

While reading this essay highlight Salman Rushdie's arguments FOR and AGAINST the idea that something might be "sacred" and beyond criticism. What might be sacred for the author? What is his final conclusion?

Salman Rushdie, "Is Nothing Sacred"

1990

I grew up kissing books and bread.

In our house, whenever anyone dropped a book or let fall a chapati or a "slice," which was our word for a triangle of buttered leavened bread, the fallen object was required not only to be picked up but also kissed, by way of apology for the act of clumsy disrespect. I was as careless and butter-fingered as any child and, accordingly, during my childhood years, I kissed a large number of "slices" and also my fair share of books.

Devout households in India often contained, and still contain, persons in the habit of kissing holy books. But we kissed everything. We kissed dictionaries and atlases. We kissed Enid Blyton novels and Superman comics. If I'd ever dropped the telephone directory I'd probably have kissed that, too.

All this happened before I had ever kissed a girl. In fact it would almost be true, true enough for a fiction writer, anyhow, to say that once I started kissing girls, my activities with regard to bread and books lost some of their special excitement. But one never forgets one's first loves.

Bread and books: food for the body and food for the soul - what could be more worthy of our respect, and even love?

It has always been a shock to me to meet people for whom books simply do not matter, and people who are scornful of the act of reading, **let alone** writing. **It is perhaps always astonishing to learn** that your beloved is not as attractive to others as she is to you. My most beloved books have been fictions, and in the last 12 months I have been obliged to accept that for many millions of human beings, these books are **entirely** without attraction or value.

We have been witnessing an attack upon the very idea of the novel form, an attack of such bewildering ferocity that it has become necessary to restate what is most precious about the art of literature - to answer the attack, not by an attack, but by a declaration of love.

Love can lead to devotion, but the devotion of the lover is unlike that of the True Believer in that it is not militant. I may be surprised - even shocked - to find that you do not feel as I do about a given book or work of art or even person; I may very well attempt to change your mind; but I will finally accept that your tastes, your loves, are your business and not mine. The True Believer knows no such restraints. The True Believer knows that he is simply right, and you are wrong. He will seek to convert you, even by force, and if he cannot he will, at the very least, despise you for your unbelief.

Love need not be blind. Faith must, ultimately, be a leap in the dark.

The title of this essay is a question usually asked, in tones of horror, when some personage or idea or value or place held dear by the questioner is treated to a dose of iconoclasm. White cricket balls for night cricket? Female priests? A Japanese takeover of Rolls-Royce cars? Is **nothing sacred**?

Until recently, however, it was a question to which I thought I knew the answer. The answer was No.

Does the author believe in God? What does he say about people who believe?

No, **nothing** is **sacred** in and of itself, I would have said. Ideas, texts, even people can be made **sacred** - the word is from the Latin *sacrare*, "to set apart as holy" - but even though such entities, once their sacredness is established, seek to proclaim and to preserve their own absoluteness, their inviolability, the act of making **sacred** is in truth an event in history. It is the product of the many and complex pressures of the time in which the act occurs. And events in history must always be subject to questioning, deconstruction, even to declarations of their obsolescence. To revere the **sacred** unquestioningly is to be paralyzed by it. The idea of the **sacred** is quite simply one of the most conservative notions in any culture, because it seeks to turn other ideas Uncertainty, Progress, Change - into crimes.

To take only one such declaration of obsolescence: I would have described myself as living in the aftermath of the death of god. On the subject of the death of god, the American novelist and critic William H. Gass had this to say, as recently as 1984: The death of god represents not only the realization that gods have never existed, but the contention that such a belief is no longer even irrationally possible; that neither reason nor the taste and temper of the times condones it. The belief lingers on, of course, but it does so like astrology or a faith in a flat earth.

I have some difficulty with the uncompromising bluntness of this obituary notice. It has always been clear to me that god is unlike human beings in that it can die, so to speak, in parts. In other parts, for example India, god continues to flourish, in literally thousands of forms. So that if I speak of living after this death, I am speaking in a limited, personal sense - my sense of god ceased to exist long ago, and as a result I was drawn toward the great creative possibilities offered by surrealism, modernism and their successor, those philosophies and aesthetics born of the realization that, as Karl Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air."

