

Political Aesthetics:

Cross-Cultural Desire and the Capitulation of Form
in the Work of Kazuo Ishiguro and Salman Rushdie

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Confused by our clumsy gestures of interpretation, history is never kind to those who expect anything of her. Under the formal pageant of events which we have dignified by our interest, the land changes very little, and the structure of the basic self of man hardly at all.

Durrell 59

The implicit assumption in this article is that the English novel, as indeed the novel as a genre (for which the bell has now been tolling for a number of decades, if one is to believe the critics), can yet be revitalized and rejuvenated if it agrees to be "creatively disrupted by pressures of infinity within the womb of space;" and if "realism is to yield insight into 'inverted' metamorphoses as threshold to a higher aesthetic factor in pawns of spirit" (Harris 1983: 65). To my mind, this is relevant to Kazuo Ishiguro's arch-realistic narratives because they bring into play a repressed lucidity which could be subversive of their own self-confirming premises; and a sense of aesthetic metamorphosis, of a quest for cultural transformation brought about by "pressures of infinity" or universality, can be pinned down even more easily in the work of Salman Rushdie — certainly in *The Satanic Verses*. My guess, then, is that these writers suffer from a kind of cultural claustrophobia, which underlies the formal and thematic aspirations of a fiction blazing with pent-up cross-cultural desire. On the other hand, it can also be argued that their search for new cultural forms and formations is necessarily hampered by their willingness to have their texts "coded in a code of the world" (Frame 1993: 78); so that the innovative strain of their work tends to be held in check, which accounts for its astonishing narrative closure, or for what I have called the capitulation of form in front of the enormity of the challenge inherent in an evolutionary brand of cross-culturalism.

This is a challenge which calls for an art of genesis or transformation, which can usefully be contrasted with Lawrence Durrell's belief in the unchanging "structure of the basic self

of man," statically embodied in the realism of *Prospero's Cell* (from which my epigraph is taken). This was written in 1945, in the aftermath of a global catastrophe which Durrell may have wished to relativize (or to escape from) through an appeal to some universal humanity, in which he discerned nothing less than mythological forms. Durrell, of course, professed a preoccupation with what he took to be the spiritual (and sexual) etiolation of twentieth-century man, and by extension with a sense of cultural decadence which branded him with the mark of an apocalyptic kind of post-culturalism. Yet it seems to me that such an awareness of the end can potentially be turned into a feeling for new cultural formations, which someone like Durrell may never have dreamed about. By this token it is quite possible to go against the grain of his statement in *Prospero's Cell*, by arguing that some "satanic verses" have somehow crept their way into his evocations of the Mediterranean paradise. Thus, "[u]nder the formal pageant of events which we have dignified by our interest," other events or incidents might slip into focus and form the particulars of an alternative line of historical development.

This becomes clearest in the light of what Salman Rushdie refers to as "the Christian notion of the Fall" (Rushdie 1983: 23), which applies not only in the realm of individual fate but also within the larger scope of cultural growth and dynamics. This connects Rushdie with a more positive form of post-culturalism, capable of investing new meaning in the iconography of the Fall. For while Durrell's sense of cultural exhaustion in the West yields a peculiar yearning for the edenic world of the eastern Mediterranean, and the tug of history on that world takes the Durrellian hero precariously to the edge of Paradise, someone like Rushdie goes one step further towards the abyss — indeed literally so, since his protagonists turn out to be suspended in mid-air on the first page of *The Satanic Verses*, and zooming down to sea after their hijacked plane has exploded above the English Channel.

The irony lies in the fact that "the Christian notion of the Fall" applies here not to Christian citizens at all, but to a couple of Hindu subjects tumbling towards "the appointed zone of their watery reincarnation" (Rushdie 1988: 5). Moreover, this reincarnation turns out to have little to do with the Brahmanic doctrine of metempsychosis since Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha are seized by "a force so implacable that . . . it was impossible for [them] to die" (8). Thus, although they are obviously involved in a process of rebirth as they transit through "a long, vertical tunnel" (6) in the clouds, Rushdie makes it clear that this is a process which "wanted nothing to do with [their] pathetic personality, that half-reconstructed affair of mimicry and voices, it intended to bypass all that" (9). The fact that they acquire a soft-focus appearance, since there is "a fluidity, an indistinctness, at the edges of them" (8), is clearly meant to make them representative of more than merely themselves, so that their rebirth encompasses a quantity of lives and enacts a recycling of the various "debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-

tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, *land, belonging, home*" (4). In this respect their fuzzy outline matches their readiness, as professional actors, to impersonate identities other than their own, and finally to speak up for all the displaced or dislocated populations of the world.

