

# Demonizing Discourse in Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses"

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SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *The Satanic Verses* (1988) is one of the relatively few works of fiction to have made a significant and permanent impact outside the enclosed world of literature. Despite W. H. Auden's assertion that "poetry [by which he meant imaginative literature in general] makes nothing happen" (242),<sup>1</sup> this novel has clearly made a number of things happen. It has led to the loss of over twenty lives. It made its author go into hiding from the Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* of 1989, where he has remained under government protection ever since. Above all, coinciding with the ending of the Cold War, it has played a significant role in redefining the West's image of itself. The Other is no longer the threat of Communism, but that of Islamic fundamentalism—far more of a paper tiger than the very real nuclear menace offered by the USSR and its allies. The book was similarly used by Islamic clerics to reinforce their image of the US (and its Western allies) as the Great Satan—doubly ironical seeing what a fierce critic of American policy abroad Rushdie had shown himself to be in *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey* (1987). The Iranian President Khamene'i told his followers, "*The Satanic Verses* . . . is no doubt one of the verses of the Great Satan" (Appignanesi 87). In giving Rushdie's ironic title a literal reading (although itself figurative in another way) Khamene'i politicized the novel irrevocably. The Ayatollah Khomeini justified his *fatwa* against Rushdie by similarly accusing him and "the world devourers" (the West) of publishing *The Satanic Verses* as "a calculated move aimed at rooting out religion and religiousness, and above all, Islam and its clergy" (Appignanesi 90). Considering that the clergy in Iran occupied the highest positions of

political power, it can be seen how threatening Rushdie's novel must have appeared to the leaders of an Islamic theocratic state.

Whereas Western politicians have chosen to represent this conflict as a battle between democratic freedom of speech and autocratic censorship or even terrorism (the *fatwa*), Rushdie's ideological stance, both within the novel and in his numerous comments on its reception, is a great deal more complex and problematical. In an article written about responses to the book, "In Good Faith" (1990), Rushdie insists that he has "never seen this controversy as a struggle between Western freedoms and Eastern unfreedom." Instead, he asserts, his novel champions "doubts, uncertainties." "It dissents from the end of debate, of dispute, of dissent" (*Imaginary Homelands* 396). In defending his right to defend all issues endlessly, to postpone closure indefinitely, to oppose certainties of all kinds whether they originate in the East or the West, Rushdie is clearly positioning himself as a writer in a postmodern world where nothing can be asserted with assurance. "I am a modern, and modernist, urban man," he insists in the same essay, "accepting uncertainty as the only constant, change as the only sure thing" (404-05). This refusal to countenance any of the grand narratives that have governed Eastern or Western civilization is precisely the stance that Jean-François Lyotard identifies as central to the postmodern condition.<sup>2</sup> Rushdie has been simultaneously hailed by many critics as the preeminent practitioner of postcolonial writing which is normally characterized by its opposition to the values and ideology of the metropolitan centre. While postmodernism itself is said to embrace cultural relativity, it tends to prioritize relativity *per se*, whereas postcolonialism normally prioritizes non-Western cultural diversity. In other words there is an implicit conflict in the two positions: postcolonialism adopts specific political positions which postmodernism goes out of its way to relativize.

Rushdie's own life history further complicates this dichotomy. Brought up a Muslim in a Hindu country, he was sent to an English public school at the age of fourteen, and chose to stay on in England after obtaining a degree in History at King's College, London. Self-exiled from his native country, he was repeatedly rebuffed by the inherent racism he met with in his adopted

country. Prior to the proclamation of the *fatwa* Rushdie was one of the acutest critics of the Thatcher regime's brand of racist politics. After he was placed in the care of the British security services, he found himself in the ambivalent position of an adopted citizen owing his life to a government that was simultaneously passing anti-immigrant legislation motivated by the fear of being swamped by alien races. Marginalized racially, Rushdie nevertheless belongs more to the centre of the dominant culture when considered in terms of class and wealth. He has turned the hybridity of his migrant (as opposed to immigrant) status into a desirable if uncomfortable mode of existence. It offers him freedom from "the shackles of nationalism," but it is "a burdensome freedom" (*Imaginary Homelands* 124). It means that writers in his position "are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective, because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society" (19). As an insider, Rushdie is postmodern in his validation of uncertainty. As an outsider, he is postcolonialist in his satirical subversion of the certainties of metropolitan (Thatcherite) politics and the center's exercise of power.

Rushdie attempts to reconcile these internal stresses by resorting to a trope—that of oxymoron—by means of which he seeks to celebrate the certainty of uncertainty, the singular affirmation of plurality. Inevitably he has been taken to task by each camp for supposedly embracing the opposing one. In particular, he has come under sustained attack for his quintessentially postmodern attitude by Marxists, especially by Aijaz Ahmad. Ahmad attacks Rushdie on the grounds that his fictional space is "occupied so entirely by Power that there is no space left for either resistance or its representation" (127). In Ahmad's eyes Rushdie lacks proper anti-imperialist political conviction. However, critics such as Ahmad embody a specific postcolonial interpretation of the political that is far too crude when applied to Rushdie's writings. Rushdie refuses to adopt any easy position in the postcolonial debate, because he stands on both sides of its divide. This enables him to discern in both dominant and emergent cultures the same desire to appropriate the truth for themselves and to use this truth to valorize their imposition of it on believers and dissenters alike.

Despite Rushdie's later protestations, there is no doubt that he set out in this novel to confront what he disparagingly calls "Actually Existing Islam" (by which he means "the political and priestly power structure that presently dominates and stifles Muslim societies") with the uncertainties governing the circumstances under which the Qu'ran came into existence (*Imaginary Homelands* 436). The original verbal battle between Muhammad and the poets who defended the polytheism he set out to replace, which is reenacted in Rushdie's fictional reconstruction of it, has since been replayed—verbally—between its author and the mullahs. Islamic fundamentalism squares off against Islamic secularism (Rushdie was brought up in a Muslim family where, however, "there was an absolute willingness to discuss anything." Appignanesi 30). As Aamir Mufti has put it, "in secularizing (and hence profaning) the sacred 'tropology' of Islam by insisting upon its appropriation for the purposes of fiction, the novel throws into doubt the discursive edifice within which Islam has been produced in recent years" (107). In effect Rushdie chooses to oppose the anti-imperialist discursive formation of Islam by pitting against it the alternative discursive formation of imaginative fiction. Rushdie seems to see in fictional discourse a neutral discursive space in which he can give free play to competing discourses that oppose both the discourse of Islam and that of Thatcherite nationalism. *The Satanic Verses*, then, can be seen as a bricolage of conflicting discourses framed by the controlling discourse of fiction. But just how neutral is a discourse that controls? In its postmodern form is not fictional discourse itself competing for dominance with the other discursive formations it seeks to incorporate within its all-embracing grasp?

