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► **To cite this version:**

Cécile Girardin. Heir to the Enlightenment: Memorial Writing and Commitment in Joseph Anton, by Salman Rushdie. *Études britanniques contemporaines - Revue de la Société d'études anglaises contemporaines*, 2016, 50. hal-04613189

**HAL Id: hal-04613189**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04613189>**

Submitted on 18 Jun 2024

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# Études britanniques contemporaines

Revue de la Société d'études anglaises contemporaines

50 | 2016

L'Engagement

Commitment

Commitment to Otherness

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## Heir to the Enlightenment: Memorial Writing and Commitment in *Joseph Anton*, by Salman Rushdie

*Héritier des Lumières : Écriture mémorielle et engagement dans Joseph Anton, de Salman Rushdie*

CÉCILE GIRARDIN

<https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.3153>

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### Résumés

Français English

Dans ses mémoires publiées en 2012, *Joseph Anton*, Salman Rushdie livre un compte-rendu de la période située entre 1988 et 2002, alors qu'il était l'écrivain le plus recherché au monde. Cet article étudie le projet historiographique au cœur du texte de Rushdie, et révèle ainsi son statut ambigu, dans sa volonté incessante de reprendre ses droits sur sa propre histoire personnelle. En outre, les mémoires témoignent du sens profond de l'engagement: elles sont construites sur le passage de la théorie à la pratique de l'engagement politique pour un artiste, et proposent ainsi une réflexion sur les conditions même de l'action publique au nom d'idéaux dans la politique internationale contemporaine.

In his 2012 memoir, *Joseph Anton*, Salman Rushdie provides a third-person account of the period between 1988 and 2002, when he was the most wanted writer on earth. This article purports to study the historiographical project at the heart of Rushdie's text, revealing its ambiguities as he tries to reclaim his own personal story. Furthermore, the memoir bears testimony to the very meaning of commitment: it considers the passage from the theory to the practice of political commitment for an artist, thus interrogating the conditions of public action in the name of ideas in contemporary world affairs.



## Entrées d'index

**Mots-clés :** Salman Rushdie, Joseph Anton, Mémoires, Fatwa, Histoire, Islam, Lumières, Engagement, Liberté d'expression, Censure

**Keywords:** Salman Rushdie, Joseph Anton, Memoire, Fatwa, History, Islam, Enlightenment, Commitment, Freedom of speech, Censorship

## Texte intégral

- 1 Midway through his memoir, *Joseph Anton*, Salman Rushdie identifies the precise moment when he decided 'to lead the campaign against the fatwa' (398) and to defend himself, because, he explains, '[a]n invisible, silent man was an empty space into which others could pour their prejudices, their agendas, their wrath. The fight against fanaticism needed visible faces, audible voices. He would be quiet no longer. He would try to become a loud and visible man' (340). This passage is a turning point in the story of his life as a fugitive: from then on, he proceeds to reclaim lost territory and to become the protagonist of his life, tired of being a 'football' or a 'pawn' in 'someone else's game' (390) 'kicked from end to end' (241). This declaration of intent to engage in a war, both intimate and collective, points to the challenge of actual politics for an artist. The dire situation imposed by the death sentence seems to test his very vocation as a committed writer: as he becomes the most wanted man on earth, the postcolonial writer who had always claimed to be an heir to Voltaire and Swift is asked to turn his ideals into a way of life. Committing himself in acts, rather than relying on the metaphorical feuds he had always been used to, can be regarded as his personal moment of heroism, his *kairos*. Realizing, step by step, that language in itself is of no help,<sup>1</sup> Rushdie proposes in his memoir a study on commitment and its inherent paradoxes, the protagonist being continually at grips with restraint, silence and hiding.
- 2 This article purports to analyze the ways in which memoir-writing unveils the modalities of real-life commitment for a prominent writer whose literary work and life have been closely scrutinized for several decades. First, the memorial project of self-justification calls for a reading of *Joseph Anton* as historiographical work, in order to address the moral questions of legitimacy and truth-telling at the core of commitment; second, the article will attempt to assess the values and principles guiding commitment according to Rushdie, by considering the recurring references to the Enlightenment, a period often fantasized as the golden age of committed literature.
- 3 The title of the book, *Joseph Anton, A Memoir*, refers to the code name he was asked to coin by the authorities in charge of protecting him during the thirteen-year period that followed the decision of the Ayatollah Khomeiny of Iran to issue a *fatwa* against him in February 1989. This pseudonym is composed of the first names of Conrad and Chekov, two writers Rushdie views as literary role models. Written in the third person, the 650-page memoir purports to deliver the ultimate history of what really befell the main protagonist and victim of the infamous *fatwa*; it minutely unveils his version of what happened during the period between 1988 and 2002, when, in the midst of major geopolitical upheavals, his case became the epitome of the new world order to come. The volume thus conjures up the retrospective war fought inch by inch in order to bring into light, not only a personal story that had been caricatured by the news coverage, but also a supposedly *right* version of history. Writing this story from the point of view of the victim amounts to an ambitious historiographical project, comparable to the memoirs of eminent diplomats or military heroes. Incidentally, it recalls the war memoirs of illustrious ancestors like Julius Caesar and Charles de Gaulle, who also wrote in the third person, thereby reinforcing their status as legendary heroes. Memorial writing relies on the proven intimacy between writer and history, which gives an individual life public significance, and the *fatwa* against Rushdie is indeed an important event of the late Cold War that triggered diplomatic, political and cultural consequences beyond the Anglo-Iranian zone. What strikes the reader from the outset



