

## 10. The Satanic Verses *and* *the Demonic Text*

To see the devil as a partisan of Evil and an angel as a warrior on the side of Good is to accept the demagogy of the angels. Things are of course more complicated than that.

– Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*<sup>1</sup>

### BANNED BOOK

In his essay “In Good Faith” (1990), Salman Rushdie discusses the reactions his novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988; “SV”) has evoked around the world.<sup>2</sup> According to Rushdie, his novel has been treated as “a work of bad history, as an anti-religious pamphlet, as the product of an international capitalist-Jewish conspiracy, as an act of murder,” everything but literature, a work of fiction. Rushdie is especially mystified by the claims that when he was writing *The Satanic Verses* he *knew exactly what he was doing*. “He did it on purpose is one of the strangest accusations ever levelled at a writer. Of course I did on purpose. The question is, and it is what I have tried to answer [in this essay]: what is the ‘it’ that I did?”<sup>3</sup> A critical reader is faced with the same question; furthermore, the novel itself seems to question ‘I’ as well as ‘it’: it tests the limits of ‘authorship’ – the idea of an unified, fully conscious and purposeful author.

Both in the analysis of the novel, and in making any comments on the uproar following its publication, the complex role of de-contextualisation should be given careful attention. Writing is dangerous, as Jacques Derrida has noted.<sup>4</sup> Derrida emphasises the radical *iterability* of any written communication; it must “remain legible despite the absolute disappearance of every determined addressee in general for it to function as writing, that is, for it to be legible.” In a sharp contrast to the idea of writing as a means to convey the intended meaning, writing is (sometimes, as in Rushdie’s case, very em-

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<sup>1</sup> Kundera 1978/1996, 85-86.

<sup>2</sup> I have used the paperback edition now widely available: Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*. Dover (DE): The Consortium, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Rushdie 1991, 393, 407, 410.

<sup>4</sup> According to Derrida, writing is dangerous, anguishing: “It does not know where it is going. [...] If writing is *inaugural* it is not so because it creates, but because of a certain absolute freedom of speech, because of the freedom to bring forth the already-there as a sign of the freedom to augur.” (Derrida 1968/1978, 11, 12.)

phatically) “repetition to alterity.”<sup>5</sup> A written sign “carries with it a force of breaking with its context,” and is always drifting away from its author’s intentions and open to new meanings.<sup>6</sup> It is Rushdie’s purpose in his essay to restore the novel with its “relevant context”; he tries to explain what sort of notion about ‘literature’ governed the production of *The Satanic Verses*, and to “insist on the fictionality of fiction.”<sup>7</sup> Because of his personal predicament, this “restoration” is – albeit elucidating and well justified – somewhat overdetermined and one-sided. The demonic aspects of this novel’s imagery and textuality make it difficult to construct *The Satanic Verses* as a “benevolent” and “positive” work – or *only* that. Rushdie makes a reasonable and solid plea for positive interpretation. It is, however, possible to appreciate the conflicting and disruptive aspects of the novel (from the safe distance of a critical reader, of course). Those features play an important part in the striking effect that *The Satanic Verses* has on the reader, and may largely explain how this novel has been such fertile ground for different “misreadings.” My reading of the demonical aspects of *The Satanic Verses* will at first outline its general strategy of hybridisation. My hypothesis is that the demonic elements are used in the novel to dramatise conflicting and problematical aspects in the production of identity. The identity in question can further be analysed to have several different aspects or dimensions in Rushdie’s text, which all contribute to my reading of it as a demonic text, a demonic form of polyphonic textuality.

The most visible and far-reaching reaction to Rushdie’s novel was the *fatwa* (religious/legal judgement) dictated by Ayatollah Khomeini:

In the name of Him, the Highest. There is only one God, to whom we shall all return. I inform all zealous Muslims of the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses* – which has been compiled, printed, and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet, and the Qur’an – and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its content, are sentenced to death.

I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they may be found, so that no one else will dare to insult the Muslim sanctities. God willing, whoever is killed on this path is a martyr.

In addition, anyone who has access to the author of this book, but does not possess the power to execute him, should report him to the people so that he may be punished for his actions.

May peace and the mercy of God and His blessings be with you.

Ruhollah al-Musavi al-Khomeini, 25 Bahman 1367 [February 14, 1989].<sup>8</sup>

The passionate protests against the novel began among the Muslims in India even before the novel was officially published. Twenty-two people lost

<sup>5</sup> Derrida 1971/1982, 315.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>7</sup> Rushdie 1991, 393, 402.

<sup>8</sup> Pipes 1990, 27 [orig. *Kayhan Havai*, February 22, 1989]. – The fatwa was officially renounced by the Iranian government almost a decade later, in September 24, 1998.

their lives: rioters were shot in Bombay, the novel's translators, or just Muslims considered too moderate in their opinions, were assassinated. The incident had major consequences on the commercial and diplomatic relations between Iran and several Western countries. Perhaps more importantly, the cultural relationship between Islam and the secular West was aggravated. Extreme fundamentalism became more confirmed than ever as the dominant Western perception of Islam.

From the Western perspective, the burning of Rushdie's books and the effort to silence him with violence were offences towards fundamental human rights.<sup>9</sup> From the viewpoint of many Muslims, *The Satanic Verses* was a direct assault on Islam, abuse of the Koran, the Prophet, and everything they considered holy. Rushdie's novel was clearly able to hit a very sensitive spot in cultural relationships. The different ways to articulate 'right' and 'wrong,' or differences in how 'human rights,' or the right way of living should be understood, were sharply thematised. This is hardly a coincidence, as *The Satanic Verses* is openly addressing and discussing these questions in its pages. As Salman Rushdie himself characterises it,

If *The Satanic Verses* is anything, it is the migrant's-eye view of the world. It is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition, and from which, I believe, can be derived a metaphor for all humanity. [...]

Those who oppose the novel most vociferously today are of the opinion that intermingling with a different culture will inevitably weaken and ruin their own. I am of the opposite opinion. *The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure.<sup>10</sup>

The most central structuring principle, and an essential aspect of this novel's demonic thematics, is *hybridity*. The mixture of different cultures, the Indian, the British, the Arabic, is manifest in its cast of characters and milieu. The opposition and mingling of the religious with the secular is another important area where hybridisation takes place. This opposition and the systematic breaking of the limit between the sacred and the secular is also the most notable transgressive feature of the text, and the borderline where the Western and Muslim sensibilities concerning the status of writing collided. The title of the novel also points towards the ambiguous role that religiosity plays in Rushdie's text.

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<sup>9</sup> The article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; see e.g. *The Rushdie Letters: Freedom to Speak, Freedom to Write*. Ed. Steve MacDonald & Article 19. (MacDonald 1993.)

<sup>10</sup> Rushdie, "In Good Faith"; Rushdie 1991, 394.

“The Satanic Verses” refers to an episode in the history of Koran, which, before Rushdie’s novel, was almost forgotten.<sup>11</sup> A wide range of old Muslim sources recount that early in his career (about 614 C.E., a year or so after he began his public preaching), Mohammed confronted resistance towards his monotheistic message especially among the Meccan aristocracy. The Ka’ba was a polytheistic religious centre and the town’s prosperity relied heavily on pilgrims. According to At-Tabari (d. 923), an early historian and commentator on the Koran, Mohammed was asked to acknowledge the three most important goddesses of Mecca; in return, the nobles would endorse Mohammed’s teaching.<sup>12</sup> In the Koran, this question is addressed in Surat an-Najm, verses 19-21:

Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza,  
And Manat, the third, the other?

In At-Tabari’s account, Mohammed “hoped in his soul for something from God to bring him and his tribe together.” Accordingly, he recited the following words of approval:

These are the exalted birds,  
And their intercession is desired indeed.

But afterwards the angel Gabriel came to Mohammed and revealed that these words were not from God, but from the devil. (At-Tabari tells that “Satan threw on his tongue” those verses, *alqa ash-shaytan ‘ala lisanihi.*) Promptly, “God cancelled what Satan had thrown.” The words of approval were deleted, and the canonical Koran text carries a completely opposite message:

Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza,  
And Manat, the third, the other?  
Shall He have daughters and you sons?  
That would be a fine division!  
These are but [three] names you have dreamed of, you and your fathers.  
Allah vests no authority in them.  
They only follow conjecture and wish-fulfillment,  
Even though guidance had come to them already from their Lord.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In the Islamic tradition this is known as the *Gharaniq* incident (from the key expression, *birds*, in the controversial verses). Daniel Pipes (1990, 115) notes that the expression “the Satanic Verses” is unknown in Arabic; it is taken from the Western (orientalist) sources, not from the Islamic tradition, and therefore lays Rushdie open for charges of orientalism.

<sup>12</sup> Other sources than Tabari include the biographer Ibn Sa’d (d. 845), the collector of hadith (the Muslim tradition) al-Bukhari (d. 870), and the geographer Yaqut (d. 1229). See Pipes 1990, 56-59. The translations from the Koran here follow the versions used in *The Satanic Verses*, and in Pipes’s account.

<sup>13</sup> Koran, Surat an-Najm, verses 19-23.

This tale casts serious doubts on the divinity of the Koran; if the holy text was once touched up in the context of political interests, then perhaps other “revelations” had all-too-human motivations, too? It could be claimed that the messages came to Mohammed in suitable times, and that their content conveniently affirmed the Prophet’s own standpoint. Some orientalist and sceptics had used the incident to discredit the divine authority of Koran and thereby to shake the very foundations of Islam. The orthodox Muslim response (formulated by such thinkers as Muhammad ‘Abduh and Muhammad Husayn Haykal) was to seize the differences in the sources, and to announce the whole episode as apocryphal and a lie.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, there is still real ground for discussion; the canonical verses themselves address the question of human innovation and the sacred. ‘Lat,’ ‘Uzza’ and ‘Manat’ are claimed to be “but names you have dreamed of, you and your fathers.” In other words, even long-held values and traditional deities can be declared as false. The concept of “blasphemy” points towards the fundamental incompatibility of faiths: it is the duty of those of the “true” faith to assert their truth and to declare void the truths of others. The Koran installs itself as the absolute truth by the power of its own word (the word of ‘Allah’); the status of writing is therefore of great theological importance.

Daniel Pipes, the director of Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia and an author of many studies of Islam, claims that even the title of Rushdie’s novel was read as blasphemous by the Muslims.

Rushdie’s title in Arabic is known as *Al-Ayat ash-Shaytaniya*; in Persian, as *Ayat-e Shetani*; in Turkish, *Şeytan Ayatleri*. *Shaytan* is a cognate for “satan” and poses no problems. But, unlike “verses,” which refers generically to any poetry of scripture, *ayat* refers specifically to “verses of the Qur’an.” Back-translated literally into English, these titles mean “The Qur’an’s Satanic Verses.” With just a touch of extrapolation, this can be understood to mean that “The Qur’anic Verses Were Written By Satan.” Simplifying, this in turn becomes “The Qur’an Was Written By Satan,” or just “The Satanic Qur’an.”<sup>15</sup>

The Qur’an/Koran cannot be translated; the Word of Allah was recited in Arabic.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the same is true for Rushdie’s novel, as well; here, the simple act of translation and transfer of the title into another language and culture metamorphosed an ironic and dense metafictional text, or a novel of “magical realism,” into something that might be translated as “the Black Bible,” in the Western idiom. The shift from the context of many voices and value systems to one where one text dominates and guides reading very powerfully, effects a radical transformation of Rushdie’s text. “Babel is also

<sup>14</sup> Pipes 1990, 61-62.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-17.

