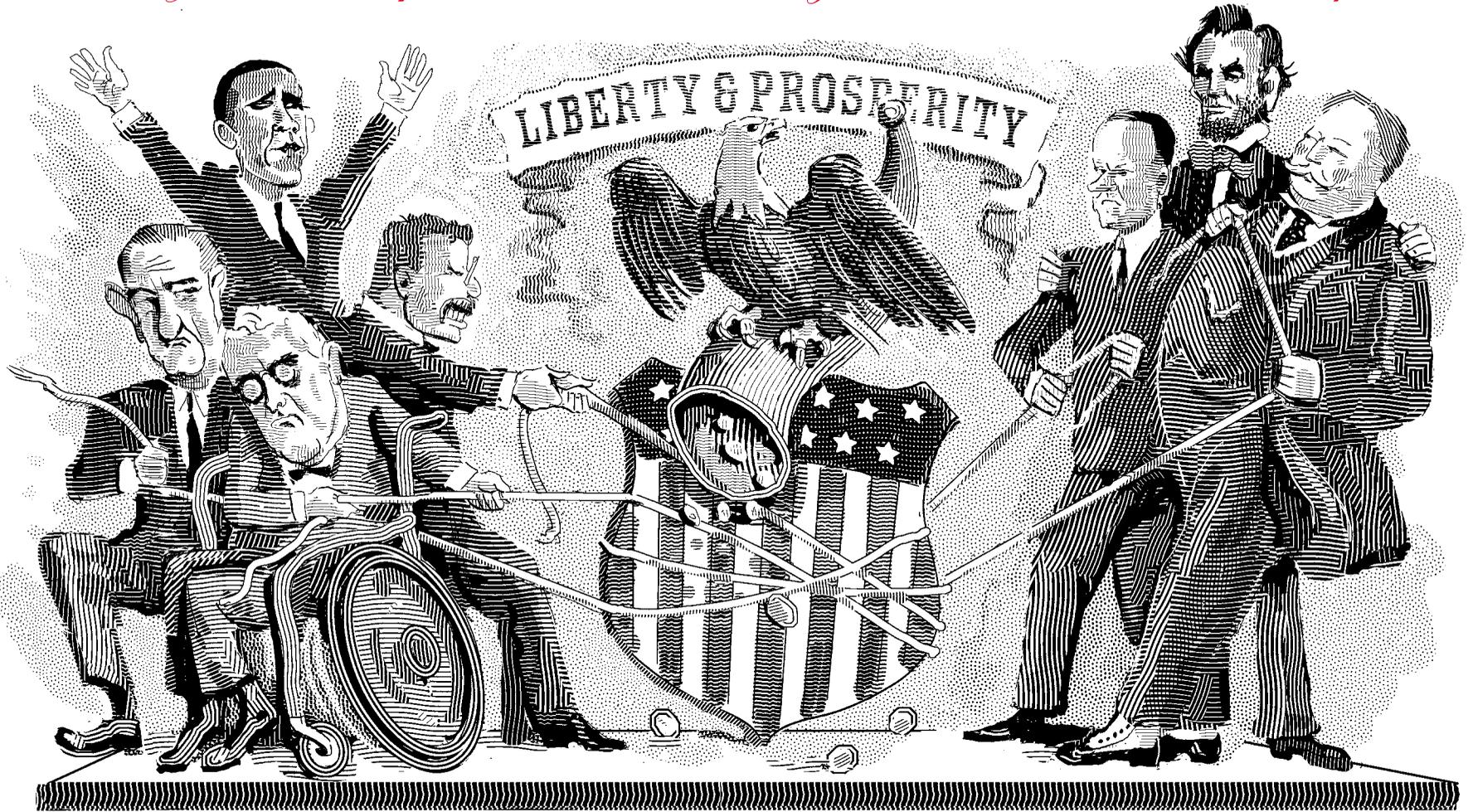


VOLUME XIII, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2012/13

# CLAREMONT

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Book Review by Benjamin Balint

## BLASPHEMER

*Joseph Anton: A Memoir*, by Salman Rushdie.  
Random House, 656 pages, \$30



ON VALENTINE'S DAY 1989, THE CELEBRATED British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie received the worst review of his career: a death sentence. Iran's mortally ill Ayatollah Khomeini, who had never so much as seen a copy of *The Satanic Verses*, made the murder of its author, "along with all the editors and publishers aware of its contents," a holy obligation upon millions of believers. "Even if Salman Rushdie repents and becomes the most pious man of all time," the imam intoned several days later, "it is incumbent on every Muslim to employ everything he has got, his life and his wealth, to send him to hell." Another absolutist ayatollah, Hassan Sanei, offered a million-dollar bounty for the blasphemer's head.