It did not seem to me, however, that my ungodliness, or rather my post-godliness, need necessarily bring me into conflict with belief. Indeed, one reason for my attempt to develop a form of fiction in which the miraculous might coexist with the mundane was precisely my acceptance that notions of the **sacred** and the profane both needed to be explored, as far as possible without prejudice, in any honest literary portrait of the way we are.

That is to say: The most secular of authors **ought to** be capable of presenting a sympathetic portrait of a devout believer. **Or, to put it another way:** I had never felt the need to totemize my lack of belief, and so make it something to go to war about. Now, however, I find my entire world-picture under fire. And as I find myself **obliged to** defend the assumptions and processes of literature, which I had believed that all free men and women could **take for granted**, and for which all unfree men and women continue every day to struggle, so I am obliged to ask myself questions I admit to finding somewhat unnerving.

Do I, perhaps, find something **sacred** after all? Am I prepared to set aside as holy the idea of the absolute freedom of the imagination and alongside it my own notions of the world, the Text and the Good? Does this add up to what the apologists of religion have started calling "secular fundamentalism"? And if so, must I accept that this "secular fundamentalism" is as likely to lead to excesses, abuses and oppressions as the canons of religious faith?

Herbert Read, one of the leading British advocates of the modernist and surrealist movements, was a distinguished representative of the cultural values closest to my heart. "Art is never transfixed," Read wrote. "Change is the condition of art remaining art." This principle is also mine. Art, too, is an event in history, subject to the historical process. But it is also *about* that process, and must constantly **strive to** find new forms to mirror an endlessly renewed world. No aesthetic can be constant, except an

Why do the two tribes of monkeys not fight with each other?

aesthetic based on the idea of inconstancy, metamorphosis, or, to borrow a term from politics, "perpetual revolution."

More than twenty years ago, I listened to a lecture by Arthur Koestler. He propounded the thesis that language, not territory, was the prime cause of aggression, because once language reached the level of sophistication at which it could express abstract concepts, it acquired the power of totemization; and once peoples had erected totems, they would go to war to defend them. (I ask pardon of Koestler's ghost. I am relying on an old memory, and that's an untrustworthy shoulder to lean on.) In support of his theory, he told us about two tribes of monkeys living on, I think, one of the northern islands of Japan. The two tribes lived in close proximity in the woods near a certain stream, and subsisted, not unusually, on a diet of bananas. One of the tribes, however, had developed the curious habit of washing its bananas in the stream before eating them, while the other tribe continued to be non-banana-washers. And yet, said Koestler, the two tribes continued to live contentedly as neighbors, without quarrelling. And why was this? It was because their language was too primitive to permit them to totemize either the act of banana-washing or that of eating bananas unwashed. With a more **sophisticated** language **at their disposal**, both wet and dry bananas could have become the **sacred** objects at the heart of a religion, and then, look out! - Holy war.

A young man rose from the audience to ask Koestler a question. Perhaps the real reason why the two tribes did not fight, he suggested, was that there were enough bananas to go round. Koestler became extremely angry. He refused to answer such a piece of Marxist claptrap. And, in a way, he was right. Koestler and his questioner were speaking different languages, and their languages were in conflict. Their disagreement could even be seen as the proof of Koestler's point. If he, Koestler, were to be considered the banana-washer and his questioner the dry-banana man, then their command of a language more complex than the Japanese monkeys' had indeed resulted in totemizations. Now each of them had a totem to defend: the primacy of language versus the primacy of economics; and dialogue therefore became impossible. They were at war.

Between religion and literature, as between politics and literature, there is a linguistically based dispute. But it is not a dispute of simple opposites. Because whereas religion seeks to privilege one language above all others, one set of values above all others, one text above all others, the novel has always been *about* the way in which different languages, values and narratives quarrel, and about the shifting relations between them, which are relations of power. The novel does not seek to establish a privileged language, but **it insists upon** the freedom to portray and analyze the struggle between the different contestants for such privileges.