<sup>16</sup> The Arabic name of Koran – *Qur’an* – means recitation, or text to be read aloud. It is derived from the verb *qara’a* (‘to read,’ ‘to recite’) but it probably also has a connection with the Syrian word *qeryana* (‘reading,’ especially of religious lessons). (Räisänen 1986, 13, 19.)

this *possible impossible step* [*ce pas impossible*], beyond hope of transaction, tied to the multiplicity of languages within the uniqueness of the poetic inscription” has Derrida been (impossibly) translated.<sup>17</sup> The sacred texts are not alone in the dilemma of having something irreducibly untranslatable in them; the presence of the original context can never be transferred with the text, thereby the Babel of interpretations is a fact.<sup>18</sup> A religious community is united by shared values and beliefs. The coexistence of competing and conflicting views and voices has traditionally illustrated hell – as opposed to the one voice and harmony of heaven.<sup>19</sup> *The Satanic Verses* uses demonic imagery in ambiguously self-ironic ways to dramatise how profoundly Western individualism becomes positioned as “satanic” when it is opposed to fundamentalist religious ideals.

#### AGAINST THE ORTHODOXY

The criticism of *The Satanic Verses* has often centred on the discussion whether the novel is blasphemous, or not. One could make a case that it both *is* blasphemous, and *not*, at the same time. A written text – in this case, a novel – is not just the material object, but (in a much more profound sense) all the immaterial conditions that shape its reception. In a classic blasphemy trial at Morristown in 1887, Robert G. Ingersoll presented the issue as follows: “[W]hat is blasphemy? Of course nobody knows what it is, unless he takes into consideration where he is. What is blasphemy in one country would be a religious exhortation in another. It is owing to where you are and who is in authority.” David Lawton, who has adopted this statement as an epigram in his study *Blasphemy* (1993) analyses blasphemy as a particular linguistic act, one which makes visible the implicit limits in the social systems of meaning. Blasphemy is, according to Lawton, “a place where one sees whole societies theorising language.”<sup>20</sup> It is, for example, hard to deny the (society’s) unconscious revolt against Christianity in the intense fascination with the fantasy of the “Witches’ Sabbath” in the late Medieval period. There is an unacknowledged reciprocity between the faithful and the blasphemer according to Lawton; it seems to be true that the fantasies of communion with the Devil, as described by Norman Cohn in his *Europe’s Inner Demons*, could only be conceived from within an intimate knowledge of Christianity. “In every respect they [the witches and their blasphemous activities] represent a collective inversion of Christianity – and

<sup>17</sup> Derrida 1992, 408 (orig. *Schibboleth: Pour Paul Celan*, 1986).

<sup>18</sup> See Derrida 1985 (“Des Tours de Babel”); see also Gen. 11:1-9.

<sup>19</sup> The traditional symbolism saw the division between peace and prosperity (heaven) and turmoil, despair and alienation from the social unity (hell); in a pluralistic and culturally complex modernity the status of heterogeneity has gone through re-evaluation. See: Bernstein 1993 (on the development of ideas concerning hell); Bakhtin 1929/1973 (on the concept of polyphony, especially pp. 21-26 on Dante).

<sup>20</sup> Lawton 1993, 17.

an inversion of a kind that could only be achieved by former Christians.”<sup>21</sup> In its self-consciousness, *The Satanic Verses* can be also seen as a sustained meditation on the conditions of blasphemy, how sanctity is constructed and what is the role of mockery as its counter-discourse.

The thematic foregrounding of borderlines is pervasive in Rushdie’s novel, making it an emphatic dramatisation of possibilities for discursive conflicts. It should be pointed out that *The Satanic Verses* is not “Satanic” in the traditional, one-dimensional sense of advocating some “anti-truth,” or developing a simple reversal of religious (Islamic) identity. Instead, it explores the difficulties of constructing any stable identities in a context that could be best described as post-modern. This can be illustrated by analysing the diverse ways in which the demonic elements are applied at the novel’s texture. The most important single feature in this area, and one that affects everything else, is the systematic juxtaposition and blending of the religious and the profane, and the self-conscious commentary about this process.

Question: What is the opposite of faith?

Not disbelief. Too final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief.

Doubt.

[...] [A]ngels, they don’t have much in the way of a will. To will is to disagree; not to submit; to dissent.

I know; devil talk. Shaitan interrupting Gibreel.

Me?<sup>22</sup>

This quotation comes from an important intersection in the novel; the chapter titled “Mahound” introduces the controversial sections, and this meditation on the devil and the will is prominently situated in the beginning of it. Rushdie’s text in this point does not address the total opposite of religious faith, it is not indifferent or unsympathetic towards the religious tradition. Instead, it articulates a middle ground between secularism and religiosity by exploring the religious elements with an involved but critical attitude. Thereby, the question of the narrator (“Shaitan [...] Me?”) becomes a real point of inquiry. Not the angelic, nor the satanic, but the demonic tradition with its emphasis on the plurality and polyphony of subjectivity is able to illustrate the complexities of this position. The fundamentalist construction of religious identity, which cannot tolerate any doubt, critique or even individual will, renders the essential heterogeneity of the human condition as “devil talk.” *The Satanic Verses* asks whether, under this sort of discursive condition, the self (as the speaking subject) should be identified with “Shaitan.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Cohn 1975/1993, 147.

<sup>22</sup> SV, 92-93.

<sup>23</sup> “*Shaytan* is a pagan Arabic term possibly derived from the roots ‘to be far from’ or ‘to born with anger.’ Under Jewish and Christian influence, Muhammad defined the term in relation to its Hebrew cognate *satan*, ‘opponent’ or ‘obstacle.’ The Qur’an also describes him as accursed, rejected, and punished by stoning. He is a rebel against God. The

The prominence of the demonic elements in the novel may appear perverse from an orthodox religious perspective. The novel, however, presents its own motivations. Religion is a communal matter in *The Satanic Verses*, it is assigned the intermediary role between specific personal concerns and the public and shared material of a culture. Therefore it is submitted to an ideological inquiry; this is what the use of ‘dissent’ signals above. It is a concept with a dual history in the political parlance as well as in the field of religion. Whereas political ‘dissidence’ is an important concern of liberal Western activism, the religious dissenter refuses to conform to the doctrines of orthodoxy or the established Church.<sup>24</sup> Traditionally, the dissidents have been perceived as serious threats by both the political and religious orthodoxy, and the measures towards heretics and political trouble-makers have been forceful. Some prominent elements in *The Satanic Verses* ally themselves with such rebels and subjugated groups, and present the choice of demonic elements as a political act. For example, the Prophet makes an appearance in Rushdie’s novel as “Mahound;” this is the Medieval Christian contortion of “Mohammed.” It signifies otherness to the point of having been used as a synonym for the devil.<sup>25</sup>

His name: a dream-name, changed by the vision. Pronounced correctly, it means he-for-whom-thanks-should-be-given, but he won’t answer to that here; not, though he’s well aware of what they call him, to his nickname in Jahilia down below – *he-who-goes-up-and-down-old-Coney*. Here he is neither Mahomet not MoeHammered; has adopted, instead, the demon-tag the farengis hung around his neck. To turn insults into strengths, whigs, Tories, Blacks all chose to wear with pride the names they were given in scorn; likewise, our mountain-climbing, prophet-motivated solitary is to be the medieval baby-frightener, the Devil’s synonym: Mahound.<sup>26</sup>

The change of name signals the change of discursive rules: it is the narrator’s way of saying ‘This should be read differently, not according to the practise shaped by the holy text. This is a dream, fiction.’ Those elements that mark the difference – Mohammed transformed into ‘Mahound,’ Islam translated into ‘Submission’ (with this word’s negative connotations in the

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name Shaytan appears much more frequently in the Qur’an than does Iblis [the other name for the devil], usually in connection with the tempting and seduction of humans; the term *shayatin* in the plural also appears as the equivalent of Christian demons, evil spirits who are followers of the evil leader.” (Russell 1984, 54.)

<sup>24</sup> ‘Dissent’ comes from the Latin *dissentire*, to differ. Cf. *dissidere*, to sit apart, to disagree. (*New Webster’s Dictionary*.)

<sup>25</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives five, now antiquated uses for ‘Mahound’ (most examples date from the fifteenth century): 1) The ‘false prophet’ Muhammed; in the Middle Ages often vaguely imagined to be worshipped as a god; 2) A false god; an idol; 3) A monster; a hideous creature; 4) Used as a name for the devil; 5) Muslim, heathen. (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989, q.v. ‘Mahound.’)

<sup>26</sup> SV, 93. – “Coney” is associated for an Indian reader with “cunt,” bringing an additional blasphemous potential in play. (I am grateful to Professor Alphonso Karkala for this remark.)



“free West”), Mecca reincarnated as ‘Jahilia’ (ignorance), etc. – are not neutral modifications. They all have distinctly pejorative traits. David Lawton follows Jonathan Dollimore as he writes that “organised religion encounters in a blaspheming rival ‘a proximity rooted in their differences’.”<sup>27</sup> Rushdie’s text displays openly its proximity to Islam, using it to stir discussion about the different interpretations of “community.” The justification for stigmatised terms is overtly political; furthermore, “whigs, Tories, Blacks” are part of the Western (British and American) political past and the polycultural present. They suggest a history of political debate and dialogue, as well as of one governed by colonialism; the narrator also alludes to the struggle of minorities in the postcolonial situation. Name-calling has a different status in this context; the horizon of immutable truths and sanctity is interlaced in this brief section with the perspective of conflicting human interests, which makes all claims for one, holy and privileged view appear as dubious. There is subtle irony in the words the young immigrant girl, Mishal, speaks to Saladin Chamcha, who has metamorphosed into the shape of Satan: “I mean, people can really identify with you. It’s an image white society has rejected for so long that we can really take it, you know, occupy it, inhabit it, reclaim it and make it our own.”<sup>28</sup>

The opposition and mixing of the religious and the political points towards two ways of perceiving language and writing: static and dynamic. Whereas Koran denies all authority from “names you have dreamed of, you and your fathers,” the situation and characters as presented in *The Satanic Verses* cannot adopt any truths as preordained, or God-given. Other people’s beliefs, the sphere of human invention, and therefore, of change – all these are combined with the question of language. As we read from the stream-of-consciousness of Jumpy Joshi, a character with poetic aspirations: “*The real language problem: how to bend it shape it, how to let it be our freedom, how to repossess its poisoned wells, how to master the river of words of time of blood [...]*.”<sup>29</sup> The main characters of *The Satanic Verses* are living among many religions, between conflicting cultures and values. This heterogeneity is heightened by the fact that most of them are immigrants, people of Indian origin in Britain. Any meanings cannot be taken as given, because the shared language, English, is not “their” language, originally. Every word of it is alien because of its Western heritage; it is steeped in the history of colonialism. Hami K. Bhabha has written aptly: “Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* attempts to redefine the boundaries of the western nation, so that ‘foreignness of languages’ becomes the inescapable cultural condition for the enunciation of the mother-tongue.”<sup>30</sup> This can be compared with Rushdie’s own formulation (as quoted above) that it is “the migrant condition” from which “could be derived a metaphor for all humanity.” Basically, *The Satanic Verses*

<sup>27</sup> Lawton 1993, 144-45; Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence* (1991, 18).

<sup>28</sup> SV, 287.

<sup>29</sup> SV, 281. Italics in the original.

<sup>30</sup> Bhabha 1994, 166 (also 1990, 317; and quoted in Lawton 1993, 186).

defines (post)modern subjectivity as something that arises from heightened awareness of language, and from recognition of “self” as being something defined and redefined by language.

We can conclude from this emphasis on the British context and the immigrant experience, that the Koran itself is not among the real “targets” of Rushdie’s subversive text, but rather the fundamentalist interpretation of it, as perceived from the “migrant condition.” The change of Islamic names, characters and narratives are nowhere as radical as are the transformations situated in the Great Britain.

The manticore ground its three rows of teeth in evident frustration. ‘There’s a woman over that way,’ it said, ‘who is now mostly water-buffalo. There are businessmen from Nigeria who have grown sturdy tails. There is a group of holidaymakers from Senegal who were doing no more than changing planes when they were turned into slippery snakes. I myself am in the rag trade; for some years now I have been a highly paid male model, based in Bombay, wearing a wide range of suitings and shirtings also. But who will employ me now?’ he burst into sudden and unexpected tears. [...]

‘But how they do it?’ Chamcha wanted to know.

