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CLASSICAL REFERENCES AND THEMES IN
SALMAN RUSHDIE’S THE SATANIC VERSES

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The storm of religious and political controversy which Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses has generated is likely to overshadow for a long time any attempt to look dispassionately at its more purely literary qualities. However, it may not be premature to single out one such element, which struck me already when I was making my first acquaintance with the novel, namely the effective use Rushdie has made of classical references to underline a few of the main themes of his work. I will grant immediately that the specifically Greco-Roman contribution to The Satanic Verses is a modest one and hardly comparable to the matrix of classical references and allusions that runs through, for instance, James Joyce’s almost equally controversial Ulysses of sixty-eight years ago. Nevertheless, it does play a significant role in the narrative and thematic framework of Rushdie’s novel.

The Satanic Verses derives much of its energy and vitality from its cultural eclecticism: the pressures of the global, heavily Americanized consumer culture, the troubling realities of survival and adaptation faced by the Anglo-Indian and other Third-World minorities in Britain, the religious beliefs and

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3 Stuart Gilbert’s, James Joyce’s Ulysses, rev. ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1952) is a detailed study of the elaborate Odyssean narrative and thematic framework of Joyce’s novel.

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social prejudices still cherished in the traditional (yet not unchanging) rural Moslem and Hindu societies of modern India—all these converge almost kaleidoscopically in the flamboyantly vibrant picture that Rushdie draws of life in the late twentieth century. Perhaps, “the eclectic, hybridized nature of the Indian artistic tradition,” upon which the authorial narrator remarks at one point (70), is especially equipped to create such a vision. That vision, however, while indeed richly kaleidoscopic, is not a chaotic, let alone nihilistic, one; and the use made of classical references represents one means whereby the novel is ultimately successful in presenting an artistically ordered and humanistically purposeful aspect to the thoughtful reader.

One of the novel’s major points of contact with the classical tradition comes through its reminiscences of Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*; these, in turn, contribute to the articulation of the theme of metamorphosis and of the corollary issues of physical, social, and spiritual identity that this theme inevitably raises. The parallel between the transformation of Saladin Chamcha, the central character of *The Satanic Verses*, into a grotesque, satyr-like creature and the metamorphosis of Apuleius’ Lucius into a donkey is made explicit on page 243, where Mr. Muhammed Sufyan pulls the fleeing Saladin into the safety of his premises of his cafe and roominghouse in London, jokingly quoting Lucius’ question to the servant-woman Fotis just before his fateful experimentation with the magic ointment of the witch Pamphile: “Once I am an owl, what is the spell or antidote for turning me back into myself?”

A bit further on, we are told of the source of the quotation:

Lucius Apuleius, Moroccan priest, AD 120-180 approx., colonial of an earlier Empire, a person who denied the accusation of having bewitched a rich widow yet confessed, somewhat perversely, that at an early stage in his career he had been transformed, by witchcraft, into (not an owl, but) an ass.

The slight geographical inaccuracy of the reference to Morocco and the somewhat misleading implication that *The Golden Ass* is a straightforwardly autobiographical work fit the surreal atmosphere of much of the novel and the defiantly offhand tone sometimes adopted by the authorial narrator.

There are a few distinct echoes in Saladin’s adventures of the trials and tribulations suffered by Lucius. The abuse that Saladin experiences at the hands of the police who arrest him just as his metamorphosis begins to take its course has its obvious parallel in the maltreatment that Lucius is subjected to after his metamorphosis (and perhaps even before this accident if we count his harrowing experience at the Festival of Laughter). Like Lucius in a similar predicament, Saladin is unable to communicate his true identity to the police, who hear only a bleating sound coming out of his mouth (159). There is also a comic contrast between the prudish Saladin “taken aback by the sight of his phallus, greatly enlarged and embarrassingly erect, an organ that he had

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5 Ibid., 3.29.
the greatest difficulty in acknowledging as his own" (157) and the lustily pagan Lucius who finds his enlarged organ the one redeeming feature of his metamorphosis.\footnote{Ibid., 3.24.}

Saladin, then, joins the ranks of the picaro-figures in the Western novel (especially of the Renaissance period) that have been, to some extent, inspired by Apuleius' Lucius.\footnote{On the \textit{Nachleben} of \textit{The Golden Ass} in the picaresque novel of the Renaissance and early Modern Period, see P. G. Walsh, \textit{The Roman Novel} (Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 1970), ch. 8; and A. Scobie, "The Influence of Apuleius' \textit{Metamorphoses} in Renaissance Italy and Spain," \textit{Aspects of Apuleius' \textit{Golden Ass}}, ed. B. L. Hijmans, Jr. and R. Th. van der Paardt (Groningen: Bouma's Boekhuis, 1978), 211-230.}

