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"A Marriage of Heaven and Hell": Defending the Surreal Possibilities of Authorship, Prophecy and Intertextuality in Rushdie's Heretical Fiction

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**A “Marriage of Heaven and Hell”:
Defending the Surreal Possibilities of
Authorship, Prophecy and Intertextuality
in Rushdie’s Heretical Fiction**

Dr. Lisa Eck

May 16, 2011

I. Slides 1- 12 (background information-2011 gathering in Srinagar)

Salman Rushdie’s 1994 short story, “The Prophet’s Hair,” reads as a twentieth century parable about the destructiveness of God-on-earth. Its source materials include both journalistic accounts of the historic theft of the Prophet’s hair from the Hazratbal Mosque in Srinagar, Kashmir in December of 1963, and, as I will try to prove later in the paper, a late 19th century French surrealist text: *Les Chants de Maldoror*, which is also a story about a holy hair that reeks havoc on earth (Ghosh 225). So, is Rushdie using his short story to talk back to his persecutors? If so, what is he trying to say about the state of contemporary Islam? Are the labels: heretic and infidel, self-fulfilling prophecies in his case? Has he become what his critics say he is?

Slide 13: history, 1963

Slide 14: story within story

It is fair to say that the short story “The Prophet’s Hair,” published six years after *The Satanic Verses*, represents Rushdie at his most satirical on the topic of religion. Mentioned also in *Midnight’s Children* (Niven 238), the actual theft of the prophet’s hair had interested Rushdie for decades as a rich crime mystery. Indeed, who actually stole the prophet’s hair? Was the ‘returned’ hair *really* the original, or just presented as such to the masses marching in the streets, in cities from Srinagar, Kashmir to Khulna, East Pakistan? Rushdie’s tale imaginatively solves

the crime: it turns out that all along it was Hashim, the moneylender, -- a kind of stock character from folklore -- who found the hair floating in the lake. According to my reading, the text's main rhetorical purpose is to act as a parable – or cautionary tale – for those who attempt to horde God.

Slide 15: Hashim before and after = the region before and after the Revival of Muslim Fundamentalism

Slides 16 and 17: Figuratively Speaking; True Target

The story takes as its target the literal, fetishistic, logic of fundamentalist ideologies which seek to own the truth through objects: holy hairs and holy texts. It's telling that Hashim is a collector, and that his approach to faith is acquisitive, or greedy; he's even a collector of samovars, or Russian hot-plates, a reminder to the knowing reader of the Cold War superpowers' tried to somehow "own" Kashmir, along with neighboring Afghanistan. To be clear, part of the humor of the tale is that Hashim is not a good Muslim, and so cannot be read to represent the faith as a whole. Instead he is opportunistic. He's the moneylender who increases his interest rates to 70% so as to emphasize the seriousness of the crime of usury for his sinful clients (41); and most prominently, he's the Muslim who defies Mohammed's explicit prohibition against relic worship by "prizing" the holy hair (44).

Slide 18: who owns Islam?

Slides 19 and 20: TRANSITION into Satanic Verses

On the face of it, my reading of “The Prophet’s Hair” seems to provide RETRO-ACTIVE support to a narrow, but widely popularized, reading of *The Satanic Verses* as a manifesto of secularism, one that dares to parody the role of prophesy and faith in the late twentieth century. If, however, as Christine Cavanaugh has argued “the novel’s founding competition [is] between prophesy and its falsifications, between inspired verses and satanic verses,” the possibility is preserved in Rushdie’s fiction for the efficacy of prophets who “defy categorization,” in other words for real prophets, or unconventional forms of prophecy (393). How interesting, then, that *Satanic Verses* claims as one of its influences: the suitably demonic, Romantic voice of William Blake. When asked in a 1988 interview with John Clement Ball what texts had most influenced *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie offered an interesting list of texts engaged with religious and spiritual questions: beginning with Blake’s “Marriage of Heaven and Hell.” This essay represents an attempt to reconcile parody and prophecy, skepticism and spiritualism, in both Rushdie’s controversial novel and his lesser known short story, all through the surreal possibilities preserved in his literary sources.

One of the tasks this essay takes on is to try to recalibrate – or revise, my own reading of *Satanic Verses* by revisiting its brief reception prior to the fatwa. Ball’s interview is part of this puzzle, conducted as it was in October of 1988, some four months before Rushdie was delivered his macabre Valentine’s Day death sentence, on February 14th, 1989.

Slide 21: thesis

My hope is that if we momentarily take the voice of religion out of the conversation, we allow new ways for religion and questions of belief to enter back in.