‘They describe us,’ the other whispered solemnly. ‘That’s all. They have the power of description, and we do succumb to the pictures they construct.’<sup>31</sup>

Saladin Chamcha was born Salahuddin Chamchawala, and after changing his name to adopt a career in the West, he has undergone a complete physical transformation, as well. It should be pointed out, that despite the cruel and distressing situation, this section carries its own, absurd humour. Chamcha is described as having hairy goat-legs, a tail and an over-sized phallus as the Pagan fertility god, Pan, and he is called “Beelzebub” or “devil” even by his friends. The main emphasis, however, is not laid on the religious tradition in this section, or on how religious ideas can alter one’s identity. Western philosophical ideas, and the contemporary discussion on how the conceptual representations of reality take part in creating the reality they try to convey, are the main source of humour here. Especially a reference to the role of Nietzsche and his theory of truth is pertinent here, as the lives of Rushdie’s left-wing intellectuals are immersed in radical discourses, many of which owe something to Nietzsche. Compare Rushdie to the following quotations:

What, indeed, does man know of himself! Can he even once perceive himself completely, laid out as if in an illuminated glass case? Does not nature keep the most from him, even his body, to spellbind and confine him in a proud, defective consciousness [...].

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<sup>31</sup> SV, 168.

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations [...]. [T]ruths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures [...].<sup>32</sup>

The pathos and drama of such radicalism are both illustrated to the reader and distanced from him by the simultaneous effects of irony and fantastic-grotesque spectacle. *The Satanic Verses* discusses also contemporary literary theory in such sections as in the above metamorphic scene from the “medical facility at the Detention Centre.” Rushdie’s novel is overtly self-aware of itself as a literary creation, as an illusory representation or fabrication of reality in a linguistic medium. Edward Said’s influential study, *Orientalism*, was published in 1978, and Rushdie’s novel can be interpreted as making its own contributions to the discussion of how Western (dominant) culture constructs alien images of “others” in its discourses. The traditional distinction between fiction as an “object” for the theorising “subject” is hereby subverted; *The Satanic Verses* takes theory as its subject matter, and gives it a fantastic representation. This has double consequences: firstly, cultural theories are given great importance and weight as they become capable of building reality as experienced by the novel’s characters; and, secondly, these same theories receive ironic shades of doubt, as they become mixed with fantasy, and thereby fictionalised. As we can see, the principles of heterogeneity and crossing of discursive borderlines has “blasphemous” (or just problematic) results in other fields besides those of religion.

## ALIEN SELVES

Demonic elements are containers and vehicles for some very troublesome phenomena: the disintegration of identity, or psychic unity, the disintegration of social groups, or breakdown of such divisions as truth/lie, good/evil, or man/animal. All these are rejected into the field of the demonic for obvious reasons. Life would become very complex if such basic categories were questioned. However, this exclusion is not self-evident; nor has it ever been absolute. In all times people have had different ways to cope with this area. Telling stories about transgressive phenomena is one important way. Religious narratives have dealt with this phenomena by assigning demonic figures the role of obstacles and adversaries to be conquered. My previous analyses have pointed out how Western horror culture has modified its perception of demonic elements and how their role has been re-evaluated and acknowledged as potential, or even essential aspects of subjectivity. Rushdie’s text is aware of this development, and makes this manifest by numer-

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<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche 1980, 42-47. – This quotation is given prominent place in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978/1987, 203), in the context of how “truths” about others are produced under the conditions of one’s time and culture, some “system of truths,” or representations.

ous references in the same direction. For example, the theme of identifying with monster figures is prominent in Chamcha's hit success, *The Aliens Show*. This popular TV show is characterised as an entertaining crossbreeding between "The Munsters," "Star Wars" and "Sesame Street." With its "Ridley" character, a terrifying alien "who had an obsession with the actress Sigorney Weaver," and the mentioning of such names as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Rutger Hauer and the film *Blade Runner*, the darkness and complexities of the contemporary science fiction are highlighted in the novel's encyclopaedic field of references. 'Alienation' is one of the concepts that *The Satanic Verses* thematises; "The Aliens Show" even has "the Alien Nation," "a team of Venusian hip-hoppers and subway spray painters and soul-brothers."<sup>33</sup>

*The Satanic Verses* is clearly not interested in any stable and harmonious identity that could act as a buttress for a fixed ideology, or, for example, centralised government. The typical character in this novel is an alien, in several senses of the word: he is a foreigner, a person displaced into another culture; he is a stranger for himself as for the significant others; in short, *alien* is a concept that emphasises how people inhabit different worlds, even simultaneously. As the dream sequences (those which relate to the Islamic tradition) have been separated from the rest of the novel, the context built by the text itself has been lost. *The Satanic Verses* consists of nine chapters, five of which are located in contemporary London; the main plot forms the bulk of the novel, and the two by-plots (the stories of Mahound and Ayesha, the butterfly girl) are framed by it. In other words, the perspective into these religious episodes in non-Western cultures is built from a position of marginality in the West. The concept of alienation can consequently be applied to *The Satanic Verses* in many ways. Everyone in the novel is "other": the characters are seeking or questioning their identities themselves, or are otherwise estranged by narration. This could be dubbed "double marginality"; the novel simultaneously separates itself from the Western context by adopting the marginal perspective of the immigrant groups, and distances itself from other traditions by mixing religious elements with modern scepticism. The frame of reference, nevertheless, is dominantly a contemporary Western – urban and secular – reality.

The textual, social and cultural aspects of the hybridity in *The Satanic Verses* intersect in the construction of identity: the novel explicitly discusses the idea of a single, unified identity, and also challenges it in its own textual practice. This opposition of unity versus plurality is linked with the angelic/demonic division, and thereby to the novel's key thematics. The epigram from *The History of the Devil* by Daniel Defoe, read in the context that the title of the whole work is concerned with the "Satanic" pole, accentuates some of the ideological context for the novel's demonic elements.

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<sup>33</sup> SV, 62 (quotation), 268.

Satan, being thus confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for though he has, in consequence of his angelic nature, a kind of empire in the liquid waste or air, yet this is certainly part of his punishment, that he is ... without any fixed place, or space, allowed him to rest the sole of his foot upon.<sup>34</sup>

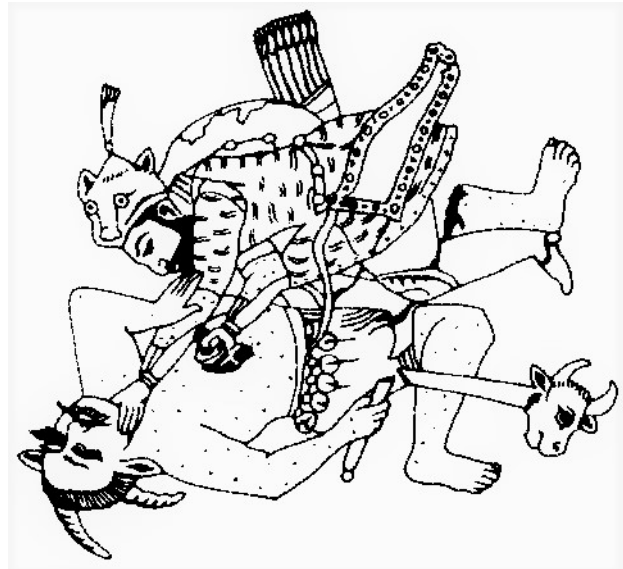
The perspective and emphasis – one could say, the novel’s politics – are on the side of the displaced, those without the privilege of a “proper” place. Being exceedingly aware of how “others” are subject to demonising by the dominant culture, *The Satanic Verses* incorporates a partial reversal of the role of demonic elements into its structure. The novel itself blazons its “Satanism” in its title; the connection between fiction and the demonic is also explored in its pages. Saladin Chamcha’s transformation into a devil character brings the complexities and ambiguities of the demonic into focus by producing their effects in the life of a main character – with whom the reader is most probably going to identify. This reversal of the traditionally rejected “demonism” is not, however, unconditional celebration. The ambivalent role of the demonic elements in *The Satanic Verses* needs a more careful analysis, and it can best be achieved by reading this ambivalence on three different levels: firstly, that of characters, secondly, in the role of the narrator, and, thirdly, in the ambivalent role of “fiction” in the novel.

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<sup>34</sup> Defoe, quoted as an epigram in *The Satanic Verses*.

## ANTITHETICAL CHARACTERS

This fragmented and complex novel is given unity by the repeated names which appear and reappear in different contexts in the separate story lines. The material heterogeneity of *The Satanic Verses* is obvious; Hans Seminck has argued that the repetition of names functions to underline the thematic connections between different narratives.<sup>35</sup> It is, however, equally possible to read the novel's three narratives as thematically divergent, or even in opposition to each other. For example, the story of the village's pilgrimage in India can easily be read as the thematic opposite of the Jahilia sequences: the patriarchal despotism of Mahound is opposed to the feminine mystical experience shared by the villagers as they walk into the sea. The reiteration of names has a perhaps quite uncomplicated basis; Rushdie was originally working on different projects, and as the contemporary Western novel became entangled in the narratives about East and religion, he made several names echo each other in these differing constituent parts. This invites the reader to search for – and to produce – thematic analogies between the different narratives during the reading process.<sup>36</sup>



*“Rustam killing the White Demon”  
(the emblem from The Satanic Verses).*

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<sup>35</sup> Seminck 1993, 39-40.

The central narrative in the novel can be summarised by the processes and events that become personified in the lives of the main characters. This is the authorial synopsis:

*The Satanic Verses* is the story of two painfully divided selves. In the case of one, Saladin Chamcha, the division is secular and societal: he is torn, to put it plainly, between Bombay and London, between East and West. For the other, Gibreel Farishta, the division is spiritual, a rift in the soul. He has lost his faith and is strung out between his immense need to believe and his new inability to do so. The novel is 'about' their quest for wholeness.<sup>37</sup>

Two main characters, Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta, become involved in a highly stylised adventure, which mixes the farcical with the tragic and is continuously swaying at the borderline between the allegorical and the fortuitous. The novel opens with a bang: these men are falling from the skies, the only two surviving victims of the explosion of Flight AI-420, the jumbo jet "Bostan." The first impressions are important; Gibreel is described as singing popular Indian songs, swimming and embracing the air in his purple bush-shirt. As an opposite and counterpart figure in terms of colonialist discourse, Saladin is "prim, rigid," and portrayed in "a grey suit with all the jacket buttons done up, arms by his sides, taking for granted the improbability of the bowler hat on his head [...]."<sup>38</sup> Not only are their movements and ways of behaving different from each other, they are described as falling in opposite positions, Chamcha upside-down, and as forming together a figure of a wheel – "performing their geminate cartwheels all the way down and along the hole that went to Wonderland [...]."<sup>39</sup>

The two men are adopted as yin and yang symbols, as competing and complementing elements in a narrative experiment; most intentions of traditional realism are abandoned, and the reader is directed towards adopting allegorical or metaphorical reading strategies. The dramatic opening especially leads us towards different mythological frames of reference. Gibreel's opening lines are: "To be born again [...] first you have to die." The narrator notices how Chamcha was falling "head first, in the recommended position for babies entering the birth canal": birth, death and rebirth are among the first mythical motifs employed in the text.<sup>40</sup> Important are also the different connotations of "the fall." The myth of the falling angels is a significant reference, as are the Christian religious ideas concerning original sin. "Bostan" is one of two Islamic paradises, and the motif of fall thereby is given the connotation of a fall from a state of perfection into something less perfect. As we learn more about these two men it becomes clear that they have both

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<sup>36</sup> See Pipes 1990, 54-55.

<sup>37</sup> "In Good Faith"; Rushdie 1992, 397.

<sup>38</sup> SV, 3-6.

<sup>39</sup> SV, 6.

<sup>40</sup> SV, 3, 4.

lost their faith; the literal fall from the aeroplane echoes the “fall” in a religious sense.