The use of discursive formations, according to Michel Foucault, represents an attempt to control and contain the "barely imaginable powers and dangers," the "ponderous, awesome materiality" of language (*Archaeology/Discourse* 216).<sup>3</sup> Within *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie pits secular against sacred, nationalist or racist against transnationalist or migrant, historical against ahistorical, and above all, authoritative against fictional forms of discourse. I want to concentrate on Rushdie's attempt to use fictional discourse to undermine the totalizing discourses of

religion and nationalism. To undermine is not necessarily to destroy. Rushdie has said that the novel is an exploration of the "God-shaped hole" left in him after he had abandoned the "unarguable absolutes of religion" (Appignanesi 75). Apart from a brief moment of reverse apostasy during the period of the *fatwa*, he has remained a secular Muslim who has always aspired to achieve within an aesthetic context that transcendence experienced by the religious mystic. He maintains that art, like religion, can produce a "flight of the human spirit outside the confines of its material, physical existence" (*Imaginary Homelands* 421). Clearly the danger for someone holding this belief is that he will treat art or fiction as a transcendental signifier. Like many writers of the twentieth century, he is looking for an alternative religious experience outside the restrictive confines of an organized religion such as that of Islam (which literally means "Submission"). He would claim that, unlike Islamic fundamentalists, he does not seek to compel anyone to accept his aesthetic ideology. Nevertheless he clearly believes that this ideology is superior to that of either the fundamentalists or the imperialists. He has no wish to compel, but a strong wish to persuade.

This still leaves open to question why Rushdie should think that the discourse of art or fiction should have a truth-value unavailable to revealed religion. Can there be a hierarchy of discourses? According to Foucault all discourses are subject to their own particular confining sets of rules. If this is the case, why should the discourses of fundamentalist religion and nationalism find Rushdie's use of fictional discourse in *The Satanic Verses* so threatening? Is it because fiction claims to incorporate those other discursive formations within its own discourse and in doing so to reveal the will to power underlying their will to truth? (But doesn't the Qu'ran do the same thing in its treatment of contemporary poets?) Foucault identifies the will to truth as the most important of the three systems of exclusion that govern discourse. He claims that it has tended to assimilate the other two systems—prohibited words, and the division between reason and folly. Each discursive formation claims for itself the status of "true" discourse, concealing behind its will to constitute the truth of things its desire for power. This is obviously the case in the

instance of a theocratic state such as Iran where Islamic faith (of the Shi'ite variety) is invoked to justify a war against even fellow (Sunni) Muslims of a neighboring state such as Iraq. By calling it a *jihad* or holy war, by definition a war waged against infidels, such a state draws on the discourse of "true" religion to sanction its naked nationalist and political ambitions. In a similar fashion Mrs. Thatcher appealed to the "truth" of the rights to self-determination by the Falkland Islanders to sanction her desire to retain political power back in the metropolitan center.

But Foucault insists that the same great systems of exclusion govern the discourse of literature. Literature too feels that it has to extend its power over its readers by claiming truth for itself. According to Foucault, "Western literature has, for centuries, sought to base itself in nature, in the plausible, upon sincerity and science—in short, upon true discourse" (*Archaeology/Discourse* 219). One might argue that what is loosely referred to as postmodern literature does anything but base itself on nature. As Mimi insists in the novel: "I . . . am conversant with postmodernist critiques of the West, for example, that we have here a society capable only of pastiche: a 'flattened' world" (261). Rushdie has obviously read his Jameson.<sup>4</sup> Yet when Rushdie comes to defend fiction in his own person he claims that postmodern writing offers the truest reflection of contemporary human experience: a "rejection of totalized explanations is the modern condition. And this is where the novel, the form created to discuss the fragmentation of truth, comes in. . . . The elevation of the quest for the Grail over the Grail itself, the acceptance that all that is solid *has* melted into air, that reality and morality are not givens but imperfect human constructs, is the point from which fiction begins" (*Imaginary Homelands* 422). This comes close to basing fiction in nature by redefining the natural. Rushdie is unashamedly pitting his naturalized fictional discourse against what he terms (with an acknowledgment to Lyotard) the unnatural, totalizing discourses of religion and national politics. As Foucault suggests, the will to truth "tends to exercise a sort of pressure, a power of constraint upon other forms of discourse" (*Archaeology/Discourse* 219).

In effect Rushdie claims for fictional discourse an imaginative form of truth where freedom reigns in place of institutional

control. Fiction, he maintains, can flout the mundane facts and still appeal to the world of the imagination to claim that it represents the “true” or authentic transcription of human experience. In “Imaginary Homelands,” he argues that “[w]riters and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own images; they fight for the same territory. And the novel is one way of denying the official, politicians’ version of the truth” (14). Rushdie’s figurative allusions here are revealing. While he is ostensibly arguing about claims to truthfulness, his vocabulary (“rivals,” “fight,” “territory”) belongs to the world of power.