But first, a note about form: “Intertextuality to what end?” What’s interesting about a book like *Satanic Verses* talking to a poem by Blake? Like a true postmodern DJ, much has been made of Rushdie’s skill at mixing – at hybrid sampling; after all *The Satanic Verses* opens with the question: “who has the best tunes?” (10) There is perhaps no better spokesperson for an aesthetic of what Rushdie describes as:

Slide 22: Block Quote

“mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that,” as the author himself (“In Good Faith,” 394). In an oft quoted passage from his essay “In Good Faith,” Rushdie argues that *The Satanic Verses* “celebrates...the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs...[this novel] is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining” (394). But here, the logic that persuades us is a spatial logic; in a postcolonial world these “unexpected combinations” of voices are located in the specific cartography of the present, in a globalized geography. This postmodern and postcolonial “mix up” finds a worthy anthem in the 1955 song Rushdie’s modern Angel Gabrielle – the Bollywood actor, Gibreel-- sings as he falls towards England from an airplane that’s been exploded by a terrorist bomb. “My shoes are Japanese/These pants are English/The red hat on my head is Russian/Still my heart is Indian” (Brians 11). **Slide 23: a 20th century FALL of MAN**

It is interesting to continue to complicate, as Homi Bhabha does “the location of culture” (indeed, where *is* Gibreel as he falls through 29,000 feet of transnational airspace?), but for the purposes of this paper, it is the *temporal* mixing, or intertextual time-travel, that I find most challenges my initial reading of *The Satanic Verses* and even “The Prophet’s Hair.”

Slide 24: Intertextuality as Time-Travel

My sense of how intertextuality differs from everyday, pedestrian forms of allusion is that much more of the authority and world view of the “visiting” text comes to occupy the ideological spaces of the host text. The question becomes: how much authority can a Romantic voice like Blake’s have in a postmodern novel like Rushdie’s? As the voice of the divine imagination, is Blake an audible influence in the novel, or are narrative nods at “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” simply decorative allusions?

Slide 25: corrective thesis

In the special case of Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, I contend that discredited theories about Romantic authorship as a form of prophetic revelation are meant to inspire the secular or skeptical reader to enter into a spiritual space in which the phenomenon of prophecy, or various forms of “hearing voices,” do not remain safely ensconced in the obsolete past – a place modern notions of progress urge us to ignore.

With its own inscribed past in tow, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” has the benefit of reminding us that in 1790, when Blake began the poem (Erdman 801), he felt compelled to engage with both the wisdom of ancient Old Testament prophets -- Isaiah and Ezekiel, whom he

addresses by name--, and the problem of a modern prophet (in his view a false prophet), namely, Emanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish seer.

Slide 26: Inspired Prophets v. False Prophets? 1790

Harold Bloom argues in his commentary on the poem that “One can surmise that Blake’s initial impetus to write “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” came from his outraged response to Swedenborg’s [volume] *Divine Providence* (Bloom 896). The trigger seems to have been Swedenborg’s rigid taxonomy of the good and the bad, the predestined and the damned. Blake’s journal response to Swedenborg reads: “Good and Evil are here both Good & the two contraries Married” (Blake qtd. in Bloom 896).

Slide 27: quote marriage of good and evil

The Satanic Verses also, of course, explores both the 7th century revelations by the Angel Gibreel to Mohammed, and the 20th century revelations preached by a female prophet from a Shia village in Pakistan, whom the character Ayesha is based on (Meer 112).

Slide 28: Mohammed c/c Ayesha

Ayesha, readers will remember, persuades several hundred of her disciples to embark on a walking pilgrimage to Mecca, on a route that includes walking into or onto or somehow “through” the Arabian Sea (Brians 45). As Rushdie scholar Paul Brians explains: “this seemingly insane girl claims to have been told by the Angel Gibreel that Mishal” – an upper-middle class, secular character in the novel – “has breast cancer. The only cure, she pronounces, is to make a foot pilgrimage to Mecca” (45). Eventually, in the plot as in real life, her followers follow her into the sea and drown.

In another “early” interview, before the logic of warring civilizations came to dominate the reception of the novel— Book-burning Islam on one side, the Free Speech Decadence of the West on the other—, Rushdie explained to the interviewer Ameena Meer: “I was trying in the novel, to face up to, not just the nature of revelation, but also the power of belief” (112). When Meer tries to explain away the real life Ayesha’s popular following as a function of rural isolation and lack of education, Rushdie counters with anecdotal evidence that holy speech and prophecy are part of contemporary life, especially in India, and not incompatible with education. He describes frequent encounters with: “People who are completely educated...[who] still have a guru...that they’re completely devoted to” (112). While each modern example of prophecy — Swedenborg’s dream visions and Ayesha’s fatal pilgrimage — are perhaps treated by each author with more skepticism than the more safely distanced-discursive voices of Isaiah and Mohammed, there is something to be learned from the seriousness of this pair of heretics — Blake and Rushdie -- for at least the heretic is willing to take on the possibility of prophesy in a postmodern world in which allegories of heaven and hell may seem quaint on first inspection.