The fall is also connected with the identities of these two characters: all its oddities and fantastic qualities are situated in the context of their arrival in England, a dramatic transition from one culture into another. The change-over initiates a mutation; Chamcha and Gibreel begin their symbolic evolution into different alternatives as “migrants.” Both of them are Indian-born, but the “angelicdevilish” fall brings out their differences – they are cast into dual roles, as traditional symbols in a religious-political drama as well as realistically drawn personalities. Gibreel Farishta is singing of “inviolably sub-continental [Indian] hearts,” whereas Saladin Chamcha is answering him with a jingoistic British hymn.<sup>41</sup> The opening transition into the British context serves in *The Satanic Verses* as a fracture which brings out the hidden insecurities in emigration in particular, and in the current fast transmutation of culture in general. Can one trust one’s old self any more, believe in the traditional signs of good and evil, when contacts with other traditions and other ways of thinking proliferate?

Saladin and Gibreel offer different answers to this question, and this difference grows into an important aspect of the polyphonic strategy of *The Satanic Verses*: the heterogeneous and conflicting elements are set against each other, in a dialogue.<sup>42</sup> The “Satanic” movement, or change, as opposed to “divine” stasis and harmony are illustrated in the life of the main characters by their differing ways of constructing identity. Saladin has endorsed change, tried to reject his Indian past and adopt a new, Western identity. He starts to metamorphose into the figure of the devil. Gibreel, on the contrary, has stayed his whole life in India; he has also made a successful career as an actor playing the roles of India’s many gods in popular theological movies. Gibreel receives the halo of an angel in this process of transmutation. Both men are actors, both have changed their names and their lives consist of different roles; in a sense, they are metaphors for (post)modern subjectivity, lives marked by constant choices and self-conscious decisions between numerous courses. As is often the case, these choices may be problematic and painful because there is no longer any certain, fixed horizon of values to lean on. Early on, the novel hints that good and evil are (in a Nietzschean idiom) just “metaphors which are worn out;” Gibreel has a “face inextricably mixed up with holiness, perfection, grace: God stuff.”<sup>43</sup> He is made a symbol of goodness because of his appearance. Analogously, Chamcha cannot be accepted for leading roles in England because of his foreign looks – he is demonised because his skin is dark.

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<sup>41</sup> SV, 6.

<sup>42</sup> See Bakhtin 1929/1973, 34: “*The polyphonic novel as a whole is thoroughly dialogical. Dialogical relationships obtain between all the elements of its structure, i.e. the elements are contrapuntally counterposed.*” Emphasis in the original.

<sup>43</sup> SV, 17.



The narrator informs the reader that the transmutation which puts the novel in motion is an act of “Creation,” and that the reasons for it will be a “revelation.”<sup>44</sup> This play with religious language is ironic; the traditional ideas of angels and devils, of such ‘good’ and ‘evil’ that would have absolute and immutable criteria, are questioned from the start. The “angel” (Gibreel, the angel Gabriel) and the “devil” (Chamcha, the “shaytan”) are cast in their roles just because they happen to be positioned on opposite sides of a culturally sensitive division. Traditional religious society is inclined to reject such apostates as Mr. Saladin Chamcha, the British citizen; the comments of Changez Chamchawala, Saladin’s father, are illustrative: “A man untrue to himself becomes a two-legged lie, and such beasts are Shaitan’s best work.”<sup>45</sup> As the narrator piously follows the same lines, the tone is one of playful irony and didactic (mock)seriousness:

A man who sets out to make himself up is taking on the Creator’s role, according to one way of seeing things; he’s unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of abominations. From another angle, you could see pathos in him, heroism in his struggle, in his willingness to risk: not all mutants survive. Or, consider him sociopolitically: most migrants learn, and can become disguises. Our false descriptions to counter the falsehoods invented about us, concealing for reasons of security our secret selves.<sup>46</sup>

The narrator is using religious language to address the problematic fictionality inherent in modern identity. It could be argued (as nowadays is almost self-evident) that all identities are constructed and produced in particular situations, under certain conditions; immigration from one culture into another, however, makes this process visible and heightens self-awareness in its conflicts. Saladin is a modern man, he makes his own choices and decisions. In his father’s views this is no real life: Saladin has lost his soul, been demonised. The comments of the narrator and such details as Saladin acting as the voices of inanimate objects (such as the ketchup bottles in TV commercials), or the monsters in *The Aliens Show*, support this view.

Chamcha is described as the “Man of a Thousand Voices and a Voice”: his construction of identity is extravagant, he is a walking personification of fiction.<sup>47</sup> The opposition between ‘fictional’ and ‘factual’ is one of the most important lines of battle in this polyphonic work. Sacred, religious texts make claims for absolute truth, and supposedly a life lived according to their instructions would be considered as more ‘truthful,’ from the point of view of the believers. As Rushdie’s narrator assigns a modern migrant the role of

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<sup>44</sup> SV, 5.

<sup>45</sup> SV, 48.

<sup>46</sup> SV, 49.

<sup>47</sup>SV, 60. The reference is to the “Arabian Nights” collection of tales, *The Thousand and One Nights*, the paradigm of obsessive storytelling (Scheherazade’s life literally hangs on her narratives: she has to conceive new tales to keep her husband, Schariar, from killing her).

Creator, he also develops the opposition between secular fiction and sacred scripture which is accentuated in the Jahilia episodes. These sections are framed by Gibreel Farishta's struggle with his faltering religious identity.

Gibreel has in his numerous roles established himself as the personification of the divine. His supernatural experiences, however, begin only after he has lost his former faith due to a mysterious disease: Gibreel feels wrongly punished, and his protests allude to the sorrows of Job and the classic problem of God's cruelty. As an "anti-Job," Gibreel is released from his sufferings only after he has renounced God. As his first act after leaving the hospital, he goes into a hotel and eats pig meat, as the palpable evidence of transgressing the limits of his former identity.<sup>48</sup> There is a way of reading the novel that follows the comparison of religion with illness: when Gibreel is cured, he also recovers from the disease of Faith. As the tormenting religious visions start, they are an indication of Gibreel's failing mental health; as Gibreel accepts the reality of the supernatural, he is also described as losing his touch with a shared reality, and falling into a psychosis. Gibreel Farishta is thereby not just a "good" character as opposed to the "evil" Saladin Chamcha – despite their haloes and horns, respectively. As they are described in the beginning as falling intertwined together from the skies, so they should be read as interrelated and complementary figures in their hybrid identities. Chamcha with his bowler hat and British accent represents a denial and break with his original identity and Indian culture; Farishta differs from him by his tighter bonds with his religious identity. These two characters are offered as starting points for the narrative which studies the effects of transition and hybridity. The events during their migration explore and comment on the break with the "original" (their cultural context, and their original selves as produced by this context). In an important section towards the latter part of the novel the narrator makes a metafictional commentary on this division:

Well, then. – Are we coming closer to it? Should we even say that these are two fundamentally different *types* of self? Might we not agree that 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; – that he chose neither near-fatal illness nor transmuting fall; that, in point of fact, he fears above all things the altered states in which his dreams leak into, and overwhelm, his waking self, making him that angelic Gibreel he has no desire to be; – so that his is still a self which, for our present purposes, we may describe as 'true' ... whereas Saladin Chamcha is a creature of *selected*

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<sup>48</sup> SV, 28-30. Gibreel's disease probably has its model in the illness of the famous Bombay movie star, Amitabh Bachan; there are several common features between Rushdie's fiction and this case (for details, see Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*, 1989; cf. Seminck 1993, 24). The episode with pig's meat has an (auto)biographical basis; Rushdie has described how he proved his new-found atheism at the age of fifteen by buying himself a "rather tasteless ham sandwich" ("In God We Trust," 1985, 1990; 1992, 377). Rushdie's biography is discussed in Weatherby 1990.

discontinuities, a *willing* re-invention; his *preferred* revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom, ‘false’? And might we then not go on to say that it is this falsity of self that makes possible in Chamcha a worse and deeper falsity – call this ‘evil’ – and that this is the truth, the door, that was opened in him by his fall? – While Gibreel, to follow the logic of our established terminology, is to be considered ‘good’ by virtue of *wishing to remain*, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man.<sup>49</sup>

It is consonant with the thorough irony of *The Satanic Verses* that Gibreel’s “goodness” is driving him crazy: his incapacity to change makes him an alien in the postmodern world, whereas Chamcha survives by endorsing his ‘alienness’ and is also able to enter into a dialogue with his past. “Goodness” is defined as passivity; Gibreel is shown as incapable of differentiating himself from all the historical “voices” that speak through him.<sup>50</sup> The “evil” of *The Satanic Verses* should properly be understood as the demonic in the Goethean sense: it is the amoral dynamism in the universe, something that oversteps all the divisions that our culture establishes in its attempts to separate the selected “good” meanings from the flux of phenomena.<sup>51</sup> “How does newness come into the world?” asks the narrator as Chamcha forces Gibreel to sing and fly during their fall. “Chamcha willed it [the miracle] and Farishta did what was willed.”<sup>52</sup> The division between good and evil, the angelic and the demonic, is translated into a division between passive power and active will. The overall narrative attitude towards this “theory” embedded in the novel is, nevertheless, one of ironic play and reversals; for example, the narrator continues his above analysis as follows:

– 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*.<sup>53</sup>

The narrator here construes self as something always and inherently hybrid: the immutable and pure ideal of ‘goodness’ thereby becomes something “unnatural” – thus Saladin’s father’s warnings about renouncing one’s natural identity, and of the conscious creation of self as “unnatural” have become reversed. The immediate context of these two accounts of “unnatural” are different; such dislocations and changes of context are characteristic of

<sup>49</sup> SV, 427.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. William Blake’s views on the “passivity” of good and the “active” character of evil; above, page 243. (See also below, page 275.)

<sup>51</sup> *The Satanic Verses* refers to the intertwined nature of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ by quoting Goethe’s *Faust*; SV, 417.

<sup>52</sup> SV, 8, 10.

<sup>53</sup> SV, 427. Italics in the original.

*The Satanic Verses*, contributing to the ways in which the text creates a kaleidoscopic impression of good and evil changing places and dancing around each other – as Saladin and Gibreel twirl around each other during their fall.

Homi K. Bhabha points out that Chamcha is situated in a similar division himself:

Translated, by Sufyan [Chamcha's landlord], for the existential guidance of postcolonial migrants, the problem consists in whether the crossing of cultural frontiers permits freedom from the essence of the self (Lucretius), or whether, like wax, migration only changes the surface of the soul, preserving identity under its protean forms (Ovid).<sup>54</sup>

In his theory of cultural enunciation, Bhabha has emphasised the split, or “Third Space” between the I and You designated in the statement: the production of meaning involves this liminal condition of language – and thus infuses all linguistic meanings with “unconscious” aspects and ambivalencies.<sup>55</sup> Bhabha perceives Rushdie's migrants in terms of transitions and translations, of meanings and of identities. Following Walter Benjamin, he pinpoints the element of resistance in the translation; the heterogeneity of the migrant culture exposes the uncertainties inherent in the construction of cultural identity. According to Bhabha, the real source of “blasphemy” in *The Satanic Verses* is this indeterminacy: like Chamcha, the demonic goatman, its main characters are subjects of cultural difference, living in “the interstices of Lucretius and Ovid, caught in-between a ‘nativist’, even nationalist, atavism and a postcolonial metropolitan assimilation.”<sup>56</sup> The hybridity dramatised in the lives of these characters is also the most problematic aspect of the novel; it does not settle in one culture or position, but, instead, explores their limit in repeated transgressions.

#### THE TRANSGRESSIVE NARRATOR

The idiomatic voice of the narrator has been strongly present in the above discussion of the ambiguous characters in *The Satanic Verses*. In the beginning of the novel, as the nature of the miraculous fall of Gibreel and Saladin is discussed, the narrator intervenes in the characters' discourse by commenting on it:

‘God, we were lucky,’ he [Chamcha] said. ‘How lucky can you get?’

I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and -potence, I'm making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope. Chamcha willed it and Farishta did what was willed.

Which was the miracle worker?

Of what type – angelic, satanic – was Farishta's song?

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<sup>54</sup> Bhabha 1994, 224 (“How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation”).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 36 (“The Commitment to Theory”).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 224-26.

