

# From orality to literacy : the case of The Satanic Verses

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## From Orality to Literacy: The Case of *The Satanic Verses*

Martine Hennard Dutheil

“Discourse was not originally a product, a thing, a kind of goods; it was essentially an act – an act placed in the bipolar field of the sacred and the profane, the licit and the illicit, the religious and the blasphemous. Historically it was a gesture fraught with risks.”

Michel Foucault, cited by Rushdie

The Rushdie affair began, as we all know, when Ayatollah Khomeini issued a death sentence against the author of *The Satanic Verses* for blasphemy on 14 February 1989. The controversy that followed revealed important cultural differences not so much between “East” and “West” as between different conceptions of language. I am going to suggest that the tension between a predominantly oral world-view and a literate one is a key to the reception of the novel. The allegedly subversive episode of the satanic verses dramatizes the passage from the spoken to the written word, and Rushdie goes on to show that this transition is hazardous. What is more, the voiced and the scripted word are caught in a double bind, as their relationship is one of mutual but problematic dependence. As he brings into conflict the world-views which have evolved from these two aspects of the word, Rushdie in fact explores the paradox on which most religious texts rest. Although his focus is on the Islamic tradition, the novelist investigates the age-old question of the difference (or, rather, *différance*) between speech and writing.

Walter Ong has observed in his influential study of orality and literacy that language is a mode of action in an oral society (in Hebrew, for instance, *dabar* can mean both “word” and “event”). The performative function of the oral word endows it with considerable power. Unlike the written sign, speech abolishes distance, which produces effects of presence. In Ong’s words, “The fact that oral peoples commonly and in all likelihood universally consider words to have magical potency is clearly tied in, at least unconsciously, with

their sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven" (Ong, 33).<sup>1</sup> Hence the crucial role played by the spoken word in most religions where, to quote Ong,

The sense of the sacral is attached also to the written word. Still, a textually supported religious tradition can continue to authenticate the primacy of the oral in many ways. In Christianity, for example, the Bible is read aloud in liturgical services. . . . We read in Corinthians 3:6: "The letter kills, the spirit gives life." (74-5)

Malise Ruthven, who applies Ong's insights to Islam, notes that

The Qur'an, like most other sacred texts, occurs at the historic juncture between orality and literacy. This radically affects both its status and the way it is understood. Indeed, it would hardly be too strong to say that the cult of the text, of which Sunni Islam is an outstanding example, is the characteristic posture of a society moving away from pure orality into the realm of literacy, before the literate outlook has fully taken hold. (Ruthven, 144)

Ong has shown that the shift from orality to literacy has profound social, economic, religious and philosophical implications: the invention of writing enables the development of a historical perspective on the past, the shift from magic thought to science, the passage from "the highly polarized, agonistic, oral world of good and evil, virtue and vice, villains and heroes" (45) to a more complex world-view, the valuing of change and originality over repetition, and so on. The invention of writing, in other words, is a turning-point in the history of mankind which threatens the values and beliefs on which the oral world-view is based.

According to Ong, "Many modern cultures that have known writing for centuries but have never fully interiorized it, such as Arabic (or Greek) culture, rely heavily on formulaic thought and expression still" (26). Socrates famously voices the dangers of writing in Plato's *Phaedrus* (274-7). His arguments are the following: unlike speech, writing destroys memory and makes the mind go soft. It is a debased form of communication because it is cut off from the pure realm of ideas. Last but not least, it is vulnerable to all

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<sup>1</sup> As he documents the evolution from speech to writing, Ong disagrees with Derrida's strategic privileging of writing. What Ong fails to see, however, is that Derrida disputes the notion of speech as guaranteeing a "true" (i.e. pure and immediate) representation of the idea, which confers it a privileged position in the philosophical tradition. Challenging the principle of the primacy of speech over writing, Derrida does not simply reverse their hierarchical relation, but displaces it by suggesting that iterability (repetition/alterity) more adequately describes the condition of language in general.