To some extent, then, Rushdie seems to encourage an allegorical reading of *The Satanic Verses*, in the light of which the explosion of the *Bostan* resonates like "a big bang, followed by falling stars. A universal beginning, a miniature echo of the birth of time" (4) which inaugurates a new phase in history, characterized by large human migrations. In this context "the Christian notion of the Fall" is wrenched from its usual frame of cultural reference, and is made to signify the demise of any culture as a community of spiritual belonging perfectly at one with itself. Rushdie's characters are invariably shut out from the pre-migration "paradise" of cultural integration: a move which reflects actual developments in the contemporary world, and which is hailed as both a blessing and a curse, or indeed an "endless but also ending angelicdevilish fall" (5). The ambivalence of the Fall, as depicted in *The Satanic Verses*, can perhaps be ascribed to Rushdie's openness of mind as he tackles the questions of metamorphosis and adaptation, and, through these, of cultural combination or hybridity, in an attempt to understand history as rather less static than someone like Durrell would have it. *The Satanic Verses* can therefore be regarded as an attempt to find an answer for the questions asked by the narrator at the beginning of the book: "How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?" (8).

There may be nothing very new to this presentation of *The Satanic Verses* as a reflection on the problems of immigration, or on the transformations of identity which affect the exile having to come to terms with a new cultural environment. Other critics have approached the novel in this way, running the risk, perhaps, of reducing the work to a piece of documentary evidence on life in contemporary England. I cannot help being struck by the way in which criticism of the book has been polarized, as attention was divided between the supposedly offensive sections, which seemed to be calling for religious-speculative comments, and what has been termed "the less polemic sections" (MacDermott 1993: 40), which were thought to deal with "a very secular England" (Brennan 1989: 147). I do not wish to dispute that Rushdie shares in the belief, expressed by Hanif Kureishi, that "[t]he immigrant is the Everyman of the twentieth century" (Kureishi 1990: 141); but I think he tries to address this issue in general trans-cultural, rather than in personal, terms — according to the principle that "[i]n this century history stopped paying attention to the old psychological orientation of reality" (Rushdie 1988: 432), because "these days, character isn't destiny any more. Economics is destiny. Ideology is destiny. Bombs are destiny"

(432). One advantage of reading the book as a theoretical experiment on how to represent culture in a post-cultural world, rather than as a social-realist account of a few individual characters, is that its unity of purpose and design might then come to the fore. Within such a framework, the "Satanic Verses" included by the Prophet in the Koran might stand for the degree of adulteration suffered by any culture at any stage in its development, from its moment of inception (as symbolized by Mahomet's revelation on the mountain-top) until much later (when cultures have suffered such dilution that the godlike and the satanic have become inextricably mixed).

Crucially, a more theoretical approach will encourage the reader to take into account the novel's aesthetics, enmeshed as it is in the problem of representing a cross-cultural reality by means of a code of expression governed by certain linguistic and cultural conventions. In this respect it is worth noting that whatever difficulties Rushdie encountered in his elaboration of a cross-cultural mode of creative meaning, they seem to find an echo, at a more theoretical level, in Edward W. Said's speculations about culture in his books *Orientalism* (1978), *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). One common feature of all these studies is that Said circumscribes what he calls "the seductive degradation of knowledge" (1991, 328) which comes to pass within isolated cultures, when they do not interact with others. This is why he deems it necessary to reach a new level of perception, "a synthesis represented by a war of liberation, for which an entirely new *post-nationalist theoretical culture* is required (Said 1993: 323, my emphasis). Clearly, this kind of synthesis is conceivable thanks to Said's approach to culture as strictly the appanage of the nation. As Abdul R. JanMohamed puts it, Said "must affirm the value of infidelity to cultures, nations, groups, institutions, etc., to the extent that these are defined in monologic essentialist terms" (JanMohamed 1993: 117). In other words Said *posits* culture — in the dual sense of "postulate" and "put in position" — the better to perform its abolition in a gesture of epistemological and geographical displacement. This constitutes his response to the historical fact of colonialism, since Said points out that "[p]artly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic" (xxix). By this token imperialism is presented as both a symptom of, and the beginning of a remedy for, the disease of culture.

