

The Day Panurge No Longer Makes People Laugh

The Invention of Humor

The pregnant Madame Grandgousier ate too much tripe, and they had to give her a purgative; it was so strong that the placenta let go, the fetus Gargantua slipped into a vein, traveled up her system, and came out of his mama's ear. From the very first lines, Rabelais's book shows its hand: the story being told here is not serious: that is, there are no statements of truths here (scientific or mythic); no promise to describe things as they are in reality.

Rabelais's time was fortunate: the novel as butterfly is taking flight, carrying the shreds of the chrysalis on its back. With his giant form, Pantagruel still belongs to the past of fantastic tales, while Panurge comes from the yet unknown future of the novel. The extraordinary moment of the birth of a new art gives Rabelais's book an astounding richness; it has everything: the plausible and the implausible, allegory, satire, giants and ordinary men, anecdotes, meditations, voyages real and fantastic, scholarly disputes, digressions of pure verbal virtuosity. Today's novelist, with his legacy from the nineteenth century, feels an envious nostalgia for the superbly heterogeneous universe of those earliest novelists and for the delightful liberty with which they dwelt in it.

Just as Rabelais starts his book by dropping Gargantua onto the world's stage from his mama's ear, so in *The Satanic Verses*, after a midair plane explosion, do Salman Rushdie's two heroes fall through the air chattering, singing and carrying on in comic and improbable fashion. While 'above, behind, below them in the void' float reclining seats, paper cups, oxygen masks, and passengers, one of them – Gibreel Farishta – swims 'in air, butterfly-stroke, breast-stroke, bunching himself into a ball, spreadeagling himself against the almost-infinity of the almost-dawn,' and the other – Saladin Chamcha – like 'a fastidious shadow falling headfirst in a grey suit with all the jacket buttons done up, arms by his sides . . . a bowler hat on his head.' The novel opens with that scene, for, like Rabelais, Rushdie knows that the contract between the novelist and the reader must be established from the outset; it must be clear: the story being told here is not serious, even though it is about the most dreadful things.

The marriage of the not-serious and the dreadful: witness this scene from Rabelais's *Fourth Book*: on the open sea, Pantagruel's boat meets a ship full of sheep merchants; one of them, seeing Panurge with no codpiece and with his eyeglasses fastened to his hat, takes the liberty of talking big and calls him a cuckold. Panurge is quick to retaliate: he buys a sheep from the fellow and throws it into the sea; it being their nature to follow the leader, all the other sheep start jumping into the water. In a panic, the merchants grab hold of the sheeps' fleece and horns, and are dragged into the sea themselves. Panurge picks up an oar, not to save them but to keep them from climbing back onto the ship; eloquently, he exhorts them, describing the miseries of this world and the benefits and delights of the next, declaring that the dead are more fortunate than the living. Even so, should they by some chance prefer to go on living among humans, he wishes them a meeting with some whale, like Jonah. The mass drowning accomplished, the good Frère Jean congratulates Panurge, only reproaching him for having paid the merchant beforehand and thus thrown away money. Says Panurge: 'By God, I got a good fifty thousand francs' worth of fun for it!'

The scene is unreal, impossible; does it, at least, have a moral? Is Rabelais denouncing the stinginess of the merchants, whose punishment should please us? Or does he mean to make us indignant at Panurge's cruelty? Or, as a good anticlerical, is he mocking the stupidity of the religious clichés Panurge recites? Guess! Every answer is a booby trap.

Says Octavio Paz: 'There is no humor in Homer or Virgil; Ariosto seems to foreshadow it, but not until Cervantes does humor take shape. . . . Humor,' he goes on, 'is the great invention of the modern spirit.' A fundamental idea: humor is not an age-old human practice; it is an *invention* bound up with the birth of the novel. Thus humor is not laughter, not mockery, not satire, but a particular species of the comic, which, Paz says (and this is the key to understanding humor's essence), 'renders ambiguous everything it touches.' People who cannot take pleasure from the spectacle of Panurge letting the sheep merchants drown while he sings them the praises of the hereafter will never understand a thing about the art of the novel.

The Realm Where Moral Judgment Is Suspended

If I were asked the most common cause of misunderstanding between my readers and me, I would not hesitate: humor. I had only recently come to France, and I was anything but blasé. When a famous professor of medicine asked to meet me because he admired *The Farewell Party*, I was most flattered. According to him, my novel was prophetic; in my character

Skreta, a doctor who treats apparently sterile women at a spa by injecting them secretly with his own sperm from a special syringe, I have hit on the great issue of the future. The professor invites me to a conference on artificial insemination. He pulls a sheet of paper from his pocket and reads me the draft of his own presentation. The gift of sperm must be anonymous, love: love for an unknown ovum that seeks to accomplish its mission; the donor's love for his own individuality, which is to be perpetuated by the donation; and, third, love for a couple that is suffering, unfulfilled. Then he looks me in the eye again: much as he admires my work, he does have one criticism: I did not manage to express powerfully enough the moral beauty of the gift of semen. I defend myself: this is a comic novel! My doctor is a crackpot! You shouldn't be taking it all so seriously! 'So,' he says, suspicious, 'your novels aren't meant to be taken seriously?' I am baffled, and suddenly I realize: there is nothing harder to explain than humor.

