

The Courier's Tragedy: Thomas Pynchon and Salman Rushdie in Tune with Each Other

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One of the first signs of life from Salman Rushdie after the fatwa in February, 1989, was his review in January, 1990, of Thomas Pynchon's novel *Vineland*. Rushdie demonstrates here an aesthetic affinity between himself and Pynchon: both are surrealist novelists. Furthermore, the review contains an ironic comment, based on hard-earned experience, on Pynchon's secretiveness: "So he wants a private life and no photographs and nobody to know his home address. I can dig it, I can relate to that (but, like, he should try it when it's compulsory instead of a free-choice option)" (1). What Rushdie appreciates most in Pynchon is his humour, and he notes with satisfaction that Pynchon again has littered his text with small songs—"microchip musical gimmickry"—"unfortunately, unprintable here" (36), in the *New York Times Book Review*. When the review was republished in Rushdie's collection *Imaginary Homelands*, one of the songs was, however, printed:

Fuck you, mister,
Fuck your sister,
Fuck your brother,
Fuck your mother,
Fuck your pop—
Hey! I'm a cop! (IH 355; Vld 356)

This piece of indecent and silly verse is typical of that often found in Pynchon's texts. In this respect Pynchon and Rushdie are similar. The satanic verses in Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* are not just the notoriously heretical ones connected with the Koran, which, according to Muslim tradition, were dictated to Muhammed by Satan as feministic-henotheistic contraband:

"Have you thought upon Lat and Uzza, and Manat, the third, the other?
. . . They are the exalted birds, and their intercession is desired indeed."
(SV 114)

and which, when the three goddesses were detected, were rejected and replaced by:

"Shall He have daughters and you sons? . . . That would be a fine division!

"These are but names you have dreamed of, you and your fathers. Allah vests no authority in them." (124)

Other verses in Rushdie's novel are equally satanic: the anonymous phone-messages with which the rival Saladin Chamcha torments his friend Gibreel Farishta and Gibreel's mistress Allie, to make them jealous of each other:

*Rosy apple, lemon tart,
Here's the name of my sweetheart.
A . . . I . . . I . . .* (444)

or

*Knickerknacker, firecracker,
Sis! Boom! Bah!
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Rah! Rah! Rah! . . .*

*Violets are blue, roses are red,
I've got her right here in my bed.
Goodbye, sucker.* (446)

These doggerel rhymes, feeble-minded, anonymously and apparently innocently delivered by the voice-imitator Chamcha, are thus even more terrifying in the ears of Farishta—banal as evil itself.

Chamcha keeps the fire of jealousy burning, inspired by, among other things, August Strindberg's intimate relation with the much younger actress Harriet Bosse: "He tried to keep her locked up at home. . . . It was like the old Cliff Richard song: *Gonna lock her up in a trunk / so no big hunk / can steal her away from me'*" (SV 442).

In Pynchon's novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, the rock group The Paranoids make the same sudden changes between sophisticated literary references and pop choruses:

*What chance has a lonely surfer boy
For the love of a surfer chick,*

*With all these Humbert Humbert cats
Coming on so big and sick?
For me, my baby was a woman,
For him she's just another nymphet (147)*

These lines, sung when the counter-tenor's girlfriend has absconded with an older man, allude to *Lolita*, in which Vladimir Nabokov composed and analyzed feeble-minded nonsense verse. (Pynchon may have attended Nabokov's lectures on literature at Cornell University in the late fifties.) When the literary historian Humbert Humbert, seducer of the twelve-year-old Lolita, is "deserted" for another man, he writes, jealous and full of despair over the perishability of being:

Wanted, wanted: Dolores Haze.
Her dream-gray gaze never flinches.
Ninety pounds is all she weighs
With a height of sixty inches.

My car is limping, Dolores Haze,
And the last long lap is the hardest,
And I shall be dumped where the weed decays,
And the rest is rust and stardust. (255)

Humbert then comments:

By psychoanalyzing this poem, I notice it is really a maniac's masterpiece. The stark, stiff, lurid rhymes correspond very exactly to certain perspectiveless and terrible landscapes and figures, and magnified parts of landscapes and figures, as drawn by psychopaths in tests devised by their astute trainers. I wrote many more poems. (255)

The members of the Paranoids are difficult to distinguish from one another, and their behavior can be quite childish: "grabassing around, trying to push each other over the side" (CL 58). Their resemblance—Oedipa "couldn't tell them apart, three of them were carrying electric guitars, they all had their mouth open" (38)—and their predilection for crowding recall Walter Benjamin's description of K's assistants in Franz Kafka's *Castle*:

"It was . . . their ambition . . . to use up as little space as possible. To that end they kept making various experiments, folding their arms and legs, huddling close together;"—In Indian mythology there are the gandharvas, celestial creatures, beings in an unfinished state. Kafka's assistants are of

that kind: neither members of, nor strangers to, any of the other groups of figures, but, rather, messengers from one to the other. (113)

Messages, messengers (couriers, carriers), mail and mail delivery play a part in the obscure conspiracies in which Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49* is involved. Guided by strange signs—a muted post horn and a number of forged stamps—and after close reading a seventeenth-century play, *The Courier's Tragedy*, she is on the track of a secret, anarchistic postal system. As in Nabokov, the perishability of being is formulated in terms of Elizabethan drama: "The rest is silence." Furthermore—as in Rushdie—a corrupt verse haunts the novel. Puzzlingly, Oedipa's paperback edition of the play contains a variant reading. The verse in her book reproduces, exactly as in Rushdie, the name of an unmentionable, in this case the founder of the underground postal system—Trystero.

When the narrative thread in the conventional novel frays and ceases to communicate, there is a demand for unexpected, (un)clean, demonic elements: "skatologically" scanned via buzzing telephone wires in Rushdie, sinister as the smile on the Statue of Liberty on one of the counterfeit stamps in Pynchon—from both sides cunningly spread messages without sender.

Sacrosanct literature—"Great Books"—will sooner or later turn out to be written in ink made from ancestors' carbonized bones, as Pynchon expressively describes the moral collapse of literature. Bizarre nonsense verse and surprising songs are, in this respect, less compromised, less pretentious. They do not know their origin and adapt to their messenger, their courier. In Kafka—again according to Benjamin—the song is "a token of hope which comes to us from that intermediate world—at once unfinished and commonplace, comforting and silly—in which the assistants are at home" (114). This may be a reminder of Rushdie's and Pynchon's secret whereabouts, their hiding places, from where—armed only with "gut fear and female cunning" or "'silence, impersonation, opposition masquerading as allegiance'" (Pynchon's Joycean allusions in *Lot 49* [21, 174])—they send us their novel cries, the crying of the lot of us all.

—Stockholm

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