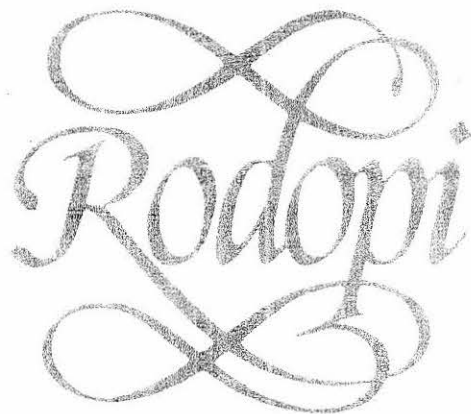


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A Note on Painting in *The Moor's Last Sigh*

HENA MAES-JELINEK

Pictoribus atque poetis quid libit audendi semper fuit aqua libertas

Ut pictura poesis¹

HORACE'S FIRST WELL-KNOWN COMPARISON between painting and writing is wholly relevant to Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*² as a parallel between the two forms of art and, even more importantly, in its emphasis on the freedom of the imagination and of expression. The second, more frequently quoted aphorism is just as relevant to the novel, in which, as I hope to show, Rushdie uses painting as a metaphor for the art of writing in general and his own in particular. One is also reminded here of Shakespeare's Sonnet XXIV, "Mine eye hath played the painter," in which metaphors of painting continue throughout, for "perspective it is best Painter's art."

The subject of the narrative is by now fairly well known: Moraes Zogoiby, usually called "Moor," is forced to leave India in haste to save his life. He flees to Spain and seeks refuge in the fortress (a mock-Alhambra) built by Vasco Miranda, a former family friend and a second-rate painter, who was in love with Aurora Zogoiby, Moor's mother, and jealous of her art of painting. Aurora is presented as the "greatest Woman Painter" and one of her paintings as "the equal for colour and movement of any Matisse dance-circle" (102).³ Moor wants to recover four of

¹ "Painters and poets have always had equal freedom to dare anything"; "Poetry is like a painting"; Horace, *Ars Poetica/Art poétique*, ed. & tr. Léon Hermann (Brussels: Latomus, 1951): 22, 35. The second quotation suggests that each work of art must be treated according to its specific genre. But its original meaning is usually distorted to make it say that poetry is the sister of painting.

² Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995; London: Vintage, 1996). All page references are to this edition and are given in the text.

³ In a recent Internet article on the sale at Sotheby's of a painting by the Indian painter Amrita Sher-Gil, she is said to have inspired the character of Aurora. Actually, she is mentioned in the novel as Aurora's rival for the title of Greatest Woman Painter (102). "Sotheby's to sell painting by

his mother's paintings stolen from the Zogoiby bequest for Miranda. The latter, however, keeps him prisoner in his fortress, forcing him to write his family saga and, as in *The Thousand and One Nights*, threatening to kill him once his narrative is over. Creating under threat is not dissimilar to Rushdie's own situation when writing the novel, his first full-length work of fiction⁴ after the *fatwa* provoked by *The Satanic Verses*. Although Aurora is clearly not Rushdie, and although he has objected to the "obsession with autobiography,"⁵ some of the criticism the painter must face for supposedly religious reasons inevitably brings to mind his own predicament at the time of writing:

She was obliged to counter accusations of social irresponsibility by divers 'experts.' [...] she found herself being described [...] 'as that Christian female married to a Jew.' [...] How easily a self, a lifetime of work and action and affinity and opposition, could be washed away under such an attack! (234)

If, as has been pointed out, Moor's narrative amounts to a construction of the self and society, an "art of aestheticization" that creates a new kind of fiction,⁶ his mother, Aurora née da Gama, is, through her painting, both the Cassandra and the catalyst of his self-revelation and shares with him the creative centre in the novel. Already as an adolescent, locked up for punishment in her room, she paints its walls and ceiling, evoking in her frescoes not just the landscapes and the history of India and her family, but also the dense Indian crowd with its sense of anger and pain. That early painting epitomizes a theme central to Moor's narrative and, at a further remove, Rushdie's own: the representation of protean, ambivalent, contradictory India, its "historical generosity of spirit" (33), but an India who "both loved and betrayed her children" and who, in spite of her love, could turn monstrous and murderous" (59–61), especially when personified later in the novel by Indira Gandhi (137). At this stage, however, in Aurora's fresco, many-faced Mother India's features are those of her mother Isabella Ximena, whose loss she laments.