is the newness of Rushdie's enterprise in *Joseph Anton*: never had memoirs written by victims of totalitarian regimes been globally mediatized;<sup>2</sup> never had major political tensions between nation-states been triggered by the sole work of writers or artists, a case that makes the victim's testimony unique.

4 Moreover, the status of *Joseph Anton* as memoir remains ambiguous and puts into question the reliability of the narrator in a project that is as much political as it is aesthetic. Rushdie writes history by relying on a solid experience in the field: his scholarly knowledge of the historical context, on the one hand, and his story-telling skills, on the other, endow the text with captivating virtuosity. The characters, albeit real,<sup>3</sup> are sometimes treated as characters in a novel,<sup>4</sup> and history is woven into the text as it is in his great postmodernist novels.<sup>5</sup> Rushdie explains that he had initially tried to write a fictional autobiography, in vain. He had meant to write '[a] hallucinatory portrait of a man whose picture of the world had been broken,' but abandoned the idea, because '[t]he only reason his story was interesting was that it had actually happened. It wouldn't be interesting if it wasn't true' (340-1). Thus the one, significant difference with memoirs written by world leaders lies in the acute awareness of literary style, which turns the text into another piece of his literary opus. Rushdie recreates the conditions of novel-writing through his style, his unmistakable voice and the narrator's authoritarian manhandling of his protagonist's life. Having access to no contradictory source, the reader is lulled by the voice of the author—charming, controlling, funny, knowledgeable. Moreover, the narrator gets the upper hand when Joseph Anton, whose identity was kept secret throughout his short life, dies shortly before the end of the text. It is as if the author, Salman Rushdie, was throwing away the only key left to his alias's secrets and was reclaiming his stolen identity at last: 'Mr Joseph Anton, international publisher of American origin, passed away unmourned on the day that Salman Rushdie, novelist of Indian origin, surfaced from his long underground years and took up part time residence in Notting Hill. Mr Rushdie celebrated the moment, even if nobody else did' (610). This playful staging of his death is in keeping with a typical Rushdiean plot, where characters, often the victims of their evil doubles or of their metamorphic identities, die and reappear at will in carnivalesque settings.<sup>6</sup> Rushdie's decision not to fictionalise his life story is recurrently challenged by the author's obsessive playfulness and fantasy. His alias is his creation: reclaimed from history, Joseph Anton is set in a mock-detective story, where Rushdie's genius can thrive, thanks to his gift for comedy. The existence of another character provides room for creativity and amounts to a strategic staging of Rushdie's heroism: with his alias, he can pretend not to fall in the trap of writing a panegyric; nonetheless, Joseph Anton, being subjected to life-threatening danger, is endowed with a certain degree of heroism, however tempered with irony (for example, when he has to hide under the kitchen sink to avoid being seen).