Who am I?

Let's put it this way: who has the best tunes?<sup>57</sup>

The casual invocation of "God" by Chamcha in his (rhetorical) question is immediately followed by the narrator's comments and quizzing about his identity. In this particular context, alongside "revelation" and "creation," these hints construct the position of divinity for this voice. Simultaneously, however, it intimates a possible Satanic identity; for example, in the Jahilia sections the traditional image of God is defined as patriarchal, and the narrator is distinctly separating his/her position from His. "From the beginning men used God to justify the unjustifiable. He moves in mysterious ways: men say. Small wonder, then, that women have turned to me."<sup>58</sup> This alliance with the opponent of patriarchal God (the devil, traditionally portrayed as being worshipped by female witches) is not consistently followed elsewhere in the novel. Rather, the narrator plays with these two opposing positions, with their discordances, and the final outcome is one of demonic ambivalence.

The questions of narrator and narrative cannot be separated (and we have to return to this question again later, in the context of fiction and its identity); the fragmented narratives in *The Satanic Verses* are linked to the splintered selves of its protagonists and to the ambiguous roles of its narrator. The dominant metaphor for this multiplicity is one of possession; early in the novel, Gibreel Farishta is described as consuming all the essential ingredients for the intertextual Babel which is going to fill the subsequent pages:

To get his mind off the subject of love and desire, he [young Gibreel] studied, becoming an omnivorous autodidact, devouring the metamorphic myths of Greece and Rome, the avatars of Jupiter, the boy who became a flower, the spider-woman, Circe, everything; and the theosophy of Annie Besant, and unified field theory, and the incident of the Satanic verses in the early career of the Prophet, and the politics of Muhammad's harem after his return to Mecca in triumph; and the surrealism of the newspapers, in which butterflies could fly into young girls' mouths, asking to be consumed, and children were born with no faces, and young boys dreamed in impossible detail of earlier incarnations, for instance in a golden fortress filled with precious stones.<sup>59</sup>

Later, as the metamorphoses, the Satanic verses, the harem and the butterfly girl are all surfacing among the novel's convoluted narratives, the reader is free to interpret the fantastic elements as delusions or dreams produced by Gibreel's possessed mind. Any one interpretation, or reduction to a single explanation, is not sufficient to cover all the novel's diversified materials. The openness of structure, or, in other terms, the compulsion to in-

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<sup>57</sup> SV, 10.

<sup>58</sup> SV, 95.

<sup>59</sup> SV, 24.

corporate new components into the text, characterises Salman Rushdie's literary work in general, and easily suggests demonic metaphors in its polyphony. One review of *The Satanic Verses* sets forth how "Rushdie is possessed by a story-telling demon"; his novels are works of such megalomaniac abundance and openness of narration that they appear to be able to swallow up anything. "In *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie has created a fictional universe whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. It is several of the best novels he has ever written."<sup>60</sup> The possession metaphor is treated by Rushdie's text itself; this excerpt is from the beginning of *Midnight's Children* (1981):

I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity. [...] I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me; and guided only by memory [...] I must commence the business of remaking my life [...].<sup>61</sup>

Rushdie's narratives and narrators deliberately confuse the limit of identities; the possession metaphor is offered as a way to articulate the complexity of hybrid and plural (instead of unified and monological) subject positions. In *The Satanic Verses* the narrator is frequently inviting attention to his own role, and adding an important element to the overall atmosphere of uncertainty. The narrator is playing with two opposite ideas of "authorial voice" (once again, the strategy of confusing a traditional dualism is applied as the structuring principle). The narrator's indirect suggestion of his omnipotence and omniscience in the fictional universe alludes to the classic idea of the author as a "maker," as the rational creator in full control of his creation. On the other hand, the narrator emphasises the possessive quality of the separate narratives; especially Gibreel is portrayed as the romantic alternative of a story-teller, one possessed by his materials. Older literary criticism distinguished between models of the "maker" and the "possessed" author, and searched for an ideal in "an equilibrium of tensions," when "the struggle with the daemon has ended in triumph."<sup>62</sup>

The position of the narrator in *The Satanic Verses* unsettles this dualism, and accepts the coexistence of incompatible alternatives. The fictional universe is built on the act of narration; therefore, the narrator's question "Who am I?" is integral for the fictive character's inquiries of *why* they are put through their sufferings. "For what was he [Saladin Chamcha] – he couldn't avoid the notion – being punished? And, come to that, *by whom?* (I

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<sup>60</sup> Irwin 1988, 1067.

<sup>61</sup> Rushdie 1982, 9-10.

<sup>62</sup> Wellek - Warren 1942/1966, 85. (The reference here is to L. Rusu, a Rumanian scholar.) This greatest of creative categories (*type démoniaque équilibré*) should, according to Wellek and Warren, include the names of Goethe, Dante, Shakespeare, Dickens, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky.

held my tongue.)”<sup>63</sup> The narrator implies having either full responsibility or knowledge of the narrated events. Elsewhere, however, the narrator denies having full authorial control over the process:

And there is a Gibreel who walks down the streets of London, trying to understand the will of God. [...]

(I’m giving him no instructions. I, too, am interested in his choices – in the result of his wrestling match. Character *vs* destiny: a free-style bout. Two falls, two submissions or a knockout will decide.)<sup>64</sup>

Instead of an interventionist God, this narrating personage is claiming to be a detached observer in an experiment involving the momentous philosophical dilemma about free will (‘destiny’ and ‘character’ are two ways of referring to the determinism in man’s actions).<sup>65</sup> In a manner consistent with the novel’s principle of transgression and heterogeneity, this proclamation of separateness between the narrator and the characters does not hold. Gibreel Farishta is described as seeing God; in a hilarious act of blasphemous self-irony, this apparition carries some not-so-flattering likeness to the author, Salman Rushdie.

He saw, sitting on the bed, a man of about the same age as himself, of medium height, fairly heavily built, with salt-and-pepper beard cropped close to the line of the jaw. What struck him most was that the apparition was balding, seemed to suffer from dandruff and wore glasses. This was not the Almighty he had expected. ‘Who are you?’ he asked with interest. [...]

‘Ooparvala,’ the apparition answered. ‘The Fellow Upstairs.’

‘How do I know you’re not the other One,’ Gibreel asked craftily, ‘Neechayvala, the Guy from Underneath?’

[...] ‘We are not obliged to explain Our nature to you,’ the dressing-down continued. ‘Whether We be multiform, plural, representing the union-by-hybridization of such opposites as *Oopar* and *Neechay*, or whether We be pure, stark, extreme, will not be resolved here.’<sup>66</sup>

The irony of the situation has multiple levels. From a perspective internal to the fiction, this God of *The Satanic Verses* acts in discordance with his own words. “The rules of Creation are pretty clear: you set things up, you make them thus and so, and then you let them roll.” And a bit later: “I sat on Alleluia Cone’s bed and spoke to the superstar, Gibreel. *Ooparvala* or *Neechayvala*, he wanted to know, and I didn’t enlighten him [...].”<sup>67</sup> The narrator appears as too tempted by the role of the Maker, of the author-God, to resist fooling with his fictional characters’ lives; he actually throws Gibreel

<sup>63</sup> SV, 256.

<sup>64</sup> SV, 457.

<sup>65</sup> About the strong deterministic tradition in religion, folklore and literature, see Carl-Martin Edsman, “Divine and Demonic Necessity in the Oresteia” and the other articles collected in Ringgren 1967.

<sup>66</sup> SV, 318-19. The “divine” names are here given in Hindustani.

<sup>67</sup> SV, 408-9.

into the road of madness by his intervention. If considered as a device at the metafictional level, the inscription of an “author” as a figure into his own fiction has also its ironies, or ambiguities. It confuses the distinctiveness of fiction at its traditional limits: the fields of author, narrator and fiction start to overlap. This structural ambivalence corresponds to the confusing vacillation in the narrator’s self-definition – or, in his obvious unwillingness or incapacity to produce one. The narrator offers both his characters and the reader contradictory messages in a sort of demonic double-play: the question of the narrator’s identity “will not be resolved here,” as he states. This works as an indication of the interstitial quality of the novel, in general. Instead of producing identities, it inquires into their possibilities and preconditions. This is at its most manifest in a chain of questions.

There is a voice whispering in his [Mahound’s] ear: *What kind of idea are you? Man-or-mouse?*

We know that voice. We’ve heard it once before.<sup>68</sup>

The immediate reference here is to the discussion about doubt being the opposite of faith, and the sceptical doubts thereby being “devil talk” (the narrator placed the question if he could be Shaytan himself: “Shaitan interrupting Gibreel. [/] Me?”) The Prophet’s nagging self-doubts make this a modern self – and demonic (or the morally more neutral ‘daimonic’) in several senses of the concept.

*What kind of idea am I? I bend. I sway. I calculate the odds, trim my sails, manipulate, survive.*<sup>69</sup>

Here, this question is repeated in the mind of Abu Simbel, the leader of Jahilia. It is further established as a signal of self-scrutiny, of meditation on the moral ambivalence inherent in the constitution of a self.

– Should God be proud or humble, majestic or simple, yielding or un-?  
*What kind of idea is he? What kind am I?*<sup>70</sup>

Abu Simbel’s offer to gain the souls of Jahilia in exchange for the recognition of the three principal goddesses has caused a fracture in the certainty of the Prophet’s mind. *The Satanic Verses* continues here to develop the connection between the human self and its ideas. This novel does not search for any “natural” or “authentic” version of subjectivity; human existence is perceived and understood within the horizon of those ideas that people themselves are able to conceive. Man is always an *idea*: a human creation, or fabrication – essentially a fiction.

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<sup>68</sup> SV, 95.

<sup>69</sup> SV, 103.

<sup>70</sup> SV, 111.



*Any new idea, Mahound, is asked two questions. The first is asked when it's weak: WHAT KIND OF AN IDEA ARE YOU? Are you the kind that compromises, does deals, accommodates itself to society, aims to find a niche, to survive; or are you the cursed, bloody-minded, ramrod-backed type of damnfool notion that would rather break than sway with the breeze? – The kind that will almost certainly, ninety-nine times out of hundred, be smashed to bits; but, the hundredth time, will change the world.*<sup>71</sup>

This time, the question is presented in Gibreel's mind by Baal, the poet. Gibreel is situated in his confused state between two ages and two places, and the question is targeted to himself, now, as much as to the Prophet, long time ago. Should one follow one's own ideas and ideals, and build an identity on radical differences, or should one perceive identity as something that is produced in community? The moment of hesitation in Prophet's career is compared further to the situation of migrant subjects in the (post)modern world; the society is in a flux, there is a "newness entering the world" – how should a new identity be negotiated under these conditions? What is right, what is wrong? What is the correct perspective to decide the basis for ethics: what is good, what is evil? The hallmark of the human condition is the imperfect knowledge and uncertainty about the full consequences of one's actions. The repeated question grows into an emblem of *The Satanic Verses*, one that emphasises the state of existing between alternatives, or of being divided into conflicting components.

The question of religion plays a key role in the novel's examination of identity and its problems. Partly this prominence is a sign of the key position religion has occupied as the most significant frame of reference for the majority of people outside the current Western hegemony of secular economy and science. Partly, it is also used as a symbol for an individual's search for unity and fulfilment. The stories of Mahound and Imam, the patriarchal religious leaders, are most concerned with the former field; "uncompromising; absolute; pure" are keywords for religious fanaticism. Especially Imam, the fictional rendering of Ayatollah Khomeini, is described as pure and uncompromising to the point of inhumanity. In Imam's view, the whole Western conception of history with its ideas of progress, science, and rights, is the creation of Devil, "a deviation from the Path, knowledge is a delusion, because the sum of knowledge was complete on the day Al-Lah finished his revelation to Mahound."<sup>72</sup>

Ayesha is articulated as the most positive alternative to the religious leadership in the novel; she is an authentic female mystic, and with her young beauty and romantic butterflies, an image of love's divinity (she is capable of mobilising the forces of Eros, that "powerful daimon" in Mirza

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<sup>71</sup> SV, 335. Italics in the original.

