textual hermeneutic of a 'chain of witnesses' to enter into a dialogue with modernity it too has to incorporate precisely the modes of textual questioning enshrined in the received scholia tradition. Good theory, as in the case of Said's reflections on humanism, and great writing, as in the case of *The Satanic Verses*, engage with the same problematic: how to make the outsider an insider, and how to make the principles of humanism part of collective everyday life, how, like Auerbach's Dante, to show that the past is realised in the present through figurality and how to "reconstruct the history of [one's] own time as part of a personal commitment to the field" (2004, pp. 115-6) to make knowledge and not be its passive receptacle. Humanism is not an exclusive system restricted to a canonical understanding of the Western intellectual tradition alone; it finds exemplary form only when, as in the case of Auerbach or Rushdie, there is a clear admission that one can understand the world, humanistically that is, "from the limited perspective of one's own time and one's own work" (2004, p. 117). And in spite of Said's silence on the textuality of Islam's holy book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* makes the Other no longer an unruly mob knocking on the doors of a Eurocentric humanism but a group which extends the boundaries of humanistic criticism and makes it part of a robust, critical, self-reflexive participatory democracy. In this context Said himself would have acknowledged our right to read his own works not as exemplary gospel truth but as works that attempt to think through what James Clifford said were the totalising habits of Western humanism.

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