In the opening chapter of the novel, Rushdie forces his readers to become conscious of the paradoxical nature of fiction’s notion of “true” discourse: “Once upon a time—it was and it was not so, as the old stories used to say, *it happened and it never did*—maybe, then, or maybe not” (35). All fictional discourse is predicated by that “maybe.” It is for the reader to decide on the probability of the imaginative construct. *The Satanic Verses* begins by flouting any sense of factual reality with an impossible rebirth—two actors (as the two main protagonists are tellingly characterized) falling to earth without parachutes or wings from a height of 29,000 feet. Other improbabilities follow. Gibreel acquires a halo and Chamcha goat hooves and horns. A dead lover visits Gibreel on a magic carpet. Gibreel tropicalizes London’s climate. The British authorities turn immigrants into a water-buffalo, slippery snakes and a manticore, itself a beast of fictional invention. In effect Rushdie is exploiting the extended boundaries of fictional discourse to demonstrate that what is invented is not necessarily untrue if read figuratively. When Chamcha asks the manticore how “they” manage to turn the immigrants into such weird creatures, he promptly replies, “They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct” (168). But the novelist, Rushdie goes on to imply, has a superior power of description, which should enable him to overpower the descriptive discourse of the racist immigration authorities. Like the novelist, these authorities make the “story” they concoct about how Chamcha came to be unconscious (mainly due to the beating they gave him) “more convincing” by incorporating into

their fiction the fact that he was at any rate genuinely sick beforehand (169). Rushdie parodies their method of telling a story by starting off as they do with a fiction, such as the man-ticore, and then offering—not facts, but a figurative explanation for the seemingly unreal shapes they assume.

Interspersed with the “realist” chapters are chapters in which Gibreel is visited by unwanted dreams or nightmares. Paradoxically, within his surreal world of dreams Gibreel becomes the spectator or participant in a series of historically authenticated occurrences (suggesting that history itself is a collective dreaming about the past). His dream of Mahound (the Christian crusaders’ demonic term of abuse for Muhammad) incorporates numerous incidents from accounts of the life of Muhammad. Similarly the story of Ayesha makes free use of a widely reported episode that happened in Karachi in 1983 when Naseem Fatima led thirty eight Shi’a followers into the sea which they expected to part for them. Another narrative strand in Gibreel’s dream chapters—the account of the Imam’s return from exile—resembles the Ayatollah Khomeini’s return to Iran on the downfall of the Shah in 1979.

Gibreel is torn between a “real” world where the miraculous happens and a world of dreams where the miraculous is restored to an imagined but largely verifiable historical past. As Gibreel gradually drifts into a state of schizophrenia Rushdie further complicates the already confused distinction between material and imaginative reality by showing the barrier between waking and dreaming worlds slowly crumbling. Neither Gibreel nor the reader can be sure of where one world ends and the other begins. The resulting confusion can be either liberating or destructive. “The imagination,” Rushdie admits, “can falsify, demean, ridicule, caricature and wound as effectively as it can clarify, intensify and unveil” (*Imaginary Homelands* 143). On the other hand, Rushdie reveals his own prejudice when he inconsistently insists that “the opposition of imagination to reality . . . reminds us that we are not helpless; that to dream is to have power.” Here again we glimpse the will to power underlying fiction’s will to (imaginative) truth. Rushdie continues: “Unreality is the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so that it may subsequently be

reconstituted" (*Imaginary Homelands* 122). But what does he mean by "reality"? Apparently "our conventional, habit-dulled certainties about what the world is and has to be," a world "in which things inevitably get worse" (122). The dream worlds of the artist have "the power . . . to oppose this dark reality" (122). Their (postmodern) plurality, Rushdie asserts, brings the light of truth to a world benighted by the unitary truths of politics and religion. But the discourse of fiction is seen here to be as incapable as is all true discourse, according to Foucault, "of recognizing the will to truth which pervades it" (*Archaeology/Discourse* 219). It is as blind to its determination to establish its superior status as are the discursive formations of nationalism and Islam that it subordinates to its purposes. Discourse, like knowledge, is necessarily contaminated by its desire to dominate.

How does fictional discourse exercise its power of constraint on those totalizing discourses it opposes? Primarily by appropriation. It incorporates them into its own discourse, one which ostensibly throws all proclaimed truths into question. Whereas Muslims believe that the archangel Gabriel dictated God's verses to Muhammad, Mahound, in Rushdie's subversive version of the origins of the Qu'ran, exercises a form of telepathy by means of which he mesmerizes Gibreel into dictating what he (Mahound) needs from him. In other words Rushdie replaces the unauthored word of God by the psychologized interaction between the needful Prophet and his supposedly angelic mouthpiece—an internal projection. Since Gibreel is responsible for uttering under Mahound's spell both the Satanic verses and their angelic rebuttal, the fictional discourse places him in a position to throw doubt on Mahound's claim that the first set of verses came from Satan:

Being God's postman is no fun, yar.  
 Butbutbut: God isn't in this picture.  
 God knows whose postman I've been. (112)

Cast in fictional discursive form and undermined by Rushdie's use of a playful, punning tone, the absolutes of Islamic faith become humanized and relativized. The mere substitution of "postman" for "Messenger" reduces the sublime to the mundane. Rushdie repeatedly exploits the polysemantic nature of

language to make us conscious of the possibility of alternative readings that were present at the moment that the discourse of Islam privileged one of them for its own use. For instance, *Bostan*, one of the two gardens of paradise, is also the name of the plane which is blown up by Sikh terrorists in the opening chapter of the book. Paradise, then, within a framework of fictional discourse, offers no haven from the uncertainties of this world. The sight of perfection that Allie Cone glimpsed on Mount Everest is seen by this representative figure of the postmodern world to be unattainable in the here and now. Perfection entails absolute silence, according to Allie: "why speak if you can't manage perfect thoughts, perfect sentences" (296)? Entry into the world of language, as the writer of fiction knows, entails the compromises and ambiguities that accompany imperfection, a fact that the believers in scripture deny. Within Rushdie's fictional universe most certainties (especially those consolatory absolutes held by religion) crumble. Uncertainty is the only unchanging certainty that Rushdie perversely posits in the novel.

Within his own discourse Rushdie performs what Foucault terms a genealogical analysis on the discourse of Islam. Such an analysis involves investigating how that discourse was formed, what were its norms, and what were the conditions for its appearance, growth and variation (*Archaeology/Discourse* 231-32). Indeed it is precisely this interest in what Foucault terms genealogy that predominates in this novel:

How does newness come into the world? How is it born?  
Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made? (8)

Mahound's discourse is founded on the insistence that there is only one God. He imposes this monotheistic idea on the people of Jahilia (meaning the period of ignorance prior to the advent of Islam), themselves polytheists who have constructed their city out of the shifting sands of the desert. Mahound's insistence on repetitive ritual washing is itself a threat to the survival of their multifold structures built of dry sand, as well as offering a paradigm of the difference in their ideological positions. The Jahilian polytheists (like contemporary postmodernists) can accept a greater degree of linguistic discontinuity in their belief in gods with overlapping powers and domains than can Mahound,

who belongs to what Foucault terms the “‘critical’ group” which imposes “forms of exclusion, limitation, and appropriation” on the threatening linguistic universe (*Archaeology/Discourse* 231). Mahound’s triumph represents the imposition of a unitary belief system on a society that resembled India where “the human population outnumbers the divine by less than three to one” (16). Here Rushdie combines a postcolonial admiration for Indian diversity with a Western postmodern endorsement of the polysemantic nature of language. But he seems to forget that diversity can be (and was in the case of the British Empire) used to divide and rule.