Carlos Fuentes has called the novel "a privileged *arena*." By this he does not mean that it is the kind of holy space which one must put off one's shoes to enter; it is not an arena to revere; it claims no special rights *except the right to be the stage upon which the great debates of society can be conducted*. "The novel," Fuentes writes, "is born from the very fact that we do not understand one another, because unitary, orthodox language has broken down. Quixote and Sancho, the Shandy brothers, Mr. and Mrs. Karenin: their novels are the comedy (or the drama) of their misunderstanding. Impose a unitary language: you kill the novel, but you also kill the society."

He then poses the question I have been asking myself throughout my life as a writer: *Can the religious mentality survive outside of religious dogma and hierarchy?* Which is to say: Can art be the third principle that mediates between the material and spiritual

In what way is religious belief different from literature?

worlds; might it, by "swallowing" both worlds, offer us something new - something that might even be called a secular definition of transcendence?

I believe it can. I believe it must. And I believe that, at its best, it does.

What I mean by transcendence is that flight of the human spirit outside the confines of its material, physical existence which all of us, secular or religious, experience on at least a few occasions. Birth is a moment of transcendence which we spend our lives trying to understand. The exaltation of the act of love, the experience of joy and very possibly the moment of death are other such moments. The soaring quality of transcendence, the sense of being more than oneself, of being in some way joined to the whole of life, is by its nature short-lived. Not even the visionary or mystical experience ever lasts very long. It is for art to capture that experience, to offer it to, in the case of literature, its readers; to be, for a secular, materialist culture, some sort of replacement for what the love of god offers in the world of faith.

It is important that we understand how profoundly we all felt the needs that religion, down the ages, has satisfied. I would suggest that these needs are of three types: firstly, the need to be given an articulation of our half-glimpsed knowledge of exaltation, of awe, of wonder; life is an awesome experience, and religion helps us understand why life so often makes us feel small, by telling us what we are *smaller than*; and, contrariwise, because we also have a sense of being special, of being *chosen*, religion helps us by telling us what we have been chosen by, and what for. Secondly, we need answers to the unanswerable: how did we get here? How did "here" get here in the first place? Is this, this brief life all there is? How can *it* be? What would be the point of that? And, thirdly, we need codes to live by, "rules for every damn thing." The idea of god is at once a repository for our awestruck wonderment at life and an answer to the great questions of existence, and a rulebook, too. The soul needs all these explanations - not simply rational explanations, but explanations of the heart.

It is also important to understand how often the language of secular, rationalist materialism has failed to answer these needs. As we witness the death of communism in Central Europe, we cannot fail to observe the deep religious spirit with which so many of the makers of these revolutions are imbued, and we must concede that it is not only a particular political ideology that has failed, but the idea that men and women could ever define themselves in *terms* that exclude their spiritual needs.

It seems obvious, but relevant, to point out that in all the countries now moving toward freedom, art was repressed as viciously as was religion. That the Czech revolution began in the theaters and was led by a writer is proof that people's spiritual needs, more than their material needs, have driven the commissars from power.

What appears plain is that it will be a very long time before the peoples of Europe will accept any ideology that claims to have a complete, totalized explanation of the world. Religious faith, profound as it is, must surely remain a private matter. This rejection of totalized explanations is the modern condition. And this is where the novel, the form created to discuss the fragmentation of truth, comes in. The film director Luis Bunuel used to say: "I would give my life for a man who is looking for the truth. But I would gladly kill a man who thinks he has found the truth." (This is what we used to call a joke, before killing *people* for their ideas returned to the agenda.) The elevation of the quest for the Grail over the Grail itself, the acceptance that all that is solid *has* melted into air, that reality and morality are not givens but imperfect human constructs, is the point from which fiction begins. This is what Jean François Lyotard called, in 1979, *La Condition Postmoderne*. The challenge of literature is to start from this point, and still find a way of fulfilling our unaltered spiritual requirements.

Explain the above quote. What is the difference between looking for the truth and having found it?

