

“A Punishment of Dreams”: Reading Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* after *Orientalism*

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Abstract: This article focuses on Edward Said’s still undigested influence on world literary studies by using Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) as a test case of what Said’s thinking, beginning with *Orientalism* (1978), allows in terms of reading quintessential works of world literature. The article links Said’s elaboration of “contrapuntal reading” in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) with his claim in the “Imaginative Geography and its Representations” chapter of *Orientalism* that the confrontation with Islam, dating as far back as the eighth and ninth centuries, constituted a “lasting trauma” for Europe and the West (59). With Said’s remarkable diagnosis of what Islam represented—and perhaps continues to represent—for the West’s Eurocentric, orientalist imaginary firmly in mind, this article provides an opportunity for scholars and students of world literature alike to move forward in the debate over how world literature is to be read, translated, and disseminated across historically uneven networks of violent, traumatic cultural encounters.

Keywords: world literature, trauma studies, Edward Said, Salman Rushdie, postcolonial theory, Anglophone novel

I. Introduction: The Lasting Trauma of Islam

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said addresses what he admits was, in hindsight, a glaring lacuna in *Orientalism* (1978)—namely, the absence of recognition of the diversity and prevalence of resistance to colonial and imperialist violences throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries across the globe: “[W]hat I left out of *Orientalism* was that response to Western dominance which culminated in the great

movement of decolonization all across the Third World . . . in places as diverse as nineteenth-century Algeria, Ireland, and Indonesia” (xii). Said explains that “the point” of *Culture and Imperialism* is that “to ignore or otherwise discount the overlapping experiences of Westerners and Orientals, the interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonized co-existed and battled each other through projections as well as rival geographies, narratives, and histories, is to miss what is essential about the world in the past century” (xx). Although Said is working with a center-periphery model of cultural encounter that no longer holds methodological sway in contemporary postcolonial and world literary studies, he is subtly introducing a productive, still-undertheorized set of conceptual tools for processing reactions to the violences and traumas of historical interconnection in the global contexts of colonialism and the continuing realities of empire. Said’s self-critique of *Orientalism* in *Culture and Imperialism* succeeds in building on the former’s methodological edifice with an innovative approach to seizing on spaces of cultural encounter contrapuntally, thereby offering a renovated conceptual infrastructure capable of accounting for the multifaceted violences of colonialism as well as the resistances to colonialism that have so far precluded colonialism’s uncontested, worldwide declaration of victory. As I detail below, Said’s theory and practice of “contrapuntal reading” offers an approach to reading postcolonial works of world literature (which I apply to Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*) with an eye toward both the violence that historically seeded its production and the resistance to the violence that such works imagine (*Culture and Imperialism* 66).

In significant and subtle ways, Pheng Cheah’s response to the geospatial orientations of world literary studies echoes the critical import of Said’s self-critique. Cheah provides the most forceful argument to date for why world literature must not be conceptualized independently of the world-(re)making potential of postcolonial literature, an argument that is latent in Said’s reflections on contrapuntal criticism as well as his sensitivity to asymmetrical narratives of cultural encounter under postcolonial conditions. Cheah correctly points out that Said is a pioneering figure in “the geographical turn in postcolonial criticism” (218) by virtue of advancing the influential thesis in *Culture and Imperialism*

that “a literary work’s worldliness” is predicated on “its geographical infrastructure, its *spatial* situated-ness” (Cheah 219; emphasis in original). Yet Cheah’s assessment of Said’s continued relevance does not explicitly recognize that Said supplements this geographical dimension of his thinking with an acute awareness of how alternative temporalities are always at play where cultural encounters occur.

It is with this reading of how Said supplements the geographical dimension of his thinking in mind that I defend Said’s relevance to contemporary postcolonial as well as world literary studies. I do so by focusing on his contrapuntal approach to cultural encounter, illuminated, in this article, in the context of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Said’s contrapuntal approach obliges vigilant reflection on how the work of literature as such keeps the world open against the pressures of world-closure that colonial and global-capitalist pressures ceaselessly apply. Accordingly, I join critics such as Joe Cleary, who has begun to see that although “he is more commonly identified with post-colonial studies than with world literature, Edward Said’s relationship to both projects was intimate and ambivalent” (132). The wager of this article is that approaching Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* contrapuntally in the context of the palimpsestic cultural encounter that the novel stages will enable critics to recognize Said’s ongoing value to the future of post-colonial and world literary criticism.

Reading *The Satanic Verses* as a work of literature attuned to the anti-imperialist, anti-orientalist imperative of inhabiting the “imaginative geography” of postcolonial world history—i.e., Rushdie is aware that the anti-imperialist work of reversing the geographical violence that imperialism tends to commit is to be conducted not least through the imagination¹—requires that Said’s explanation of contrapuntal reading in *Culture and Imperialism* be linked with a claim he makes in the “Imaginative Geography and its Representations” chapter of *Orientalism* (55). He argues that the confrontation with Islam, dating as far back as the eighth and ninth centuries, constituted a “lasting trauma” for Europe and the West (59). This claim is a remarkable diagnosis of what Islam represented—and perhaps continues to represent—for the Eurocentric imaginary.² It demands that we acknowledge that the im-

agitative spaces, distances, and temporalities across which inscriptions of cultural differences are predicated constitute abyssal wounds of representation—as Rushdie’s protagonists are made painfully aware. These wounds can never be seamlessly sutured. Instead, signs or memories of the originary trauma of encounter persist into the future.