<sup>72</sup> SV, 210.

Saeed).<sup>73</sup> She is opposed to the two male leaders, Mahound and Imam, also by being a charismatic leader from the uneducated masses; therefore her political status is different. She leads the villagers into a personal, not institutionalised, religious experience; her relationship to power is less domineering.<sup>74</sup> The division, or the demonic conflict, however, is present here, as well. Ayesha's pilgrimage, the *Padyatra*, is followed from the standpoint of Mirza Saeed, who is a secular man, and acts as a "demon of doubt" in the odyssey. He points out the weaknesses in Ayesha's leadership and questions her miracles. He perceives the inhumanity of Ayesha's endeavour for transcendence, how her absolutism drives her followers to their deaths. Ayesha even accepts the stoning of a baby, because it was illegitimate, and therefore a "Devil's child."<sup>75</sup> She represents the pursuit after an ideal that is ready to sacrifice everything else in order to be absolutely unbroken in faith.

'Why should we follow you,' the Sarpanch asked, 'after all the dying, the baby, and all?'

'Because when the waters part, you will be saved. You will enter into the Glory of the Most High.'

'What waters?' Mirza Saeed yelled. 'How will they divide?'

'Follow me,' Ayesha concluded, 'and judge me by their parting.'

His offer had contained an old question: *What kind of idea are you?* And she, in turn, had offered him an old answer, *I was tempted, but am renewed; am uncompromising; absolute; pure.*<sup>76</sup>

Mirza Saeed's revolt has much desperation behind it: he is bound to the pilgrimage because his wife and Ayesha – the two women he loves – are taking it. For a secular man the acceptance of miracles would mean giving up one's identity. As Mirza Saeed says: "It is the choice, then [...] between the devil and the deep blue sea."<sup>77</sup> The climaxing image of the religious following their leader under the surface of the Arabian sea is a particularly striking image of Mirza Saeed's fears before the "leap of faith." He is longing to lose his self in the Other, but traditional religiosity is not an option for him; *The Satanic Verses* portrays collective and dogmatic religions as dangerous and alien practices. The only variety of faith that is given a positive, identifying treatment, is the faith in love. As Mirza Saeed is finally dying, after losing his reasons for living, he has a vision of Ayesha; he is drowning in the sea because

<sup>73</sup> SV, 219-20. Her name evokes again the demonic beauty from H. Rider Haggard's *She*; see above, page 176n26. (The "powerful daimon," *daimôn megas*, is Plato's expression, from his *Symposium* [202d].)

<sup>74</sup> In his dreams Gibreel is the medium (as the archangel Gabriel) for all three prophets, and confronts their differences: "With Mahound, there is always a struggle; with the Imam, slavery; but with this girl, there is nothing" (SV, 234). The sources for the revelations are in every case in the prophet's own self, but these selves are articulated differently.

<sup>75</sup> SV, 496-97.

<sup>76</sup> SV, 500.

<sup>77</sup> SV, 484.

he cannot open his heart for her – and she is drowning with him. This finally breaks Mirza Saeed's heart: he opens up, "and they walked to Mecca across the bed of the Arabian Sea."<sup>78</sup> If there are moments without pervasive irony and scepticism in *The Satanic Verses*, this affirmation of love, the need for belief in a mutual bond, is one of the strongest candidates.

Another moment of reconciliation is at the end of Chamcha's story: his father's death. "*He is teaching me how to die*, Salahuddin thought. *He does not avert his eyes, but looks death right in the face*. At no point in his dying did Changez Chamchawala speak the name of God."<sup>79</sup> The narrator has changed 'Saladin' back into 'Salahuddin' which conveys the idea of some – perhaps a little bit more "original" – of his many "alternative selves" returning into Chamcha's life after all his experiences. He does not stick to his bowler hat any more, but faces his starting-points, deals with the relationship with his family and two cultures. Changez Chamchawala demonstrates how one can sustain one's dignity and individuality when living in one's own, non-Western tradition. "I have no illusions; I know I am not going anywhere after this," Changez says. What is in common in the atheistic dying of Changez Chamchawala, and in the final surrender of Mirza Saeed, is that they are characterised by the affirmation of an individual choice, and rejection of official religions or answers. *The Satanic Verses* speaks for the value of love, but it is human love, not the ideal love of a transcendent God.

#### FICTION THAT VIOLATES THE LIMITS

"Why demons, when man himself is a demon?" asks Isaac Bashevis Singer's "last demon" in Chamcha's stream of consciousness. He is tempted to add: "And why angels, when man is angelic, too?" The narrator speaks in this context of Chamcha's "sense of balance, his much-to-be-said-for-and-against reflex." *The Satanic Verses* makes it impossible to separate one opposite from the other – high and low, holy and profane, good and evil are inextricably entangled with each other. Rushdie connects with that thread of the Western intellectual heritage which has renounced distinct categories or clear-cut dualisms, and instead sympathised with "Eastern" pluralism. It is a Christian heresy to consider Evil and Good as complementary and mutually implicated; William Blake is such a heretic in writing that "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. [/] From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil."<sup>80</sup> Blake's poem is one of the two

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<sup>78</sup> SV, 507.

<sup>79</sup> SV, 531. Italics in the original.

<sup>80</sup> "Marriage of Heaven and Hell"; Blake 1982, 94.

works Rushdie names as significant influences on *The Satanic Verses*; the other is *The Master and Margarita* (1966-67) by Mikhail Bulgakov.<sup>81</sup>

Singer's short story, "The Last Demon" records the thoughts of the last demon, as the holocaust of the Second World War ended that reality where demons had still been conceivable.<sup>82</sup> *The Satanic Verses* is written in this post-holocaust reality, where we have to face our (human) capacity for in-human deeds. Angels and devils all stand for a potential in man himself – and one has to bear the responsibility. Consequently, even when the role of an angel or a devil is cast on a character, he remains fully human: a mixed bag of strengths and weaknesses. Rushdie has written approvingly about Singer, that he seems "like so many writers, from Milton onwards, to be somewhat 'of the devil's party'."<sup>83</sup> As a Jew living in the twentieth century, Singer could hardly close his eyes on the more problematic aspects of human nature. *The Satanic Verses* shares the same disillusionment in traditional truths. The disreputable figure of the devil with his horns and hoofs can act as a figure for liberation, as the angel can personify anger and destruction. These lines quoted from Goethe's *Faust* could apply to Saladin as devil, but equally they could be inverted and applied to Gibreel as angel:

– *Who art thou, then?*  
 – *Part of that Power, not Understood,*  
*Which always wills the Bad, and always works the Good.*<sup>84</sup>

Both Chamcha and Gibreel finally choose "the left path" (the Satanic alternative); in other words, they are condemned to realise their modern troubled individuality in their differences, not in harmony with some Law or divine standards – because such do not exist in the world of this novel.<sup>85</sup> "Demon" and "angel" are therefore radically decontextualised; without the religious context the traditional meanings attached to these signs appear merely contingent. They are just "names you have dreamed of, you and your fathers," full of "conjecture and wish-fulfillment." Religious imagery is separated from its authority.<sup>86</sup>

Uncertain pluralities and excessive heterogeneity question the possibility of constructing other identities, as well; the religious categories are not

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<sup>81</sup> "In Good Faith"; Rushdie 1992, 403. – The first draft of Bulgakov's novel was written already in 1929 and it was completed May 14, 1939, but it was only published posthumously, and even then in a censored form (see Krugovoy 1991, 62, 212).

<sup>82</sup> Singer 1953/1982, 179-87.

<sup>83</sup> "Isaac Bashevis Singer"; Rushdie 1992, 343.

<sup>84</sup> SV, 417. Cf. Goethe 1808/1949, 75.

<sup>85</sup> SV, 352, 419.

<sup>86</sup> Rushdie's justification for his decontextualisation of religious imagery is based on his experience of living at the juncture of cultures: "If migrant groups are called devils by others, that does not really make them demonic. And if devils are not necessarily devilish, angels may not necessarily be angelic ... From this premise, the novel's exploration of morality as internal and shifting (rather than external, divinely sanctioned, absolute) may be said to emerge." ("In Good Faith"; Rushdie 1992, 402-3.)

the only ones which are transgressed. The separate identities of fiction, the idea of an autonomous work of art, and authorship, are all called in question. Keith Wilson has evoked the classic quotation from Keats in the context of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*:

What Keats definitely offered as the nature and responsibility of his type of 'the chameleon Poet' – 'A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually in for[ming] and filling some other Body' – is inverted by Saleem into consideration of the other bodies, including all the pre-conception ones, that inform and fill, at times to overflowing, the writer. The image of the writer as both master and victim of public and private material, which he has been formed by in the past and is himself attempting to form in the present, dominates *Midnight's Children*.<sup>87</sup>

As we saw, the position of narrator in *The Satanic Verses* is also ambiguous and polyphonic. Gibreel, as the image of a story-teller in the novel, cannot control the sources of his dreams: "this isn't my voice it's a Voice" – "God knows whose postman I've been."<sup>88</sup> The narrator is alluding to his role as the Creator, or author, of this fiction – and even making an appearance on its pages in the likeness of a novelist, perhaps as Rushdie himself – but his relationship to his creation is a curious mixture of involvement and detachment. The limits of fiction, and its autonomous identity (as a fantasy separate from empirical reality, and as an independent work of art) becomes blurred in many ways.

One way that the autonomy of *The Satanic Verses* is undetermined derives from its overflow of intertextual material. A comparison to Bulgakov's novel serves as an illustrative example. The scenario and the fundamental themes are remarkably similar in *The Master and Margarita* and *The Satanic Verses*. In Bulgakov's work the impulse that sets the story in motion is the arrival of Satan and his demonic entourage into the modern capital of Soviet Russia. In *The Satanic Verses* the devil-shaped Chamcha (and Gibreel in his role as the angel of destruction) travel through London. Both novels consist of several intertwined stories, and both include an account of the origin of a major world religion as one of these. In Bulgakov, this mythical-religious dimension is the passion of Jesus ("Yeshua Ha-Nostri" in the novel); in Rushdie's text, the revelation received by the Prophet, Muhammad. The contrasting mixture of contemporary reality and mythical past, the secular and religious realities operate as the structuring principle in both works. In addition, the stylistic and thematic similarities are pronounced: some elements in contemporary society are made grotesque by employing demonic phenomena. The bitter satire is counterbalanced by a similar philosophy of relativism: the demonic and the divine, light and darkness are seen as neces-

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<sup>87</sup> Wilson 1984, 24. See Keats 1970, 157. – "Master and victim" is Rushdie's own expression; see *Midnight's Children* (Rushdie 1982, 463).

<sup>88</sup> SV, 112.

sary and mutually complementary – and the emphasis lies on the demonic laughter and slander. A demonic ambivalence characterises both of these novels; George Krugovoy has referred to the frustration that critics have expressed as Bulgakov's novel "cannot be reduced to any one-sided conception, either religious or anti-ecclesiastic."<sup>89</sup> Bulgakov's Devil, Woland, articulates this ambivalence in the novel from his own point of view:

You [the messenger of Yeshua] pronounced your words as if you refuse to acknowledge the existence of either shadows or evil. But would you kindly ponder this question: What would your good do if evil didn't exist, and what would the earth look like if all the shadows disappeared?<sup>90</sup>

Krugovoy has made a detailed reading of Bulgakov's complex symbolism to save *The Master and Margarita* from accusations of Manichaeism, but the fact remains that in the end it is the Devil who "saves" the novel's lovers and grants them "rest" (but no heaven, or the divine light).

