

Step Across This Line

S.Rushdie

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There is one picture in this collection, namely a photograph of the author by the fashionable (and fashion) photographer Avendon. Two pictures only actually met the approval of the photographer, and only one of those of the subject itself. It shows a mildly satanic presence (the other picture supposedly was even more satanic), a man in his advanced middle age with a greying beard and a balding skull. A man who has, in the words of the author, been through a lot in his life. In other words a man of character and experience.

What are the experiences of Salman Rushdie? Three pivotal events stand out in his biography. The first at age 13, was moving to England. He certainly has indelible Indian roots growing up as a child in Bombay, yet his formative years as an adolescent and a young adult were in the west, in London and Cambridge, where he got a degree in history in 1968. This move certainly from a private point of view must have been the defining moment of his life, from the point of view of the outside world of course of no interest at all. The second pivotal experience must have been the publication and the success of his novel 'Midnight's Children' when he was 34. He made it, became a published author, and a few years later his success was being confirmed by he being selected among the best British young novelists. In his writings he repeatedly refers back to his 'Midnight's Children' in particular the frustrated efforts to have the book transferred to the screen, either as a serialisation or as a full-length movie. This book is written in the style of magic realism, so successfully introduced by Marquez, and thus extending that genre from being a Latin American provincial preoccupation to a more extended one. Obviously it is his way of expressing his own Indian identity, whatever is meant by such a hackneyed phrase, as well as Indian identity in general shaped by recent history. One may or may not share the sentiments and literary sensitivities of the author, yet in order to fully appreciate an author you need to appreciate his books, a fact that should be too obvious to have to be spelled out, but many authors serve to functions, one of being an author, and the other of being the celebrity that authorship may occasionally bestow, and which usually manifests itself of becoming a public voice, that can be expected to be listened to. And it is in this capacity, as a public voice and authority, the pieces of this selection are being written. Thus in it we do not meet the soul of the writer, we meet his social chatty self, and are thus treated not to truths but to opinions. This makes for an easier and less demanding reading, in which you tend more often than not nod and agree with the author.

The third pivotal event in his life is far easier to date and pinpoint, it clearly is the fatwa announced against him on February 14, 1989. In this he was elevated from just being an established novelist, known chiefly among the book-reading public, to a true celebrity, known also by the media-consuming masses. Gratifying as such an elevation may have been to his professional career (although one probably should not exaggerate the amount of increased sales of his works) it was, he assures us (and clearly we have

no reason to doubt him), not able to compensate for the purely personal pain, because for one thing, the practical restrictions and privations that it involved, continued for the better part of a decade, most of which time the public (as opposed to would-be-assassins?) simply had forgotten him. The British Government protected him, if somewhat niggardly, resenting the imposition his notoriety involved, in particular the complications it imposed on their own financial dealings with Iran. Initially much pressure was put on him to officially renounce his book - the Satanic Verses, that had been the pretext for his head, ostensibly in order to ease the negotiations with some British hostages. This put him into an awkward moral position, in effect of becoming the hostage to the hostages, and also implicitly having the blame shifted onto himself. Thus came into being the so called 'Rushdie-affair' implicating his reckless behaviour as its cause. The crucial question to ask is whether such accusations of complicity has some basis, or whether he is in fact an innocent victim, part of a much larger struggle of freedom, especially freedom of expression, against a reactionary and conceited clique of religious fanatics rejecting the values of the democratic west.

It is always easy to defend freedom of expression when it concerns expressions you thoroughly approve of. In the case of Rushdie it concerns his own novel, and naturally any frustrations as to its expression will be deeply resented. Clearly he is outraged, and understandably so, and his natural reaction is to focus on himself and resent any perceived lack of lustre when it comes to championing his case. (He is disappointed in the caution western countries exhibit due to their own financial involvements with the Iranian regime, especially the British as noted above, although he is generally lauding the support of Scandinavian countries, except for the Danish concern for their feta cheese exports.) Such egocentricity is of course somewhat grandiose, but Rushdie has of course a perfect excuse for such exaggerated claims, as the struggle is seen as going beyond being merely personal and becomes one of principle, part of the general struggle for freedom of expression and liberty to pursue happiness, in the face of religious bigotry and political strictures. By identifying himself with a grander cause, his writing suffers, instead of being a thoughtful and provocative intellectual he becomes an orator, addressing official bodies and rallies, extolling the sacredness of his cause. As a consequence it becomes a diatribe against evil regimes, not unlike the moral crusades of a Bush, condemning terrorism as the scourge of modern life. This identification with established political power must be considered as somewhat ironic and of course unavoidable, because his hope for physical survival is exclusively pinned on the protection of capable western governments, some of whose agendas he needs to make his own in a tighter way than he may ideally have liked.