In *The Fourth Book*, there is a storm at sea. Everyone is on deck struggling to save the ship. All except Panurge, paralyzed with fear, who just whimpers: his great lamentations go on for pages. When the storm abates, his courage returns and he bawls all of them out for their laziness. And this is what's odd: not only does this coward, this liar, this faker, provoke no indignation, but it is at the peak of his braggadocio that we love him most. These are the passages wherein Rabelais's book becomes fully and radically a *novel*: that is, a *realm where moral judgment is suspended*.

Suspending moral judgment is not the immorality of the novel; it is its *morality*. The morality that stands against the ineradicable human habit of judging instantly, ceaselessly, and everyone; of judging before, and in the absence of, understanding. From the viewpoint of the novel's wisdom, that fervid readiness to judge is the most detestable stupidity, the most pernicious evil. Not that the novelist utterly denies that moral judgment is legitimate, but that he refuses it a place in the novel. If you like, you can accuse Panurge of cowardice, accuse Emma Bovary, accuse Rastignac – that's your business; the novelist has nothing to do with it.

Creating the imaginary terrain where moral judgment is suspended was a move of enormous significance: only there could novelistic characters develop – that is, individuals conceived not as a function of some pre-existent truth, as examples of good or evil, or as representations of objective laws in conflict, but as autonomous beings grounded in their own morality, in their own laws. Western society habitually presents itself as the *society of the rights of man*; but before a man could have rights, he had to constitute himself as an individual, to consider himself such and to be considered such; that could not happen without the long experience of the

European arts and particularly of the art of the novel, which teaches the reader to be curious about others and to try to comprehend truths that differ from his own. In this sense E. M. Cioran is right to call European society 'the society of the novel' and to speak of Europeans as 'the children of the novel.'

Profanation

The removal of gods from the world is one of the phenomena that characterize the Modern Era. The removal of gods does not mean atheism, it denotes the situation in which the individual, the thinking ego, supplants God as the basis for all things; man may continue to keep his faith, to kneel in church, to pray at his bed, but his piety shall henceforward pertain only to his subjective universe. Having described this situation, Heidegger concludes: 'And thus the gods eventually departed. The resulting void is filled by the historical and psychological exploration of myths.'

The historical and psychological exploration of myths, of sacred texts, means: rendering them profane, profaning them. 'Profane' comes from the Latin *profanum*: the place in front of the temple, outside the temple. Profanation is thus the removal of the sacred out of the temple, to a sphere outside religion. Insofar as laughter invisibly pervades the air of the novel, profanation by novel is the worst there is. For religion and humor are incompatible.

Thomas Mann's tetralogy, *Joseph and His Brothers*, written between 1926 and 1942, is an excellent 'historical and psychological exploration' of sacred texts, which, recounted in Mann's smiling and sublimely tedious tone, instantly cease to be sacred: God, who in the Bible exists for all eternity, becomes in Mann's work a human creation, the invention of Abraham, who brought him out of the polytheistic chaos as a deity who is at first superior, then unique; recognizing to whom he owes his existence, God cries: 'It's unbelievable how well that dust-dumpling knows Me! I'm starting to make a name through him! Truly, I'm going to anoint him!' But above all: Mann emphasizes that his novel is a humorous work. The Holy Scriptures making us laugh! As in the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife: crazy with love, the woman bites her tongue and then pronounces her seductive lines lisping like a baby, 'thleep with me, thleep with me,' while the chaste Joseph, day after day for three years, explains patiently to the lisper that they are forbidden to make love. On the fateful day, they are alone in the house; she starts up again, demanding 'thleep with me, thleep with me,' and he yet again patiently, pedantically explains why they must not make love, but as he explains he gets hard, harder, my God he gets so

superbly hard that Potiphar's wife is driven mad by the sight; she rips his garment off him, and when Joseph runs away, still with his erection, she – demented, desperate, enraged – howls and shouts for help, accusing Joseph of rape.

Mann's novel won universal respect; proof that profanity was no longer considered an offense but was henceforward an element of customary behavior. Over the course of the Modern Era, nonbelief ceased to be defiant and provocative, and belief, for its part, lost its previous missionary or intolerant certainty. The shock of Stalinism played the decisive role in this evolution: in its effort to erase Christian memory altogether, it made brutally clear that all of us – believers and nonbelievers, blasphemers and worshipers – belong to the same culture, rooted in the Christian past, without which we would be mere shadows without substance, debaters without a vocabulary, spiritually stateless.