kinds of misinterpretation in the absence of its author. In "Plato's Pharmacy," Jacques Derrida shows how the dominant philosophical tradition in the West has built a system of metaphysical oppositions whereby origin, speech, meaning and presence are systematically valued over writing, difference, and absence – and goes on to demonstrate that they are in fact inextricably linked.<sup>2</sup> Derrida observes that the meaning of *pharmakon*, the term which Socrates uses to describe writing, is fundamentally ambiguous, since it means both poison and remedy. And indeed, the paradox is that Plato puts Socrates' objections against writing . . . in writing. In the Egyptian myth, the King (and after him a large part of the metaphysical tradition) dismisses Theuth's invention as a poisoned gift on the grounds that it is an art of make-believe. Socrates adds that, unlike speech, writing is cut off from its father, its origin, the living *logos* itself. As a consequence, orphaned or illegitimate, the written text starts wandering this way and that and falls into all kinds of unscrupulous hands. To quote Socrates:

And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its aid, being unable to defend itself or attend to its own needs. (*Phaedrus* 275e, quoted by Derrida)

Writing is suspect, because it escapes the control of the author, and does away with paternal authority (political, religious, philosophical), hence the threat of misuse and misinterpretation.

In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie also explores the relations between origin and repetition, speech and writing, but in the context of Islam. Like Derrida, he focuses on the inaugural moment *par excellence* in this tradition, the divine Revelation itself. Although the orthodox view is that the Qur'an is miraculously unaffected by the circumstances of its production and transmission, the episode of the satanic verses raises the question of mediation and foregrounds its dangers by describing how evil slips in and introduces difference into God's message. It is even tempting to relate Rushdie's *alter ego*, whom Gibreel finds sitting on his bed "look[ing] like a

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of iterability as the condition of possibility of the sign but at the same time of the impossibility of "pure" meaning, see Derrida's critique of Austin's speech-act theory (which leaves aside literary texts as "non-serious" and therefore non-exemplary language) in "Signature Event Context." Unlike Austin, who considers the "source" of an utterance to be self-evident, Derrida argues that a mark is more often than not cut off from its moment of production and alleged context of origin, as in a citation.

myopic scrivener" (*The Satanic Verses* 319), to his mythical forebear, Thoth, the god of writing (but also of games and magic) in "Plato's Pharmacy":

the figure of Thoth is opposed to its other (father, sun, life, speech, origin or orient, etc.), but as that which supplements and supplants it. Thoth extends or opposes by repeating or replacing. By the same token, the figure of Thoth takes shape and takes its shape from the very thing it resists and substitutes for. But it thereby opposes *itself*, passes into its other, and this messenger-god is truly a god of the absolute passage between opposites. . . . In distinguishing himself from his opposite, Thoth also imitates it, becomes its sign and representative, obeys it and *conforms* to it, replaces it, by violence if need be. . . . Sly, slippery, and masked, an intriguer and a card, like Hermes, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of *joker*, a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play. (Derrida, *Dissemination* 93)

Modelled on his "father," the author himself, the playful and intrusive narrator of *The Satanic Verses* adopts God-like poses of omnipotence and omniscience, but the reader suspects that he might as well be Shaitan, God's "other" and satanic double. Thus, throughout the novel, the narrator presents the battle between good and evil as a competition of verses, whereby God's claim to have produced a work of unsurpassable beauty is contradicted by the devil who, as the saying goes, has the best tunes.

Rushdie's critique of the Islamic "logocentric theology" is actually based on two distinct episodes: while the incident of the satanic verses calls into question the origin and hence the truth value of the spoken word, the anecdote of the unfaithful scribe casts doubt on the reliability of the written word. The story of Salman's changes in the sacred text thus activates anxieties linked to the transmission of God's message. Rushdie explores the tension between the status of the Qur'an and its conditions of production on the assumption that mediation denies the direct, simple and continuous transmission of meaning on which the Islamic world-view, like the Platonic one, is premised. Malise Ruthven points out that