5 According to Jean-Louis Jeannelle, the theoretician of memoir-writing, a memoir, contrary to autobiography, the goal of which is self-knowledge through introspection, aims at eliciting the agreement of a community and of future generations about the historical and moral exemplarity of its author's life (332). The choice to write in the name of someone other than himself—not quite different but not the same—reinforces such a project, and places the narration on a double level, memoir and history. The memoir is not only the story of an individual but also of a community, in which he stands as a character among others. A memoir is 'a form of discourse addressed to the public opinion by an individual willing to plead his case and to prove the relevance of the course of a life' (Jeannelle 329).<sup>7</sup> As such, memorial writing is, almost naturally, *committed*, considering that commitment is the point where the individual and the collective connect, where the individual decides to translate into acts, for others than himself, a choice that s/he had initially made for him/herself.<sup>8</sup> The moral imperative of this form of commitment lies at the core of the volume, framed as it is in order to excavate truth pertaining to the life of a community at a given time: above all, he wants to warn others of an existing danger, to reconsider how things really happened and to explain how 9/11 was made possible. To do so, he engages in a rhetorical battle that

consists in reclaiming his name, his identity as a writer, his history, his image, his writing, and even his country of origin, India, where he was forbidden to travel for several years. Reclamation is a key word in the memoir,<sup>9</sup> and historiographical reclaiming sometimes takes the form of a battle between good and evil, when the self-righteous protagonist tries to correct the mistakes of the past. For example, on a visit to Austria where his friend André Heller was staging the 'Freedom Festival' at the Heldenplatz, the very place where in 1938 Adolf Hitler had announced the Anschluss of Austria, he claims: 'To hold an anti Nazi rally in that same place was to perform an act of reclamation, cleansing the Heldenplatz of the stain of the Nazi memory and by doing so to strike a blow against the rising neo-Nazism of the present' (451). More to the point, the memoir attempts to track down the lies upon which his so-called case thrived; in particular, the text debunks the news coverage that was made of the Rushdie affair by focusing on the true meaning of words:

At the CBS offices he was the big news story of the day. People in the newsroom and on various monitors were already using the word that would soon be hung around his neck like a millstone. They used the word as if it were a synonym for 'death sentence' and he wanted to argue, pedantically, that that was not what the word meant. But from this day forward it would mean that for most people in the world. And for him. *Fatwa*. (4-5)

- <sup>6</sup> He describes the quick and irreversible process whereby an entirely new notion for the general public in the West—a *fatwa*, which is an Islamic religious decree issued by the ulama—is being learnt, domesticated, and misused, becoming a shortcut for a barbaric death sentence. This is one of the first instances of the globalization of culture and politics, whereby a foreign state purports to carry out a death sentence outside of its borders while introducing significant changes in the lexicon used in the global media.<sup>10</sup> The fury over *The Satanic Verses* was made possible by a variety of linguistic shortcuts which the media in the West failed to revise. In Muslim countries, slogans helped to unite crowds and the key word 'satan' was everywhere to be seen: in the riots that CNN would stage live, he was 'Satan Rushdy,' 'the horned creature on the placards carried by demonstrators down the streets of a faraway city, the hanged man with protruding red tongue in the crude cartoons they bore' (5), and his book was elliptically titled 'Satanic Verses,' that is to say 'verses that were satanic' (5). Focusing on language helps Rushdie to rehabilitate truth, by introducing some degree of complexity in the representation of reality.<sup>11</sup>
- <sup>7</sup> To face his judges, Rushdie chooses to portray his alias as a man guided by values and principles inherited from the Enlightenment. The overall structure of the memoir is straightforward: the order is chronological, with an emphasis on the idea that the *fatwa* was only the first building block of the bigger, more organised structure of Muslim fanaticism, which culminated on September 11, 2001. The years 2001 and 2002 coincide with the final period covered by the memoir, presented as the beginning of a new era in which the intellectual-writer needs to take up arms to uphold the liberal values of the Enlightenment. Throughout the memoir, the *fatwa* is compared to the annunciatory bird of the flock's full-fledged lethal attack, and Hitchcock's thriller looms as multifaceted reference: generic, with the narrative structured around suspenseful episodes; metaphoric, with the symbolism of winged creatures explored extensively;<sup>12</sup> hermeneutic, with the *fatwa* as the first bird, the premonitory sign of a new world order that could not be ignored in a relevant interpretation of history. He summarises his uneasy position in grandiloquent terms: 'Before anyone else was interested in the ornithology of terror he saw the gathering birds. He would be a Cassandra for his own time, cursed to be unheard, or if listened to then blamed for what he pointed at' (341).
- <sup>8</sup> In the ten parts that make up the volume the author strives to define his various, changing positions as victim, culprit, icon, hero, spokesperson, freedom of speech's knight, but also as a man caught up with despair and metaphysical questions in the storm of history. The memoir, carefully crafted on the double layer of the public and the intimate, highlights the force of circumstance. The beginning of the text masterfully