What also emerges from Rushdie’s fictional historicization of the origins of Islam is that Mahound began life as a successful businessman (as Muhammad did) and subsequently used the new religion to consolidate in business-like fashion his secular hold on power. Mahound moves from the will to power to the will to truth which soon enough reveals the underlying will to power that resurfaces as the religious metamorphoses into the political. Mahound is also likened to Ibrahim (Abraham), who at God’s command abandoned his wife in the desert. The narrator comments, “From the beginning men used God to justify the unjustifiable” (95). Such an aside implicitly opposes a different discourse (humanism? feminism?) to that of religion. But simultaneously it gives narratorial approval to the opposing discourse, which defeats the ostensible postmodern stance of universal doubt. The context suggests that the primary discourse invoked is that of feminism. Much is made of Mahound’s imposition of a maximum of four wives on his followers while permitting himself twelve. In a section of the novel that particularly inflamed Muslims Rushdie parodies Mahound’s household by inventing the brothel in which Baal the poet (representative of the discourse of literature) parallels Mahound, and the twelve prostitutes he marries take on the names of the Prophet’s twelve wives. Sacred (that is, divinely condoned) and secular sexuality, like sacred and secular verbal creativity, are made to appear virtually identical in a fictional context. The distinctions that define Islamic discourse (Foucault’s external rules of exclusion) are subtly elided until that discourse merges into the discourse of fiction

where it becomes just another imaginative textual construct. In this instance Rushdie is more successful in undermining a unitary discourse by placing it in a discursive context that deliberately equates sacred and secular through the use of literary parallelism.

Rushdie has a more difficult task attempting a genealogical analysis of the discourse of nationalism, if only because the formation of nations predates recorded history. In the case of Britain he chooses instead to invoke the Norman conquest of 1066 (an event used by English historians to mark the beginning of the Middle Ages) by having Gibreel and Chamcha fall to earth at Hastings, the site of the battle in which William the Conqueror defeated Harold and replaced Anglo-Saxon civilization with a new regime. Just as William swallowed a mouthful of sand on landing at Hastings, Gibreel swallows a mouthful of snow, while Chamcha had already been forced to swallow a kipper, bones and all, "the first step in his conquest of England" (44). The narrative reminds us from the start that Britain is the product of countless invasions each of which has put new blood into its system. Gibreel invokes another royal foreigner, William of Orange, whose bloodless revolution in 1688 brought with it an influx of new ideas from the Continent. Gibreel reflects, "Not all migrants are powerless. . . . They impose their needs on their new earth, bringing their own coherence to the new-found land, imagining it afresh" (458). The newest conquerors are immigrants from the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent. Conquest, however, is not without its dangers. Both Williams died of unnatural causes—Rushdie refers in the novel to the later William's death from falling off his horse onto the hard earth he'd civilized. Similarly one of the two migrant protagonists and other immigrant characters in the novel meet unnatural deaths, some at the hands of the xenophobic British authorities who remain blind to their own mixed racial origins.

Margaret Thatcher, who had been in power for over nine years by the time the novel was published, comes in for harsher treatment than does Mahound, being referred to as "Torture. Maggie the Bitch" (269). Rushdie had been particularly enraged by a speech she had made after Britain's victory against Argentina in

the Falkland Islands (Las Malvinas) in which she “most plainly nailed her colours to the old colonial mast, claiming that the success in the South Atlantic proved that the British were still the people ‘who had ruled a quarter of the world’” (*Imaginary Homelands* 92). Unconsciously she was betraying the fact that she did not consider immigrants like Rushdie who had come from the ruled quarter to be a true part of the national identity. Rushdie goes further, arguing that “the British authorities, no longer capable of exporting governments, have chosen instead to import a new Empire, a new community of subject peoples,” referring to the post war immigration from the Caribbean (*Imaginary Homelands* 130). It is this attempt to reverse the course of history that enables Rushdie to establish a link between Mrs. Thatcher and the Imam, the contemporary representative of Islamic fundamentalism. When Mrs. Thatcher called for a return to Victorian values, Rushdie wrote, “she had embarked on a heroic battle against the linear passage of Time” (*Imaginary Homelands* 92). In the novel, Valance makes the same point more colorfully to a disconcerted Chamcha. The connection to the Imam becomes clear when the Imam tells an equally disconcerted Gibreel that he will smash all the clocks when he comes to power in the name of God’s “boundless time, that encompasses past, present and future; the timeless time, that has no need to move.” “I am eternity,” he asserts (214). Whereas Lyotard and Fredric Jameson both claim in their way that the postmodern entails a denial of the forces of history, Rushdie’s satire at the expense of these two modern leaders who have set out to reverse the chronological progression of time emanates more from his postcolonial belief in the need to acknowledge the historical effects of imperialism if these are to be overturned and left behind by the newly liberated peoples of the old empires. The truly postmodern response to Mrs. Thatcher’s and the Imam’s reversal of historical time would be to allow temporal and atemporal forces equal play.