I was raised an atheist and that suited me until the day when, in the darkest years of Communism, I saw Christians being bullied. On the instant, the provocative, zestful atheism of my early youth vanished like some juvenile brainlessness. I understood my believing friends and, carried away by solidarity and by emotion, I sometimes went along with them to mass. Still, I never arrived at the conviction that a God existed as a being that directs our destinies. Anyhow, what could I know about it? And they, what could they know? Were they sure they were sure? I was sitting in church with the strange and happy sensation that my nonbelief and their belief were oddly close.

The Well of the Past

What is an individual? Wherein does his identity reside? All novels seek to answer these questions. By what, exactly, is the self defined? By what a character does, by his actions? Yet action gets away from its author, almost always turns on him. By his mental life, then? By his thoughts, by his hidden feelings? But is a man capable of self-understanding? Can his secret thoughts be a key to his identity? Or, rather, is man defined by his vision of the world, by his ideas, by his *Weltanschauung*? This is Dostoyevsky's aesthetic: his characters are rooted in a very distinctive personal ideology, according to which they act with unbending logic. For Tolstoy, on the other hand, personal ideology is far from a stable basis for personal identity: 'Stepan Arkadieievich chose neither his attitudes nor his opinions, no, the attitudes and opinions came to him on their own, just as he chose neither the style of his hats nor of his coats but got what people were wearing' (*Anna Karenina*). But if personal thought is not the basis of an individual's

identity (if it has no more importance than a hat), then where do we find that basis?

To this unending investigation, Thomas Mann brought his very important contribution: we think we act, we think we think, but it is another or others who think and act in us: that is to say, timeless habits, archetypes, which – having become myths passed on from one generation to the next – carry an enormous seductive power and control us (says Mann) from ‘the wells of the past.’

Thomas Mann: ‘Is man’s “self” narrowly limited and sealed tight within his fleshly ephemeral boundaries? Don’t many of his constituent elements come from the universe outside and previous to him? . . . The distinction between mind in general and individual mind did not preoccupy people in the past nearly so powerfully as it does today. . . .’ And again: ‘We may be seeing a phenomenon which we would be tempted to describe as imitation or continuation, a notion of life in which each person’s role is to revive certain given forms, certain mythical schema established by forebears, and to allow them reincarnation.’

The conflict between Jacob and his brother Esau is only a replay of the old rivalry between Abel and his brother Cain, between God’s favorite and the neglected, jealous one. This conflict, this ‘mythical schema established by forebears,’ finds its new avatar in the destiny of Jacob’s son Joseph, himself one of the favored. Impelled by the immemorial sense of the favored one as culpable, Jacob sends Joseph to reconcile with his jealous brothers (an ill-fated move: they will cast him into a well).

Even suffering, that seemingly ungovernable reaction, is only ‘imitation and continuation’: when the novel gives us the words and behavior of Jacob mourning Joseph’s death, Mann comments: ‘This was not his usual style of speech. . . . Noah had previously used analogous or similar language about the flood, and Jacob adopted it. . . . His despair was expressed in formulas that were more or less traditional . . . though this should not cast the slightest doubt on his spontaneity.’ An important note: imitation does not mean lack of authenticity, for the individual cannot do otherwise than imitate what has already happened; sincere as he may be, he is only a reincarnation; truthful as he may be, he is only a sum of the suggestions and requirements that emanate from the well of the past.

Coexistence of Various Historical Periods Within a Novel

I think back to the time when I was beginning to write *The Joke*: from the start, and very spontaneously, I knew that through the character Jaroslav the novel would cast its gaze into the depths of the past (the past of folk

art) and that the 'I' of my character would be revealed in and by this gaze. In fact, all four protagonists are created that way: four personal communist universes grafted onto four European pasts: Ludvik: the communism that springs from the caustic Voltairean spirit; Jaroslav: communism as the desire to reconstruct the patriarchal past that is preserved in folklore; Kostka: communist utopia grafted onto the Gospel; Helena: communism as the wellspring of enthusiasm in a *homo sentimental*. Each of these personal universes is caught at the moment of its dissolution: four forms of communism's disintegration; which also means the collapse of four ancient European ventures.

In *The Joke*, the past appears only as a facet of the characters' psyches, or in essayistic digressions; later, I wanted to put it directly on stage. In *Life Is Elsewhere*, I set the life of a young poet of our time against the backdrop of the whole history of European poetry so that his own footsteps should mingle with those of Rimbaud, of Keats, of Lermontov. And I went still further, in this mingling of different historical periods, in *Immortality*.

As a young writer, in Prague, I detested the word 'generation,' whose smell of the herd put me off. The first time I had the sense of being connected to others was later, in France, reading *Terra Nostra* by Carlos Fuentes. How was it possible that someone from another continent, so distant from me in itinerary and background, should be possessed by the same aesthetic obsession to bring different historical periods to coexist in a novel, an obsession that till then I had naively considered to be mine alone?

Impossible to grasp the nature of the *terra nostra*, the *terra nostra* of Mexico, without looking down into the well of the past. Not as a historian would do, in order to see the chronological unfolding of events, but in order to consider: what does the *concentrated essence* of the Mexican *terra* mean to a man? Fuentes grasped that essence in the form of a dream novel where various historical periods telescope into a kind of poetic and oneiric metahistory; he thus created something almost indescribable and, in any case, hitherto unknown to literature.