Like Lucius, Saladin has been stripped of his former physical and therefore also social identity. However, more than in Lucius, Saladin's loss of identity is already strongly prefigured in his life prior to his transformation. He is a largely rootless immigrant to England from India, who has renounced his ties with his relatives and friends there, above all his relationship with his father, and has become totally estranged from his Islamic-Indian religious and cultural heritage, having become pathetically Anglophile and wishing to be seen as more English than the English. Adding a further twist to his deracination is the peculiar career he has built for himself in Britain, for he has become an actor of truly protean capacities, specializing in doing voices and impersonations of all sorts (even of inanimate objects!) for radio and television commercials. In such a symbolically charged career there is obviously a strong element of dehumanization as well. In \textit{The Satanic Verses}, then, the theme of metamorphosis carries a more powerful undertone of social commentary and satire than in \textit{The Golden Ass}, although this dimension is not completely lacking in the latter.\footnote{Fergus Millar, "'The World of the \textit{Golden Ass},'" \textit{JRS} 71 (1981): 63-75 offers an excellent study of the socio-political milieu presupposed, described, and at times mildly satirized in Apuleius' novel.}

As Rushdie himself has said in an interview, metamorphosis is one of the principal themes of the novel.\footnote{\textit{Time}, 27 Feb. 1989, 20. Cf. also Edmundson's (above, note 2, 68) statement: "\textit{The Satanic Verses} is in love with metamorphosis."} Aside from its implications for social commentary and satire, metamorphosis also suggests such powerful religious and metaphysical notions as incarnation, reincarnation, and transmigration of souls which have played a central role in the Hindu tradition of India, but which are uncongenial to the great monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.\footnote{An attractive anthology of classical Hindu texts on these and related religious-philosophical subjects is \textit{Hindu Scriptures}, trans. R. C. Zaehner (London: J. M. Dent, 1966). In comparing Hinduism with Greco-Roman polytheism (introduction, vi), Zaehner seems to overlook, however, that the mature polytheism of the Greco-Roman world was, like that of Hinduism, highly syncretistic.} In the earlier part of the novel, it is Gibreel Farishta, the second major character of \textit{The Satanic Verses} (who has made a very successful career as a movie actor in India, specializing in the roles of various deities of the}
Hindu pantheon), who expounds this religious philosophy to the more sceptical Saladin (84):

Reincarnation, for frenzied Gibreel, was a term beneath whose shield many notions gathered a-babeling: phoenix-from-ashes, the resurrection of Christ, the transmigration, at the instant of death, of the soul of the Dalai Lama into the body of a new-born child...such matters got mixed up with the avatars of Vishnu, the metamorphoses of Jupiter, who had imitated Vishnu by adopting the form of a bull; and so on, including of course the progress of human being through successive cycles of life, now as cockroaches, now as Kings, towards the bliss of no-more-returns. To be born again, first you have to die.

The Hindu conception that the Godhead or Ultimate Reality (Brahman) can and does manifest itself in an endless multiplicity of incarnations has some affinity with the syncretistic presentation of the goddess Isis in The Golden Ass in her epiphany to Lucius and indeed with the religious syncretism that was characteristic of much of Greco-Roman antiquity, but is at complete variance with the Judaic and Islamic faiths, which uphold the absolute transcendence of God over created reality; even orthodox Christianity allows only for the one and unique incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. It is not surprising, then, that the syncretistic polytheism of Hinduism and the pagan Greco-Roman world can accommodate a degree of playfulness in its depiction of deity—a playfulness which should not be confused with mere frivolity—that is unthinkable in the strictly monotheistic traditions. In classical literature, that spirit of ludic gaiety towards the gods—the polymorphous perverse, as one might call it, on the religious plane—has found its most splendid crystallization in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. As Leonard Barkan has well demonstrated in The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism, the artistic, psychological, and philosophical allure that this work has had for Western art and literature throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and even into the Modern Period has been a profound and pervasive one.11

In my reading, then, of The Satanic Verses, the radical Hindu conception of metamorphosis intermingling all levels of reality, from the subhuman to the divine, stands in close alliance with pre-Christian Greco-Roman polytheism but is set off sharply against the Moslem understanding of God and the cosmos. This conflict is played out above all in the two principal characters, Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta. In Gibreel, this struggle assumes a strongly historical (or rather pseudo-historical) dimension in his phantasmagoric reenactment of the founding of a new religion, very similar to Islam, in Arabia. Ironically, Gibreel, despite his earlier effusions affirming the Hindu world view, is increasingly drawn into an understanding of reality that sees everything in terms of uncompromisingly dichotomous oppositions, between good and

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evil, right and wrong, pure and impure. His quest for absolute certainty becomes an all-consuming obsession that seems to contribute very much to his self-destruction at the end of the novel, where he commits murder and then kills himself.