Instead Rushdie attempts to subvert the uncreated word of God by rehistoricizing the origins of Islam (just as he undermines the Thatcher regime’s desire to return to the Victorian days of Empire by staging a race riot that is representative of contemporary immigrants’ militant rejection of the ideology of

imperialism). He does this by turning to a distinctive characteristic of literary discourse—literary form—in order to subvert the claims to truth of Islamic discourse. He employs a form that begins by attempting to distinguish through alternating chapters between the waking present-day “reality” of London (and Bombay) and Gibreel’s dreams of his participation in phantasmagoric historical events, and that deliberately engineers the collapse of that distinction as the fictionality of the controlling literary discourse asserts itself. In framing history within a fictional context this novel is not behaving like a typical postmodern work of art in which, as Jameson puts it, “the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether” (18). Rather, the mythologized past of the origins of Islam is given a sense of lived historical actuality by being dramatized within the novel; in the process it is demystified and returned to the fallible world of human need and error. Simultaneously the fictionalized episodes involving Gibreel’s and Chamcha’s escapades in Ellowen Deeowen (itself a product of fiction, a child’s nursery rhyme name for London) incorporate recognizable elements from contemporary history: references to Enoch Powell’s famous prediction in a speech to the House of Commons in 1969 that rivers of blood would flow if immigration to Britain were not severely restricted; recognition that Mrs. Thatcher was attempting “literally to invent a whole goddam new middle class in this country” (270); the easily identifiable London ghetto of Brickhall where the harassment of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent by police and white youths boils over into a full scale race riot. In these and other similar sections of the book contemporary reality constantly erupts into and disrupts the impression that we are occupying a world of pure imagination. This bricolage of historical and fictional components is not available to the discourse of religion for which a condition of the discourse is that the truth be accepted as of divine origin. Whereas religion asserts the truth of its discourse (itself a will to power), postmodern fiction ostensibly questions all forms of truth—those of both historical fact and fictional invention.

Or does it? Behind the postmodern pastiche artist cannot one discern the traditional writer as seer? However, instead of finding

truth in long established shared verities, Rushdie privileges a non-totalized, pluralistic, open-ended form of discourse that coincides with postmodern writing practices. Truth-value in his view is multiple and conflicting; it comes closer in definition to the satisfactoriness of belief favored by pragmatic philosophers. But the will to truth persists. A radical postmodern stance, on the other hand, would proclaim the inaccessibility of truth and confine itself to undermining all claims to absolute truth by and in discourse. Rushdie's position entails an assumption of superiority over those claiming to represent the truth by demonstrating the impossibility of doing so. Yet Rushdie implicitly elevates the multiple and conflictual nature of fictional discourse to a position of higher "truth." The very fact that it can incorporate the truth of religion into its manifold discourse—and *The Satanic Verses* certainly accomplishes this—is intended to show the superiority of plural fictional discourse to the unitary discourse of Islam. But, as Sara Suleri has acutely pointed out, "the desecriling [sic] of religion" in *The Satanic Verses* "can simultaneously constitute a resacrilizing of history" (190). Even history, however, is subordinated in the novel to the playful and irresistible powers of the artistic imagination. And, despite Rushdie's assertions to the contrary, the imagination goes well beyond the raising of questions in Rushdie's fiction. He tends to say one thing while accomplishing another. "Answers are cheap. Questions are hard to find," he asserted on the occasion of his emergence from hiding in September 1995 to talk about his latest novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (Montalbano E7). Yet the new novel shows him once again implicitly going beyond mere questions when deploring "the tragedy of multiplicity destroyed by singularity, the defeat of Many by One" (Wood 3). Why the insistence on binary polarity? What is wrong, for instance, with the One and the Many? Is this not the more genuine postmodern alternative to the exclusivity of the One?

Another characteristic of fictional discourse which Rushdie uses to subvert the truth claims of other unitary discourses is its ability to exploit a disparity between tone and substance. Having already written one comic epic (*Midnight's Children*), Rushdie considered *The Satanic Verses* the most comic of his

first four novels (Jain 99). By “comedy” he understands “black comedy” “that doesn’t always make you laugh” (Haffenden 240). Black comedy, which applies a comic tone to serious, even tragic subject matter, is a mode that in its written form is largely appropriated by literature. It is much used by postmodern writers confronted with a world on the brink of self-annihilation. Rushdie makes skillful use of this mode to undercut the serious tone which religious and political discourse employs most of the time. As the narrator says at one point, all he can offer in place of tragedy is the echo of it, a “burlesque for our degraded, imitative times, in which clowns re-enact what was first done by heroes and kings” (424). So heroes of the past (like Muhammad) are transformed into burlesque images (like Mahound) of their heroic models in this contemporary retelling of their stories.

Rushdie’s use of black comedy is particularly evident in the passages concerning politics, capitalist greed and racism, all of which tend to mutually support one another’s rhetoric. The epitome of this ethos is a minor character in the book, Hal Valance, an advertising executive who used to employ Chamcha for the voice-overs in his commercials. His hero is Deep Throat, who advised Bob Woodward: follow the money. Hal takes this advice to heart. Over lunch he confides to Chamcha:

“I . . . love this fucking country. That’s why I’m going to sell it to the whole goddamn world, Japan, America, fucking Argentina. I’m going to sell the arse off it. That’s what I’ve been selling all my fucking life: the fucking nation. The flag.” (268)

Hal uses market research to justify removing all signs of black immigrants from his commercials, ending up by sacking Chamcha for being “a person of the tinted persuasion” (267). His justification: “ethnics don’t watch ethnic shows” (265). Chamcha’s media image is “just too damn racial” (265). (It is interesting that most of Hal’s racial prejudices echo actual instances of racism that Rushdie records encountering while working for the advertising industry; see *Imaginary Homelands* 136-37.) Hal has no compunction about projecting his racism onto the immigrant community by accusing Chamcha of being too alien even for his fellow immigrants (for the “ethnic universe” as Hal puts it in his execrable commercialized jargon).

Political opposition to Hal's television show in which Chamcha starred comes from a black activist, Dr. Uhuru Simba. The police claim that, while under arrest, he fell off the lower of two bunks in his cell on waking up from a nightmare and broke his neck falling to the floor. The absurd improbability of this explanation is typical of the way Rushdie employs black humor to expose the repeated instances of racial bias offered during the eighties by the British police, who habitually employed a quasi-legal terminology (such as is used by the Community Relations Officer in the book) to lie their way out of their illegal actions. It is interesting to reflect that the reality of the lies told in court by the police during the prosecution of the Birmingham Five (or by Mark Fuhrman during the O. J. Simpson trial) was actually more subversive of social justice than the hilarious and absurd explanations offered in Rushdie's novel for the death in jail of Dr. Simba. The exposure effected by the supposedly superior discourse of fiction is less credible, if more enjoyable, than the simultaneous press exposure of police perjury by the supposedly inferior discourse of the media. Comedy, in this case black comedy, may expose the hypocrisies of those in authority, but cannot and does not attempt to affect the course of social history in the way that more utilitarian discourses can and do. In his role as a post-modern writer, Rushdie, in "bracketing off the real social world," (as Terry Eagleton writes of all postmodernists) "must simultaneously bracket off the political forces which seek to transform that order" (67-68).