One way of defining orientalism, as Said discusses in *Orientalism*, is in terms of its role in managing the effects of this traumatic encounter on the cultural imagination of the West. The discourse of orientalism represents for Said “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the ‘Orient’ and (most of the time) the ‘Occident’” (*Orientalism* 2) as well as “a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” (3). Accordingly, orientalism provides the West with an imaginary palliative for coping with its perception that “Islam” and the “Orient” more broadly constitute a lasting traumatic encounter. It is the legacy of this encounter, moreover, that overshadows the “punishment of dreams” (Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* 32) endured by Rushdie’s protagonists, Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta. Each of the characters lives and relives historical trauma through repetitive bursts of the imagination at key moments in the narrative of their immigrant arrivals—the narrative, that is to say, of their traversal of a historical wound of cultural encounter that cannot easily be healed (if it can be healed at all).

The tragic historical irony of Said’s diagnosis, of course, is that whereas Islam posed as the catalyst of a “lasting trauma” for the Western imaginary, the West, with its rapacious greed and bloody quest for global dominance in the protracted Age of Empire, functioned as a far worse purveyor of trauma virtually everywhere it set sail around the world. Both the West and the Islamic world, in Said’s view, lay claim to an experience of trauma, albeit one that is far from equivalent in terms of historical responsibility and guilt. We ignore either of these two perspectives—that is to say, these two claims to an experience of trauma—at our own peril, for it is precisely the way that they have come to be intertwined in a more global, worldly, or planetary framework that ensures such experiences of trauma will indeed last into the future. Accordingly,

one of the questions this article seeks to address is how this “lasting trauma” appears in light of Said’s view of the West’s and Islam’s “overlapping territories, intertwined histories” in *Culture and Imperialism* (3). This article is interested less in describing any discrete territory that overlaps with other discrete territories or in a discrete history that is intertwined with other discrete histories; rather, it is interested in the space of overlap and the instant of intertwinement, especially when they appear as culturally irreconcilable trauma.

Said provides the methodological framework (via the metaphor of musical counterpoint) to uncover these spaces and instants of geographical and historical overlap and intertwinement and enables us to explore traumatic interstitial displacement as it is depicted in cross-cultural documents of traumatic encounter, which include such literary works as Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. The novel displaces its two central protagonists in a space that promises not a borderless utopia of either postcolonial or cosmopolitan hybridity but a traumatism glimpsed only darkly through a “punishment of dreams.”

Said’s diagnosis of an imperialist world order predicated first on precipitating and second on dissimulating the interminable trauma it produces in the name of civilization, organized spatiotemporally as a system of “overlapping territories, intertwined histories,” is seen first in *Orientalism* through the innovative interpretive lens of the “imaginative geography” that made imperialist expansion so diabolically successful. According to Said, it was the development of the imaginative geography of empire that allowed for the imperialist expansion that he forcefully indicts in *Orientalism* for weaponizing orientalist discourse, “turning vast geographical domains into treatable, and manageable, entities” (115). As Cheah notes, it is the patient analysis of this development that informs Said’s later assertion in *Culture and Imperialism* that “if there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical element. Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control” (Said 225). Said uses this lens of imaginative geography to pinpoint the (oftentimes baleful) contribution of cultural production to the ongo-

ing struggle over who has the right and, above all, the power to assign or oppose the narrative grids or design the cognitive maps that are responsible for driving the economies of representation that continue to orchestrate uneven distributions of violence and power in the twenty-first century.

II. Said and the Contrapuntal Exigencies of World Literature

Between *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, Said's thinking began turning on a topological understanding of historically violent, traumatic cultural encounters. For Said, these encounters are overdetermined by questions about who gets to assert their right to occupy the space of such encounters peaceably, without fear of their voices being silenced, their labor exploited, or their identities and perhaps also their lives (and the lives of their communities) being disfigured or outright eliminated. Despite the fact that becoming aware of the imaginative geographical distances between cultures and communities is the first step toward conceiving of ways of crossing such divides more ethically, we should still be cautious not to lose sight of the fact, as Said never did, that the desire to overcome cultural distance (and difference) can pose not only as an opportunity but also as a threat. Said wanted his work on the politics of representation after *Orientalism* to nourish a sensitivity about how oppositional claims on the right to representation, or what he elsewhere dubs the "permission to narrate" ("Permission to Narrate" 27), must not be oversimplified to mean cultural irreconcilability—not just for strategic but for historical and geopolitical reasons as well. When it comes to understanding the problematic of representation, Said never tired of explaining, it is imperative to begin from the perspective that the geographical and imaginative spaces in which representation is contested are always shared and always involve historical intertwinement and overlap. We must keep this in mind if we are to responsibly identify the possibilities and honor the imperatives of cultural resistance and survival within the contemporary world paradigm of globalization and imperialism. The ethical horizon of contrapuntal reading becomes visible in the face of these possibilities and imperatives, providing Said with a useful methodological framework that can overcome certain ten-

dencies of criticism that make it difficult to hear alternative voices speak, read counternarratives of world-(re)making possibility, or see oppressed existences as other than orientalist projections.