One minor but brilliantly drawn figure who also personifies this need for absolute certainty, and indeed the absolute and unshakeable possession of it, is the exiled Imam bidding his time in London, a totally unbending and humorless character, fiercely intent on remaining completely uncontaminated by any impurity, physical or spiritual—an obsession that is fittingly reflected in his continual drinking of purified water supplied, ironically enough, by an American-made water-purifier. A similarly rigid and fanatical mindset is caricatured in the figure of the American Christian fundamentalist, Mr. Eugene Dumersday, who fulminates everywhere he goes against godless Darwinism and evolution.

Saladin, in contrast to Gibreel, is ultimately willing to settle for a reality that is ambiguous and perhaps altogether impervious to the comfort-giving claims of many a traditional belief concerning the nature of God, man, and the universe. In the second major set of classical references in the novel (276-277, 288), Saladin is confronted by Mr. Sufyan with two fundamental metaphysical alternatives: the Epicurean-Lucretian view (presented through a direct quotation from Lucretius) that there is no abiding reality save the indestructible atoms and the Pythagorean teaching (presented with a quotation, in translation, from the speech of Pythagoras in book 15 of Ovid’s Metamorphoses) that there is indeed an enduring spiritual essence, or soul, that survives any physical change, even death; the latter represents, of course, also the classical Hindu view. Saladin finds little comfort to be had from either understanding of reality, but recognizes that the Epicurean-Lucretian world view entails the more radical conception of change: nothing is immune from change and therefore destruction, except the immutable and indestructible atoms. He finally opts for Lucretius’ conception of the soul and human identity (288).

12 "No more of these England-induced ambiguities, these Biblical-Satanic confusions!—Clarity, clarity, at all costs clarity!" (353). These thoughts of Gibreel well sum up his need for absolute certainty.
13 Lucr. 1.670-671: "nam quodcumque suis mutatum finibus exit / continuo hoc mors est illius quod fuit ante."
14 Ov. Met. 15.169-172: "utque novis facelis signatur eera figuris / nec manet, ut fuerat, nec formas servat easdem, / sed tamen ipsa easdem est, animam sic semper easdem / esse sed in varias doceo migrare figuram."
15 It is interesting to note that the wide ranging intellectual speculation that developed in Indian civilization also produced one philosophical school (the Lokayata-Carvaka school, in particular the so-called "Rogue Carvakas") that offered a totally materialist account of reality and denied the immortality of the soul; see A. K. Warder, Outline of Indian Philosophy (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971), 124-128.
He chose Lucretius over Ovid. The inconstant soul, the mutability of everything, das Ich, every last speck. A being going through life can become so other to himself as to be another, discrete, severed from history.

Bleak and cheerless this view may be from many a religious and philosophical perspective, it paradoxically leads Saladin to accept all of reality ("every last speck") with an almost existentialistically life-affirming embrace.

This radical acceptance of change and discontinuity in human life is made to carry some important corollaries later on in the novel when the authorial narrator reflects on the fundamental implications of such a philosophy of life and contrasts Saladin’s growth as a person with that of Gibreel in this respect (427): "Gibreel, for all his stage-name and performances; and in spite of born-again slogans, new beginnings, metamorphoses;—has wished to remain, to a large degree, continuous—that is, joined to and arising from his past," "whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of selected discontinuities, a willing re-invention." As such Saladin is characterized by a "falsity of self" which might be called "evil." Gibreel, on the other hand, "is to be considered ‘good’ by virtue of wishing to remain, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man." The narrator, however, immediately questions his sharp contrast between the Saladin-type and the Gibreel-type of human character as being too rigid and simplistic a formulation and suggests that evil lies everywhere beneath the surface of human behavior (427):

—But, and again but: this sounds, does it not, dangerously like an intentionalist fallacy?—Such distinctions, resting as they must on an idea of the self as being (ideally) homogeneous, non-hybrid, "pure,"—an utterly fantastic notion!—cannot, must not, suffice. No! Let’s rather say an even harder thing: that evil may not be as far beneath our surfaces as we like to say it is.—That, in fact, we fall towards it naturally, that is, not against our natures.

This is the most philosophical passage in The Satanic Verses, being almost didactically serious in tone. But it states a "message" that resonates through much of the novel, phantasmagoric though the narrative often may be: reality is almost inextricably complex, dizzying in its confusion, and seems to defy any comfort-giving formulation that we may care to invent.