The feature of fictional discourse that, it is claimed, distinguishes it from all other discourses is its unique and special use of language. Ever since the Russian Formalists argued that literary language defamiliarizes "everyday" language (but which? and whose?), there seems to have been general agreement that the discourse of fiction has at its disposal uses of language that other discourses may borrow but do not deploy systematically. If one accepts Foucault's assertion that discursive formations are governed by internal and external thresholds and limits "to master and control the great proliferation of discourse, in such a way as to relieve its richness of its most dangerous elements" and "to organize its disorder so as to skate round its most uncontrollable

aspects" (*Archaeology/Discourse* 228), then the question arises whether literature is privileged above other forms of discourse because it allows within its borders more of the dangers and disorder of uncontrolled discourse, ostensible chains of signifiers refusing all semblance of closure. Foucault at times suggests as much, as when he writes, for instance, that "literature's task is to say the most unsayable—the worst, the most secret, the most intolerable, the shameless" (*Power, Truth, Strategy* 91). Surely this is just what *The Satanic Verses* is doing? In a key essay, "Is Nothing Sacred?" Rushdie claims that one way in which his use of literary language acts in just this fashion is by undermining the monologic discourse of religion: "whereas religion seeks to privilege one language above all others, one text above all others, one set of values above all others, the novel has always been *about* the way in which different languages, values and narratives quarrel, and about the shifting relations between them, which are relations of power" (*Imaginary Homelands* 420). If Rushdie begins to sound like Foucault here this may be because he has read him and goes on in the essay to quote extensively from his "What Is an Author?"<sup>5</sup> It is significant, however, that neither Foucault nor Rushdie are entirely consistent in their claim to see in literary discourse a (negative) superiority over rival discursive formations.

By placing the monologic discourses of Islam and of nationalism within the polyglossic and heteroglossic discourse of fiction, Rushdie is able to decentre them and reveal the self interest that lies behind all special uses of language—except that of fiction to which he remains largely blind. Rushdie is extremely adept at using literary language to expose the polysemantic nature of terminology given a unitary (or, as Bakhtin would say, a centripetal) interpretation by the forces of authority. His sheer linguistic inventiveness produces neologisms whose uncomfortable conjunctions expose the contradictions inherent in the original word—"Bungledish" and "BabyLondon" come to mind. With one inventive word combination, London, the imperial center, the epitome of wealth and power, that held its colonial peoples in captivity as Nebuchadnezzar did the Jews, is by verbal association made to share the downfall of Babylon and become "the habita-

tion of devils" (Rev. 18.2). Similarly he strings words together the effect of which is to undermine the conventional distinction between them: "angelicdevilish," or "information/inspiration." Another linguistic feature that enables Rushdie to make seemingly impossible connections in this particular novel is his multiple use of the same proper names. He takes from Islamic history Ayesha, the name of the Prophet's favorite wife, and uses the same name for the most popular of the prostitutes in the Jahilia brothel, for the Muslim visionary who led her fellow villagers to drown in the sea, and for one of the girl prostitutes in London. Sacred and profane versions of womanhood become fused and indistinguishable by this linguistic sleight of hand. Whereas all the Ayeshas exist in Gibreel's dreams, the name of Gibreel's lover, Alleluia Cone, who belongs to the waking world, becomes metamorphosed via her nickname, Allie, to Al-Lat, the goddess denounced by Mahound, and to Mount Cone (the equivalent to Mount Hira in Islamic tradition) which Mahound ascends to receive the words of Allah, both of which feature in Gibreel's dream world. In this instance Rushdie is using language to reinforce the lack of distinction between material and imaginative worlds. Many other characters share their name with characters who belong to a different narrative sequence, such as Mishal, Hind, and Salman, Mahound's scribe, who bears the same name as the author. Salman, when he starts deliberately mistranscribing Mahound's dictation, discovers that his "poor words could not be distinguished from the Revelation by God's own Messenger" (367). Rushdie's mischievous use of his own name for this character cannot help privileging Salman's subversive discourse in which the natural slippage of language undermines the divine status of the Q'uran. Is this deliberate on Rushdie's part?—an attempt to escape from his own logocentrism by acknowledging it? Or is he once again giving narrative sanction to the superior status of literary discourse?

Rushdie repeatedly dramatizes the heteroglossic quarrel between languages that he, like Bakhtin, considers the special province of fictional discourse. Heteroglossia, according to Bakhtin, is "*another's speech in another's language . . . a special type of double-voiced discourse*" (324). On two occasions Rushdie pits a

poet's linguistic dexterity against the thunderings of, respectively, a politician and a prophet. Enoch Powell's racist speech threatening rivers of blood is appropriated by the immigrant Jumpy Joshi as the title and subject for a poem in which the river of blood of the slain is transformed into the river of blood of humanity in all its variety: "Reclaim the metaphor, Jumpy Joshi had told himself. Turn it; make it a thing we can use" (186). The second instance involves the linguistic battle between Baal, the satirical poet, and Mahound who stands opposed to all poets and poetry. Baal pits his poetic satires against Mahound's Recitation. The role of the poet, Baal declares, echoing Foucault, is to "name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it going to sleep" (97). Words, it turns out, can be mortal (as Rushdie knows to his cost). When Mahound finally has Baal in his power he orders him and the twelve prostitutes he married to be executed. "Whores and writers, Mahound," Baal shouts as he is dragged away. "We are the people you can't forgive." To which Mahound replies, "Writers and whores. I see no difference" (392). The grand narrative of religion can only see the plural and contradictory discourse of literature, what Rushdie has called "the schismatic Other of the sacred (and authorless) text," as a prostitution of the one truth (*Imaginary Homelands* 424). But doesn't the decentered discourse of postmodern literature equally see the grand narrative of religion as a prostitution of the truth? Why does its plurality and fragmentation make it preferable to a unitary master narrative? Different, yes. More comprehensive, because less insistent on the unitary nature of truth, maybe. But superior? It still betrays the same will to power as those grand narratives that it despises.