orchestrates the extremely diverse elements that made up the fatal cocktail of the 'Rushdie Affair,' from the genesis of the *Satanic Verses* to the explosion of violence in the years 1989 and 1990. He focuses on his passion for the history of Islam, on his family background—particularly his atheist father who was nonetheless a specialist of Islam—his fascination for the Enlightenment as well as for British politics, which is the other topic of *The Satanic Verses*. He devotes pages to foreign affairs, to the geopolitical position of Iran, to the war between Iraq and Iran, to the political situation in Pakistan and India in the 1980s, thus demonstrating his grasp of world affairs. In this sense, *Joseph Anton* is a peculiar archive to assess the year 1989 as turning point in world history, from the viewpoint of a postcolonial writer:

That year [1989], which began with horrors—on a small scale the *fatwa*, on a much larger scale Tiananmen—also contained great wonders. The magnificence of the invention of the hypertext transfer protocol, the `http://` that would change the world, was not immediately evident. But the fall of communism was. He had come to England as a teenage boy who had grown up in the aftermath of the bloody partition of India and Pakistan, and the first great political event to take place in Europe after his arrival was the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. Oh no, he had thought, are they partitioning Europe now? [...] The Brandenburg gate was opened and the two Berlins became one. In Romania, Ceausescu fell [...]. Samuel Beckett died. (217)

9 He retraces the chain of events from the decision of an Indian MP to use the book to appeal to his Muslim constituency during the 1988 general election, to the moment when the Iranian leader decided to issue a *fatwa* at the beginning of 1989, in an attempt to define a common foreign enemy in a country shattered by the eight-year conflict with Iraq. *The Satanic Verses* is thus a 'worldly' novel in the Saidian sense,<sup>13</sup> an event in itself to a certain extent, caught in a precise, real net of circumstances. Twenty-five years later, the memoir can be seen as a magnifying glass on the nagging question: was Rushdie aware of the potential effect of his novel when he was writing it? Did it proceed from a strong desire to engage in a controversial debate? In *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie justifies himself constantly, starting with the origins of his interest for the eponymous episode in the history of Islam: when he was a student at Cambridge, he developed an interest in the episode of the so-called satanic verses—according to which the prophet had supposedly written a verse contradicting monotheism, before repudiating it. Rushdie's fascination got fixated on the human dimension of the story: 'The belief that the story of the birth of Islam was fascinating because it was an event *inside history* [...] obviously influenced by the events and pressures and ideas of the time of its creation; that to historicize the story, to try to understand how a great idea was shaped by these forces, was the only possible approach to the subject' (24). These lines conjure up a key element of Rushdie's poetics, which consist in historicizing and desacralizing people or principles holding hegemonic positions in human societies, in order to highlight the contingency of power struggles.<sup>14</sup> This is part of a long and didactic development about the history of Islam, underlining both Rushdie's own aesthetic and intellectual interests, and his fierce refusal of superstition and dogma.