In traditional Islamic theology . . . the Qur'an is the Uncreated Word of God – an intrinsic part, as it were, of the Divine Essence. In effect this means, not just that God speaks Arabic, but that the classical Arabic of the Qur'an is a part of the Divine Logos. (8)

Islam, in common with most religions, has attempted to ward off the problems posed by the shift from speech to writing by sacralizing the text of the Recitation. Edward Said, however, stresses the different relations of the Western and the Islamic traditions to their foundational texts. While the

classics and the Bible have a long history of hermeneutic and scholarly commentary, which Said suggests derives from their original appearance in “foreign” languages (Hebrew, Greek, Latin) and hence of “the continuing need of translations, editors, and interpreters,” different conditions prevail in the Islamic context. The concept of *‘idjaz*, for instance,

describes the uniqueness of the Qur’an as rendering all other texts impotent in comparison. Thus since the central text is in Arabic, and since, unlike the Gospels or even the Torah, it is given as unitary and complete, textual traditions are essentially supportive, not restorative. All texts are secondary to the Koran, which is inimitable. (Said, 199)

One of the consequences of the unique status of the Qur’an is its untranslatability. Malise Ruthven notes that “most Muslims [around the world] are required to memorize it in Arabic, a language they [sometimes] barely understand. Urdu and English translations were, until quite recently, looked upon askance” (55). Indeed, a translated text, *a fortiori* God’s perfect poetry, loses its self-identity in translation.

The novel genre (as the word itself indicates) is already subversive insofar as it imagines alternative ways in which the world can be viewed and changed. Edward Said notes that the alternative beginning proposed by the novelistic creation is transgressive since it supplements the totalizing account of the world presumably given by the Qur’an:

It is significant that the desire to create an alternative world, to modify or augment the real world through the act of writing (which is one motive underlying the novelistic tradition in the West) is inimical to the Islamic world-view. The Prophet is he who has completed a world-view; thus the word heresy in Arabic is synonymous with the word “to innovate” or “to begin.” Islam views the world as a plenum, capable of neither diminishment nor amplification. (81)

To “see the world anew” (*Imaginary Homelands* 393), the task Rushdie sets himself to accomplish through his writings, turns out to be a risky enterprise when different world-views are put into confrontation. But Rushdie’s most original idea, which I claim underlies his whole artistic project, is precisely his refusal to see them as simply opposed by demonstrating how conventionally contrasted concepts, values and cultures inevitably collude.

The dangers inherent in repetition (as in translation) are of course foregrounded in mimicry and parody. Ruthven stresses that

Muhammad's claims to prophethood were vested in speech. He performed no miracles. . . . Instead he challenged his auditors to produce a single verse of comparable merit to the verses of the Qur'an. The Qur'anic word for verse – *aya* – also means “miracle” or “sign.” Some tried, and perhaps succeeded: but inevitably their offerings were dismissed as impious parodies. Since the Qur'an became the absolute standard of literary excellence, its claims were self-validating. . . . Prophets and poets were engaged in intellectual warfare: for the most part the poets articulated the old pagan values which Islam sought to change. (41)<sup>3</sup>

*The Satanic Verses* is presented as both the antithesis to the monologic discourse of God's law, and its uncanny double. Ruthven even observes that the structure of the novel

is as complex, and as confusing to many readers, as that of the Qur'an itself: indeed, *The Satanic Verses*, like its predecessor *Shame*, seems in a way to mirror the Muslim scripture. Like *The Thousand and One Nights*, it is a kind of “anti-Qur'an” which challenges the original by substituting for the latter's absolutist certainties a theology of doubt. (17)

As it mirrors the fractured form of the Qur'an, the novel undermines the self-validating claim to perfection laid by the sacred text. By blurring the distinction between the sacred original and its profane copy, *The Satanic Verses* calls into question conventionally contrasted discourses and forces them to recognize their mixed character at the origin. In Derridean terms, Rushdie therefore opens the full presence of the Qur'anic text to productive difference.