To be sure, the contrapuntal perspective Said offers on narratives of historical trauma and violence is relevant to contemporary discussions of world literature today. Insofar as Said’s diagnosis of the traumatic encounter between Islam and the West demarcates a space where cultural imaginaries overlap, intersect, and intertwine antagonistically, it disqualifies in advance the Habermasian possibility of rational communication between two equal partners. Reading Said on the question of this space of lasting trauma in *Orientalism* in conjunction with his reflections on the practice of contrapuntal reading in *Culture and Imperialism*, moreover, is an opportunity for world literature scholars to move forward in the debate, articulated most interestingly over the last several years by Mariano Siskind, Gayatri Spivak, Emily Apter, Aamir Mufti, and Cheah, over how world literature is to be read, translated (or not), and disseminated across historically uneven, exploitative networks of socioeconomic development—in other words, how “the world of world literature” (Siskind 356; emphasis in original), in Siskind’s pithy phrasing, is to be conceptualized. Said’s contribution to these questions consists of the future-driven, time-expanding force of contrapuntal reading, which demands that scholars keep open the unfinished narratives of overlap and intertwinement in a way that parallels Cheah’s worldly vision of how we can maintain the liberatory potential of post-colonial literatures.

The discourse of world literature that traces its genealogy to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* has experienced something of a conceptual renaissance since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The defining question of world literature discourse today, however, remains how to negotiate the problem of distance and translation that invariably separates and unites discrete cultural imaginaries. As Siskind sees it, one of the limitations of contemporary world literature discourse is that it is all too often enthralled with a worldview of utopic communicative potential whereby “the world” designates a safe haven, a site of discursive neutrality in which global cultures can one day peaceably co-

exist if they follow the example of world literature studies and recognize that we all inhabit one world, or rather one globe:

The problem I find with this genealogy of world literature (again: from Goethe to [René] Wellek to many of the proponents of a renewed world literature today) is that it tends to see the literary world—*the world of world literature*—as a field where the different cultural singularities that otherwise define each other through violent ethical and economic antagonisms find a common discourse and enter into a dialogue that, supposedly, serves as a model for a global political agency. (356; emphasis in original)

Siskind's targets in this article are the proponents of a cosmopolitan universality of world literatures who undertake critical readings of traditions, genres, and texts only to subsume the local particularities of such works into a homogeneous conception of global culture. What is frequently missing in such readings, Siskind charges, is an adequate awareness of the hegemonic, asymmetrical forces of cultural translation that conspire against the acknowledgement of capitalist exploitation in the postcolonial context of globalization.

To combat this absence, Siskind proposes that, if we are to hold on to the notion of world literature, then we must do so not by "thinking of world literature . . . as a defined corpus, but as a way of reading" that "foregrounds the constitutive tension at the center of the discourse of world literature" (358). This is a focus that Siskind finds largely unaccounted for in conceptions of world literature commonly attributed to David Damrosch, Pascale Casanova, and Franco Moretti. Notably, Apter, Mufti, and Spivak—scholars who have made important strides toward rethinking the epistemological agenda of what the world of world literature signifies as well as what its practices of reading and translation must ethically (and realistically) hope to achieve if justice is to be done to novel expressions of cultural alterity—do not commit this oversight. Apter observes that "many recent efforts to revive World Literature rely on a translatability assumption. As a result, incommensurability and what has been called the Untranslatable are insufficiently built into the

literary heuristic” (3). Mufti, in his wonderfully titled *Forget English!*, is far more explicit in labelling the translational impulse in world literature a twenty-first-century performance of orientalism: “[I]f the concept of world literature always contains within itself an attempt (or at least the desire) to bridge the social distance between the First and Third Worlds, between the centers of the world system and its peripheries, our name for the logic of this bridging is ‘Orientalism’” (20). According to Spivak, thinking about world literature must therefore avoid the orientalist pursuit of familiarizing the culturally unfamiliar. She substitutes the word “planet” for “globe” in *Death of a Discipline* (2003) in order to disrupt the epistemological imperialism that thinks the world exists to be dominated, exploited, administered, and therefore known by the language and perspective of the West: the globe is “that abstract ball covered in latitudes and longitudes, cut by virtual lines. . . . The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system” (Spivak 72).

Only those who have benefited from the long historical narrative of ownership and control of the world will lack the sense that the condition of our living on the planet is one of estrangement and survival rather than familiarity and comfort. Spivak turns to the Freudian *unheimlich* to help ground the work of reading comparatively in the space of world literature, to help track planetarity “as a recognition of that which makes our home *unheimlich* or uncanny” (74).³ Pursuing this confrontation with the Freudian *unheimlich* will not result, Spivak is quick to note, in some sort of revelatory discovery of what planetarity is, where it is to be found, or how it is to become available, pace Fredric Jameson, for cognitive mapping: “I cannot offer a formulaic access to planetarity. No one can” (78). What Spivak does offer, however, is an affirmation of untranslatability that can serve as a provocation to inquire, first into which literary or cultural productions are exemplary in this planetary, pedagogical regard, and then into how comparative literary criticism is to attune itself to reading and thinking in this actively uncanny way.