From that day to this, Rushdie says in the opening to his forceful third-person memoir, *Joseph Anton*—the pseudonym he adopted for 11 years while hiding, based on the first names of Conrad and Chekhov—the word *fatwa* "hung around his neck like a millstone."

One scene from the offending novel both reflects and prefigures the ugly reality. A "bearded and turbaned Imam" in exile harbors "a dream of glorious return...a vision of revolution." He plots the overthrow of his country's wine-drinking Empress, convinced that her sin "is enough to condemn her for all time without hope of redemption." He thunders "apostate, blasphemer, fraud."

For the real-life imams, it seems the blasphemy was in the novel's re-imagining of the episode that gave *The Satanic Verses* its name. In several 8th- and 9th-century collections

called Hadith—the exemplary sayings and doings of Muhammad and his companions—the prophet is said to have descended from the mountain and recited several verses about three winged goddesses then worshipped in Mecca, only to recant and claim that he had been deceived. The verses had been dictated to him not by the archangel Gabriel, he said, but by Satan, and should be expunged.

THE EFFECTS OF THE EDICT THAT branded Rushdie with the scarlet A of "apostate," and that sought to expunge his words from the world, spread far beyond the Iranian imams in Qom. Regarding his book as a weapon of the West against the East, the Egyptian sheikhs of al-Azhar and the Wahhabi mullahs of Saudi Arabia, vilified him in bloodcurdling terms. "Death, perhaps, is a bit too easy for him," said Iqbal Sacranie of the U.K. Action Committee on Islamic Affairs. (Sacranie was knighted by the queen in 2005.) Mobs in Islamabad, Kashmir, and Bombay threatened murder and mayhem and consigned the offending book to the flames. Five rioters died in Islamabad. Bookstores carrying the book were bombed in London, Sydney, and Berkeley. The novel's Japanese translator was murdered, its Italian translator stabbed and seriously injured, and its Norwegian publisher shot three times in the back. India, "the deepest wellspring of his inspiration," banned the book and prevented its author from visiting. (He would not be permitted to return for more than twelve years.)

A campy Pakistani film depicted Rushdie as a sadistic drunk who in the climactic scene is struck dead by divine lightning bolts. Afzal Ahmad, the actor who played Rushdie, became so reviled that he was forced into hiding.

So, of course, was Rushdie, who in his latest book draws on his journal to paint, with impressive novelistic detail, a picture of a sequestered life of "cringings and crouchings," swirling rumors of assassination squads, around-the-clock armed protection provided by the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police as he moved between an endless series of safe houses (more than 50 in the first most fearful months), of tense briefings and threat assessments with intelligence chiefs, of drawn curtains and armored cars. Among other humiliations, he had to hide in a bathroom whenever a cleaner or repairman visited. It would be seven years before Rushdie could give an announced public reading, and more than nine before he would be allowed to fly again on British Airways. Suddenly at the mercy of other people's fears, he writes, he felt imprisoned, hounded for most of his forties into a "fretful, scuttling existence."

RUSHDIE WAS NOT PREVIOUSLY KNOWN for shying from politically engaged fiction. In *Midnight's Children* (1981), he had savaged Indira Gandhi's government; in *Shame* (1983), he satirized Pakistan's President Zia-ul-Haq. Nor were religious habits of mind foreign to him. "The structures and metaphors of religion (Hinduism and Christianity



as much as Islam) shaped his irreligious mind," he writes. His father was a scholar of Islam who adopted the name Rushdie after the 12th-century Arab rationalist and philosopher Ibn Rushd, or Averroes, who had defended Aristotelian philosophy and attempted to re-edit the Koran to make it more readable. "He was his father's son," Rushdie writes of himself, "godless, but fascinated by gods and prophets."