10 The two novels that Rushdie wrote before *The Satanic Verses*, *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983), had also stirred trouble when they came out. Published in the midst of the Cold War, they today stand as contemporary examples of political, committed literature, which satirically portrayed the leaders of Pakistan and India. With his two early novels Rushdie had carved a place in the literary world as a spokesperson for immigrants from South Asia, at a time when representations of so-called Third World cultures were scarce in the British novel. In the early 1980s, Rushdie grew into an outspoken writer, denouncing corruption, dictatorship, paternalism and fanaticism, and questioning the powerful to the risk of being censored. Said theorised such a role for the writer-intellectual:

The role [...] cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma [...] to be someone who cannot easily be coopted by governments or corporations, and



whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug (Said 1996, 11).


11 *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* were subjected to violent but nonetheless limited reactions: *Shame* was censored in Pakistan and Indira Gandhi sued Rushdie for the way he described her. With *The Satanic Verses*, the fury over the book grew beyond known boundaries, and in *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie is driven by a need to understand this unprecedented mayhem and to justify himself before the tribunal of history. Thus he tirelessly tries to answer the questions he had been asked so many times and which gave birth to snowballing misunderstandings: did he know what he was doing? Was writing such a book worth it? Didn't he know that the Muslim community would not tolerate such an idea? Such questions did not seem relevant in 1989: instead, Rushdie viewed his work as part of a literary satirical tradition running all the way to Rabelais and Sterne. Facing Indira Gandhi in a defamation trial only seemed to be part of the game. Rushdie had theorised his own view of committed writing in his essays published in *Imaginary Homelands*, claiming that literature was an arena of conflicting discourses, aimed at changing his readers' political outlook.<sup>15</sup>

12 The memoir addresses similar questions, but two decades later, they receive a renewed treatment in the light of profound changes regarding censorship and freedom of speech.<sup>16</sup> For instance, he quotes a remark made by one of his editor friends, Robert Gottlieb, in the early 1990s: 'I'm always defending you, Salman. I always tell people, if you had known that your book was going to kill people, you wouldn't have written it' (64). This important question points at actual, imminent death: the Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses* was murdered, deadly riots occurred in Rushdie's name, and the probability of murder remains. But this call for peace, kind-hearted and down-to-earth, unleashes Rushdie's furor. According to him, such a viewpoint lies at the core of the moral confusion of the West and justifies his campaign against Muslim extremism. Rushdie claims to keep fear at bay, upholding his faith in the inviolability of freedom:

Actually existing Islam had become its own poison and Muslims were dying of it and that needed to be said, in Finland, Spain, America, Denmark, Norway and everywhere else. He would say it, if nobody else would? He wanted to speak, too, for the idea that liberty was everyone's heritage, and not, as Huntington argued, a Western notion alien to the cultures of the East. As 'respect for Islam' which was fear of Islamist violence cloaked in Tartuffe-like hypocrisy, gained legitimacy in the West, the cancer of relativism had begun to eat away at the rich multicultures of the modern world. (357)

13 The memoir bears testimony to the consistency of his views about Islam:<sup>17</sup> he reiterates the idea according to which the current transformation of Islam threatens modernity itself, as it doubles up with a loosening of the Enlightenment values induced by a desire to accommodate contradictory discourses (anti-racism, secularism, tolerance, respect), leading to tacit submission: 'Greater danger of the growing menace was that good men would commit intellectual suicide and call it peace. Good men would give in to fear and call it respect.' (341)

14 The memoir's narrative technique consists in exposing, for each challenge he has to face, a history lesson capable of guiding his judgement. Thus he repeatedly compares the *fatwa* to the other attacks against freedom of expression throughout the centuries: the trials of Socrates, Jesus, Galileo, the indictment of writers in the 18th-century, the censorship of the great 20th-century novels like *Lolita*, *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and so on. Historical comparisons and references frame the text: for instance he draws a striking comparison between the riots that took place in Bradford in 1989, where his book and portraits of himself were burnt publicly, with the German auto-da-fés of 1933:



In Bradford a crowd was gathering outside the police station in the Tyrls, a square also overlooked by the Italianate city hall and the courthouse. There was a pool with a fountain and an area designated as a 'speakers' corner' for people to sound

off about whatever they liked. The Muslim demonstrators were uninterested in soapbox oratory, however. The Tyrils was a more modest location than Berlin's Opera Square had been on 10 May 1933 and in Bradford only one book was at issue, not twenty-five thousand or more; very few of the people gathered there would have known much about the events presided over more than fifty-five years earlier by Joseph Goebbels, who cried, 'No to decadence and moral corruption! Yes to decency and morality in family and state! I consign to the flames the writing of Heinrich Mann, Ernst Gläser, Erich Kästner.' The works of Bertold Brecht, Karl Marx, Thomas Mann and even Ernest Hemingway were also burned that day. (127-8).

15 The spirit of the Enlightenment is looming in the memoir. The memoir highlights and denounces these moments in history when the values of the 18th century were put to the test, thus making his personal experience truly significant in time and space. The *fatwa* is depicted as one of these 'dark newnesses' of history, 'innovations that came into being in the name of a totalizing ideology, an absolute ruler, an unarguable dogma, or a god' (343). This comparatist habit was judged as self-serving, part of a strategy to turn his fate into a legend,<sup>18</sup> but it actually provides a relevant context that allows the reader to assess the complexity of the event against the news media's temptation to use ready-made comments and images. As Said theorised, 'The intellectual task is explicitly to universalize the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race and nation suffered to associate that experience with the suffering of others' (Said 1996, 44). Page after page, Rushdie strives to make his story relevant to all by drawing comparisons and historical parallels. Ovid, Averroes, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Byron, Bertold Brecht, Heinrich Heine, George Orwell, Mandelstam, Solzhenitsyn: the authors he refers to here and there—from all continents and all times, pointing at the relevance of literature as universal—are carefully selected for their common quality, which consists in situating their works at the crossroads of the public and the private.

16 Political commitment is fulfilled in the fifth and sixth parts of the memoir, which feature the protagonist's political coming of age as he enters the world of actual politics: giving up writing altogether—albeit temporarily—he becomes his own advocate and engages in a political campaign for which he needs to learn the language and the tricks. He pictures Joseph as he outlines strategic press releases, organises meetings with key political leaders (Thatcher, Clinton, Blair among others), carefully plans literary events and negotiates every inch of air-travel with international airlines. The author's task is driven by the desire to reconstruct and reclaim the achievements of the Enlightenment:

He was fighting against the view that people could be killed for their ideas, and against the ability of any religion to place a limiting point on thought. But he needed, now, to be clear of what he was fighting for. Freedom of speech, freedom of the image, freedom from fear and the beautiful, ancient art of which he was privileged to be a practitioner. Also skepticism, irreverence, doubt, satire comedy and unholy glee. He would never flinch from the defense of these things. (285)

17 In this quixotic quest,<sup>19</sup> he finally obtains a more favorable diplomatic treatment, with significant improvement of his status with regard to Iran. This period of actual commitment also produced a long-lasting achievement. In the years that followed his ordeal, he used his notoriety to put in place the International Parliament of Writers, a structure that ensures that persecuted writers all over the world can find shelter homes in refuge cities. His status as a known intellectual and literary celebrity allowed him to represent other writers, thus reaffirming this symbolic relation between committed writer and his time.