Rushdie recounts to Meer how the “Ayesha” story was “the most extraordinary image of faith [he’d] come across in years” (112). “I wanted to try to understand it,” he confesses, “and the tool I use to understand the world is to write about it” (Meer 112). How can we hear this final point Rushdie makes as more than an easy maxim passed off in an interview? Of the several of Blake’s twelve “Proverbs of Hell,” Martine Dutheil sees in play in *The Satanic Verses*, perhaps the most poignant is the following: “Every thing possible to be believ’d is an image of truth” (Brians 58). Are the possibilities articulated by faith stranded, and in this sense punished by the text -- orphaned and discredited--, or is there something “holy,” or reverent --even humble, about the space Rushdie’s fiction gives still unanswerable questions about revelation and belief?

To offer a third possibility: does *The Satanic Verses* perform its own narrative marriage of heaven and hell by marrying parody and prophecy?

Maybe judge for yourself? Handout: plot summary of the Jahalia Chapters

In the sense that a parody is always a written imitation of some original text, then Rushdie's chapters that re-imagine Mohammed's 7th century, can be described as a kind of parody. But I would argue that there is something earnest here – a genuine form of theological inquiry that wonders out loud about the issue of transmission: how DOES God's word come to earth, and how shall we judge its messengers and its scribes? As you can see from Brian's summary, the incident of the "Satanic Verses," is believed by many Islamic scholars to have been an historic event, part of the history of Islam, albeit now an apocryphal one. Their inclusion in the holy writ, the Qur'an, and then their expulsion, encourage the reader to think about Mohammed's apparent confusion about WHO he should be listening to, when hearing voices – any manner of voices. If we add Blake's point of view to this conversation, the incident becomes less an occasion for skepticism (i.e. this is not just a chance for Rushdie to expose Mohammed as the business-man-turned-prophet-and-politician that he was), and more of a chance to re-image the human side of the Prophet. Indeed, Blake's theories on human nature, laced throughout Rushdie's text, suggest a key role for the so called "demonic," as an equally valued source of inspiration.

Slide 29: A REVIEW -- quote marriage of good and evil

“If I do have a kind of moral view of the world,” Rushdie confesses to Meer in a voice that might as well be channeling one William Blake: “it’s trying to construct for myself a sense of the spiritual life of human beings...which says we all have [the divine] inside us, you don’t need to go outside to look for the divine...[nor] the demonic” (114). Talking to the interviewer, Clement Ball about what we might dub the Blakean epistemology in the novel, Rushdie goes further when he describes his interest in “the doubleness in everything: that good has an evil dimension, that evil has a good side (103).

Slide 30: Positive and Negative Projects

It would be easy at this point to stop at the conclusion that “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” simply offers Rushdie a bold 18th century precedent for rejecting binaries of all kinds -- angel and devil, believer and non-believer, self and Other, native and foreigner – but this would exclude the possibility that perhaps Blake offers more than help with the negative, or deconstructive, project of the novel, maybe his work helps to preserve the positive possibility of revelation in real time: in his time, in our time.

Danish scholar, Sten Moslund supports the view that one of the novel’s core achievements is the “disestablishment [or decentering] of [two of] the world’s fixating discourses...religion and ethnocentric nationalism (295). He cites Soren Frank’s argument that “the novel renounces the exclusive logic of ‘either...or’ and replaces it with the inclusive logic,” popularized in the work of Gilles Deleuze, “of ‘both...and’ [or] ‘and...and...and,’ which invites an endless expansion of possibility, rather than leaving us with a reductive choice between two

mutually exclusive elements (Frank in Moslund 295). Moslund goes on, however, to assert that Rushdie's "idea of literature as a privileged discursive arena appears to sanctify literature" (298) and to "treat [it] as an unproblematic source of "revelation only" (303). It follows then that Moslund objects to the way Rushdie's novel seems to promote the trope of the artist as seer; and he singles out Blake by name as one of the voices in the text that authorize this discredited view of authorship.

Slide 31: Artist as Seer?