The problem, however, is that Said fails to live up to the requirements of his own theoretical cultural synthesis, not through malice but perhaps simply out of philosophical necessity. There is a discrepancy between theory and practice in his work, which can be ascertained by measuring the distance which separates his ideal of culture as process from his critical pronouncements on literature, which tend to regard all texts as unqualified expressions of cultural constraint. For example, in *Culture and Imperialism* Said proposes to scan some

of the great literary icons of the West for residual traces of "the imperial process of which they were manifestly and unconcealedly a part" (Said 1993: xv); but then there is an unflinching and unrelenting quality to his endeavour, which accounts for his tendency to approach all literature as if it were governed by "instrumental processes whose goal is to mobilize consent, to eradicate dissent, to promote an almost literally blind patriotism" (375). In all its formal manifestations, then, culture is cast in a mould of unyielding rigidity which is only redeemed by Said's *theoretical* perception of it as heterogeneous and internally differentiated. It is this gap between practice and theory which underlies what Benita Parry has called Said's "enabling utopianism" (Parry 1993: 41).

I would like to suggest that a phrase like "enabling utopianism" carries especial relevance to the work of Salman Rushdie or, in a very different way, to someone like Kazuo Ishiguro. In the two panels of his literary diptych, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Ishiguro probes the limits of a culture at the end of its tether, which registers the increasing purchase of alien forces (like American influence) as well as a sense of inner fatigue at the end of an imperialist era. However implicit this may be, it seems that the energizing drive underlying Ishiguro's descriptions of cultural collapse has to be called cross-cultural, in so far as such a comprehensive dismissal of cultural practices implies the possibility of an alternative ground of being. For example, such concepts as pride or dignity, which form hallmarks of the protagonist's respective cultures, tend to deconstruct themselves from within in the novels, until they are reduced to empty husks which resonate with the prospect of renewed meaning. Yet it is part of Ishiguro's tactics that neither Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World*, nor Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, should manage to break beyond the conceptual limits imposed by their own native culture. Indeed the unique pathos of Ishiguro's fiction is precisely associated with the process of self-consumption which is traced in the novels, and which ends up in the mixed blessing of cultural trauma and inevitable silence. This can be seen as a matter of aesthetic unity. Stevens's narrative must either come to a stop, as he begins to see beyond the bounds of his crippling universe, or transform itself into something entirely different. Similarly Ono remains poised on his "Bridge of Hesitation" (Ishiguro 1991: 197), in *An Artist of the Floating World*, which in any case was his point of departure in the first place. His glimpse into the strictures of patriotism may have been just deep enough for the reader to share in it; meanwhile, his final perception that Japan, "whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to make a better go of things" (206), sounds dangerously like the author's warning that the spirit of imperialism is far from extinct in his native country.

It could be argued that Ishiguro's first-person narrators are too maddeningly at one with themselves to allow for any critical perspective on culture to erupt within the bounds of

the novels. Therefore, whatever cross-cultural awareness may have been aimed at has been projected outside the work, into the space separating the reader (or the author) from the text. In this sense Ishiguro appears to share in the "enabling utopianism" which was pinpointed in Said, since his texts also turn out to document the intractability of culture, but to do so in the name of an envisaged post-cultural moment. Like Said, it seems that Ishiguro's pursuit of an integrative project necessarily stumbles upon the obstacle represented by culture's in-built capacity for self-confinement and enshrinement. This sense of cultural stasis finds a reflection, on the thematic level, in the riddle of love and marriage which Stevens never solves to his satisfaction in *The Remains of the Day*. His inability to relate to Miss Kenton, or for that matter to achieve intimacy with anybody, might be read as a token of the sterility of his world — and it is no wonder that marriage and progeny should be major issues in *An Artist of the Floating World* also. On the other hand, at the level of form, the same feeling of cultural bankruptcy finds an expression in the stark subjective realism by which a narrator reproduces in every detail the assumptions which hold sway in a particular society. Once again, Ishiguro's admirable achievement lies in the way in which he allows a culture to consume itself from within, in a text which dwells compulsively on the very traditions that it wishes to decentre. But at the same time it might also be felt that his strength is his weakness, as it were, in as much as Ishiguro reproduces in his aesthetics the very allegiance to established forms which he condemns in his characters (see Luyat 1994: 195). In other words Ishiguro's aesthetics prevents him from exploring other cultural formations than those represented, indeed caricatured, by his own protagonists. To this extent his prose conforms to what Wilson Harris has called, writing about somebody else, "an art of frustrated momentum" (Harris 1992: 95), which falls short of exploring a new reality because of a certain "enveloping formality in the subjective manner of the [work]: a formality that is essential to an irony of deadening lucidity" (95), but which ultimately constricts the investigation to the prisonhouse of one distinct culture.