Most recently, I had the same sense of secret aesthetic kinship in Philippe Sollers' *La Fête à Venise*, that strange novel whose story occurs in our own time but is a stage setting for Watteau, Cézanne, Monet, Titian, Picasso, Stendhal – for the display of their remarks and their art.

And in the meantime came *The Satanic Verses*: the complicated identity of a Europeanized Indian; *terra non nostra*; *terrae non nostrae*; *terrae perditae*; to grasp that shredded identity, the novel explores it in different locations on the planet: in London, in Bombay, in a Pakistani village, and then in seventh-century Asia.

The coexistence of different periods sets the novelist a technical problem: how to link them without having the novel lose its unity?

Fuentes and Rushdie found fantastical solutions: in Fuentes, his characters move from one period to another as their own reincarnations. In Rushdie, it is the character of Gibreel Farishta who ensures that supra-temporal connection by being transformed into the Archangel Gibreel, who in turn becomes a medium for Mahound (the novel's variant of Mohammed).

In Sollers' book and in mine, the link has nothing fantastical to it. In his, the paintings and the books seen and read by the characters serve as windows into the past. In mine, the past and the present are bridged by common themes and motifs.

Can our underground aesthetic kinship (unperceived and imperceivable) be explained by some influence on one another? No. By influences undergone in common? I cannot see what they might be. Or have we all breathed the same air of history? Has the history of the novel, by its own logic, set us all the same task?

The History of the Novel as Revenge on History Itself

History. Can we still draw on that obsolete authority? What I am about to say is a purely personal avowal: as a novelist, I have always felt myself to be within history, that is to say, partway along a road, in dialogue with those who preceded me and even perhaps (but less so) with those still to come. Of course, I am speaking of the history of the novel, not of some other history, and speaking of it such as I see it: it has nothing to do with Hegel's extrahuman reason; it is neither predetermined nor identical with the idea of progress; it is entirely human, made by men, by *some* men, and thus comparable to the development of an individual artist, who acts sometimes with genius and then not, and who often misses opportunities.

Here I am making a declaration of involvement in the history of the novel, when all my novels breathe a hatred of history, of that hostile, inhuman force that – uninvited, unwanted – invades our lives from the outside and destroys them. Yet there is nothing inconsistent in this double attitude, because the history of humanity and the history of the novel are two very different things. The former is not man's to determine, it takes over like an alien force he cannot control, whereas the history of the novel (or of painting, of music) is born of man's freedom, of his wholly personal creations, of his own choices. The meaning of an art's history is opposed to the meaning of history itself. Because of its personal nature, the history of

an art is a revenge by man against the impersonality of the history of humanity.

The personal nature of the history of the novel? But if it is to form a whole over the course of centuries, would not such a history need to be unified by some common and enduring – and thus by definition supra-personal – meaning? No. I believe that even this common meaning is still personal, human; for over the course of history the concept of this or that art (what is the novel?), as well as the meaning of its evolution (where has it come from and where is it going?), is constantly defined and redefined by each artist, by each new work. The meaning of the history of the novel is the very search for that meaning, its perpetual creation and re-creation, which always retroactively encompasses the whole past of the novel: Rabelais certainly never called his *Gargantua-Pantagruel* a novel. It *wasn't* a novel; it *became* one gradually as later novelists (Sterne, Diderot, Balzac, Flaubert, Vancura, Gombrowicz, Rushdie, Kis, Chamoiseau) took their inspiration from it, openly drew on it, thus integrating it into the history of the novel, or, rather, acknowledging it as the first building block in that history.

This said, the words 'the end of history' have never stirred me to anguish or displeasure. 'How sweet it would be to forget the monster that saps our brief lives as cement for its vain monuments. How sweet it would be to forget History!' (*Life Is Elsewhere*) If history is going to end (though I cannot imagine in concrete terms that 'end' the philosophers love to talk about), then let it happen fast! But applied to art, that same phrase, 'the end of history,' strikes me with terror; that end I can imagine only too well, for most novels produced today stand outside the history of the novel: novelized confessions, novelized journalism, novelized score-settling, novelized autobiographies, novelized indiscretions, novelized denunciations, novelized political arguments, novelized deaths of husbands, novelized deaths of fathers, novelized deaths of mothers, novelized deflowerings, novelized child-births – novels ad infinitum, to the end of time, that say nothing new, have no aesthetic ambition, bring no change to our understanding of man or to novelistic form, are each one like the next, are completely consumable in the morning and completely discardable in the afternoon.

To my mind, great works can only be born within the history of their art and as *participants* in that history. It is only inside history that we can see what is new and what is repetitive, what is discovery and what is imitation; in other words, only inside history can a work exist as a *value* capable of being discerned and judged. Nothing seems to me worse for art than to fall

outside its own history, for it is a fall into the chaos where aesthetic values can no longer be perceived.