In proposing her notion of planetarity as a way of freeing thinking from its obsession with translational homogeneity, which inclines

toward thinking about the world according to the late capitalist order of globalization—"the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere" (72)—Spivak signals an intention that is nascent in the contrapuntal mode of critique that Said practices so assiduously in his writings, beginning with *Orientalism* but becoming especially apparent in *Culture and Imperialism*. Spivak is right to insist that "anyone who believes that a literary education should be sponsored by universities must allow that one must learn to read. And to learn to read is to learn to dis-figure the undecidable figure into a *responsible* literality, again and again" (71–72; emphasis added). Spivak's "responsible literality" points to the insurmountable ambivalences that overdetermine not only the work of translation but also the work of reading: how to preserve the local signatures of textual alterity—literality—responsibly, i.e., without obliterating difference. Moreover, and following Spivak's lead, readers should take the next step and demand that the debate surrounding what to do with the contemporary discourse of world literature must enter a phase where the question of how to read becomes inscribed in the imaginative geography of planetarity, or rather the geohistorical spaces of world literature. This is precisely where Cheah locates his intervention into the prevailing methodological problem of world literature, which he articulates as a normative problem of what it means for a world to undergo a temporal process of worlding, i.e., the production, as Martin Heidegger first intuited, of "precisely what cannot be represented on a map" (Cheah 8). Much like Spivak, Cheah suggests that "worlding is not a cartographical process that epistemologically constructs the world by means of discursive representations" (8). Maps, in other words, which are both both literally and figuratively in line with the "cartographical impulse," tend to paper over the alterity of people, language, and place, so a new metaphorical language of translation, of reading world literature, becomes necessary if the world (of literature) is not to be submitted, as Spivak fears, to "the same system of exchange everywhere" (72).

Keeping in mind Cheah's call to cease "reducing the world to something spatial" (9)—an action he suggests often "objectifies the world as a temporal process" (8)—I propose a variation on Said's contrapuntal reading as a candidate for how this imperative of cessation is to be im-

aged moving forward in the twenty-first century. This article asks why world literatures and planetary literary texts situated in both spaces and times of traumatic untranslatability demand the imaginative resources of contrapuntal reading. As Said defines it in *Culture and Imperialism*, contrapuntal reading regards “imperial concerns as constitutively significant to the culture of the modern West” (66). It considers “[Western] culture from the perspective provided by anti-imperialist resistance as well as pro-imperialist apology” (66). Accordingly,

the point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of texts to include what was once forcibly excluded. . . . In reading a text, one must open it out both to what went into it and to what its author excluded. Each cultural work is a vision of a moment, and we must juxtapose that vision with the various revisions it later provoked. (66–67)

There is much to be learned from Said’s understanding of what contrapuntal reading entails for our reception of cultural texts engaged (unwittingly or otherwise) in either facing up to or covering over the historical traumas of the colonial encounter. Said’s contrapuntal readings of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* are well-documented, but relatively little has been said about how contrapuntal reading travels to literary textual locations outside of the over-trodden British tradition. The challenge is to accompany contrapuntal reading as it travels into the methodological territory of contemporary postcolonial and world literary studies without allowing it to lose any of its interpretive or conceptual power; otherwise, we risk depriving ourselves of an imaginative resource that we can ill afford to do without as we continue to confront such lasting historical traumas as the clash between Islam and the West.

III. Reading *The Satanic Verses* Contrapuntally

To read Rushdie’s worldly novel contrapuntally highlights, as Apter and Spivak encourage us to do, the untranslatability of a planetary imagi-

nation. An awareness of this untranslatability is demanded of reading world literature today. *The Satanic Verses* is most interesting in this respect not when it resolves its narrative tensions with the return home of its main protagonist, Saladin Chamcha, at the end of the novel but rather when it narrates the imaginative violence that threatens to overtake the cosmopolitan ambitions of both Saladin and Gibreel Farishta, who find themselves suddenly inscribed in the hostile imaginative geographies of cultural encounter and translation. After all, are not the chapters that caused the most offence in certain sectors of the Islamic public sphere, as Rushdie never tires of pointing out, the agonizing dream-texts derived from Gibreel's loss of his Islamic faith when he is undergoing a cultural transformation? Gibreel's path to secularization, and perhaps to an identity recognizable as belonging to a cosmopolitan universality of the kind that Siskind accuses world literary discourse of naively upholding, results not in the triumph of secular newness but in "a nocturnal retribution, a punishment of dreams" (Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* 32).

Much of the novel hinges on how Saladin and Gibreel negotiate the imperative of cultural translation that confronts them as they navigate issues of belonging not only in India, a nation fractured along class, religious, gender, and ethnic lines but also in London, the metropolitan centre of the British Empire. At the time when the novel is set, London was in the violent, oppressive throes of managing the three-decade long influx of immigrant arrivals from South Asia and the Caribbean. By the 1980s, the Brixton riots (or "Brickhall" riots in *The Satanic Verses*) had erupted and, as Rushdie wrote in 1982, London especially had become the palimpsestic cultural locus of "The New Empire within Britain":

[I]t sometimes seems that the British authorities, no longer capable of exporting governments, have chosen instead to import a new Empire, a new community of subject peoples of whom they think, and with whom they can deal, in very much the same way as their predecessors thought of and dealt with the 'fluttered folk and wild', the 'new-caught, sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child', who made up, for Rudyard Kipling, the White Man's Burden. (130)

For Rushdie, the cultural encounter precipitated by empire was no longer between a cultural world “over there” and a cultural world “over here”; rather, “here” and “there” overlap. They are irreversibly and asymmetrically intertwined and thus cannot be neatly separated as distinct spaces in the cultural imaginary of Rushdie’s protagonists. This perhaps explains why, when Gibreel transforms from one cultural identity into another, from religious believer to secular non-believer, he does so in the temporally and spatially indistinct place of dreams.