Moby Dick meets that challenge by offering us a dark, almost Manichaean vision of a universe (the *Pequod*) in the grip of one demon, Ahab, and heading inexorably toward another; namely the Whale. The ocean always was our Other, manifesting itself to us in the form of beasts - the worm Ouroboros, Kraken, Leviathan. Herman Melville delves into these dark waters in order to offer us a very modern parable: Ahab, gripped by his possession, perishes; Ishmael, a man without strong feeling or powerful affiliations, survives. The self-interested modern man is the sole survivor; those who worship the whale - for pursuit is a form of worship - perish by the whale.

In a very different way, Italo Calvino meets the challenge as well. His trilogy *Our Ancestors*, which he called an attempt to provide a family tree for modern man, offers us three bizarre and comical exemplary figures. There is the cloven viscount, bisected on a medieval battlefield, whose two halves live on, the one impossibly evil, the other improbably good, and both of them utterly insufferable. Only when they are rejoined, when good and evil blend and create a human being, is the viscount fit for human society again. And there is the Baron in the Trees, the ultimate rebel, who rejects the patriarchal command to eat a bowl of revolting snail soup and takes to the trees for the rest of his days. And finally there is the Non-Existent Knight, an empty suit of armour that keeps itself going by will-power and by total, unswerving adherence to the laws of chivalry. It becomes one of the more illustrious *chevaliers* in the army of Charlemagne. These three fables, about the inseparability of good and evil, about the consequences and importance of refusing what one finds revolting - snail soup or tyranny - and about a (literally) hollow being sustained only by a stultifying quasi-religious code, offer us dreams of ourselves, maps of our inner natures. No less effectively, but much less prescriptively than any holy text, they show us who we are.

Joyce's wanderers, Beckett's tramps, Gogol's tricksters, Bulgakov's devils, Bellow's high-energy meditations on the stifling of the soul by the triumphs of materialism; these, and many more, are what we have instead of prophets and suffering saints. But while the novel answers our need for wonderment and understanding, it brings us harsh and unpalatable news as well.

It tells us there are no rules; it hands down no commandments. We have to make up our own rules as best we can, make them up as we go along.

And it tells us there are no answers; or, rather, it tells us that answers are easier to come by, and less reliable, than questions. If religion is an answer, if political ideology is an answer, then literature is an inquiry; great literature, by asking extraordinary questions, opens new doors in our minds.

Richard Rorty, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, insists on the importance of historicity, of giving up the illusions of being in contact with Eternity. For him, the great error is what he calls "foundationalism," which the theologian Don Cupitt, commenting on Rorty, calls "the attempt, as old as (and even much older than) Plato, to give permanence and authority to our knowledge and values by purporting to found them in some unchanging cosmic realm, natural or noumenal, outside the flux of our human conversation." It is better, Cupitt concludes, "to be an adaptable pragmatist, a nomad."

Michel Foucault, also a confirmed historicist, discusses the role of the author in challenging sacralized absolutes in his essay, "What is an Author?" This essay argues, in part, that "texts, books and discourses really began to have authors ... to the extent that authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses could be transgressive." This is an extraordinary, provocative idea, even if it is stated with Foucault's characteristic airiness and a complete absence of supporting evidence: *that authors were named only when it was necessary to find somebody to blame*. Foucault continues:

What is the difference between literature and religion?

In our culture (and doubtless in many others), discourse was not originally a product, a thing, a kind of goods; it was essentially an act - an act placed in the bipolar field of the **sacred** and the profane, the licit and the illicit, the religious and the blasphemous. Historically it was a gesture fraught with risks ...

In our beginnings we find our essences. To understand a religion, look at its earliest moments. (It is regrettable that Islam, of all religions the easiest to study in this way, because of its birth during the age of recorded history, has set its face so resolutely against the idea that it, like all ideas, is an event inside history.) And to understand an artistic form, too, Foucault suggests, look at its origins. If he is right about the novel, then literature is, of all the arts, the one best suited to challenging absolutes of all kinds; and, because it is in its origin the schismatic Other of the **sacred** (and authorless) text, so it is also the art most likely to fill our god-shaped holes.