Here, I think Moslund is right; by Rushdie's own admission, the novel takes seriously "the nature of revelation", "the power of belief" and the oft quoted artist as "seer," William Blake (Meer 112, Ball 103). But where Moslund is worried, I'm intrigued – even excited. As a reader of *The Satanic Verses*, my experience of the text proved to be exactly the opposite of what the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa targeted; I didn't read a text whose sole rhetorical purpose was to "insult the Muslim sanctities" (Brians 6). Granted, as a non-Muslim reader, my ability to experience the shock value of blasphemy is much diminished (although I will revisit this issue in a minute). With that concession in mind, my experience of the novel was that it offered a welcome space to consider the mysteries of divine revelation: how can God's word be articulated in the world? How is the problem of divine dictation and reception handled by all of the world's religions? What if the receiver of revelation is unwilling (i.e. decides to wrestle with the holy interlocutor, as Rushdie's plot makes literal)? How do the politics of the day influence what is orthodox and what is apocryphal? As a person of faith myself, whose faith is highly-mediated by these scholarly questions of transmission and interpretation, foreign to fundamentalist ways of

reading as offensive Rushdie's fictional portrait of Mecca before it was sanctified as Mecca, all of this made me ask: how will God enter the world now, in the present?

To deal in specifics, I have always dismissed defenses of *The Satanic Verses* that argue that Rushdie intended for Gibreel's blasphemies to be uniformly discredited for readers based on his characteristics as an unreliable narrator. Here, I'm referring to his status as a diagnosed, 20th century, schizophrenic *actor* (mind you, who can trust an actor, let alone mentally ill actor?!), whose meta-revelations of Mohammed's 7th century revelations come to him through the highly subjective medium of dreams. To counter these arguments, I would point out that the novel explicitly leaves open the possibility that Gibreel's diagnosis is simply a 20th century way to pathologize revelations a secular world refuses to entertain as possible. Because of Rushdie's skill with pastiche, his ability to hear voices from Blake to the Beatles, from Krishna to Mahound, from Tantrism to Darwinism -- even because of the skill it takes to rhyme the Hindi word "phutt" with the German word "kaput" as cross-cultural synonyms (21)--, I admire him as a kind of cultural schizophrenic, as someone who regularly "hears voices." But what kind of receptivity is required for an author, such as Rushdie, to hear and reproduce these particular voices? Is this mixing only about parodic play, or worse, only a form of "showoffery"? I contend that for all of the cleverness and irreverent play evident in Rushdie's fiction, the Blakean principle is still preserved, namely that "every thing possible to be believed is an image of truth" (Blake 37). After crediting the decentering, centrifugal physics of the novel, Moslund raises the question of "whether it is possible to unposition oneself to such an extreme degree that one does not give preference to one power structure [or discourse] *over* another?" (Moslund 299). What Moslund finds as a flaw: Rushdie's privileging of literature, and his possible preference for a world in which the artist might still function as seer (behind his wise-cracking façade), is what

for me preserves certain controversial -- read antiquated-- ideas that our declared postmodern pluralism finds itself unable to hear.

Consistent with other Romantic authors, Blake conflates religious revelation and the work of the poetic imagination. Indeed, from his point of view religious revelation becomes necessary because of the fallen status of the imagination in a fallen world. Bloom clarifies that for Blake “Religion...must be ‘revealed’ in the sense that Revelation means the consuming of natural appearance by a more imaginative vision” (894). What interests me here is the suggested kinship religious revelation might have with literary traditions, especially in a Romantic and post-Romantic western world, where narrative approaches such as magical realism and surrealism may provide a means for authors to, in Blake’s words, “[consume] natural appearance” with “a more imaginative vision.”

Slide 32: Generic Modes carry “old fashioned” possibilities

Repeatedly in interviews, Rushdie is asked whether Gabrielle Garcia Marquez’s magical realism is one of his influences. With the interviewer Meer he fields the question as follows: “I...learned from the *Arabian Nights*...[which] the Arabs took to Spain, which got to Marquez...What you could say about magical realism is that we come from the same source material...but translated through different histories. I was brought up on those stories – flying horses and invisible cloaks – and I loved it all. [The *Arabian Nights*] seems to me to be the birthplace of stories. (111) What he admires specifically about Marquez’s work, however is the following reversal: “his writing is based on a village view of the world...[elevated above] the reality of a city. So that miracles – girls rising to heaven – are commonplace, but the railway car is bizarre” (111).