In *Culture and Imperialism* Said describes the discovery of literary modernism and its relationship to empire:

[W]hen you can no longer assume that Britannia will rule the waves forever, you have to reconceive reality as something that can be held together by you the artist, in history rather than in geography. Spatiality becomes, ironically, the characteristic of an aesthetic rather than of political domination, as more and more regions—from India to Africa to the Caribbean—challenge the classical empires and their cultures. (189–90)

Because Said contents himself with commenting on this process in canonical works of high modernism—James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*—it is reasonable to expect that world literary consciousness had undergone a further aesthetic innovation with respect to digesting the historical transformations of the experience of imperialism by the 1980s. When Rushdie describes a new empire that has migrated to the metropolitan centre of the old empire, he sets for himself the aesthetic challenge of representing empire in a highly concentrated form, one that does not easily allow the projection of an empire within and an empire without. This undertaking explains why Rushdie decided that, in the case of Saladin’s temporary visit “home after leaving school” (*Satanic Verses* 44), it would not be possible for Saladin to unproblematically assert his “Indian” identity against his “English” identity. Zeeny, Saladin’s Bombay girlfriend, declares that “we’re all bad Indians”: “Zeeny parked the car. ‘You’re lost,’ she accused [Saladin]. ‘What do you know about Bombay? Your own city, only it never was. To you, it’s a dream of childhood’ (55). Later,

after Gibreel and Saladin have fallen from the sky and Saladin has been taken away in a police van, he pleadingly tells the police that he is not “a suspicious person,” one of those “illegals,” but an Englishman, “professional name Saladin Chamcha” (168). His captors respond: “Who’re you trying to kid? . . . Look at yourself. You’re a fucking Packy billy. Sally-who?—What kind of name is that for an Englishman?” (168). Saladin is sentenced to an interstitial dream-space of the immigrant experience, a traumatic space of historical and ethnic interruption that is far from promising transcendence or even a simple escape from the dangerous reality that he faces while being held captive as an “insect on the floor of the police van” (168).

As Sigmund Freud maintains in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, dreams constitute a peculiar form of experience that protects the dreamer from having to confront the unspoken and unspeakable realities of waking life. Dreams aid the dreamer in overcoming what, in reality, eludes narrative and representation. Another word for something that demands dreaming when straightforward narration or testimony simply will not suffice is trauma—but not just personal trauma. Modern psychoanalytic theory has enabled us to think more imaginatively about the effects of historical forms of trauma on the power of historical testimony to capture traumatic events in image and text. When words fail to digest the unspeakable presence of trauma in the historical archive, as they so often do, there is a duty levied on fiction and other literary forms to turn to new or unconventional modes of expression and thought to get the job done. Dreaming is one such mode of thinking in the literary encounter with historical trauma. Yet reading dreams in a work of literature is not the equivalent of listening to dreams in real life. The value of focusing on dreaming in literature when it occupies so prominent a place in the text, however, is less to allow readers to psychoanalyze literary characters (or the author) than it is to decipher, contrapuntally, what stands outside the peculiar space of the text that demands representation seemingly only through dreaming. Read in concert, the work of Freud and Spivak suggests that there is a close connection between the experience of dreaming and the (non-)experience of the uncanny that invests dreams with the topology of planetarity that Spivak ascribes to

the uncanny: “the *Heimlich/Unheimlich* relationship is indeed, formally, the defamiliarization of familiar space. . . . Colonialism, decolonization, and postcoloniality involved special kinds of traffic with people deemed ‘other’—the familiarity of a presumed common humanity defamiliarized, as it were” (Spivak 77). Indeed, it is this menacing play between the familiar and the unfamiliar, or more precisely the process of disfiguration by which the familiar is defamiliarized according to the logic of the uncanny, that captures much of what is at stake in the reflections on cultural encounter in both Said’s *Orientalism* and Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, particularly when Rushdie’s novel stages this process in the narrative space of dream.

Rushdie’s deployment of dream-texts in *The Satanic Verses* has two diametrically opposed functions, namely the consolidation of orientalist essentialisms of the other and the defamiliarization of the epistemological ground on which such orientalist essentialisms rest. Through the discourse of orientalism, as Said explains in the “Scope of Orientalism” chapter of *Orientalism*,

something patently foreign and distant acquires, for one reason or another, a status more rather than less familiar. One tends to stop judging things either as completely novel or as completely well known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing. In essence such a category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things. . . . Not for nothing did Islam come to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians. *For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma.* (58–59; emphasis added)

In diagnosing Islam as a “lasting trauma,” Said does not suggest that we should sympathize with the European experience of Islam as an experience of trauma; on the contrary, he does this to alert us to the historical if not also metaphysical fact that the meeting place of cultural encounter is shot through with the threat of violence as much as it is with the pos-

sibility of hospitality. Said recounts an attempt in the fifteenth century by “four learned men” to “deal with Islam through *contraferentia*, or ‘conference.’ The idea was John of Segovia’s: it was to have been a staged conference in which Christians attempted the wholesale conversion of Muslims” (61). The episode “is crucial,” Said writes, “for having been a fairly sophisticated attempt . . . to put a representative Orient in front of Europe, to *stage* the Orient and Europe together in some coherent way, the idea being for Christians to make it clear to Muslims that Islam was just a misguided version of Christianity” (61; emphasis in original). The conversion conference failed, of course, but not before succeeding in rendering Western ignorance “more refined and complex, not some body of positive Western knowledge which increases in size and accuracy” (62). Viewed through the myopic eyes of European orientalism, the cause of this failure resided solely on the side of the object staged and not with the worldview that conceived of the staging in the first place, which was able to survive this encounter with the illusion of its omniscient viewpoint relatively intact. The epistemological trauma instantiated by Islam, in other words, was inscribed ever deeper into the edifice of Western cultural consciousness, “incarnating” in the mind of the West “the infinite in a finite shape” (62). Instead of admitting defeat, the West proceeded with projecting its astonishingly condescending image of Islam beyond its geographical and imaginative borders: “[T]he Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe” (63).