There are other reasons, too, for proposing the novel as the crucial art form of what I can no longer avoid calling the post-Modern Age. For one thing, literature is the art less subject to external control, because it is made in private. The act of making it requires only one person, one pen, one room, some paper. (Even the room is not absolutely essential.) Literature is the most low-technology of the art forms. It requires neither a stage nor a screen. It calls for no interpreters, no actors, producers, camera crews, Costumers, musicians. It does not even require the traditional apparatus of publishing, as the long-running success of samizdat literature demonstrates. The Foucault essay suggests that literature is as much at risk from the enveloping, smothering forces of the market economy, which reduces books to mere products. This danger is real, and I do not want to seem to be minimizing it. But the truth is that of all the forms, literature can still be the most free. The more money a piece of work costs, the easier it is to control. Film, the most expensive of art forms, is also the least subversive. This is why, although Carlos Fuentes cites the work of film-makers like Bunuel, Bergman and Fellini as instances of successful secular revolts into the territory of the **sacred**, I continue to believe in the greater possibilities of the novel. Its singularity is its best protection.

Among the childhood books I devoured and kissed were large numbers of cheap comics of a most unliterary nature. The heroes of these comic books were, or so it seemed, almost always mutants or hybrids or freaks: As well as the Batman and the Spiderman there was Aquaman, who was half-fish, and of course Superman, who could easily be mistaken for a bird or a plane. In those days, the middle 1950s, the super-heroes were all, in their various ways, hawkish law-and-order conservatives, leaping to work in response to the Police Commissioner's Bat-Signal, banding together what Superman called "truth, justice and the American way." **But in spite of** this extreme emphasis on crime-busting, the lesson they taught children - or this child, at any rate - was the perhaps unintentionally radical truth that exceptionality was the greatest and most heroic of values; that those who were unlike the crowd were to be treasured the most lovingly; and that this exceptionality was a treasure so great and so easily misunderstood that it had to be concealed, in ordinary life, beneath what the comic books called a "secret identity." Superman could not have survived without "mild-mannered" Clark Kent; "millionaire socialite" Bruce Wayne made possible the nocturnal activities of the Batman.

Why is literature the most independent and free form of art? What role does the reader play?

Now it is obviously true that those other freakish, hybrid, mutant, exceptional beings - novelists - those creators of the most freakish, hybrid and metamorphic of forms, the novel, have frequently been obliged to hide behind secret identities, whether for reasons of gender or terror. But the most wonderful of the many wonderful truths about the novel form is that the greater the writer, the greater his or her exceptionality. The geniuses of the novel are those whose voices are fully and undisguisably their own, who, to borrow William Gass's image, sign *every word they write*. What draws us to an author is his or her

"unlikeliness," even if the apparatus of literary criticism then sets to work to demonstrate that he or she is really no more than an accumulation of influences.

Unlikeness, the thing that makes it impossible for a writer to stand in any regimented line, is a quality novelists share with the Caped Crusaders of the comics, though they are only rarely capable of leaping tall buildings in a single stride.

What is more, the writer is there, in all his work, in the reader's hands, utterly exposed, utterly defenseless, entirely without the benefit of an alter ego to hide behind. What is forged, in the secret act of reading, is a different kind of identity, as the reader and writer merge, through the medium of the text, to become a collective being that both writes as it reads and reads as it writes, and creates, jointly, that unique work, "their" novel. This "secret identity" of writer and reader is the novel form's greatest and most subversive gift.

And this, finally, is why I elevate the novel above other forms, why it has always been, and remains, my first love: not only is it the art involving least compromises, but it is also the only one that takes the "privileged arena" of conflicting discourses *right inside our heads*. The interior space of our imagination is a theater that can never be closed down; the images created there make up a movie that can never be destroyed.

In this last decade of the millennium, as the forces of religion are renewed in strength and as the all-pervasive power of materialism wraps its own weighty chains around the human spirit, where should the novel be looking? It seems clear that the revival of the old, bipolar field of discourse, between the **sacred** and the profane, which Michel Foucault proposes, will be of central importance. It seems probably, too, that we may be heading toward a world in which there will be no real alternative to the liberal-capitalist social model, except, perhaps, the theocratic, foundationalist model of Islam. In this situation, liberal capitalism or democracy or the free world will require novelists' most rigorous attention, will require re-imagining and questioning and doubting as never before. "Our antagonist is our helper," said Edmund Burke, and if democracy no longer has communism to help it clarify, by opposition, its own ideas, then perhaps it will have to have literature as an adversary instead.