Improvisation and Composition

During the writing of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes did not mind altering his hero's character as he went. The freedom by which Rabelais, Cervantes, Diderot, Sterne enchant us had to do with improvisation. The art of complex and rigorous composition did not become a commanding need until the first half of the nineteenth century. The novel's form as it came into being then, with its action concentrated in a narrow time span, at a crossroads where many stories of many characters intersect, demanded a minutely calculated scheme of the plot lines and scenes: before beginning to write, the novelist therefore drafted and redrafted the scheme of the novel, calculated and recalculated it, designed and redesigned as that had never been done before. One need only leaf through Dostoyevsky's notes for *The Possessed*: in the seven notebooks that take up 400 pages of the Pléiade edition (the novel itself takes up 750), motifs look for characters, characters look for motifs, characters vie for status of protagonist; Stavrogin should be married, but 'to whom?' wonders Dostoyevsky, and he tries to marry him successively to three women; and so on. (A paradox that only seems one: the more calculated the construction machinery, the more real and natural the characters. The prejudice against constructional thinking as a 'nonartistic' element that mutilates the 'living' quality of characters is just sentimental naïveté from people who have never understood art.)

The novelist in our time who is nostalgic for the art of the old masters of the novel cannot retie the thread where it was cut; he cannot leap over the enormous experience of the nineteenth century; if he wants to connect with the easygoing freedom of Rabelais or Sterne, he must reconcile it with the requirements of composition.

I remember my first reading of *Jacques le Fataliste*; delighted by its boldly heterogeneous richness, where ideas mingle with anecdote, where one story frames another; delighted by a freedom of composition that utterly ignores the rule about unity of action, I asked myself: Is this magnificent disorder the effect of admirable construction, subtly calculated, or is it due to the euphoria of pure improvisation? Without a doubt, it is improvisation that prevails here; but the question I spontaneously asked showed me that a prodigious architectural potential exists within such intoxicated improvisation, the potential for a complex, rich structure that would also be as perfectly calculated, calibrated, and premeditated as even the most exuber-

ant architectural fantasy of a cathedral was necessarily premeditated. Does such an architectural intention cause a novel to lose the charm of its liberty? Its quality of game? But just what is a game, actually? Every game is based on rules, and the stricter the rules, the more the game is a game. As opposed to the chess player, the artist invents his own rules for himself; so when he improvises without rules, he is no freer than when he invents his own system of rules.

Reconciling Rabelais's and Diderot's freedom with the demands of composition, though, presents the twentieth-century novelist with problems different from those that preoccupied Balzac or Dostoyevsky. For example: the third and last of the books that constitute Hermann Broch's novel *The Sleepwalkers* is a 'polyphonic' stream composed of five 'voices,' five entirely independent lines: neither a common action nor the same characters tie these lines together, and each has a completely different formal nature (A = novel, B = reportage, C = short story, D = poetry, E = essay). In the eighty-eight chapters of the book, these five lines alternate in this strange order: A-A-A-B-A-B-A-C-A-A-D-E-C-A-B-D-C-D-A-E-A-A-B-E-C-A-D-B-B-A-E-A-A-E-A-B-D-C-B-B-D-A-B-E-A-A-B-A-D-A-C-B-D-A-E-B-A-D-A-B-D-E-A-C-A-D-D-B-A-A-C-D-E-B-A-B-D-B-A-B-A-A-D-A-A-D-D-E.

What is it that led Broch to choose precisely this order rather than another? What made him take precisely line B in the fourth chapter and not C or D? Not the logic of the characters or of the action, for there is no action common to these five lines. He was guided by other criteria: by the charm that comes from surprising juxtaposition of the different forms (verse, narration, aphorisms, philosophical meditations); by the contrast of different emotions pervading the different chapters; by the variety of the chapters' lengths; finally, by the development of the same existential questions, reflected in the five lines as in five mirrors. For lack of a better term, let us call these criteria *musical* and conclude: the nineteenth century elaborated the art of composition, but our own century brought musicality to that art.

The Satanic Verses is constructed of three more or less independent lines: A: the lives of Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta, two present-day Indians who divide their time between Bombay and London; B: the Koranic story dealing with the origin of Islam; C: the villagers' trek towards Mecca across the sea they believe they will cross dry-footed and in which they drown.

The three lines are taken up in sequence in the novel's nine parts in the following order: A-B-A-C-A-B-A-C-A (incidentally: in music, a sequence of this kind is called a rondo: the main theme returns regularly, in alternation with several secondary themes).

This is the rhythm of the whole (I note parenthetically the approximate number of pages): A (90), B (40), A (80), C (40), A (120), B (40), A (80), C (40), A (40). It can be seen that the B and C parts are all the same length, which gives the whole a rhythmic regularity.

Line A takes up five sevenths of the novel's page total, and lines B and C one seventh each. This quantitative ratio results in the dominance of line A: the novel's center of gravity is located in the present-day lives of Farishta and Chamcha.