Said’s detection of the emergence of a “new median category” for accommodating the uncanny newness of the other echoes Emmanuel Levinas’ idea, in *Totality and Infinity*, of the “*traumatism of astonishment*” (73; emphasis in original). Levinas suggests that it is precisely when we come face to face with the other in a closed space of encounter where neither the self nor the other can retreat that we must confront the traumatism of astonishment caused by the demand that the other places on our egocentric conception of self. Again, the interesting question is

not whether the perception, for instance, of Islam constituting a lasting trauma for the European consciousness calls for moral censure (though it no doubt does); rather, it is that in the space of the imaginative geography where the West first confronted the East (out of a desire for domination and conquest), there was no avoiding the eventuality that a trauma would mark or scar this scene of uncanny untranslatability. There can never be a pristine space of encounter where the cosmopolitan absolute of world literature would begin to flourish as if it were possible to hit a reset button on the history of orientalist and colonial violence or pretend that the past is done with us as some would wish to be done with the past. Said makes clear that trauma is both a thing of the past as well as a thing of the future. There is a spatial aspect to trauma, too, however, as Levinas observes. The memory of trauma, of the continuing violence of encounter, is transmitted through history at the place where the encounter between (at least) two cultures occurs. It would therefore seem that there is simply never enough space for two cultures or two identities to peaceably dwell with their cultural and subjective identities intact without one of them making or being compelled to make a sacrifice of unjust, unequal proportion.

If Said is right that, for the West, Islam is a lasting trauma, then how are we to read Rushdie's avowed intention in writing *The Satanic Verses*, shared with the novel's narrator, of negotiating the following questions?: “[H]ow does newness come into the world? How is it born? How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is? What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make to stave off the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine?” (Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* 8–9). The space that readers of *The Satanic Verses* must occupy, it would therefore seem, is doubly overdetermined by the form of traumatism that Said traces all the way back to the (mythical) emergence of Islam on the horizons of the West: the trauma of cultural encounter and the trauma of historical newness. The line separating a receptive hospitality for newness and a paranoiac reversion to violence against the newness of the cultural other is thin indeed. The thinness of this line demands recognition when considering the space where a lasting trauma is exacerbated, or the space where newness enters the world, or the space where

the Islamic, immigrant other, embodied by Saladin and Gibreel, crash-lands on the doorstep of the West.

Whether knowingly or not, Rushdie has fashioned one of the starkest images of the traumas of orientalism to date in the episode in *The Satanic Verses* where Saladin Chamcha finds himself consigned to a hospital of bestial immigrants after undergoing the injustice of police brutality in the van ride from the shores of England. At this point in his journey into the heart of empire, into the “dream-city” of London, Saladin is understandably confused about his transition into a goat-like figure (Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* 37). Awakened on his first night in “the mysterious institution” (172) by “a figure so impossible that Chamcha wanted to bury his head under the sheets” (173)—“it had an entirely human body, but its head was that of a ferocious tiger, with three rows of teeth” (173)—Chamcha learns that the cause of all these other bestial figures is simply, terrifyingly, that the police officers’ words transform them into beasts: “‘They describe us,’ the other whispered solemnly. ‘That’s all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct’” (174). The most terrifying of these figures for Saladin is “Glass Bertha”: “‘Glass...?’ Saladin began. ‘Her skin turned to glass,’ the manticore explained impatiently, not knowing that he was bringing Chamcha’s worst dream to life. ‘And the bastards smashed it up for her. Now she can’t even walk to the toilet’” (174).

This scene is instructively linked to an earlier scene in which Saladin undergoes his own punishment of dreams on the fated flight from Bombay to London, a punishment that has been recurring since “his flight some weeks ago” (34). “With a delicate shudder of horror,” Saladin’s punishment of dreams on “the jumbo jet Bostan, flight AI-420,” which will soon blow “apart without any warning, high above the great, rotting, beautiful, snow-white, illuminated city, . . . Proper London, capital of Vilayet” (4), starts again:

He had fallen into a torpid sleep, high above the desert sands of the Persian Gulf, and been visited in a dream by a bizarre stranger, a man with a glass skin, who rapped his knuckles mournfully against the thin, brittle membrane covering his

entire body and begged Saladin to help him, to release him from the prison of his skin. Chamcha picked up a stone and began to batter at the glass. At once the latticework of blood oozed up through the cracked surface of the stranger’s body, and when Chamcha tried to pick off the broken shards the other began to scream, because chunks of his flesh were coming away with the glass. At this point an air stewardess bent over the sleeping Chamcha and demanded, with the pitiless hospitality of her tribe: *Something to drink, sir? A drink?*, and Saladin, emerging from the dream, found his speech unaccountably metamorphosed into the Bombay lilt he had so diligently (and so long ago!) unmade. (34; emphasis in original)

The return of this dreamed-of figure made of glass in the institution of bestial immigrants signals the complete breakdown of distinct narrative levels separating the dream-like from the life-like, fiction from reality, imagination from history. In his dream, Saladin is aligned with the “bastards” from the institution who also broke Bertha’s glass-skin. The nightmare of being made of glass reflects Saladin’s fear that he now resides on the side of the other who is afforded no representational powers of defence against the violence of being renamed, of alterity being trampled in order that the sacrifice demanded of cultural encounter take place entirely on the side of the foreign other. Much of the drama of the sections set in London turns on Chamcha’s attempt to reconcile the irreconcilability of cultural encounter without having to make an uneven sacrifice of identity. The dream episodes reflect this fear as well as this hope that his fragility will lead to flexibility rather than to vulnerability. Yet whether his fragility signifies vulnerability or flexibility cannot be decided by only one party involved in a cultural encounter such as this.