But the opprobrium this time, he reports in the memoir, came as a shock. Although Rushdie knew very well that Islam did not, like Christianity, recognize a distinction between political and religious spheres, he did not expect the *fatwa* and its aftermath—could not expect it, because it was unprecedented. This Cambridge-educated man of progressive opinions, who had so vigorously attacked imperialism and racism, who had defended the Palestinians, Sandinistas, and Pakistani and Indian immigrants, now found himself derided as an opportunist who had made, in his words, a "malicious attack on his ethnic past."

Yet he considered—and in *Joseph Anton* still considers—his novel respectful of Muhammad. "It treated him as he always said he wanted to be treated, as a man ('the Messenger'), not a divine figure (like the Christians' 'Son of God')." He could not fathom how he could be called an enemy of Islam. "He was not an enemy," Rushdie writes of himself here.

"He was a friend. A skeptical, even a dissident friend, but a friend nevertheless."

In his open letter to the prime minister of India, published shortly after *The Satanic Verses* was banned in that country, Rushdie wrote:

The section of the book in question (and let's remember that the book in question isn't actually about Islam, but about migration, metamorphosis, divided selves, love, death, London and Bombay) deals with a prophet—who is not called Mohammed—living in a highly fantastical city made of sand (it dissolves when water falls upon it). He is surrounded by fictional followers, one of whom happens to bear my own first name. Moreover, this entire sequence happens in a dream, the fictional dream of a fictional character, an Indian movie star, and one who is losing his mind, at that. How much further from history could one get?

**H**ISTORY WAS NOT INCLINED TO LET Rushdie get away; nor was it kind to him even on his adopted home turf. With some heartening exceptions like Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, and Christopher Hitchens, many of his countrymen responded to the *fatwa* with dithering or appeasement. The Foreign Office remained silent. Skittish

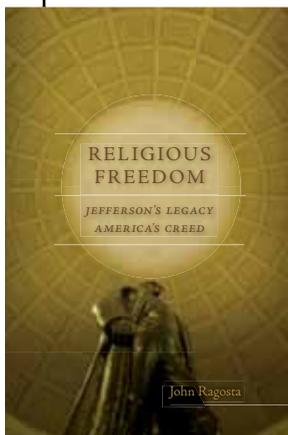
publishers cancelled contracts. W.H. Smith, Britain's largest bookselling chain, removed *The Satanic Verses* from its shelves across the country. From other quarters came the usual euphemisms about religious sensitivity. "We must be more tolerant of Muslim anger," said the archbishop of Canterbury.

*Joseph Anton* is infused with pained disappointment at his countrymen. Some deemed Rushdie not worth defending and complained of the costs to British taxpayers of keeping him alive. The writer's senior case officer at Scotland Yard turned down his request to go to the Dorchester Hotel to pick up a literary award: "It is my view that you are endangering the citizenry of London by reason of your desire for self-aggrandizement." "I wonder how Salman Rushdie is faring these days," the Tory historian Hugh Trevor-Roper fulminated,

under the benevolent protection of British law and British police, about whom he has been so rude. Not too comfortably I hope.... I would not shed a tear if some British Muslims, deploring his manners, should waylay him in a dark street and seek to improve them.

Others, Rushdie reports, believed the author complicit in his own downfall. "If you set out to make trouble," said Kingsley Amis,

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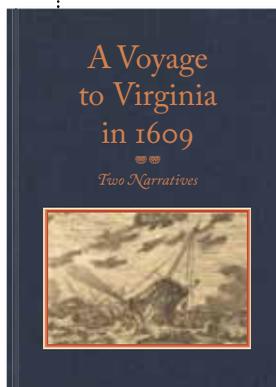
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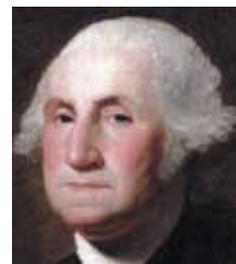
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“you shouldn’t complain when you get it.” In other words, the spoiled troublemaker had it coming. “Rushdie took on a known enemy,” said spy novelist John le Carré, “and screamed ‘foul’ when it acted in character.” British papers alternately delighted in blaming him for the continued captivity of British hostages held by pro-Iranian Shiite factions in Lebanon and in portraying him as an insufferable prima donna. A front-page headline in the *Sunday Times* announced: RUSHDIE’S WIFE SAYS HE IS SELF-OBSESSED AND VAIN. Soon to be ex-wife. Sympathizers with the insulted made its author the butt of jokes: “Have you heard about Rushdie’s new novel? It’s called *Buddha, You Big Fat Bastard*.”