In its insistence on the vicissitudinous nature of human life and with its often surreal narrative and mocking tone, The Satanic Verses has some affinity with Apuleius’ novel. Some recent criticism of The Golden Ass, most notably John Winkler’s innovative study, Auctor and Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius’s Golden Ass, has rightly moved away from a one-dimensional interpretation that views this work as a "conversion" novel resting perhaps on an elaborate philosophical-religious (probably Neoplatonic) allegory:16 such a monohemuristic approach fails to do justice to the very eclectic, multifaceted

literary texture and the not altogether smoothly integrated point of view of *The Golden Ass*. Similarly, the speech of Pythagoras in book 15 of *Metamorphoses* will be misunderstood (*pace* Mr. Sufyan) if it is taken straightforwardly as the philosophical *summa* of Ovid’s work. It simply does not work in this manner, not on its own merits as serious philosophical teaching nor in the context of the *Metamorphoses* as a whole. It is meaningful only as a pseudo-philosophical excursus characterized by a great deal of humor and playfulness befitting the tone and spirit of the entire work.

The literary richness of *The Satanic Verses*, too, will be belittled by any one-dimensional allegorical interpretation—social, psychological, philosophical, or otherwise. Thus to view it simply as a novel of social commentary and satire on the problems of racism and the integration of Third-World minorities into British society is an oversimplification. For example, the half-farcical scene (293) where, to the cheers and jeers of onlookers in a black disco in London, a waxen effigy of Margaret Thatcher is melted down is pretty obvious as social commentary and satire; but it also transports the reader back again into the magical thought-world of metamorphosis (here perhaps, specifically the world of voodoo, given the heavily West Indian clientele of the disco) that colors much of the novel. A similarly attuned perspective is needed to appreciate fully the marvellous passage (405) where Saladin, safely ensconced in Mr. Sufyan’s den, is watching television, constantly switching from channel to channel thanks to his remote-control device, which enables him to slice up and reapportron reality like a modern-day “Procrustes,” and flicking his way past the dysmorphic freaks of children’s television cartoons and the bizarre medical curiosities that proliferate on his television screen.

The quotation of the Vergilian tag, “*sunt lacrimae rerum,*” immediately preceding this passage is very apposite. At this point, it is mostly ironical, encapsulating Saladin’s attitude of helpless rage and self-pity and also reflecting sardonically on the phantasmagoric world of mutation and mutilation which he passively surveys and manipulates. But it also anticipates the more redemptive perspective at which Saladin very soon arrives (407-408):

Yes: his obsessive loathing of Gibreel, his dream of exacting some cruel and appropriate revenge,—these were things of the past, aspects of a reality incompatible with his passionate desire to re-establish ordinary life. Not even the seditious, deconstructive imagery of television could deflect him. What he was rejecting was a portrait of himself and Gibreel as monstrous.

It is not surprising, then, that we see Saladin in the concluding chapter reunited with his dying father and re-establishing old family ties and friendships in Bombay, his semibestial metamorphosis having completely vanished now. In

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17 This major point is well made by Joseph B. Solodow in his recent study, *The World of Ovid’s Metamorphoses* (Chapel Hill: U of NC Pr, 1988), 162-168.

18 Verg. *Aen.* 1. 462.
the same chapter, Gibreel comes indeed to a harrowing end, but perhaps it can be claimed that, at least at the deepest, most authentic level of his being, he had redeemed himself at the end of chapter seven by rescuing Saladin, whom he certainly had the greatest reason to hate, from the climactic fire at Mr. Sufyan's cafe.

Even the ill-fated fantastic pilgrimage of the inhabitants of an Indian Moslem village to Mecca—an important subplot in the novel—, which ends with the majority of the deluded pilgrims drowning in the Arabian Sea, is finally laid to rest on a note of exalted affirmation in the feverish imagination of one survivor, Mirza Saeed, as years later he lies on his death bed and sees, at the climactic moment, the waters of the Arabian Sea part to let the pilgrims walk through to Mecca. A note of affirmation, although here much more sober and austere in tone, can also be detected at the conclusion of the often implicitly satirical and innuendo-filled story of Mahound the Prophet, where, immediately after the Prophet has died, his favourite wife Ayesha leaves his chamber (394):

Ayesha went out into the next room, where the other wives and disciples were waiting with heavy hearts, and they began mightily to lament:

But Ayesha wiped her eyes, and said: "If there be any here who worshipped the Messenger, let them grieve, for Mahound is dead; but if there be any here who worship God, then let them rejoice, for He is surely alive."

It was the end of the dream.

Perhaps, it is not too bold to say that in the closing strains of The Satanic Verses, the at first truncated tag, *sunt lacrimae rerum*, is filled out, as it were, to embrace the ethos of the full Vergilian line, "sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt," for Rushdie's novel finally calms its tormented phantasmagoria, reaffirms the simple but enduring values of empathy and compassion, and proclaims a newly found meaning in ordinary human life.

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