The unfulfilled momentum of Ishiguro's fiction accounts for its peculiar investment in cross-cultural desire, in so far as all desire is rooted in deprivation or in the suspension of the coveted. By contrast, it should be easy to argue that cross-cultural desire comes closer to fruition in a book like *The Satanic Verses*, where the main characters seem to be invariably involved in inter-racial relationships as well as in a quest for cross-cultural identity. However, it should be noted that Rushdie's concern with the marriage of cultures is placed from the start under the signs of pessimism and resignation. For example, Saladin Chamcha's marriage to Pamela Lovelace is indeed at bottom a "loveless" one, which is only part of his dreamed metamorphosis into a perfect English gentleman — complete with bowler hat and furled umbrella but also with "an airline ticket, success, money, wife" (Rushdie 1988: 60). It is significant that Pamela herself should be

depicted as "a golden girl, a woman to envy" (50) who hides her hollowness behind a "dazzling, permanent smile" (50) but who feels at heart "like a husk, like an empty peanut-shell, a monkey without a nut" (50); so that in marrying Pamela, Saladin literally swaps his personality and culture for a glittering way of life which turns him into a ghost, an empty slate, "[a] shade, but living in the tangible, material world" (61). His pursuit of material assets is of course symbolized by the thick wallet full of Pounds Sterling which the child Saladin found in a Bombay street, and which triggered his desire to emigrate; while his adoption of a new name (shortened from his native name of Chamchawala) indicates his willingness to relinquish identity in favour of an idea — since in Anglo-Indian a "chamcha" or a "spoon" is a collaborator with the Raj, and therefore somebody who panders to the prejudices of the English.

Similarly Gibreel Farishta flies to London, on a secular kind of pilgrimage, to meet up with a "golden girl from the roof of the world" (309), a flatfooted blonde named Alleluia Cone who must give up her passion for mountain-climbing because of her fallen arches. It is significant that Gibreel's former mistress, Rekha Merchant, was also associated with the Himalayas — in the nominal sense that she owned a penthouse at Everest Vilas, a skyscraper on Malabar Hill which is a preserve of the affluent people of Bombay. As "the highest home in the highest building on the highest ground in the city" (13), Everest Vilas represents a summit of materialism (also underscored in the name of *Rekha Merchant*). By contrast, Alleluia Cone has a name which suggests a peak of spirituality, especially since "Cone" is also the name of the mountain where Mahound (Rushdie's version of Mahomet) receives his revelation. It is in keeping that Allie Cone regards mountains, especially Everest, as "land's attempt to metamorphose into sky; it is grounded flight, the earth mutated — nearly — into air, and become, in the true sense, exalted" (303); and that her mountaineering is motivated by a wish to "escape from good and evil" (313) and to rise above morality. By implication, Gibreel's attraction to her amounts to a bid for sainthood. The fact that he is hailed as a "white angel" (321) can thus be understood partly as an effect of his turning away from the materialism embodied by the demonic Chamcha.