Nonetheless, even though B and C are subordinate lines, it is in them that the *aesthetic wager* of the novel is concentrated, for it is these B and C parts that enable Rushdie to get at the fundamental problem of all novels (that of an individual's, a character's, identity) in a new way that goes beyond the conventions of the psychological novel: Chamcha's and Farishta's personalities cannot be apprehended through a detailed description of their states of mind; their mystery lies in the cohabitation in their psyches of two civilisations, the Indian and the European; it lies in their roots, from which they have been torn but which, nevertheless, remain alive in them. Where is the rupture in these roots and how far down must one go to touch the wound? Looking into 'the well of the past' is not off the point; it aims directly at the heart of the matter: the existential rift in the two protagonists.

Just as Jacob is incomprehensible without Abraham (who, according to Mann, lived centuries before him), being merely his 'imitation and continuation,' Gibreel Farishta is incomprehensible without the Archangel Gibreel, without Mahound (Mohammed), incomprehensible even without the theocratic Islam of Khomeini or of that fanatical girl who leads the villagers to Mecca, or rather to death. They are all his own potentialities, which sleep within him and which he must battle for his own individuality. In this novel, there is no important question that can be examined without looking down the well of the past. What is good and what is evil? Who is the other's devil. Chamcha for Farishta or Farishta for Chamcha? Is it the devil or the angel that has inspired the pilgrimage of the villagers? Is their drowning a piteous disaster or the glorious journey to Paradise? Who can say? Who can know? And what if this unknowability of good and evil was the torment suffered by the founders of religions? Those terrible words of despair, Christ's unprecedented blasphemy, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?': do they not resound in the soul of every Christian? Mahound's doubt as he wonders who put those verses into his head, God or the devil: does it not conceal the uncertainty that is the ground of man's very existence?

In the Shadow of Great Principles

Starting with his *Midnight's Children*, which in its time (in 1980) stirred unanimous admiration, no one in the English-language literary world has denied that Rushdie is one of the most gifted novelists of our day. *The Satanic Verses*, appearing in English in September 1988, was greeted with the attention due a major writer. The book received these tributes with no anticipation of the storm that was to burst some months later, when the Imam Khomeini, the master of Iran, condemned Rushdie to death for blasphemy and sent killers after him on a chase whose end no one can predict.

That happened before the text could be translated. Thus everywhere except in the English-language world, the scandal arrived before the book. In France, the press immediately printed excerpts from the still unpublished novel to show the reasons for the condemnation. Completely normal behavior, but fatal for a novel. Represented exclusively by its *incriminated* passages, it was, from the beginning, transformed from a work of art into a simple *corpus delicti*.

We should not denigrate literary criticism. Nothing is worse for a writer than to come up against its absence. I am speaking of literary criticism as meditation, as analysis; literary criticism that involves several readings of the book it means to discuss (like great pieces of music we can listen to time and again, great novels too are made for repeated readings); literary criticism that, deaf to the implacable clock of topicality, will readily discuss works a year, thirty years, three hundred years old; literary criticism that tries to apprehend the originality of a work in order thus to inscribe it on historical memory. If such meditation did not accompany the history of the novel, we would know nothing today of Dostoyevsky, or Joyce, or Proust. For without it a work is surrendered to completely arbitrary judgments and swift oblivion. Now, the Rushdie case shows (if proof is still needed) that such meditation is no longer practiced. Imperceptibly, innocently, under the pressure of events, through changes in society and in the press, literary criticism has become a mere (often intelligent, always hasty) *literary news bulletin*.

About *The Satanic Verses*, the literary news was the death sentence on the author. In such a life-and-death situation, it seems almost frivolous to speak of art. What is art, after all, when great principles are under attack? Thus, throughout the world, all discussion concentrated on questions of principle: freedom of expression; the need to defend it (and indeed people did defend it, people protested, people signed petitions); religion; Islam and Christianity; but also this question: does a writer have the moral right

to blaspheme and thereby wound believers? And even this problem: suppose Rushdie had attacked Islam only for publicity and to sell his unreadable book?

With mysterious unanimity (I noticed the same reaction everywhere in the world), the men of letters, the intellectuals, the salon initiates, snubbed the novel. They decided to resist all commercial pressure for once, and they refused to read a work they considered simply a piece of sensationalism. They signed all the petitions for Rushdie, meanwhile deeming it elegant to say, with a supercilious smile: 'His book? Oh no, no, no! I haven't read it.' The politicians took advantage of this curious 'state of disgrace' of a novelist they didn't like. I'll never forget the virtuous impartiality they paraded at the time: 'We condemn Khomeini's verdict. Freedom of expression is sacred to us. But no less do we condemn this attack on religious faith. It is a shameful, contemptible attack that insults the soul of peoples.'

Of course, no one any longer doubted that Rushdie actually had *attacked* Islam, for only the accusation was real; the text of the book no longer mattered, it no longer existed.