Not surprisingly, the textual status of dreams in *The Satanic Verses* has been skipped over by many critics of the novel, aided in part by Rushdie himself who uses dreaming and other fiction-serving techniques of fabulation as an (understandable) alibi for the novel’s controversial representation of the Islamic pillars of faith. He writes:

I genuinely believed that my overt use of fabulation would make it clear to any reader that I was not attempting to falsify history, but to allow a fiction to take off from history. The use of dreams, fantasy, etc. was intended to say: the point is not whether this is “really” supposed to be Muhammad, or whether the satanic verses incident “really” happened; the point is to examine what such an incident might reveal about what revelation is, about the extent to which the mystic’s conscious personality informs and interacts with the mystical event; the point is to try and understand the human event of revelation. . . . Fiction uses facts as a starting-place and then spirals away to explore its real concerns, which are only tangentially historical. Not to see this, to treat fiction as if it were a fact, is to make a serious mistake of categories. The case of *The Satanic Verses* may be one of the biggest category mistakes in literary history. (“In Good Faith” 408–09)

Ironically, when these remarks are read from a more contemporary perspective—for instance, one informed by the interpretive weight Said places on the “worldliness” of all cultural texts—we see that it is Rushdie who risks committing a category mistake by insisting that literary fiction, at its best (that is, when it takes up its “real concerns”), is only tangentially historical (or worldly). Rushdie suggests that opponents of *The Satanic Verses* who would see the book banned and Rushdie hanged are guilty of the most egregious error of literary criticism—namely, reading literature literally and assuming that what is said through the mouths of fictional characters is merely a ventriloquized restatement of the author’s sincerest beliefs. However, Rushdie risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater in his defense of *The Satanic Verses* against its supposedly fundamentalist critics⁴ by advocating for what can only amount to the complete depoliticization of his writing.

Unfortunately, Rushdie’s historical distancing of *The Satanic Verses* obscures its sober-eyed accounting of the immigrant (Islamic) experience in the Western metropolis, one that takes seriously the question of what gets forcibly sloughed off when immigrants (not to be confused with the

exiled) take it upon themselves to embody the work of cultural translation solely out of their necessity to survive. “Cast into an alien territory that very often seems like hell,” writes Timothy Brennan in *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*, “the immigrant is thrust into a mental framework of questioning at all levels” (151). Brennan’s reading demonstrates that part of what Rushdie is contending with in *The Satanic Verses* is the impracticable ordeal of mediating a cultural encounter from only one side of a cultural divide (which in any case is always multiple). Is this a situation that can be mediated without one side having to make a sacrifice of unjustly unequal proportions? How is the “traumatism of astonishment” to be negotiated in this situation and so many others like it? How is the trauma of encounter, in other words, to be reconciled contrapuntally in a way that dissolves the oppositional recalcitrance of different sides without tending to the destruction of cultural alterity?

In a gesture designed to outmaneuver the orientalist consequences of continuing to read *The Satanic Verses* according to the still-dominant “empire writes back” model of postcolonial literary criticism and thereby also evade the inscription of the ethico-political problematic of cultural encounter and the traumas that it has precipitated in the past, Feroza Jussawalla takes Brennan, Spivak, and Homi Bhabha to task for failing to consider the different ways that the novel reads, in the words of her essay’s title, not as a postcolonial novel but as “Rushdie’s Love Letter to Islam.” Jussawalla charges that various attempts at classifying Rushdie as a “‘Third World Cosmopolitan,’ a ‘metropolitan intellectual,’ and ‘a hybrid’ but most often a ‘postcolonial,’ because of his ‘birth’ as a ‘Midnight’s child’—a child born as India was gaining independence at midnight on 14 August 1947—his subsequent education in England, and subsequent home in metropolitan London,” are all perspectives that betray a Eurocentric myopia, which fails to “provide complete answers to Rushdie’s complex works or the complicated response to his work” (78–79).

Jussawalla argues that “the very hybridity that Rushdie manifests results from his being not only a ‘post-British’ colonial but also a ‘post-Mughal’ colonial” (79). This is an aspect of the novel that Said detected as well, though with a different, more post-colonial inflection. He re-

marks on Rushdie's involuntary, indeed forcibly changed allegiance after the so-called "Rushdie Affair" erupted:

Before *The Satanic Verses* appeared in 1988, Rushdie was already a problematic figure for the English thanks to his essays and earlier novels; to many Indians and Pakistanis in England and in the subcontinent, however, he was not only a celebrated author they were proud of but also a champion of immigrants' rights and a severe critic of nostalgic imperialists. After the *fatwa* his status changed drastically, and he became anathema to his former admirers. To have provoked Islamic fundamentalism when once he had been a virtual representative of Indian Islam—this testifies to the urgent conjunction of art and politics, which can be explosive. "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," said Walter Benjamin. Those darker connections are where today's interesting political and cultural conjunctures are to be found. They affect our individual and collective critical work no less than the hermeneutic and utopian work we feel easier about when we read, discuss, and reflect on valuable literary texts. (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 308–09)