Although Foucault at times appears to suggest that fictional discourse enjoys some exemption from the limitations governing other discursive formations, in "The Discourse of Language," he treats literary discourse as an exemplary case when outlining the program for a critical (as opposed to a genealogical) analysis of discourse. Critical analysis involves identifying the forms of exclusion, limitation and appropriation that enable us "to conceive discourse as a violence that we do things, or, at all events, as

a practice we impose upon them" (*Archaeology/Discourse* 229). Rushdie sees fictional discourse as an opportunity to counter "false" narratives, such as that of national politics, with the supposedly superior truth-value of imaginative literature. "I think it is a curious phenomenon of the twentieth century," Rushdie has said, "that politicians have got very good at inventing fictions which they tell us as the truth. It then becomes the job of the makers of fiction to start telling the (real) truth" (Interview, BBC). Whether the "(real)" is Rushdie's or Malise Ruthven's explanatory addition when she transcribed this excerpt, the claim to have access to the truth (and what is an unreal truth?) reveals the contradiction that lies at the heart of Rushdie's fictional polemic. The "real truth" is exactly what every discourse aspires to embody, according to Foucault. In Foucaultian terms *The Satanic Verses* has the same truth-value as those discourses it sets out to undermine. Its author unabashedly asserts that its own set of truths consist of "hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs" (*Imaginary Homelands* 394). Rushdie additionally claims that his use of non-naturalistic material in his books constitutes "a method of producing intensified images of reality" (Haffenden 246). In privileging the non-naturalistic, is not Rushdie displaying his own discursive rules of exclusion, limitation and appropriation that do as much violence to things as do discourses privileging the naturalistic? Certainly others have interpreted his use of magic realism in less positive ways. Sara Suleri, for instance, felt that in *Shame* it represented a "startlingly conservative need to take refuge in formalism" (175). What appears to be a form of freedom in one discourse, that of literature, appears to be a sterile retreat within the context of another, that of liberal politics.

Rushdie's stream of comments about the nature of his work falls under one of Foucault's internal, as opposed to external, set of rules whereby "discourse exercises its own control" (*Archaeology/Discourse* 220). Foucault's diagnosis of the function of commentary is amusing, paradoxical and disturbing (for those of us engaged in the act of commentary). "Commentary," he writes,

“averts the chance element of discourse by giving it its due: it gives us the opportunity to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that it is the text itself which is uttered and, in some ways, finalized” (221). Commentary, in other words, is charged with restricting the potentiality of discourse to proliferate uncontrollably by the use of repetition. Very few other novels have generated the volume of commentary that *The Satanic Verses* has in the short period since it was published. Most of these commentaries have attempted to appropriate the book to a particular ideology—anti-Islamic, pro-Islamic, secular, post-colonial, postmodern. By ignoring the totality of voices and discourses within the novel, they seek to fix its meaning within their particular discursive field. Rushdie’s own voluminous commentary focuses on the plurality of meanings that postmodern fiction nurtures and exploits. But he remains blind to the fact that the indeterminacy and universal doubt which his commentary champions is frequently abandoned in the novel, not just when he assumes his post-colonial mantle, but also when satirizing the abuses of Islamic religion. Incidents such as the burning of the wax effigy of Mrs. Thatcher and the Imam’s swallowing whole the armies of his supporters demonize the two leaders of racist nationalism and extreme Islamic militancy respectively in such a way as to leave little or no room for alternative readings. Rushdie might argue in his defence that he has also demonized his narrator, although his treatment of him is more ambivalent—and therefore truer to the spirit of the postmodern—than is his representation of the two leaders. Often posing as the Devil, the narrator is careful to leave open the possibility that he may as readily represent “Ooparvala,” the “Fellow Upstairs” as “Neechayvala,” the “Guy from Underneath” (318). Under cover of this ambivalence the narrator in his own commentary on the action betrays a fundamental vacillation between a postmodern open-endedness and an older humanist defense of liberal values.

But what of my own and similar instances of literary commentary that focus on (and thereby implicitly endorse) the novel’s plurality of discourses, its multiplicity of voices, its postmodern resistance to totalizing explanations, positivist ideologies and narrative closure? Do not I have Rushdie’s own commentaries as

a guarantee of authenticity? Could not I argue that Rushdie and I in our commentaries are both opening up his fictional discourse, rather than circumscribing its fortuitousness, its propensity to semantically proliferate? After all the novel undermines not just Islamic fundamentalism but Christian fundamentalism (Eugene Dumsday, the American evangelist), not just British racism, but Indian racism (Hindu nationalism). It even makes fun of Baal, the representative of literary discourse within this literary discourse, Baal whose poems as he grows old degenerate into celebrations of loss. And yet does it really put down Baal's poetry? What form does his loss take? "It led him to create chimeras of form, lionheaded goatbodied serpenttailed impossibilities whose shapes felt obliged to change the moment they were set, so that the demotic forced its way into lines of classical purity and images of love were constantly degraded by the intrusion of elements of farce" (370). Is not this a description of Rushdie's own style of writing? Is not one of the features of postmodernism its conjunction of the demotic with the classical—what Jameson terms "aesthetic populism" (2)? Compared to the (modernist) clarity and finished quality of Mahound's verses, are not Baal's an anachronistic anticipation of postmodern literature? Does not Baal conveniently conform to Rushdie's definition of his own position within the contemporary literary universe? And do not Baal and Rushdie claim a privileged status for that position? And by writing this commentary am I not employing what Foucault calls "the infinite rippling of commentary" in order "to say *finally*, what has silently been articulated *deep down*" (*Archaeology/Discourse* 221)? Am I not privileging those qualities of semantic plurality and endless signification that characterize his and other postmodern literary discourses at the expense of the monologic utterances of religious, political and other authorities? Bakhtin, on the other hand, insists that "[l]anguage . . . is never unitary" (288). He claims that "[e]very concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear" (272). If *The Satanic Verses* is intent on exposing the centrifugal forces concealed within the discourses of politics and religion, then it would be appropriate for a commentator on the novel to concentrate on centripetal forces lurking behind its postmodern carnivalesque facade.