The Clash of Three Eras

A situation unique in history: Rushdie belongs by origin to a Muslim society that, in large part, is still living in the period before the Modern Era. He wrote his book in Europe, in the Modern Era – or, more precisely, at the end of that era.

Just as Iranian Islam was at the time moving away from religious moderation toward a combative theocracy, so, with Rushdie, the history of the novel was moving from the genteel, professorial smile of Thomas Mann to unbridled imagination drawn from the rediscovered wellspring of Rabelaisian humor. The antitheses collided, each in its extreme form.

From this viewpoint, the condemnation of Rushdie can be seen not as a chance event, an aberration, but as the most profound conflict between two eras: theocracy goes to war against the Modern Era and targets its most representative creation: the novel. For Rushdie did not blaspheme. He did not attack Islam. He wrote a novel. But that, for the theocratic mind, is worse than an attack: if a religion is attacked (by a polemic, a blasphemy, a heresy), the guardians of the temple can easily defend it on their own ground, with their own language; but the novel is a different planet for them; a different universe based on a different ontology; an *infernum* where the unique truth is powerless and where satanic ambiguity turns every certainty into enigma.

Let us emphasize this: not attack but ambiguity. The second part of *The*

Satanic Verses (the incriminated part, which evokes Mohammed and the origin of Islam) is presented in the novel as a *dream* of Gibreel Farishta's, who then develops the dream into a cheap movie in which he himself will play the role of the archangel. The story is thus *doubly* relativized (first as a dream, then as a *bad* film that will flop) and presented not as a declaration but as a *playful invention*. A disagreeable invention? I say no: it showed me, for the first time in my life, the *poetry* of the Islamic religion, of the Islamic world.

We should stress this: there is no place for hatred in the relativistic universe of the novel: the author who writes a novel in order to settle scores (personal or ideological) is headed for total and certain aesthetic ruin. Ayesha, the girl who leads the hallucinating villagers to their deaths, is of course a monster, but she is also seductive, wondrous (haloed by the butterflies that accompany her everywhere), and often touching; even in the portrait of an émigré imam (an imaginary portrait of Khomeini), there is an almost respectful understanding; Western modernity is viewed with skepticism, never presented as superior to Oriental archaism; the novel 'historically and psychologically explores' sacred old texts, but it also shows how much they are *degraded* by TV, advertising, the entertainment industry; and the left-wing characters, who deplore the frivolity of this modern world – do they at least enjoy the author's full sympathy? No indeed, they are miserably ridiculous, and as frivolous as the frivolity around them; no one is right and no one entirely wrong in the immense *carnival of relativity* that is this work.

Therefore, with *The Satanic Verses*, the art of the novel as such is incriminated. That is why, in this whole sad story, the saddest thing is not Khomeini's verdict (which proceeds from a logic that is atrocious but consistent); rather, it is Europe's incapacity to defend and explain (explain patiently to itself and others) that most European of the arts, the art of the novel; in other words, to explain and defend its own culture. The 'children of the novel' have abandoned the art that shaped them. Europe, the 'society of the novel,' has abandoned its own self.

It does not surprise me that the Sorbonne theologians, the sixteenth-century ideological police who kindled so many stakes, should have made life so hard for Rabelais, forcing him often to flee and hide. What seems to me far more amazing and admirable is the protection provided him by the powerful men of his time, Cardinal du Bellay, for instance, and Cardinal Odet, and above all François I, the king of France. Were they seeking to defend principles? Freedom of expression? Human rights? They had a better motive: they loved literature and the arts.

I see no Cardinal du Bellay, no François I, in today's Europe. But is

Europe still Europe? Is it still 'the society of the novel'? In other words, is it still living in the Modern Era? Or is it already moving into another era, as yet unnamed, for which its arts are no longer of much importance? If that is so, why be surprised that Europe was not disturbed beyond measure when, for the first time in its history, the art of the novel – *Europe's* art par excellence – was condemned to death? In this new age, after the Modern Era, has not the novel for some time already been living on death row?

The European Novel

To define precisely the art I am discussing, I call it the *European novel*. By that I mean not only novels created in Europe by Europeans but novels that belong to a history that began with the dawn of the Modern Era in Europe. There are of course other novels, the novel of China, of Japan, the novel of ancient Greece, but they are not bound by any continuous evolutionary line to the historical enterprise that began with Rabelais and Cervantes.

I speak of the *European novel* not only to distinguish it from, say, the Chinese novel but also to point out that its history is transnational; that the French novel, the English novel, the Hungarian novel, are in no position to create autonomous histories of their own but are all part of a common, supranational history that provides the only context capable of revealing both the direction of the novel's evolution and the value of particular works.

At different phases of that evolution, different nations, as in a relay race, took the initiative: first Italy with Boccaccio, the great precursor; then France with Rabelais, and Spain with Cervantes and the picaresque novel; the English novel in the eighteenth century and then, toward the century's end, the German contribution, with Goethe; the nineteenth century, which belonged almost entirely to France, along with the Russian novel in the last third, and, immediately thereafter, the arrival of the Scandinavian novel. Then the twentieth century and its Central European adventure with Kafka, Musil, Broch, and Gombrowicz . . .

