

## Is forgiveness possible?: The concrete cases of Thoreau and Rushdie (on) (writing) the unforgivable<sup>1</sup>

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What can this title mean? It might seem, at first thought, that little could be farther from *Henry Thoreau's* work, at least, from his interests and from the content of what he wrote about, than the concept of forgiveness. Aloneness, ecology, animal nature, political resistance, metaphor, peacefulness and mindfulness, even philosophy, yes; but *forgiveness*? What could have been further from his mind?

Well, but, our modern critical training is such that we can instantly recognize here a double opportunity; firstly, one can claim that the very absence of 'forgiveness' from Thoreau's work, from his writing, is a presence, that there is a pregnant silence here. Secondly, and more specifically (and thus much more plausibly and interestingly *qua interpretational strategy*), one can point out the respects in which Thoreau's work is arguably directed against the very ethico-religious perspectives which would have forgiveness to be a central topic or focus of one's principles (and something which we all ought (to strive to grant and) deeply to desire to receive). For example, one might delineate the elements of Thoreau's thought which work against Christian (and, more broadly, monotheistic priestly) modes of emphasis on being granted (and granting) forgiveness; on charity; on pity; and so forth.

That is; in good company with Emerson and Nietzsche, Thoreau can quite easily be read as casting doubt on the salience and centrality and healthiness of certain character-traits that are reckoned to be signs of virtue and piety. Thoreau's critiques of philanthropy and of conventional understandings of 'neighbourliness', for instance, are well-known.

But still, does Thoreau really take this so far as to put into doubt the desirability of forgiving others their sins; can he completely revalue not only (say) philanthropy and pity but even forgiveness (and mercy)? Surely not; surely, the many things for which or for the lack of which he castigates his fellow men, 'even while' holding himself pretty rigorously apart from them, are things he would at least aspire to.

Maybe. But that last sentence hardly rings very definitively true. To get much further, we are going to have to look properly at Thoreau's text(s).

Though that could be difficult or profitless, if his discussions of these matters are entirely indirect at best, insofar as they exist at all.

But we may be in luck. We may not have to wade all through Thoreau's unique treatment of *resentment* etc. to come across what we are in search of, still less its poignant absence. For, and this might surprise even some devotees of the text, there in fact exists one beautiful and concise present-to-hand example in which there is a 'direct' and explicit treatment of the topic of...forgiveness.

Consider then, if you will, the following extended quotation from 'Walden', in which (is nested the one place in that book where) the questions I am considering here rise quite directly to the surface:

"There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted. It is human, it is divine, carrion. If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with a conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life... No, in this case, I would rather suffer evil the natural way. A man is not a good *man* to me because he will feed me if I should be starving, or warm me if I should be freezing, or pull me out of a ditch if I should ever fall into one. I can find you a Newfoundland dog that will do as much. Philanthropy is not love for one's fellow-man in the broadest sense... I never heard of a philanthropic meeting in which it was sincerely proposed to do any good to me, or the likes of me.

The Jesuits were quite balked by those Indians who, being burned at the stake, suggested new modes of torture to their tormentors. Being superior to physical suffering, it sometimes chanced that they were superior to any consolation which the missionaries could offer, and the law to do as you would be done by fell with less persuasiveness on the ears of those who, for their part, did not care how they were done by, who loved their enemies after a new fashion, and came very near freely forgiving them all they did.

Be sure that you give the poor the aid they most need, though it be your example which leaves them far behind. If you give money, spend yourself with it, and do not merely abandon it to them..."<sup>2</sup>

What is it, almost to forgive? Is it to *partially* forgive? Well, we must surely understand what forgiveness *simpliciter* is first, before we may be able to understand what coming 'close' to or 'part-way' to may consist in. This is, I think, an important point, which will recur in our subsequent discussions.

But before we turn to the broad question(s) about forgiveness which will partly occupy those discussions, let us tarry a moment over the details of this striking excerpt from Thoreau. It does not, perhaps, wear its heart quite on its sleeve.

Two descriptors which I think apply to much of the above passage are "hyperbolic" and "ironical". Thoreau's dismissive and hyper-critical tone in dealing with 'the philanthropist' is, we are sure, exaggerated for effect. He has strong substantive points to make elsewhere in 'Walden' and elsewhere about (e.g.) the hypocrisy of the slave-owning charitable man; but we of course do not take *literally* the remarks above about running for one's life, or about the Newfoundland dog.

In the crucial paragraph specifically on the Jesuits and the Native Americans, the operative mode is more one of irony *and satire* - a satire on the clichés of Christianity, thus displaying the *hypocrisy* and (if you like) cultural- relativity of those clichés and of the values they are supposed to be connected with. The lovely invocation of the superiority of the tortured even to the supposed consolation offered them by the Jesuits - one cannot help but think here of a superiority of 'strength' and mind which itself implies a moral superiority - leads into an invitation to re-value the values of missionary and 'savage'. *If*

we are to speak of forgiveness, Thoreau is perhaps saying, *we might as well* speak of it as involved in the lives of those to whom it can seem desperately alien - our ready-to-hand examples of it are liable to be comparatively unsatisfying, even hypocritical. (The irony, then, is in part that it nevertheless seems clear that we are probably not describing the native Americans's world-view aright if we describe it through a generally Judeo-Christian frame). We ought to think carefully, perhaps, before we claim ever to be forgiving, or even to see forgiving. "Forgiveness", like "neighbourliness" and various other neighbouring concepts, is a word which has become dangerously de-valued. One ought to take the remarks quoted above on the Jesuits and the Indians literally - at least in the sense that their power is such that we must take them deadly *seriously*.