Similar cases could be made of the influence of many other important twentieth-century novels; Rushdie himself has spoken about literary "cross-pollination" on an international scale.<sup>91</sup> *The Satanic Verses* does not portray devils and angels in the traditional religious sense; it is concerned with the transformation of the self with the mythical figures as its suggestive means. The literary tradition of metamorphosis supplies Rushdie's novel with numerous influential intertexts, ranging from Ovid to Franz Kafka.<sup>92</sup> Chamcha's situation is not only intimately related to Gregor Samsa's plight in Kafka's "Die Verwandlung" (1915; *The Metamorphosis*), but to the general atmosphere and situations depicted in Kafka's work. Modern anxiety, alienation and the anonymous cruelty of oppressive power structures is Chamcha's reality as much as an elemental part of *Der Prozess* (1925; *The Trial*) or *Das Schloss* (1926; *The Castle*).

To take yet another example from modern literature, some of the basic narrative strategies of *The Satanic Verses* can be traced back into Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967; *One Hundred Years of Solitude*), the paradigmatic novel of "magical realism." The tale of Macondo, a Colombian village, interweaves history and fantasy; the babies can have pig-tails, people may live hundred of years, but it is equally possible for a banana company to murder four thousand workers, while the supreme court rules that such workers had never existed. Absurdism, fantasy and historical and social commentary are placed in fertile tension, amalgamated, creating a compound that paved the way for such works as *The Satanic Verses*.

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<sup>89</sup> Krugovoy (1991, 3) is here quoting A. Zerkalov (*Evangelie Mihhaila Bulgakova*, 1984).

<sup>90</sup> Bulgakov 1966/1997, 305.

<sup>91</sup> Cornwell 1990, 185; the reference is to Timothy Brennan's *Salman Rushdie and The Third World* (1989, p. 60).

<sup>92</sup> A novel analysis of this tradition is offered by Kai Mikkonen's study, *The Writer's Metamorphosis* (1997).

The repeated query of the narrator – *Who am I?* – could thus be given several answers (“Mikhail Bulgakov,” “Franz Kafka,” “Gabriel García Márquez”), depending on which narrative or thematic element is in question.

It is justifiable to read the novel’s polyphony as a deconstruction of the idea of an “author”; after all, the unity of an empirical author has been used to secure some fixed, authorial meanings – those very same pursuits of pure and absolute truths that *The Satanic Verses* most vehemently opposes. Rushdie himself has attempted to clarify the plurality of his “empirical” self by pointing out its numerous (and potentially conflicting) influences: a moderate Muslim home, a Christian nanny, friends among Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, and the hotchpotch of Bombay with its movies, Hindu myths and Spiderman comics; “I was already a mongrel self, history’s bastard, before London aggravated the condition.”<sup>93</sup> It is hard to find support for the reestablishment of the author’s intentions as conclusive criteria for the literary meaning in *The Satanic Verses*, as Anthony Close has attempted. In his article, “The Empirical Author: Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*,” Close attacks most literary theory since W.K. Wimsatt’s and M.C. Beardsley’s article “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) by claiming that Rushdie’s predicament reveals its irresponsibility. Theoretical claims of how unimportant empirical authors are in conferring a text’s meaning gain a “grim frivolity” as Rushdie is sentenced to death because his intentions are not heard. Close argues that “meaning is centered on an *egocentric* zero-point,” and that one should renounce “implied authors” or “actantial roles” as needless hypotheses. Communication is always of an “interpersonal nature,” and one should identify the author “as a person with a specific profile and history, and with designs with his fellow men.”<sup>94</sup>

Close’s argument for the importance of the empirical author has ethical appeal and humane value. However, his conception of literature disregards those distinctive features of textuality that *The Satanic Verses* so well illustrates. As discussed in chapters two and three, neither “work of art” or “self” offer shortcuts to some unproblematic unity. Both are contested ideas and continue to deviate radically from our common-sense notions under more intense scrutiny. The reader of *The Satanic Verses* does not do justice to the intricacies of this novel if he forgets how “ego” or “person” are the exact ideas it delights in unravelling. An interpersonal aspect is strongly present in the novel, and it is a hard task *not* to discern the political and cultural views upheld in the text. However, one should remember that it is in the interests of such “readers” as Ayatollah Khomeini to equate the empirical author with “his” fiction. Rushdie quoted Michel Foucault’s essay “What is an Author?” in his Herbert Read Memorial Lecture in 1990, noting that according to Foucault, “*authors were named only when it was necessary to find*

<sup>93</sup> “In God We Trust” (Rushdie 1992, 377, 404); “Is Nothing Sacred?” (ibid., 425).

<sup>94</sup> Close 1990, 251, 255, 256, 265.

*somebody to blame.*” Literature, the discourse of art (Foucault emphasised), was originally “an act placed in the bipolar field of the sacred and the profane.”<sup>95</sup> Even if the personal history of an author is the formative process in an artwork’s emergence, one should see how this process is also an outlet for numerous determining influences that cannot be reduced to the author’s person. *The Satanic Verses* invites meditations on the unconscious aspects involved in the creation of fiction, and about the possibilities for the subject always being plural, and heterogeneous; knowledge about the author’s intellectual setting can surely be suggested as an ethical norm, but – as the “Rushdie affair” so dramatically proves – texts are *actually* always “misread,” received as dislocated and somehow alien visitors in a context different from what was originally intended. This uncomfortable horizon of demonic heterogeneity and conflicting realities is, of course, what *The Satanic Verses* is all about.

All this said, there nevertheless remain questions to be answered regarding the relationship of fiction with its other in the text. Why is the key character in the “Satanic Verses” episode called “Salman”? “Your blasphemy, Salman, can’t be forgiven. Did you think I wouldn’t work it out? To set your word against the Word of God,” announces the Prophet of fiction, prophetically heralding Rushdie’s own death sentence.<sup>96</sup> The poor scribe had begun to doubt the divinity of Mahound’s revelation, and started altering the words of the Qur’an he recorded. Salman is then, literally, the author of “the Satanic Verses”: he is shaking the faith in the Holy Scripture by proving that writing is made by humans, and that it is subject to revisions and alterations. He doubts that the Scripture is really outside time and history, a revelation of the transcendent Word as the faithful have it – and this doubt, not the total disbelief, is the “opposite of faith” (“Devil talk,” as the narrator puts it). The inscription of the name, “Salman,” into the fiction in this role and manner, is thereby a powerful gesture of self-demonisation; the empirical author is implicated in a discursive battle about the status of writing. *The Satanic Verses* embodies in itself the conflict between the ideas of “fiction” and “Truth” and articulates it using demonic imagery.

Salman saves his neck by betraying his friend, Baal, the satirist poet. He is nominated as the “true enemy” of the Prophet, and the most violent conflict in the novel is imagined between these two operators of language. As *The Satanic Verses* connects with the tradition of great satirical novels, the conflict between satire and scripture is yet another way in which the novel discusses the status of its own fictionality at the face of an alternative (religious) mode of using language.<sup>97</sup> Baal is the representative of the author in

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<sup>95</sup> “Is Nothing Sacred?” (Rushdie 1992, 424); italics in the original. Foucault 1979, 148.

<sup>96</sup> SV, 374.

<sup>97</sup> Edward and Lillian Bloom have noticed in their study, *The Satire’s Persuasive Voice*, how satire’s intention to take a stand has always been in danger of becoming destructive, instead of being “righteous.” The traditional view of religious satire is based on the conviction apparent in pamphlets of such a writer as John Milton; they might be ferocious in



the text; he is a professional writer who does not accept extraneous criteria for his work, no authority or value higher than the spirit of inquiry and scepticism.<sup>98</sup> “A poet’s work,” Baal states: “To name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep.” The narrator adds: “And if rivers of blood flow from the cuts his verses inflict, then they will nourish him. He is the satirist, Baal.”<sup>99</sup>

As the reader is now aware of how many people have actually lost their lives due to the publication of *The Satanic Verses* and the ensuing clashes, there appears to be something devilish and reckless in these lines. “Baal” is an ancient Babylonian appellation of “Lord,” implied in the devil’s name “Beelzebub,” which has probably originally signified “Baal-zebub,” or “lord of flies.”<sup>100</sup> The name of the poet is again an indication of the manner in which fiction is positioned as demonic in the text itself; the later reactions and demonising attacks on Rushdie and his novel have only been able to confirm the oppositional structure that is built into *The Satanic Verses* itself. As the Jahilia sequences unfold, this opposition becomes increasingly aggravated. Baal is forced to take flight and hide himself in a brothel. He gradually comes to realise that “his story was so mixed up with Mahound’s that some great resolution was necessary.”<sup>101</sup> The novel dramatises the conflict between secular writing (backed up by the individuality of the poet) and the sacred text (authorised by God himself) as a power struggle; poetry is subjugated and incorporated into the dualism built into religious thought. Baal’s way of attacking this power structure is analogous to the choice of the immigrant children who took the demonic figure of Chamcha as their symbol: inversion, reversal.

The logic and structure of needs behind the production of blasphemy have not been studied much; the explanations suggested by *The Satanic Verses* are as tenable as most. Elaine Pagels wrote in connection with Satan and demonising, how “the more intimate the conflict, the more intense and bitter it becomes.”<sup>102</sup> The narrator in *The Satanic Verses* asks “What is unforgivable?” and gives the following answer: “What if not the shivering naked-

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their attacks, but the reader could perceive a fixed horizon of values, of good and evil, at the background. Rushdie, however, is clearly more situated in the tradition of ambivalent satire, analysed by the Blooms in the prose and poems of William Blake, which sometimes makes it impossible to define some clear “target” for the satire. (See Bloom - Bloom 1979, 31, 47, 172, 197.)

<sup>98</sup> The connection between authorship and (diabolical) rebellion towards religious authority is traditional; “The German mystic Jacob Boehme, as far back as the seventeenth century, relates that when Satan was asked to explain the cause of God’s enmity to him and his consequent downfall, he replied in justification of his act: ‘I wanted to be an author.’ Like the son of many a good family, he was driven out, he claims, for having had literary ambitions.” (Rudwin 1931/1973, 8.)

<sup>99</sup> SV, 97.

<sup>100</sup> See, e.g. Langton 1949/1982, 166-67.

<sup>101</sup> SV, 379.

<sup>102</sup> See above, pages 40-41.

ness of being *wholly known* to a person one does not trust?”<sup>103</sup> One is reminded of Mahound’s words: “Your blasphemy, Salman, can’t be forgiven.” Only from the position of the intimate knowledge of Islam could Salman Rushdie have written so striking a rendition of a heartfelt discursive collision, a confrontation between the highest value of the secular, Western tradition (individual freedom and the value of free speech), and the Islamic (the life of the Prophet as a ‘beautiful exemplar’ for the believer aspiring to perfection<sup>104</sup>). Shabbir Akhtar, in his exposition of the Muslim view on *The Satanic Verses*, states that “Rushdie writes with all the knowledge of an insider,” and that the events and characters in the novel “bear so striking a resemblance to actual events and characters in Islamic history that one has grounds to doubt its status as merely fictional.”<sup>105</sup> In this light, the sequence that describes Baal the poet naming the twelve whores after the Prophet’s wives, and living a life of carnivalesque reversal in the brothel, *Jihab* (‘veil’; the Islamic symbol for female chastity), acquires its full blasphemous power.

Harold Bloom has argued in his study, *The Anxiety of Influence*, that literature is created in demonic tension, among agonising conflicts; the writing subject is always torn between the desire to express himself freely and those preconditions that the poetic predecessors pose as starting points. Bloom’s theory is openly masculinist, a sort of heroic reading of Freud’s ideas concerning the relationship between father and son: “The stronger the man, the larger his resentments, and the more brazen his *clinamen* [poetic misreading of his predecessors].”<sup>106</sup> In an analogous tone, Rushdie states that “The greatest human beings must struggle against themselves as well as the world. I never doubted Muhammad’s greatness [...].”<sup>107</sup> *The Satanic Verses* is concerned with the problems of the male psyche, and the conflicts in the relationship between the two men, Baal and Mahound, can be seen as a metafictional commentary on the intertextual relationship between Rushdie’s text and the Islamic tradition. Rushdie himself has given interesting reasons for the brothel episode:

[T]hroughout the novel, I sought images that crystallized the opposition between the sacred and the profane worlds. The harem and the brothel

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<sup>103</sup> SV, 426-27.