18 As the personal ordeal strengthens his moral principles—the upholding of secularism, universals, freedom of speech—the looming reference to the Enlightenment helps Rushdie to redefine political commitment: his crusade breaks through the left-right divide just as Zola had done in its time with his 'J'Accuse.' Whereas before 1988 Rushdie was part of the left-leaning, politically liberal, intelligentsia, the *fatwa* significantly altered his political outlook. The narrator explains how dear friends betrayed him in the name of their political principles:





The gulf between the private 'Salman' he believed himself to be and the public 'Rushdie' he barely recognized was growing by the day. One of them, Salman or Rushdie, he himself was unsure which, was dismayed by the number of Labour parliamentarians who were jumping on the Muslim bandwagon—after all he had been a Labour supporter all his life—and noted gloomily that "the true conservatives of Britain are now in the Labour party, while the radicals are all in blue." (131)

19 Those defending freedom of speech belong to the group he used to think of as conservative, and he acknowledges that the government of Margaret Thatcher was more attached to the values he supported than Tony Blair's.<sup>20</sup> Rushdie's stance recalls Burke's conservatism, with his defense of fundamental laws and the lessons of history, a natural distaste for individual will power and a belief in placing a set of constraints upon the individual. Quite logically, Rushdie contemplates the definite betrayal of the Marxist left:

And the eminent intellectual Paul Gilroy, author of *There Aint no Black in the Union Jack*, accused him of having 'misjudged the people' and therefore of having created his own tragedy. [...] It was not possible, in the thinking of socialist intellectuals like Berger and Gilroy, that the people had misjudged him. The people could not be wrong. (179)

20 In the face of the spectacle of bloodthirsty hordes of fanatics, the narrator strongly disagrees with the idea that the 'people' are necessarily right. It is as if the *fatwa* against Rushdie had turned the argument of anti-racism against the left itself, caught in a contradictory demand to stand for the right of minorities not to feel insulted. This apparent contradiction is redolent of the tension inherent in the work of a committed writer. Edward Said had sensibly described his own unease in his Reith Lectures: on the one hand, he supports the ideals of the Enlightenment and the image of a fiercely independent intellectual in the public sphere; on the other hand, he values the need and the right of the intellectual to acknowledge his roots, thus accepting to compromise the universality of some values. The memoir shows that the public sphere of the contemporary intellectual is everything but unique, and it is organised around identification processes that are at once diverse and conflicting. Cultural relativism, as it is condemned by Rushdie in his diatribe against the traditional left, is now an important element to deal with. Trying to define the role of the contemporary intellectual, Peter Thijssen identifies 'a new kind of public sphere, no longer a supposedly unified field of individuals who have freed themselves from social conditions, but instead an arena of multiple spheres' (Thijssen 23). The new aim of the public arena in an era of highly differentiated identities would then be 'one of learning to live with what is in effect cultural and epistemological relativism' (Thijssen 23).

21 At the end of the memoir, after his alias has passed away, Rushdie walks the streets without his protection team and reflects on *Fury*, his 2001 novel: he felt an urgency to write it, and he marvels at the way people are reading it, as 'ultra contemporary,' 'transformed by events into a historical novel about a city that was no longer the one he had written about' (620). As the memoir tried to demonstrate, the very vocation of the writer had been to grasp the present time as premonitory and transitory. *Fury*, peculiarly different from the rest of Rushdie's oeuvre, might well be considered as his most committed, because the most directly enmeshed in the reality of its time. Whereas the memoir tried to demonstrate the virtue of the Enlightenment values, in a quixotic desire to convince, literature has no confident truth to deliver. This way one might wonder if commitment in the contemporary world always misses its target, but it is as close as it can get to truth.

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DOI : 10.4324/9781315598062

## Notes

1 In the beginning, he thinks like a writer, strongly convinced of the power of words and arguments: 'Words had got him into this mess, and words would get him out of it' (212); but his view alters inevitably as he enters the world of diplomacy and politics: 'he was learning the limitations of language. He had always believed in its omnipotence, in the power of the tongue. But language would not get him out of this. [His essays] "In Good Faith" and "Is Nothing Sacred" had changed nothing' (252).

2 As a case in point, previous prison memoirs by other prominent postcolonial writers, such as Wole Soyinka or Breytech Breytenbach, received attention only as far as the regional conflict zone was concerned (totalitarian regimes in Nigeria and South Africa).