Throughout the novel, individual and family history intertwine with that of India and Europe (mainly Renaissance Spain), a history which covers a time-span from 1492 to 1993, suggesting that human motivations and behaviour, especially

artist celebrated by Salman Rushdie in *The Moor's Last Sigh*," <http://www.shareholder.com/bid/news/20000727-18637.cfm> 28/5/01.

⁴ *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) is of a different kind altogether.

⁵ "Finissons-en avec l'obsession de l'autobiographie"; in "Interview avec Christine Ockrent," *Le Vif/L'Express* (9 février 1996): 62.

⁶ On this subject, see Stephen Baker, "'You Must Remember This': Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 35.1 (2000): 43–54, and Hedi Ben Abbes, "La Remise en cause du genre romanesque dans *The Moor's Last Sigh* de Salman Rushdie," in *Theory and Literary Creation/Théorie et création littéraire*, ed. Jean-Pierre Durix (Dijon: Editions Universitaire de Dijon, 1999): 73–82.

as inspired by the will-to-power and the irrational, are much the same in different spaces and times. Although, in true postmodernist fashion, alternative versions of the family saga are evoked, the da Gamas claim to be descendants of the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama, while Aurora's husband, Abraham Zogoiby, discovers that his genealogical line was initiated by an affair between a Jewess and the last Andalusian Sultan, Boabdil, *El-zogoybi* (the misfortunate), who, when he was expelled from Granada in 1492 by Queen Isabella's *reconquista* and looked back once more on the Alhambra, emitted a deep sigh, thereby provoking his mother's contemptuous remark: "Well may you weep like a woman for what you could not defend like a man."⁷ The title of Rushdie's novel and much of its symbolism are inspired by this historical episode. Boabdil's pregnant Jewish mistress supposedly emigrated to India and provides a key element in the development of the novel's narrative. The numerous allusions in the novel to the migrations at different periods of Jews, Christians and Muslims and to their intermarriages simply make nonsense of Hindu 'purity' and 'nationalism,' a major strand satirized in the novel and also represented in Aurora's paintings (229), while the narrator, born of a mixture of races and religions, calls himself a "cross-breed" (5) and "a mongrel cur" (104).

Throughout his narrative, Moor mixes historical reality and fiction, real and imagined characters (he himself may be Nehru's son), while the first version of events he presents with precautionary warning about their uncertainty frequently turns out to have been inaccurate. Yet these postmodernist fluctuations in the nature of reality⁸ are, I believe, Rushdie's version of a world of appearances in which the truth of events is impossible to pin down while we experience them, and the search for an authentic inner self is the work of a lifetime. In this respect, the Moor's narrative is ambivalent. Although he writes, at one stage, "in the end, stories are what's left of us, we are no more than the few tales that persist" (110), he also shows that human beings are not mere language constructs and that there is a deeper truth hidden beneath their apparent personality. Beyond the exuberance, fantasy and digressions in his narrative, Moor himself is on a quest to penetrate to an authentic core: "in writing this, I must peel off history, the prison of the past. It is time [...] for the truth about myself to struggle out" (136). This stripping-off is applied to most of the characters, whose image he elaborates only to decon-

⁷ There is an actual pass in the mountains on the road from Granada to the southern Spanish coast called "Puerto del Suspiro del Moro," from where he is said to have looked back. I owe this information to Bernadette Bada.