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<sup>3</sup> In the Qur'an itself, sura XXVI, “The Poets”, warns against profane poetry. Poets are described as God's devilish doubles, wanderers adept at double talk leading the believers astray. The concluding lines read: “Shall I tell you on whom the Satans come down?/ They come down on every guilty impostor. They give ear, but most of them are liars./ And the poets – the perverse follow them;/ hast thou not seen how they wander in every valley/ and how they say that which they do not?/ [and] those who do wrong shall surely know by what/ overturning they will be overturned” (ll. 221-25; 228-31). Among the desert Arabs, honour largely depended on public opinion. The power of the poets lay in reflecting or altering these public images so that “A large part of the older poems is occupied with praise of the virtues and merits of one tribe, and satire of the vices and faults of other tribes” (Montgomery, *Muhammad at Mecca* 22). It is interesting to note that, in marked contrast to his general policy, Muhammad is said to have put to death a woman and several men who had composed anti-Muslim verses, such as 'Uqbah b. Abi Mu'ayt, when he was made prisoner at Badr. During the Medinan period, he equally commissioned the assassinations of “Asma” bint Marwan of Umayyah b. Zayd, a woman who had written poems taunting him (quoted by Ibn Ishaq), Abu 'Afak of B. 'Amr b. 'Awf, and Ka'b b. al-Ashraf, an active and popular satirist, on the same ground (Montgomery, *Muhammad at Medina* 13; 15; 18; 178).

*Rushdie's re-citation of the Recitation*

“Porteur du message, le messenger apparaît . . . mais doit aussi disparaître ou s’effacer, pour que le destinataire entende la correspondance de l’expéditeur, et non l’envoyé. Qu’il prenne trop d’importance, voilà qu’il détourne le canal de transmission à son profit. Nous pouvons donc comprendre la chute et le péché des Anges, intermédiaires normalement fidèles, par le fonctionnement, réussi ou non, mauvais ou non, de la messagerie”

Michel Serres, *La Légende des Anges*

In Rushdie’s fictional version of the beginnings of Islam, the Recitation is affected by the re-citation on which it paradoxically depends to assert its authority as sacred text. As it is passed on, God’s message loses its original identity and integrity. What is at stake here is no less than the dogma of the perfection of the Qur’an as an exact transcription of God’s words. The first word of the Qur’an is *iqra’* (“read!” or “recite!”). This command addressed to the prophet more generally spells out the protocol of reading of the sacred text, which is usually read out loud in an effort to capture the full presence of the divine word. At its heart, *The Satanic Verses* therefore opposes two rival views of reading: one which endows classical Arabic with the capacity to convey God’s message whole and pure, the other which points out the inescapable difficulties of this belief by stressing the transformative effects of reading, which guarantee the endless openness of stories to change and reinvention.

Historically, there is a long tradition of Islamic scholarship which has sought to protect the divine text against the failings of memory and the hazards of transmission. On the other hand, some (mostly Western) historians have given a more critical picture of the early days of Islam. In their view, the passage from the divine word to the written text is problematic, considering the material conditions of the transmission of the Qur’an. Ruthven, for instance, stresses that

According to some Muslim traditions, the Prophet’s utterances were dictated by him and first written down on whatever materials came to hand, such as camel-bones, palm leaves, fragments of wood and parchment. Others tell that Muhammad’s followers learned the whole of the Qur’an by heart, and that the text was only written down when there appeared a danger that the memorisers were being lost in battle. (144)

The fixing of a final, authoritative version during ‘Uthman’s caliphate (644-56), when variant texts were destroyed, itself indicates the coexistence of diverging versions of the divine message. But the anxiety to recover the