This seems like a good place to return to the short story “The Prophet’s Hair.” My initial reading was a political one, arguing that Rushdie uses fiction, in this case the genre of the fable, or satiric folktale, to critique contemporary Muslim Fundamentalism as power-hungry at best, and hypocritical at worst. However, if we leave aside the political reading for a moment, the elements of magical realism Rushdie includes at the end of his tale, seem to suggest a slightly different relationship, if not to organized religion, well then to issues of spirituality, writ large. “The Prophet’s Hair” ends by listing a series of miracles, but ironically, they don’t seem to be welcomed miracles. It seems that the narrative justice of the *Arabian Nights* – which allows that the underdogs always win: animals outsmart people, women outsmart men, poor people outmaneuver rich people -- is perverted at the end of “The Prophet’s Hair,” just as the possibility of miracles is wasted. The four sons of the thief “Sin,” whom Hashim’s daughter had hired to steal back the stolen hair, were all crippled at birth by their father so that they could earn a good living begging. This is black humor to be sure – or what critics sometimes call black comedy. Into this cynical world, a miracle comes: all four sons, who spent just moments under the same roof as the Prophet’s hair, were “all sound of limb” when they woke! To a person they were all “...properly furious, because the miracle had reduced their earning powers by 75 percent” (58).

Slide 33: Block Quote: Costa

If as Horácio Costa argues, “it is a [characteristic] of literature to bring forth what it suppresses and to rebuild what it destroys” (252), the ending of “The Prophet’s Hair” brings forth both a positive desire in the reader for miracles and a world ready to receive those miracles, even as we take in Rushdie’s black humor about the bankrupt profitability of capitalism, sin and fundamentalism: three targets temporarily “destroyed” by his satire.

Finally, as my title anticipates, Rushdie often cites surrealism, rather than magical realism, as a narrative resource. To the interviewer, Clement Ball, he described the *Satanic Verses* as a text “about surrealist forms of transformation,” (102) indebted specifically to a Dickensian brand of surrealism which acts as an “[intensification] of the real” (106). I want to end now with “an intensification of the real,” by citing Isidore Lucien Ducasse’s surreal talking holy hair, found in his 1868 novel, titled *Les Chants de Maldoror*, published under the pseudonym Lautremont. If, as I am arguing, this novel is one of Rushdie’s sources for “The Prophet’s Hair” – you’ll see in a moment that the intertextual detail suggests a strong possibility, then I would argue that the text is more than a thinly veiled piece of political revenge; it’s a text that holds out for the uncanny possibility that manifestations of the divine and the demonic are still part of everyday life.

Slide 34: Chants de Maldoror – Blasphemy in the West

In Ducasse’s novel, we meet the Creator, who bears the title: “the Supreme Drunkard,” who is drunk and about to cross a bridge into a French convent that now functions as a brothel (144-147). Our narrator watches through a grate, as the self-named Supreme Voyeur, and witnesses an alarming sight: a “rod” walking about, “coiled and uncoiled with ease, like an eel” (149). “I examined it more...narrowly” he tells us, “and...perceived that it was a hair!” “After a few moments of silence broken by irregular sobs, the hair says the following [NOTE: I need to give a **public service announcement, there is some sexually explicit language here**]:

The Creator departed for the celestial abode, leaving me here. That is not fair. The other hairs remained on his head and I lie in this lugubrious room on a floor covered with clotted blood and shreds of dry meat....Very well, so be it...But I shall not fail to inform mankind of what took place in this cell. I shall give them permission to reject their dignity like a worn-out garment, since they have the example of my master. I shall advise them to suck the penis of crime, since *another* has already done it.” “The hair fell silent...” (150, 154-155)

Reading Lautremont, I had perhaps *my* first experience of blasphemy, not only because of the offensive, and at times, pornographic imagery, but because the Creator figure so much resembles a messiah, or Jesus figure -- the Word made Flesh-- going to brothels (a plot line famously treated in Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*). But I also experienced, what the critic Jaina Sanga advocates is of great value in Rushdie’s fiction, namely the way blasphemy opens up new spaces for debate – even about the problem of full-bodied, hair-shedding prophets in our midst. Exploring the relationship between the profane and the sacred, the demonic and the divine, parody and prophesy, is as important to Rushdie today, as it was to Blake in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

On this point, I’ll let Costa have the final word: **Slide 35: Block Quote**

“Be the writer an atheist or a believer, the...figure of God rests in the corner of his or her desktop every time he or she decides to meddle in His lofty, awesome terrains... (Costa 246). I concur with Costa that Rushdie’s heretical fiction represents a form of postmodern surrealism, or pastiche, in which “godlessness” mixes with “godlongingness” in a unique dish, which still, after twenty plus years is risky to consume (251).

The End