The point here is not to referee differing interpretations of *The Satanic Verses*, as if a scorecard could be devised for keeping track of when Jussawalla nets a point on the side of reading the novel as a "post-Moghul" love letter to Islam or when Brennan, Spivak, Bhabha, or Said succeed in reading it as post-British colonial critique. The real challenge, indeed the real necessity if we are to begin devising a way or cultivating a sensibility for reading the untranslatable nerve centers of world literary and cultural experience contrapuntally, is to demarcate a dialogic space where alternative readings can come together without a preordained obligation of agreement or a defeatist preconception of incommensurability. Jussawalla is perhaps too much at risk of leading Rushdie down the identitarian road that results in what Said describes in *Culture and Imperialism*, reading William Butler Yeats contrapuntally with Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Mahmoud Darwish, as the

“nativist impasse” to be avoided at all costs, no matter how arduous is the labor of decolonization and therefore the appeal of the nativist illusion of historical escape (232).⁵ Nevertheless, one of the many values of Jussawalla’s interpretation is that it invites readers to conceptualize *The Satanic Verses* as a novel that inhabits (and is inhabited by) a space of orientalism that does not originate in the West. If such a space unproblematically originated from a Western discourse of postcolonial or anticolonial consciousness, she suspects, Rushdie’s novel would thereby inadvertently gift the West with the onto-epistemological authority over how the “East” or “Orient” is represented, how “Islam” is theatrically “staged” (Said, *Orientalism* 63), in Said’s words, or fitted into the orientalist grid that tirelessly, condescendingly seeks to tame a lasting Islamic trauma.

IV. Conclusion: *Orientalism* and the Epistemological Mutations of Imperialism

The secret to reading *The Satanic Verses* contrapuntally without turning a blind eye to its staging of the “lasting trauma” of Islam hinges on the reader’s willingness and capacity to engage with dreaming in literature, not as an escape from the violent realities that postcolonial and world literary texts are obliged to confront but as a supplemental imaginative space for negotiating orientalist experiences of trauma that continue to erupt. One way of honoring Said’s legacy is by using his work to think about ways of reading postcolonial and world literary and cultural texts, like Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, without whitewashing the historical record of the violences and above all the traumas of orientalism (and colonialism and imperialism) that remain far from being worked through. As Said writes in his preface to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Orientalism*, if “we allow justly,” for instance, “that the Holocaust has permanently altered the consciousness of our time,” then “[w]hy do we not accord *the same epistemological mutation* in what imperialism has done, and what Orientalism continues to do?” (xxii; emphasis added). Unless we come together to attend, collectively and contrapuntally—that is, without consensus but also without discord—to the historical traumas that continue to scar the present, there can be little hope that

such traumas will not intensify and erupt more violently in the future. Said's turn to contrapuntal reading in *Culture and Imperialism*, which I have tried to set in dialogue with his diagnosis, in *Orientalism*, of the lasting historical trauma between Islam and the West, exemplifies what is required to begin thinking about how the past impacts the present, and how the impact of the past on the present does not impact everyone equally. Rushdie's staging of a "punishment of dreams" in *The Satanic Verses* is a reminder that there is an ethics to dreaming in literature, just as there is a more self-evident ethics to whether we decide seriously to redress the untranslatable planetary traumas "in what imperialism has done, and what Orientalism continues to do."

Notes

- 1 One of the principle theoretical points Said makes in *Culture and Imperialism* is that, "for the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss of the locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored. Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination" (225).
- 2 Said continued to do battle with commentators, particularly Samuel Huntington, who tirelessly doubled down on their cultural ignorance by assuming that the world can be easily carved up according to such massive cultural entities as the "West" and "Islam." As Said justly charges in "The Clash of Ignorance," Huntington evinces an all too common "belligerent kind of thought," according to which "the personification of enormous entities called 'The West' and 'Islam' is recklessly affirmed." While Said opposed Huntington's belligerency of thought, he was not so naïve as to assume that such belligerence did not possess real political, cultural currency; he demanded that it be confronted head on and its origins be unearthed. This, in part, is what *Orientalism* aspires to achieve.
- 3 Spivak is primarily engaged in proposing "gender as a general critical instrument rather than something to be factored in in special cases" (74). I do not intend to ignore this dimension of Spivak's thinking, but it would require far more space than I have available here to do it justice. I therefore ask the reader to forgive me for this omission in my dialogue with Spivak in the body of this article.
- 4 The Rushdie Affair is far more complicated than I can elaborate on here, but I would like to note that the common perception that it was only out of a spirit of fundamentalist hostility to free speech is quintessentially orientalist in its refusal to grapple with the complex local conditions in England, India, and beyond, where the Rushdie Affair was most pronounced. See, for example, Bilgrami's chapter "After the Fatwah" in *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment*.

5 Brennan is therefore justified in pushing against Jussawalla’s extreme claim that *The Satanic Verses* takes the form of a *dastan* (a story or saga narrated in the South Asian tradition), as though Rushdie had not explicitly set out to write a novel. Brennan writes that “[h]er blunt claim that *The Satanic Verses* is not a novel—indeed, that Rushdie does not write ‘novels’—is a spectacular case of the excesses of nativist reading. Evidence to the contrary does not deter her” (128).

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