“true” word of God as it was revealed to Muhammad is manifest in the system of *idjaza* or licence to transmit Qur’anic lore, which Said sees as a sign of the “preeminence . . . given to what is spoken” in the Islamic tradition. He points out that “every Arabic text during the ‘manuscript age’ – the period from the seventh up to around the end of the fifteenth century – generally opens with a list of *isnads* (*asaneed*) or witnesses, linking the text to a univocal source through a series of oral transmitters” (199). Some of the early authorities have thus dismissed the episode of the satanic verses on the ground that the chain of transmitters or *isnads* was too weak to be included in the collections of *hadiths* or Traditions. Although disputed, the episode nevertheless belongs to the Islamic scriptural tradition. Ibn Sa’d and Tabari, two early Muslim commentators, report an incident in the transmission of the divine message, when Satan is supposed to have interpolated some verses into the divine revelation.<sup>4</sup> Rushdie’s retelling of the story of the Revelation stresses the discontinuities in the chain of transmission from God (or the Devil) to the archangel Gibreel, to the prophet “Mahound”, and finally to Salman the scribe, who deliberately changes words in the Revelation. Each stage involves a loss of control over the original message.

The satanic verses episode is about Muhammad’s temptation to accommodate three pre-Islamic goddesses into the Qur’an, al-Lat, al-Uzza, and Manat, and his eventual rejection of Satan’s verses of compromise. In Rushdie’s fictionalized version, Mahound’s refutation reads as follows:

“It was the Devil,” he says aloud to the empty air, making it true by giving it voice. “The last time it was Shaitan.” This is what he has heard in his listening, that he has been tricked, that the Devil came to him in the guise of an archangel, so that the verses he memorized, the ones he recited in the poetry tent, were not the real thing but its diabolic opposite, not godly but satanic. He returns to the city as quickly as he can, to expunge the foul verses that reek of brimstone and sulphur, to strike them from the record for ever and ever, so that they will survive in just one or two unreliable collections of old traditions and orthodox interpreters will try and unwrite their story. (*The Satanic Verses* 123)

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<sup>4</sup> Beside the Qur’an and the collections of Traditions (compiled in the ninth century), the main sources for the life of Muhammad are historical works from the third and fourth centuries of the Muslim era, such as Ibn Hisham’s *Sirah* (d. 833), sections of Tabari’s *Annals* (d. 922), al-Waqidi’s *Maghazi* (d. 822), and Ibn Sa’d’s *Tabaqat* (d. 845). Karen Armstrong signals that the incident is not mentioned by Ibn Ishaq, the author of the earliest and most reliable account of Muhammad’s life (111). If some Muslim scholars dismiss it as “apocryphal gossip” which denigrates the integrity of the Qur’an, others accept the story as part of the Qur’anic tradition. We shall note that, among the several versions of the episode related by Tabari, Rushdie chooses to rework Abu’l-’Aliyah’s, which explicitly exposes the political and economic context leading to Muhammad’s “verses of compromise.”

The performative force of Mahound's spoken words ("making it true by giving it voice") suggests that the origin of the Revelation lies within rather than outside the prophet.

The second major incident in the Recitation involves another set of "satanic" verses, when Salman the Persian deliberately rewrites the sacred text.<sup>5</sup> Salman is facetiously introduced as "some sort of bum from Persia by the outlandish name of Salman" (101). An early follower of the Prophet, he is derisively described as one of "a trinity of scum" about to carry out "A revolution of water-carriers, immigrants and slaves" (101). Salman, one of the author's many doubles in the novel, is the necessary mediator who transforms Mahound's words as he takes down the Recitation. In this sense, he embodies the principle of change as a repetition that distorts and alters an original source whose origin itself is doubtful.

Salman's role in the early days of Islam is central, if ambivalent. On the one hand, as Mahound's scribe, he enables the transmission of God's message in its written form. On the other hand, he introduces difference and compromises the integrity of the sacred text. Insofar as he enacts the transformative effects of writing, Salman functions as a kind of *pharmakon* in a myth of origins which, like the story of the invention of writing in Plato's *Phaedrus*, threatens the unity and truth value of the divine logos. God-the-Father has to instate a genealogy in order to perpetuate his word and his law. He needs an intermediary, the prophet, who in turn depends on a scribe to fix and spread (that is, to disseminate) the divine teachings. But the latter turns out to be unreliable as he opts for creative rewriting over dictation. In Derridean terms, the unfaithful scribe commits an act of patricidal subversion (*Dissemination* 77). Salman therefore dramatizes the process of creation as a repetition with a difference around which the novel self-consciously revolves.