⁸ On Rushdie's postmodernism, see Juliette Myers' excellent essay "Postmodernism in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*," *Manuscript* 1.2 (Spring 1996), <http://www.art.man.ac.uk/english/ms/rushdie.htm>, 1–14.

struct them gradually, revealing both his and their "secret identity" (152, 174, 179, 414). Significantly, what he calls "the truth" and the real meaning of events come out through his mother's "palimpsest-art" (226), which, while in constant evolution, traces the substance of reality itself. Indeed, the palimpsest, a painter's device, is the major metaphor of the novel:⁹

The city itself, perhaps the whole country, was a palimpsest, Under World beneath Over World, black market beneath white; when the whole of life was like this, when an invisible reality moved phantomwise beneath a visible fiction [...] [h]ow could any of us have escaped that deadly layering? How, trapped as we were in the hundred percent fakery of the real, weeping-Arab-kitsch of the superficial,¹⁰ could we have penetrated to the full, sensual truth of the lost mother below? How could we have lived authentic lives? (184-85)

Aurora's development as a painter raises the important question of the artist's choice (whether as painter or as writer) of a mode of representation – so that the self-reflexiveness of art is here as obvious in Aurora's painting as in her son's narrative. Still early in her career, she wanders in the streets and the harbour of Bombay recording scenes in their extreme variety and, through them, history being acted before her very eyes, while her subversive interpretations challenge British authority. After Independence, one of her major works becomes a "state-of-India" painting (229). However, she becomes uncertain not just about the validity of realism but about "the nature of the real itself" (173). Whereas Abraham insists that the historical present requires a "clear-sighted naturalism" (173) and realist writers (including Mulk Raj Anand!) frequent their house, Vasco Miranda, though far less talented, sees that her true nature and "secret identity" incline her towards the "epic-fabulist manner" (174) – possibly another allusion to the "fabulist road" (227) that Rushdie also followed. Vasco himself initiates the technique of painting over a painting and is convinced that Aurora has borrowed the idea from him. He, too, has an exuberant imagination, but his painting remains anecdotal, sentimental and meaningless. In the contrast between his and Aurora's work there is a suggestion, already mentioned above, that a similar artistic mode (postmodernism) can produce either trivial or meaningful art and that the "fabulist road" is not incompatible with the expression of an underlying truth. Paradoxically, Miranda is the one who encourages Aurora to be true to her own temperament, pointing to the hidden meaning of art and indirectly vindicating Rushdie's own: "Forget those damnfool realists! The real is always hidden – isn't it? – inside a miraculously

⁹ Juliette Meyers also points out the centrality of this metaphor.

¹⁰ Probably an allusion to the first version of the painting *The Moor's Last Sigh*, not Aurora's work but Vasco Miranda's.

burning bush! Life is fantastic! Paint that – you owe it to your fantastic, unreal son" (174). Moor becomes, then, "the talisman¹¹ and centrepiece of her art" (174).

The symbiosis and reciprocity between Moor's writing and his mother's painting seem at least partly due to his being, in a sense, her creation, so that his own narrative art grows out of her painter's eye; for, in the years of sitting for her, "I made a kind of portrait of her too. She was looking at me, and I was looking right back. [...] I learned the secrets of her heart as well as her mind" (219 / 221). His maimed hand, "this lump as misshapen," he says, "as modern art itself, became no more than a slip of the genius's brush" (147), though later the only "light-source" in the "Moor paintings" (220).¹² His ageing at double-speed and looking twice as old as he is may be an expression of Aurora's restlessness and, like her son, of her burning the candle at both ends (161), but also conveys a sense of urgency, of the accelerating, uncontrollable pace of history.¹³ Moor insists that he is the only one of her four children she suckled, "and the first 'Moor' pictures were done while I nestled at her breast" (220). When he is on the point of explaining the origin of his nickname and the title of his mother's "Moor sequences," he warns the reader that "We have now reached a key moment in the tale" (78).