Now the question of the freedom of expression is a complicated one, and also a demanding one, as for it to make sense. It is one thing to protect the right of expressions one approve of, quite another thing to champion what one detests. Unfortunately almost any defence of an expression on principal grounds is most often construed as at least an implicit endorsement. The key is to try to make a demarcation between speech and writing on one hand and action on the other. This is not entirely trivial, as any kind of speech and writing is an act by itself and intended to further certain purposes which may be commendable or not. In particular rousing people to action through inflammatory talk can be interpreted

as an inveigling¹. The natural question is to what extent did Rushdie flaunt religious sensibilities? Was his book (which I have not read) a personal articulation or a deliberate provocation, not to thought and reflection, but to set off a predicted furor (not unlike the commotion surely to ensue when, shouting fire in a crowded place)? Surely a vocal act can only be seen as an expression when it is directed to the reflective thinking of others; in that case the freedom to argue in a debate is to be sanctioned. On the other hand if say foul and offensive language is used, this is not so much a question of argument but verbal demonstration, accessible to the unthinking as well as the thinking, and thus maybe to be censored. We all subject ourselves to censorship, voluntary or not, and not all the effects of such restrictions are for the bad. By eschewing the obvious, it forces the writer to be subtle and may well enhance the sophistication of his message by making it inaccessible to the non-thinking. Expression takes place in a special arena between thinking people and is intended to influence thinking primarily and not action, although of course all action is a consequence of thinking, but the correspondence is not always straightforward and obvious². It is only in this arena that the unqualified freedom of expression makes sense and becomes non-contradictory. On those grounds can we remove any possible charges of mischief on part of Rushdie? My opinion is of course yes, but such an opinion can only be honestly given after some attempt at a careful analysis of what is at stake.

When Rushdie is not engaged in exalted pronouncement he is of course far more personal and interesting, because we are after all interested in the opinions of individuals, their quirks and sillinesses, not of their politically correct personas, expressing what almost everyone can express. Rushdie is a little bit celebrity struck. Being a famous writer carries of course quite a lot of clout, definitely more than being just an academic say; on the other hand compared to that of a rock-star the celebrity status is rather low-keyed, hence the relish with which he describes his encounters with the rock band U2 and his intermittent brushes with the Rolling Stones³. Such quirks are of course to be forgiven, most of us harbor similar fascinations in private, but if we consider ourselves sophisticated we are loath to admit to them.

On moral questions what has he to say? That we have already touched upon as his moral sermons have been monopolized by his peculiar fate. But when it concerns not himself he can be more forthright and sharper. As an example, after the NATO intervention in Kosovo, the tables were turned and the Serbs were subjected to reprisals. Blair, on his high moral horse would have nothing of that, the Albanians were admonished that such behaviour was unacceptable, people would from now on live in peace and harmony with each other. Beautiful words maybe, and a beautiful principle, but so ineptly naive and unthinking, perhaps not surprising coming from Blair. What did he think he was? A school-master lecturing his students? Maybe he did? Rushdie reminds the reader that

¹ Calling fire in a crowded theatre or to an execution squad are classical examples of vocal acts which cannot be classified as expressions.

² If it was the issue of free expression would be even thornier, maybe even meaningless! Once again, in the case of war an order is an order and it has predictable consequences, hence an order is an act not an expression.

³ In a TV interview once I heard him goodhumoredly remark, that while a writer to him may be checked into a room in a first class hotel when on tour, a rockstar like Elton John occupies an entire hotel.

when the Serbs came the male population fled into the woods to save their lives leaving their women and children to take care of their homes. Returning they saw them slaughtered. How could they have expected that? And how do you expect people to get over such a trauma in a few weeks? Such wounds will fester for generations to come making normal intercourse between people not only impossible but downright offensive. Those are the realities of life on which general principles may impose some structure but can never be expected to penetrate deeper.

Being a celebrity writer means that your opinions are considered to be interesting and worth taking seriously. This is, at least for a writer, the essence of the rewards of fame, more gratifying than mere riches and material comfort (although the latter should not be looked down upon, but they can be achieved in more reliable ways), namely to be listened to no matter what. As a consequence Rushdie is invited to contribute to a regular column, the selection of which is reprinted in the book. To do so is of course fraught with certain dangers. The brilliant thought in the morning may turn out not quite so brilliant in the relentless light of the day, and maybe downright silly at the advent of dusk. One such example is his suggestion that at the close count between Bush and Gore, the Salomonic solution would simply be that each jettison his vice-president and take turns at the top post. A suggestion, obviously made tongue in cheek at the time, but made to look particularly naive in retrospect.

Finally Rushdie is a writer but true to his Bombay roots he has a love-affair with the movies. His first literary efforts were provoked by seeing the movie 'the Wizard of Oz' an example when a movie is actually better than the book on which it happens to be based, that an more or less anonymous committee of writers and directors may in the end come up with a product superior to that of a single independent author. Movies are collective efforts, and although usually associated to the director alone for reasons of simplicity, they depend also upon script-writers, photographers, maybe even producers. This is a fascinating world, and Rushdie had his brush with it, engaged in the adaptation of his beloved 'Midnight children' to the screen (be it as a regular movie or a TV serialization.). But it is also a frustrating one, so many things have to come in place for things to happen. So although a script was produced, a director assigned, everything set, it can always fail at the last moment due to a permission being denied. That adaptation is still in limbo...

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