I have made a large number of sweeping claims for literature, and **I am aware of** a slightly messianic tone in much of what I've written. The reverencing of books and writers, by writers, is **nothing** particularly new, of course. "Since the early 19th century," writes Cupitt, "imaginative writers have claimed - have indeed enjoyed - a guiding and representative role in our culture. Our preachers are novelists, poets, dramatists, filmmakers and the like, purveyors of fiction, ambiguous people, deceivers. Yet we continue to think of ourselves as rational."

But now I find myself backing away from the idea of sacralizing literature with which I flirted at the beginning of this text; I cannot bear the idea of the writer as secular prophet; I am remembering that one of the very greatest writers of the century, Samuel Beckett, believed that all art must inevitably end in failure. This is, clearly, no reason for surrender. "Ever tried. Ever failed. Never mind. Try again. Fail better."

Literature is an interim report from the consciousness of the artist, and so it can never be "finished" or "perfect." Literature is made at the frontier between the self and the world, and in the act of creation that frontier softens, becomes permeable, allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist to flow into the world. **Nothing** so inexact, so easily and frequently misconceived, deserves the protection of being declared sacrosanct. We shall just have to get along without the shield of sacralization, and a good thing, too. We must not become what we oppose.

The only privilege literature deserves - and this privilege it requires in order to exist - is the privilege of being the arena of discourse, the place where the struggle of languages can be acted out.

Imagine this. You wake up one morning and find yourself in a large, rambling house. As you wander through it you realize it is so enormous that you will never know it all. In the house are people you know, family members, friends, lovers, colleagues; also many strangers. The house is full of activity: conflicts and seductions, celebrations and wakes. At some point you realize there is no way out. You find that you can accept this. The house is not what you'd have chosen, it's in fairly bad condition, the corridors are often full of bullies, but it will have to do. Then one day you enter an unimportant-looking little room. The room is empty, but there are voices in it, voices that seem to be whispering just to you. You recognize some of the voices, others are completely unknown to you. The voices are talking about the house, about everyone in it, about everything that is happening and has happened and should happen. Some of them speak exclusively in obscenities. Some are bitchy. Some are loving. Some are funny. Some are sad. The most interesting voices are all these things at once. You begin to go to the room more and more often. Slowly you realize that most of the people in the house use such rooms sometimes. Yet the rooms are all discreetly positioned and unimportant-looking.

Now imagine that you wake up one morning and you are still in the large house, but all the voice-rooms have disappeared. It is as if they have been wiped out. Now there is nowhere in the whole house where you can go to hear voices talking about everything in every possible way. There is nowhere to go for the voices that can be funny one minute and sad the next, that can sound raucous and melodic in the course of the same sentence. Now you remember: There is no way out of this house. Now this fact begins to seem unbearable. You look into the eyes of the people in the corridors - family, lovers, friends, colleagues, strangers, bullies, priests. You see the same thing in everybody's eyes. How do we get out of here? It becomes clear that the house is a prison. People begin to scream, and pound the walls. Men arrive with guns. The house begins to shake. You do not wake up. You are already awake.

Literature is the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear *voices talking about everything in every possible way*. The reason for ensuring that that privileged arena is preserved is not that writers want the absolute freedom to say and do whatever they please. It is that we, all of us, readers and writers and citizens and generals and godmen, need that little, unimportant-looking room. We do not need to call it **sacred**, but we do need to remember that it is necessary.

"Everybody knows," wrote Saul Bellow in *The Adventures of Augie March*, "there is no fineness or accuracy of suppression. If you hold down one thing, you hold down the adjoining."

Wherever in the world the little room of literature has been closed, sooner or later the walls have come tumbling down.

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What are "voice rooms" and why are they important?

What is the author's final argument against censorship?