The narrator's description of the "Moor paintings" occurs at the very centre of his non-chronological narrative. In their specific way, the pictures illustrate the themes Aurora (and to some extent Rushdie) have always dealt with, "in which history, family, politics and fantasy jostled each other [...] she had returned, too, to that exploration of an alternative vision of India-as-mother [...] a mother of cities, as heartless and lovable, brilliant and dark, multiple and lonely, mesmeric and repugnant, pregnant and empty, truthful and deceitful as the beautiful, cruel, irresistible metropolis itself" (203-204). One particular phase in the Moor paintings encapsulates both her conception of art and that of her son, and, at a further remove, can be read as a comment on Rushdie's own writing:

Around and about the figure of the Moor in his hybrid fortress she wove her vision, which in fact was a vision of *weaving*, or more accurately interweaving. In a way these were polemical pictures, in a way they were an attempt to create a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation. [...] Aurora Zogoiby was seeking to paint a golden age. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains crowded in her paint-

¹¹ Since Rushdie can seldom resist a pun, she later calls him her "lucky talis-moor," 227.

¹² See also: "her canvases seemed more like my autobiography than the real story of my life" (227), a suggestion that, as he says somewhere else, "art ultimately was not life" (247).

¹³ This is, of course, the reverse of what happens in Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (a novel Rushdie greatly admires), in which Oskar, at the age of three, refuses to grow. On this subject, see Jeanne Delbaere, "'Wahlverwandschaften': Günter Grass et Salman Rushdie," in *Wahlverwandschaften in Sprache, Malerei, Literatur, Geschichte: Festschrift für Monique Boussart*, ed. Irène Heidelberger-Léonard & Mireille Tabah (Stuttgart: Verlag Hans-Dieter Heinz, 2000): 245-59.

Boabdil's fancy-dress balls, and the Sultan himself was represented less and less naturalistically, appearing more and more as a masked, particoloured harlequin, a patchwork quilt of a man; or, as his old skin dropped from him chrysalis-fashion, standing revealed, as a glorious butterfly, whose wings were a miraculous composite of all the colours of the world. (227)

However, when Moor falls in love with a young sculptress, Uma, in whom Aurora immediately senses a rival for her son's affection and a potential traitress (as indeed she turns out to be), the nature of the "Moor paintings" changes altogether with the estrangement between mother and son owing to this intrusion of Chimène¹⁴ into the paintings as into life. Ximena or Chimène (only one of the innumerable intertextual references in the narrative) is a recurring personification of the object of unconditional blind love betrayed (this being a feature absent from the tragi-comedy by Corneille). From now on, Aurora's paintings take on a prophetic cast: "watching me in her crystal ball [...] I inhabited her fictions and the eye of her imagination saw me plain" (304). They become collages in which both the Moor and the Bombay background, "a kind of rag-and-bone yard" (302), are put together out of the detritus of the city. They stage the battle for Moor's heart, in which he tears himself away from his mother and betrays her but is thereafter brought to defeat and downfall by Chimène's treachery. And, after his lover's death and his imprisonment, when he becomes a thug in the Bombay underworld in the pay of a Hindu nationalist "purifying" the city of its minorities, not only does the figure of the Moor "in his previous metaphorical rôle as a unifier of opposites" (303) fade away, but the ideal of hybridity he used to represent is perverted and he becomes "a composite being as pitiful and anonymous as those among whom he moved" (303). The suggestion here is that no ideology is good or evil *per se* but requires the understanding, tolerance and moral sensibility which, in spite of her contradictions in real life, inform Aurora's art.¹⁵ When she dies in the course of her "annual dance against the gods" (315) after falling onto the rocks at the foot of the cliff below her garden, she leaves behind on her easel her last, unfinished painting about her son, *The Moor's Last Sigh*:

¹⁴ Aurora's mother, the first Chimène figure in the novel, was called Isabella Ximena and was a (re)conquering character recovering the da Gamas' financial kingdom. She was deeply in love with her husband yet unfaithful to him, thus providing the first distortion of Corneille's heroine. Since Moor always uses the French version of the name, I at first assumed that the intertextual reference was to Corneille's *Le Cid*. However, Moor says that, when painting Uma / Chimène, his mother incorporated aspects of the film *El Cid* starring Sophia Loren (247). What does seem to have been inspired by Corneille's play, though, is the sense of divided loyalty between parent and lover.