<sup>104</sup> In Arabic, *uswatan hasanah*; Koran 33:21; see Akhtar 1989, 3. – Joel Kuortti has argued in his study that the ‘Rushdie Affair’ points out how “sacred” reveals those categories that are essential in constructing identity, in the West as well as in Islamic communities. The value attached to literature in the West has structural similarity to that of the status of Qur’an and the Prophet in the Islam – it is a privileged arena that should be “exempted from any contamination.” He concludes, that an analysis of the “*Satanic Verses* affair can help us reveal the place of the sacred in others’ and our own lives, the agency through which we shape our identities, the dreams we live by.” (Kuortti 1997b, 161. Cf. also the discussion on the complex roles of fictionality in Rushdie’s works in Kuortti 1998.)

<sup>105</sup> Akhtar 1989, 4-6.

<sup>106</sup> Bloom 1973/1975, 43.

<sup>107</sup> “In Good Faith”; Rushdie 1992, 409.

provide such an opposition. Both are places where women are sequestered, in the harem to keep them from all men except their husband and close family members, in the brothel for the use of strange males. Harem and brothel are antithetical worlds, and the presence in the harem of the Prophet, the receiver of the sacred text, is likewise contrasted with the presence in the brothel of the clapped-out poet, Baal, the creator of profane texts. The two struggling worlds, pure and impure, chaste and coarse, are juxtaposed by making them echoes of one another; and, finally, the pure eradicates the impure. Whores and writer ('I see no difference here,' remarks Mahound) are executed. Whether one finds this a happy or sad conclusion depends on one's point of view.<sup>108</sup>

The execution of Baal in the end hardly qualifies to make *The Satanic Verses* a pious narrative; if the pure and impure world are juxtaposed, it increases the reader's awareness of the power structures that sustain the limit between them – the boundary that confines women in their separate domain, away from civic activities. Such parallelism also acts as an analogy, and encourages us to read the institution of the harem 'through' the brothel. The intertextual and discursive heterogeneity adds its own aspects to the "blasphemous poetics" of *The Satanic Verses*; as the material from the Koran is combined with narrative techniques familiar from "magical realism" or "postmodern novels," the Scripture is subjected to the rules of fiction, and inversely, fiction addresses the ideas of the sacred and of the religious experience. Political history is another "text" *The Satanic Verses* weaves into its fabric; Ayatollah Khomeini, the Islamic revolution and multi-racial or multi-cultural relations are consumed among the "multitudes" that inhabit this polyphonic novel. The encounter between different elements, however, is not balanced and harmonious. Religious and political authority is not recognised; the sanctity of the Koran is violated with the Satanic Verses episode; the basis of the Islamic way of life (in imitation of the Prophet) is discredited by the brothel sequence. The demonic features in the text seize the power structures by disintegrating their symbols. This is not only true in connection with religious power; the power structures of British society are attacked, as well, in the Detention Centre episode. The extreme violence and the Satanic conspiracy that blemish the descriptions of the British police in the novel display the demonising technique operating in a political context.<sup>109</sup> The author-narrator's likes and dislikes guide the production of reality inside this fiction; at the same time, fantastic and demonic characteristics ask the reader to be aware how subjective such a perception of reality is, how deeply our "truths" are rooted in our subconscious fears and desires. The blasphemous textuality of *The Satanic Verses* records how demonic im-

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 401.

<sup>109</sup> The police – the traditional enemy of radicalism – are accused by the narrator of witchcraft, and he even implies that they assassinated Jumpy Joshi and Pamela Chamcha, "both parties [...] well known for their radical views" (SV, 465).

agery can act as an ambivalent recognition of ties with religious and political discourses, and simultaneously as a revolt against these influences.

#### THE POSTMODERN UNCONSCIOUS

“Books choose their authors; the act of creation is not entirely a rational and conscious one,” Rushdie writes.<sup>110</sup> *The Satanic Verses* transgresses or unsettles in numerous ways the limits between fiction and its various others: religious Truth, revelation, and historical or political texts. In this process it becomes a prime example of a demonic text; it systematically violates culturally sensitive limits and categories. It applies the demonic tradition to make the reader aware of the long history of heterogeneity and ambiguity in our cultures – Judaic, Christian, Islamic, and many other cultures have all made use of the demonic in different ways. This novel is filled with conflicts: collisions and contradictions are its lifeblood. In it the personage of the author-narrator elevates himself into godhead; he declares freedom of choice for his characters, and at the same time playfully intervenes with their lives. Its choice of subject matter seeks out the most potent conflicts; it debunks the sanctity of its author’s childhood religion by demystifying the Holy Scripture of this religion. The novel also clearly signals its approval of secularism in its juxtaposition and handling of the two alternatives that Gibreel and Chamcha represent; Chamcha is able to adapt himself, but the religious dreams of Gibreel are ultimately madness and lead to failure and suicide. The demonic ambivalence of the novel’s “double protagonist” (“Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha,” as he is called in the beginning) is thus partly resolved; this solution is nevertheless only relative, not a complete resolution. *The Satanic Verses* is a novel of subversion: the “High” position (angels, prophets) is challenged, and the “Low” aspect (devils, blasphemers) is encouraged. As it strives (in Baal’s words) “to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments,” this novel is so deeply entangled in those symbolic structures of religious-political use of power it examines, that there is also a self-ironic dimension in the narrator’s question: “Who am I?” The identity of the novel is loaded by the tension between the noncommittal nature of the fiction and the needs for political commitment.

Such Western critics as Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale have analysed *The Satanic Verses* as a representative of a heterogeneous text – a type that problematically situates itself at the borderline of metafiction and actual historical processes and controversies. Hutcheon names this type as “historiographic metafiction”; McHale thinks that *The Satanic Verses* highlights the limit between fiction and reality in its play with historical persons and events.<sup>111</sup> Another interpretation would see the novel strongly contesting any such division between “real” and “fiction”; it operates in a postmodern intellectual setting that considers all truths as constructions, and therefore,

<sup>110</sup> “In Good Faith”; Rushdie 1992, 408.

<sup>111</sup> Hutcheon 1988, 5; McHale 1987, 87-88.

in a sense, fictions. The power of such fictions, however, is recognised: the revelations recorded in the Koran can have genuine effects on people's lives, even if that "truth" would be ambiguously motivated by the Prophet's needs and personality. This can be applied to Rushdie himself: "In writing *The Satanic Verses*, I wrote from the assumption that I was, and am, a free man."<sup>112</sup> In a legal sense, this is a valid assumption. Yet, there are several other senses that disqualify any claims for absolute freedom; *The Satanic Verses* itself is an eloquent exposition of several of them. The characters in this novel are constantly tossed around by powers they do not understand, nor control. Even full self-knowledge is questioned by pointing out the heterogeneity in the constitution of an individual self. As a melting pot of religious, political and fictional elements, *The Satanic Verses* questions all separate, unbroken identities; the frequent inquiries into the fictionality of one's self ("*What kind of idea am I?*") emphasise this theme. Indecision, misunderstanding, discordance: these are some of the demons haunting the construction of (postmodern) identity. The "misreading" of *The Satanic Verses*, and its author's "original intentions" just verifies the validity of Rushdie's own fiction.

*The Satanic Verses* and Rushdie's situation after its publication establish a complex lesson on the power of limits, even in our the postmodern and heterogeneous world. Michel Foucault has written: "Power as a pure limit set on freedom is, at least in our society, the general form of its acceptability."<sup>113</sup> Arthur Kroker adds to this in his work *The Possessed Individual* that today, in a postmodern society, "rules exist only as a seductive challenge to transgress them."<sup>114</sup> The power structures and the different limitations they impose on our freedom are irresistible to a postmodern mind precisely because they offer some means to illustrate and realise freedom in a transgressive act. They "save us from limitlessness," Kroker writes; absolute dissolution of all limits would amount to incapacity to make any distinctions, or to experience any real significance. The postmodern self – paradoxically – needs power structures, borderlines and prohibiting attempts: such an Other saves the postmodern subjectivity from the complete self-absorption and aesthetic emptiness of "possessed individualism."

No longer "possessive individualism" under the Lockean sign of private property and use value, but now possessed individualism under the sign of abuse value. The aestheticization of experience to such a point of excess that nature, subjectivity, and desire migrate into seduction: into a game of chance and indifferent relations of pure positionality.

"Possessed individualism" is subjectivity to a point of aesthetic excess that the self no longer has any real existence, only a perspectival appearance as a site where all the referents converge and implode.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Rushdie 1992, 396.

<sup>113</sup> Foucault 1978, 86.

<sup>114</sup> Kroker 1992, 10.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

*The Satanic Verses* is a commentary on certain features of this condition; it simultaneously participates in the disintegration of subjectivity, and becomes (through what has become known as “*The Satanic Verses* affair”) engulfed in it. The novel and its author have become subjects of “abuse value”: parts of the novel and the public image of the author have become dislocated, and pejoratively rearranged by one faction, and yet, sanctified by yet another.<sup>116</sup> There is bleak irony that the author of a major work demolishing traditional ideas of “authority” has to publicly defend his “original intentions,” or that – after writing the most vicious things about British police brutality – this author has to resort to those same authorities and police forces he has attacked, in order to save his life. One cannot avoid the feeling that the demonic imagery and unresolved, ambiguous conflicts Rushdie gave voice to have greatly contributed to the “irrational” intensity and scale of response *The Satanic Verses* has encountered. Salman Rushdie wrote about the demonic conflict inherent in the polyphony of our simultaneously post-modern and traditional, secular and religious, Eastern and Western, reality – and the global reaction proves how painfully accurate his aim was.

An analysis of the demonic aspects in *The Satanic Verses* reveals an impressive array of polyphonic techniques. The dislocation of religious or political material combined with radical transformations of important symbolic figures opens Rushdie’s text to the ambivalent effects of dissemination – characterised in Derrida’s writing by “the possibility of the ‘death’ of the addressee, inscribed in the structure of the mark [...]”<sup>117</sup> In Rushdie’s case, his writing has, in fact, turned into an infernal machine that continues to produce new meanings, even against its author’s publicly pronounced intentions. The intertextual structure of the novel has the characteristics of Barthes’s “plural or demoniacal texture;”<sup>118</sup> it even applies the blasphemous logic of dramatic reversals and juxtapositions essential in Bakhtin’s and Kristeva’s formulations of dialogism and intertextuality. The ambivalent characterisations of subjectivity as a heterogeneous and internally conflicting construction also contribute significantly to the organisation of *The Satanic Verses* as a demonic text.

To conclude, I point towards the extensive possibilities of the demonic figures and discourses, many of them realised and reshaped by *The Satanic Verses*. The dualistic mythical opposition between the angels and the devils is in innovative ways transposed into the polyphonic context of a multicul-

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<sup>116</sup> “When I am described as an apostate Muslim, I feel as if I have been concealed behind a *false self*, as if a shadow has become substance while I have been relegated to the shadows. [...] Jorge Luis Borges, Graham Greene and other writers have written about their sense of an Other who goes about the world bearing their name. There are moments when I worry that my Other may succeed in obliterating me.” (Rushdie 1992, 406.) Note the Gothic and demonic connotations in Rushdie’s description of his own situation.

<sup>117</sup> Derrida 1971/1982, 316.

<sup>118</sup> Barthes 1977, 160; see above, chapter three (page 102).

tural society and metafictional textuality. The radical consequences of this dislocation and recontextualisation reverberate through the many dimensions of this work; for example, the figure of the angel becomes a symbol of a belief in one, immutable truth, whereas the devil is better suited to become a symbol for the fluid and conflicting postmodern condition.

Heterogeneity and ambiguity characterises also the textual identity of *The Satanic Verses*. The ambivalent status of its blasphemous strategies and its emphasis on dissidence and doubt situates Rushdie's work in the rebellious and radical tradition of demonic texts. Often controversial, such works are not designed to offer univocal answers or instruction, as much as to unsettle and disrupt the conventional order of things. *The Satanic Verses* forces us to face and experience the painful problems hidden at the limits of our individual and collective identities, as demonic elements have done in various cultures from time immemorial.