Instead, even the best commentators attempt to impose their own circumscription on the novel's polysemantic potential. Homi Bhabha views Rushdie's contextualization of the Qu'ran within the discourse of postmodern fiction that has brought on the charge of blasphemy:

It is not that the "content" of the Koran is directly disputed; rather, by revealing other enunciatory positions and possibilities within the framework of Koranic reading, Rushdie performs the subversion of its authenticity by the act of cultural translation—he relocates the Koran's "intentionality" by repeating and reinscribing it in the locale of the novel of postwar cultural migrations and diasporas. (226)

Bhabha is intent on revealing the impersonal operations of cultural translation. Blasphemy, he contends, constitutes "a moment when the subject-matter or the content of a cultural tradition is being overwhelmed or alienated, in the act of translation" (225). "Secular translation of the origins of Islam is itself the product of 'the disjunctive rewriting of the transcultural, migrant experience'" (226). Bhabha is clearly employing a post-colonial critical perspective. So he is endorsing, by reinterpreting, Rushdie's implicit ideological stance, on the grounds that it is representative of the way postcolonial newness makes its contribution to the postmodern world. As Foucault ironically observes, "the novelty lies no longer in what is said, but in its reappearance" (221). The apparent openness of postmodernism to both or all sides of an argument seems calculated to invite readers and commentators (even Rushdie) alike to try to tie down and circumscribe the plurality of meanings playfully offered by the text.

Foucault has not finished with me/us yet. Literary discourse, he argues, is also a prime example of a "fellowship of discourse" whose function is "to preserve or reproduce discourse, but in order that it should circulate within a closed community" (*Archaeology/Discourse* 225). Ridiculous, the reader will say; anyone who wants to can read *The Satanic Verses*. But then we look at what happens to those who attempt to read it outside the literary fellowship. Enraged Muslims are reminded by those within the fellowship of literature that this is mere fiction. To read into a novel an act of blasphemy is to misunderstand the nature of fictional discourse. As Billy Batusta, the producer of a "theologi-

cal" movie about the life of Muhammad says in the novel, when asked if it would not be seen as blasphemous, "Certainly not. Fiction is fiction; facts are facts" (272). Rushdie has echoed this argument privileging the literary reading over all others in his many commentaries defending the novel. So have most of the book's commentators. When Margaret Thatcher and her foreign secretary dared to apologize on behalf of the British nation for any offense the book might have caused and expressed a dislike of its contents, the *Financial Times* published a rebuke from within the literary community proclaiming that "they are wholly unqualified, in their capacity as elected politicians, to have a useful opinion" on matters of literary taste (Appignanesi 148)—a perfect instance of the operation of a fellowship of discourse claiming exclusive right to comment on one of its own productions.

So where do I stand as a critic of this novel within the fellowship of discourse? Should I, in typical poststructuralist fashion, explore the semantic multiplicity of this text, its inclusion of competing discursive formations, its selfconscious deconstruction of its apparent thematic position(s)? Yet is there not something hypocritical about this impersonal stance? Like Rushdie, I lost my religious faith long ago, and share with him his dislike of religious dogmatism as well as his admiration for the state of transcendence that religion can produce. Like him, I was politically opposed to the Thatcher government's implicitly racist attitudes while living in London during her period in office. I have no patience with the concept of blasphemy (which incidentally illustrates another of Foucault's rules determining conditions under which discourse may be employed—ritual, which restricts who may even talk about the discursive content). Am I to pretend that I have no opinions of my own? Would not my readers and students simply lose patience with my liberal refusal to take sides? The appeal to plurality, with which much of the time I find myself in sympathy, seems to me totally inappropriate when faced with the need to take a unitary stand on subjects like the Thatcher government's immigration policy.

Is not, then, what is missing in Rushdie's fiction any critique of the pluralist position he espouses in his fiction? In his commen-

taries on the novel, he is prepared to adopt, as we have seen, a unitary (and superior) attitude to the dogma of Islamic fundamentalism and Thatcherite racism. What is missing is any recognition on his part of this contradiction between his defence of his unitary stance as commentator of his own work and the creative plurality lying at the centre of his imaginative fiction. So there appears to be no escape from the blindnesses and limitations of discursive formations within which we operate. All I can do, and have done, is to make explicit the limitations of the literary discourses that on the one hand Rushdie and on the other hand I are working within. They are not superior to others. I choose to read and comment on fictional discourse finally because I personally feel more comfortable within it, because I like to enter that impossible world where writers name the unnamable, where language is a tool of power, where dreams hold their own with material reality, and where as Blake wrote (whom Rushdie quotes in the novel) "a firm persuasion that a thing is so" will "make it so" (338).<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Cf. "Art is a product of history, not a cause . . . so that the question of whether art should or should not be propaganda is unreal. . . . If not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would be materially unchanged" (Auden 393).
- 2 "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives." "Postmodern knowledge . . . refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (Jean-François Lyotard 38).
- 3 Foucault makes a point of distinguishing discourse analysis from the history of ideas. Discursive formations consist of statements which, like equations and unlike sentences, are functional, and, like events, are material but incorporeal. A discursive formation, Foucault asserts, "is made possible by a group of relations established between authorities of emergence, delimitation, and specification." It is "defined (as far as its objects are concerned, at least) if one can establish such a group; if one can show how any particular object of discourse finds in it its place and law of emergence; if one can show that it may give birth simultaneously or successively to mutually exclusive objects, without having to modify itself" (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 44).
- 4 Rushdie is echoing Fredric Jameson's remarks in "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." There he refers to "the pastiche of the stereotypical past" which "endows present reality . . . with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage." He also identifies "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness" as a distinguishing feature of postmodernism (*Postmodernism* 9).
- 5 In "The Discourse on Language," Foucault groups the use of the author (by which he means the unifying principle in any group of writings that guarantees their

coherence) within what he calls "principles of constraint," because, like commentary and disciplines, the author principle limits the hazards of discourse. He had already offered a more elaborate explanation of the author as a function of discourse in his essay "What Is an Author?" (*Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* 113-38).

- 6 I am indebted to Michael North for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay, which resulted in substantial alterations to it.

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