¹⁵ Rushdie is reported to have said in an interview about *The Moor's Last Sigh* that "he was interested to try to suggest there's a flip side to pluralism"; Isabel Santaloalla, review of Catherine Cundy, *Salman Rushdie* (Manchester University Press, 1996), *Wasafiri* 28 (Autumn 1998): 69.

In that last work, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, she gave the Moor back his humanity. This was no abstract harlequin, no junkyard collage. It was a portrait of her son, lost in limbo like a wandering shade: a portrait of a soul in Hell. And behind him, his mother, no longer in a separate panel, but re-united with the tormented Sultan. Not berating him - *well may you weep like a woman* - but looking frightened and stretching out her hand. (315-16)

The poignancy of this painting is foreshadowed when Aurora is said to be "facing up in that stark description of the moment of Boabdil's expulsion from Granada, to her own treatment of her only son [...] all its elements converg[ed] on [...] the Sultan's face, from which horror, weakness, loss and pain poured like darkness itself, a face in a condition of existential torment reminiscent of Edvard Munch" (218). Later, in Spain, Moor discovers yet more horror in the painting that has prophesied her death - depicted below the figure of the Sultan is the man who ordered her murder, not the nationalist Raman Fielding, whom Abraham accused, thereby provoking Moor's revenge, but Abraham himself. This palimpsest counterbalances Vasco Miranda's representation of Aurora below the Moor in his own sentimental painting of *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Not only does Miranda force Moor to write his family saga under duress, he also keeps prisoner a Japanese art historian whom he forces to peel off his Moor painting to reveal the portrait of Aurora, who had jilted him as a lover. When he kills Aoi Uë just before dying himself - when a needle left in his body after an operation years before (154) pierces his heart - the murder seems purely gratuitous. Yet one may wonder whether paying with her life for the liberation of the portrait of the artist does not in a sense allegorize another consequence of the *fatwa* issued after the publication (also in Japan) of *The Satanic Verses*. And although, by then, Aoi Uë has become Moor's Chimène, not as a lover but as a highly moral model, unlike Rodrigo he fails for the second time to accept death in order to save Chimène. Paradoxically, and contrary to all versions of *El Cid*, including the early legend, Chimène is associated with the Moor(s) against whom Rodrigo heroically fought - possibly a humorous feature of hybridity in Moor's (Rushdie's) narrative.

At one stage in the narrative, Moor comments on his relationship with his father, noting that neither he nor the nationalist Fielding ("Mr India," 168) could qualify for "Father India" (168-69). Rather, he identifies his father throughout with a character in an American film, *Mogambo*. The word "Mogambo" means 'passion' in Swahili,¹⁶ but the major relevance of the comparison is to the Clark Gable

¹⁶ I owe this information to Valérie Bada. See Ava Gardner, *Ava: Mémoires*, tr. Françoise Cartano (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 1991): 208. It was also Valérie who drew my attention to Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra* (see below). Rushdie's familiarity with cinematic culture is simply astounding. Many other characters are identified with Hollywood heroes.

character in the film, a "strong man" and predator who ensnares both animals and women and whom no one can resist. The disclosure of his father's and mother's palimpsest portraits in the "Moor" paintings are a last comment on the duality of Bombay and, more generally, Mother India: the fanaticism and ruthlessness of some politicians and businessmen on the one hand; love, generosity and imaginative ebullience on the other.