If Europe were only a single nation, I do not believe the history of its novel could have lasted with such vitality, such power, and such diversity for four centuries. It was the ever new historical situations (with their new existential content), arising in France, then in Russia, then elsewhere, and somewhere else again, that kept the art of the novel going, brought it new inspirations, suggested new aesthetic solutions. It is as if in the course of its journey the history of the novel kept waking the different parts of Europe, one after the other, confirming them in their specificity and at the same time integrating them into a common European consciousness.

In our own century, for the first time, the important initiatives in the history of the European novel are appearing outside Europe: first in North America, in the 1920s and '30s, and then, in the '60s, in Latin America. What with the pleasure provided me by the art of the French-speaking Antillean novelist Patrick Chamoiseau, and then by Rushdie's, I would prefer to speak more generally of the *novel from below the thirty-fifth parallel*, the *novel of the South*: a great new novelistic culture characterized by an extraordinary sense of the real coupled with an untrammelled imagination that breaks every rule of plausibility.

I am delighted by that imagination without understanding completely where it comes from. Kafka? Certainly. For our century, it is he who gave legitimacy to the implausible in the art of the novel. Yet the Kafkan imagination is different from Rushdie's or García Márquez's; that teeming imagination seems rooted in the very specific culture of the South; for example, in its still living oral literature (Chamoiseau drawing inspiration from the Creole storytellers) or, as Fuentes likes to recall, in the Latin American Baroque, more exuberant, more 'crazy,' than Europe's.

Or another key to that imagination: the *tropicalization of the novel*. I refer to Rushdie's fantasy: Farishta hovers above London and wishes to 'tropicalize' that hostile city. He lists the advantages of tropicalization: 'institution of a national siesta . . . new birds in the trees (macaws, peacocks, cockatoos), new trees under the birds (coco-palms, tamarind, banyans with hanging beards) . . . religious fervour, political ferment . . . friends to commence dropping in on one another without making appointments, closure of old folks' homes, emphasis on the extended family . . . spicier food. . . . Disadvantages: cholera, typhoid, legionnaires' disease, cockroaches, dust, noise, a culture of excess.'

('Culture of excess' is an excellent expression. The tendency of the novel in the last stages of its modernism: in Europe: the ordinary pursued to its utmost; sophisticated analysis of gray on gray; outside Europe: accumulation of the most extraordinary coincidences; colors on colors. The dangers: in Europe, tedium of gray; outside Europe, monotony of the picturesque.)

The novels created below the thirty-fifth parallel, though a bit foreign to European taste, are the extension of the history of the European novel, of its form and of its spirit, and are even astonishingly close to its earliest beginnings; nowhere else today does the old Rabelaisian sap run so joyfully as in the work of these non-European writers.

The Day Panurge No Longer Makes People Laugh

Which brings me back one last time to Panurge. In *Pantagruel*, he falls in love with a woman and is determined to have her at all costs. In church, during mass (isn't that a hell of a sacrilege!), he addresses her with some outrageous obscenities (in today's America, such 'verbal rape' would cost him dear) and, when she refuses to listen, takes his revenge by sprinkling her gown with the minced genitals of a bitch in heat. As she leaves the church, all the dogs roundabout (six hundred thousand and fourteen, says Rabelais) run up and piss on her. I remember living in a workers' dormitory when I was twenty, my Rabelais in Czech translation under my bed. The men were curious about this fat book, and time and again I had to read them the story, which they soon knew by heart. Even though these were people of a rather conservative peasant mentality, their laughter hadn't a trace of condemnation for that rhetorical and urinary harasser; they adored Panurge, so much so that they gave his name to one of our companions; no, not a womanizer, but a youngster known for his naïveté and his exaggerated chastity, who was ashamed to be seen naked in the shower. I can hear their cries as if it were yesterday: 'Panurk' – our Czech pronunciation of the name – 'get into the shower! Or we'll wash you down with dog piss!'

I can still hear that hearty laughter, making fun of a pal's modesty but at the same time showing an almost marveling affection for it. They were delighted by the obscenities Panurge addresses to the woman in church, but equally delighted by the punishment the woman's chastity inflicted on him and then, to their great pleasure, her own punishment by the dogs' urine. With what or whom did my erstwhile companions sympathize? With modesty? With immodesty? With Panurge? With the woman? Or with the dogs who had the enviable privilege of urinating on a beauty?

Humor, the divine flash that reveals the world in its moral ambiguity and man in his profound incompetence to judge others; humor: the intoxicating relativity of human things; the strange pleasure that comes of the certainty that there is no certainty.

But humor, to recall Octavio Paz, is 'the great invention of the modern spirit.' It has not been with us forever, and it won't be with us forever either.

With a heavy heart, I imagine the day when Panurge no longer makes people laugh.