**W**ITH PATIENT SKILL, JOSEPH ANTON tells the story of what Rushdie calls “his journey back to personhood”—from Joseph Anton to Salman Rushdie—and his defiant refusal during the hard journey to abdicate either the writer’s duty of describing reality or his fidelity to himself. “If he wrote timid, frightened things, or angry, vengeful things, his art would be mangled beyond hope of repair. He would become a creature of the *fatwa* and nothing more.” This refusal—and the fact that *The Satanic Verses* is still in print, in 46 languages—is his hard-won victory over obscurantism and censorship.

But as the pressures on artistic and intellectual freedoms daily grow, the attack against Rushdie can be seen as one salvo in a larger war—one that has subsequently involved the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh on an Amsterdam street in 2004 (as he was dying, van Gogh reportedly asked his assailant, “Can’t we talk about this?”); the violent response to a dozen cartoons of Muhammad published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005, which claimed over 200 deaths around the world; the protests against the inadvertent burning of Korans in Afghanistan in February 2012, which led to at least 29 Afghani deaths and the killing of six American soldiers; and the violent demonstrations against the crude video, “Innocence of Muslims,” last September.

**I**T IS FITTING, THEN, THAT A BOOK WHICH serves as a bracing reminder of the fragility of our liberties closes with a stirring affirmation of the freedoms of speech and of imagination with which literature lives in such close and ennobling communion. “Literature’s view of human nature,” Rushdie observes at the end of the memoir, “encouraged understanding, sympathy, and identification with people not like oneself, but the world was pushing everyone in the opposite direction, toward narrowness, bigotry, tribalism, cultism and war.”

In this sense, if Rushdie’s journey in *Joseph Anton* is towards a post-fatwa personhood, it also returns him to a boyhood in Bombay full of stories: “bright stories and dark stories, sacred stories and profane, his to alter and renew and discard and pick up again as and when he pleased, his to laugh at and rejoice in and live in and with and by, to give the stories life by loving them, to be given life by them in return.”

The boy who was born into one language, Urdu, and would make his life and work in another, learned from these stories something about the fluidities and pluralities of identity, the very capacities of self-creation that decades later would so infuriate his absolutist critics. “A man who sets out to make himself up,” Rushdie writes early in *The Satanic Verses*, “is taking on the Creator’s role, according to one way of seeing things; he’s unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of abominations.” And against that way of seeing things, he learned something, too, about the differences between insularity and openness, rigid answers and elastic questions, the Word and words—and he made his choice.

*Benjamin Balint is a writer living in Jerusalem and author of Running Commentary: The Contentious Magazine that Transformed the Jewish Left into the Neoconservative Right (PublicAffairs).*

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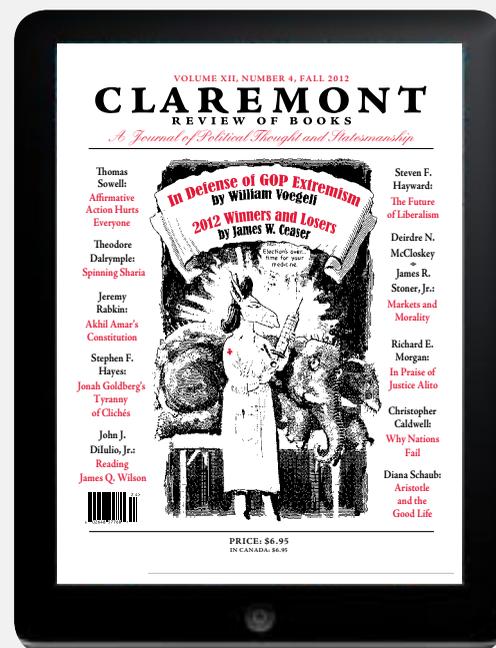
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