The theme of the lost mother is a recurrent one both in the narrative and in Aurora's painting, first when she paints the loss of her own mother, Isabella, in her first fresco, then in the degradation of the political situation in "Mother India," especially under Indira Gandhi during the years of the second Emergency (1974–77), and finally in the unfinished painting called *The Moor's Last Sigh*. For Moor himself, the painting has at least two meanings: it represents the tragic loss and assassination of his mother, and it parallels his predicament and that of the fifteenth-century Sultan Boabdil heaving a sigh at having to quit a territory he considered to be his mother country and to leave his beloved Alhambra. Throughout the narrative, Moor refers to the family house in Bombay as "Paradise" or "Eden."¹⁷ It may not be too far-fetched to suppose that it also expresses Rushdie's sadness at a time when he had no hope of ever going back to "Mother India."¹⁸ Nevertheless, in spite of its pessimism, the unfinished painting suggests openness and a possibly hopeful future. Quite like *The Satanic Verses*, *The Moor's Last Sigh* indirectly conveys Rushdie's materialistic philosophy¹⁹ and his horror of religious fanaticism, showing Hindus destroying a mosque (363) and Muslims smashing up Hindu temples (365). One of Aurora's purely anecdotal paintings (*The Kissing of Abbas Ali Baig*) is attacked for being supposedly anti-religious, and the Zogoibys are then stigmatized as "Christian Jews" (234–35). Commenting on Aurora's all-encompassing first fresco, Moor observes: "Only God was absent" (60). Even Abraham's mother, the caretaker of the Cochin synagogue, tells her son, "There is no world but the world. [...] There is no God" (84). As in Rushdie's other fiction, the only ideal implied is a secular humanism and the "pluralist philosophy" (272)

¹⁷ See Washington Irving's similar description in "The Author's Farewell to Granada": "It was at an opposite point of the compass from *la cuesta de las lagrimas* (the hill of tears) noted for the 'last sigh of the Moor'. I now could realize something of the feelings of poor Boabdil when he bade adieu to the paradise he was leaving behind and beheld before him a rugged and sterile road conducting him to exile"; *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832; Granada: Miguel Sánchez Editorial, 1979): 301.

¹⁸ Since then Rushdie has been back to India with his son. For an account of this visit (in April 2000), see his "Back to the Land I Love," *The Times* (13 June 2000).

¹⁹ On the subject of Rushdie's philosophical materialism, see Pierre François, *Inlets of the Soul: Contemporary Fiction in English and the Myth of the Fall* (Cross/Cultures 35; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1999): 209–54.

on which the Zogoiby children are raised, even if this is often defeated, as Aurora makes clear when she hears that her son is working for the nationalist Fielding:

Aurora had apparently decided that the ideas of impurity, cultural admixture and *mélange* which had been, for most of her creative life, the closest things she had found to a notion of the Good, were in fact capable of distortion, and contained a potential for darkness as well as for light. This 'black Moor' was a new imagining of the idea of the hybrid – a Baudelairean flower [...] of evil. (303)

No character in the novel lives up to his or her ideal, his or her notion of moral good, and Moor himself is far from innocent. What remains when his history has been "peeled off" is his essential humanity and a potential "interweaving," of which the Alhambra, the Moor's lost paradise, is a symbol:

There it stands, the glory of the Moors, their triumphant masterpiece and their last redoubt. The Alhambra, Europe's red fort, sister to Delhi's and Agra's – the palace of interlocking forms and secret wisdom, of pleasure-courts and water-gardens, that monument to a lost possibility that nevertheless has gone on standing, long after its conquerors have fallen; like a testament to a lost but sweetest love, to the love that endures beyond defeat, beyond annihilation, beyond despair; to the defeated love that is greater than what defeats it, to that most profound of our needs, to our need for flowing together, for putting an end to frontiers, for the dropping of the boundaries of the self. (433)

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