3 A wide spectrum of the British, American and Indian societies is represented in the memoir, ranging from the world of editing, politics, marketing, cinema, music, to acquaintances of all kinds who happened to have a word to say in the affair—to name just a few prominent figures: Cat Stevens, Bono, Madonna, Warren Beatty, Jerry Seinfeld, Graham Greene, Thomas Pynchon, Paul Auster, Vaclav Havel, Jack Lang, and so on.

4 One might think about the bodyguards of the protagonist who form a recurrent team of grotesque characters, treated with humor, affection and irony.

5 *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, in particular, feature historical developments that contribute to the blurring of generic lines between fiction and non-fiction.

6 Rebirth is the main theme of *The Satanic Verses*; doubles abound in all of his novels (see for instance Saleem and Shiva in *Midnight's Children*).

7 My translation.

8 This is the thesis of Benoît Denis, in his historical study of literature and commitment, who links commitment to the idea of a contract, or transaction between writer and community (30–32).



9 See for instance: 'He had been interested in reclamation ever since he wrote *Midnight's Children* to reclaim his Indian heritage for himself [...] Now once again he would set out to reclaim lost ground. His completed novel would be published, and with that act he would reclaim his place in the world of books' (442).

10 This process was described some time ago by Arjun Appadurai, who focused on the irrelevance of territory as defining elements for conflicts like the Rushdie case.

11 For a thorough analysis of the ways in which the Rushdie affair was instrumentalised by various political groups, see Catherine Pessio-Miquel in her reading of *Joseph Anton*.

12 As in *The Satanic Verses* where the protagonists are fallen angels representing good and evil, the memoir features frequent references to winged creatures, which point at anguish and death, such as in the image of the angel of history: 'He was just listening in the right direction, looking towards the advancing storm' (341), or of the exterminating angel: 'And always the wings of that giant blackbird, the exterminating angel, beating close at hand' (504).

13 Edward Said develops the concept of 'worldly' novels throughout his oeuvre: 'texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied forms are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society, in short, they are in the world, and hence, "worldly"' (Said 1983, 35).

14 The portrayal of Margaret Thatcher in *The Satanic Verses* is a case in point.

15 The volume played a key role in the formation and development of postcolonial studies and postcolonial literature, which, from the beginning, established itself as 'committed.' See, in particular, the essay 'Outside the Whale' written before the affair (1984) and the pieces written post-1989, like 'In Good Faith,' 'Is Nothing Sacred?' and 'One Thousand Days in a Balloon.'

16 For an overview of the theoretical and historical changes on the subject of censorship since the Rushdie affair, see Girardin.

17 Rushdie has written extensively about the need for Islam to reform in the wake of 9/11, carefully separating the cultural achievements of Islam and political Islam (see his second volume of essays, *Step across this Line*), and he has been widely criticised for it, especially by left-leaning commentators, in America and in Europe. For example see Terry Eagleton's diatribe, 'The Liberal Supremacists.'

18 When the memoir was published, its reception was particularly harsh, especially among literary critics in the Anglo-American press (see for instance Heller and MISHRA), who chose to focus solely on the psychology of the writer.

19 Rushdie is not subtle when it comes to describing what he stands for: it is his 'his task' (352), his 'mission to insist on the vital importance of books, and of protecting the freedoms necessary to create them' (351); he ends up being 'an ambassador for himself' (355), 'a symbolic icon' (357), speaking 'on behalf of' bereaved writers (419–20).

20 At the end of the memoir, he is outraged by the attempt by the Labour party to extend the Blasphemy Law to Islam: 'The Blair government continued to try to find ways of making it illegal to criticize religion' (521).

## **Pour citer cet article**

### *Référence électronique*

Cécile Girardin, « Heir to the Enlightenment: Memorial Writing and Commitment in *Joseph Anton*, by Salman Rushdie », *Études britanniques contemporaines* [En ligne], 50 | 2016, mis en ligne le 07 avril 2016, consulté le 10 juin 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/3153> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.3153>

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### *Articles du même auteur*

**DE LOUGHRY Treasa, *The Global Novel and Capitalism in Crisis—Contemporary Narratives*** [Texte intégral]

London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020

Paru dans *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 62 | 2022