Salman's doubting of the divine origin of Mahound's message is aroused by a change in the nature of the Revelation: "in those years Mahound – or should one say the Archangel Gibreel? – should one say Al-Lah? – became obsessed by law" (363). The scribe "began to get a bad smell in [his] nose, and [he] thought, this must be the odour of those fabled and legendary

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<sup>5</sup> The fictional Salman combines the name and deeds of two historical figures, Salman Farsi and Abdullah Ibn Sa'ad. The fictional Salman's doubting of the Revelation is based on a story related by Tabari, who records how Abdullah, one of the Prophet's scribes, lost his faith temporarily when the Prophet failed to notice an error in his transcription. Of Persian origin, the historical Salman masterminded Muhammad's victory over the Meccans by building a defensive ditch around the city of Medina. Because of this strategy, the Meccans failed to conquer the city, which was later interpreted as a sign of God's support to the Muslims.

unclean creatures, what's their name, prawns" (365). For Salman, the matter-of-fact content of the late Revelations suggest that Mahound is no longer the relay but the source of the divine message. The second reason for Salman's growing disbelief lies in the subordinate role of women in Islam. Salman notes that they are discriminated against in the laws regulating marriage, inheritance and testimony. The Qur'an even dictates the postures of love, forbidding those where women are on top (364).

But Salman definitively loses his faith after testing the prophet. A dream gives him the "diabolic idea" to change words as he takes down the Recitation:

So here I was, actually writing the Book, or rewriting, anyway, polluting the word of God with my own profane language. But, good heavens, if my poor words could not be distinguished from the Revelation by God's own Messenger, then what did that mean? What did that say about the quality of the divine poetry? (367)

Exceeding his function, Salman ceases to be a copyist to become a writer. Disbelief, transgression, but also creative writing comes with the confusion between divine and human languages, perfect original and faulty copy, speech and writing. Salman carries on with his "devilment" until Mahound gets suspicious. Fearing for his life, the scribe flees back to Jahilia. As he lucidly puts it to the satirist Baal: "It's his Word against mine" (368). Beside raising the difficulty of distinguishing between sacred and satanic verses, dream and vision, imagination and God, the episode brings up the question of mediation as transformation and accounts for the transgressive nature of such inquiry.

In sum, Rushdie submits the orthodox version of the pure origin of the Revelation and its miraculous transmission to the transformative effects of repetition in general and writing in particular. For him, origins are irrecoverable except through the process of repetition which inevitably estranges their self-identity and truth value. Writing in the paradigmatic print-genre, the novel, which Georg Lukács has defined as "the epic of a world forsaken by God" in *The Theory of the Novel*, Rushdie unsettles the theologocentric system of clear-cut and hierarchized notions.<sup>6</sup> His exploration of the conflict between truth and fiction, God's word and Satan's (or the writer's), leads to a radical questioning of their age-old opposition.

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<sup>6</sup> "The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God. The novel hero's psychology is demonic; the objectivity of the novel is the mature man's knowledge that meaning can never quite penetrate reality, but that, without meaning, reality would disintegrate into nothingness and inessentiality" (Lukács, 88).

Rushdie explores the tension between sacred and profane language, and specifically between the Qur'an as God's perfect poetry and the novelistic production. As he rewrites a passage of the Qur'an into his novel, he repeats the fall of the divine *logos* into the world of signs (ambiguous, deceptive, double). The controversial passages all dramatize the implication of fact and fantasy which Rushdie sees as the very condition of discourse. Far from being "offensive" in any simple way, Rushdie's focus on the contested knowledge of the beginnings of Islam probes the question of origin, and in particular the difference at the origin. The novelist thus invites us to think beyond familiar oppositions (God and the Devil, East and West, sacred and profane language, speech and writing) by highlighting their complex relations and inevitable complicities.

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