However, Rushdie seems keen to make the point that the steep way to Heaven is unwalkable for human beings with flat feet. Allie herself eventually submits to the pressures of the time when she decides that her own "'icequeen' image" (309) must be saleable, so that she starts appearing in advertisements for a "range of outdoor products and leisurewear" (308) for holidaymakers. She thus follows in the footsteps of Rekha Merchant, indeed literally so since she too finds her death by falling from the top floor of the Everest Vilas skyscraper, some hours before Gibreel himself commits suicide in the wake of his own Icarus-like fall from angelhood. The only avenue of exploration which remains open in the book is the one followed by Chamcha, who similarly recants his former faith and

returns to the city of his birth, recovering in the process both his fuller name and the Indian twist of his vowels. The novel thus ends in typical Rushdie fashion, with a narrowing down of the cultural horizons under consideration, as Chamcha re-enters his old life in recognition of the fact that "history is not so easily shaken off; he was also living, after all, in the *present moment of the past*, and his old life was about to surge around him once again, to complete its final act" (535, Rushdie's italics).

The nostalgic ending of *The Satanic Verses* has been hailed as some sort of advance on Rushdie's previous books, if only because he does not kill off all his characters for once, and because the sense of cultural fall which is portrayed here paves the way for an "affirmation of renewal" (Booker 1991: 195), implicit in the evocation of "a variety of exciting possibilities for the future" (195). Rushdie himself has endorsed this reading in an interview (see Appignanesi and Maitland 1989: 40). Yet I have difficulties with this approach, because Chamcha's final return to a prelapsarian state of cultural unity amounts to a denial of the "exciting possibilities" explored earlier on in the book. Against all odds, I think, Rushdie eventually reinstates the primacy of culture as "confining myth of authenticity" (Rushdie 1988: 52). This seems to be echoed at the level of form, as the novel appears to sign a last-minute truce with the forces of realism. Indeed someone like Milan Kundera admired the book for the exuberant freedom with which it taps the resources of magic realism (see Kundera 1993: 13-47); and the inventiveness of the novel is possibly most apparent in its treatment of the theme of metamorphosis, which is explored as a metaphor of cultural change. But then Rushdie desists from this exploration at the same time as he restores his characters to their original shape. In so doing he forecloses whatever possibilities were previously envisioned, and he forsakes any belief in the idea that it is the migrants, who have been changed when they "crossed the skies in search of work and dignity and a better life for their children" (Rushdie 1988: 414), who will be the ones to remake society, by "bringing their own coherence to the new-found land, imagining it afresh" (458).

It is a paradox that Rushdie should turn his back on magic realism, in the last section of *The Satanic Verses*, more or less when Saladin Chamcha comes into his family inheritance, in which a wonderful magic lamp takes pride of place. As Saladin rubs the copper-and-brass lamp the universe miraculously shrinks, as he discovers that "he no longer believe[s] in fairy-tales" (547) — literally on the last page of the book. In a sense, the lamp pours forth a kind of anti-magic which propels the reader back into the real world. It is an aspect of Rushdie's "enabling utopianism" that his experimentations with a cross-cultural reality tend to be confined within the pages of a book which is shown to have no ramifications in the real world. In this Rushdie reverses Ishiguro's paradigm, as it were, since the post-cultural moment is now projected wholly inside fiction rather than beyond it. Also, Rushdie has a way

of emphasizing the fictionality of his work which is rather fashionable (not to say post-modern, and therefore perhaps also apolitical). It has been argued, of course, that the multi-lingual quality of *The Satanic Verses* made its political project self-evident, in that Rushdie was obviously "practicing linguistic decolonization as well as preaching it" (Booker 1991: 202). Yet Tim Brennan has shown that this poses problems, as Rushdie sprinkles throughout his text some ingredients of "foreign" cultures which he immediately translates for his Western reading public, while his many borrowings from "exotic" languages go into the making of a huge linguistic soup in which the taste of English is nonetheless predominant (see Brennan 1989: 165-166). It is clear, at any rate, that this kind of cultural mixture would prove explosive if it were to be concocted in a real human society. It may be no coincidence that Rushdie's next book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, in which a similar linguistic and cultural balance is maintained (see Durix 1993: 120-122), should have been written as a fairy-tale set at an allegorical remove from any immediately recognizable society. My suggestion is that this is an effect of Rushdie's utopianism (or shall we say: his hopefulness), which may be no less enabling than Ishiguro's but which seems, even though Rushdie is the more formally innovative writer of the two, if anything less political. The irony of the matter is that Rushdie's return to culture involves a turn away from history which is not devoid of certain Durrellian overtones.

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