The question I wish to concentrate on in this paper, is not whether forgiving others is desirable. I take it that, *ceteris paribus* (though that clause is going to be of extreme import and complexity here), it *is*. At least, that it *is* for anyone for whom the issue of whether forgiveness is (in the right circumstances etc.) desirable does not generally *arise* - not, I mean, because forgiveness is desperately alien to that person/to their culture (in which case forgiveness would not be desirable (or undesirable), because it would not be relevant), but rather because it is part of a *presumed* background, part of the stream of their life.

No, my question is the connected but also importantly distinct and prior question of whether forgiveness is possible, and, if so, of what it (forgiveness) *is*; what is its nature, in what does it consist? Do we know what we are doing with this concept; do we have a *right* to presume it?

And the route I will take toward answering this perhaps surprising question, the seemingly-bizarre question of whether forgiveness is possible at all, is to look closely at the concept of unforgiveness, of unforgivability. It might reasonably be thought prior to reflection that nothing can be truly eternally, unalterably, unforgivable; in which case very obviously forgiveness will very probably take place pretty frequently. But if it is to be argued that there *is no such thing* in the world as true forgiveness, it must follow trivially that nothing is forgivable. Such that it is natural to consider the category of the unforgivable, and to determine its breadth of application. Let us start with some perhaps unusually clear examples of unforgivability, then, and proceed from there.

What is unforgivable? One example may be Thoreau's; how could one possibly forgive one's own torturers? We don't actually believe that the Indians forgave the Jesuits, except possibly after a *very* new fashion. Surely, the *most* anyone could imagine, let alone expect, would be for forgiveness not to be an *issue* here, as it probably is best said not to be for those who, again like Thoreau's Indians, seem able not to feel bitterness to the point even of treating their torture or execution as some kind of interesting practical exercise.<sup>3</sup>

What else is unforgivable? Well, what could be less forgivable than betrayal and mentally-torturing maliciousness? Here, then, is another possible (fictional - but how true to life!?! How many of us have not at some point felt betrayed in our love by a friend, or by someone, at least?) example of unforgivability, to enrich our diet. It is I think richly-

textured, in part through being drawn from the text of Salman Rushdie's remarkable and epochal novel, 'The Satanic Verses':

"Saladin Chamcha...concealed behind the...copper beech,...observed Gibreel Farishta bursting out of the front door of the block of flats in which he'd been waiting impatiently for [Allie, his girlfriend and love]'s return; observed him red-eyed and raving. The demons of jealousy were sitting on his shoulders, and he was screaming out the same old song, wherethehell whothe whatthe dontthinkyoucanpullthewool howdareyou bitchbitchbitch...  
[Chamcha], with a satisfied nod, strolled away down an avenue of shady, spreading, trees.

The telephone calls which now began to be received...by both Allie and Gibreel... were not brief calls, such as those made by heavy breathers and other abusers of the telephone network, but, conversely, they never lasted long enough for the police, eavesdropping, to track them to their source. Nor did the whole unsavoury episode last very long - a mere matter of three and a half weeks, after which the callers desisted forever; but it might also be mentioned that it went on exactly as long as it needed to, that is, until it had driven Gibreel Farishta to do to Allie Cone what he had previously done to Saladin - namely, the Unforgivable Thing.

It should be said that nobody, not Allie, not Gibreel, not even the professional phone-tappers they brought in, ever suspected the calls of being a single man's work; but for Saladin Chamcha, once renowned...as the Man of a Thousand Voices, such a deception was a simple matter. In all, he was obliged to select (from his thousand voices and a voice) a total of no more than thirty-nine.<sup>4</sup>

When Allie answered, she heard unknown men murmuring intimate secrets in her ear, strangers who seemed to know her body's most remote recesses, faceless beings who gave evidence of having learned, by experience, her choicest preferences among the myriad forms of love; and once the attempts of tracing the calls had begun her humiliation grew, because now she was unable simply to replace the receiver...

Gibreel also got his share of voices: superb Byronic aristocrats boasting of having 'conquered Everest' [[Allie was a mountain climber]], sneering guttersnipes, unctuous best-friend voices mingling warning and mock-commissioner, *a word to the wise, how stupid can you, ...anything in trousers, you poor moron, take it from a pal*. But one voice stood out from the rest, the high soulful voice of a poet, one of the first voices Gibreel heard and the one that got deepest under his skin; a voice that spoke exclusively in rhyme, reciting doggerel verses of an understated naivete, even innocence, which contrasted so greatly with the masturbatory coarseness of most of the other callers that Gibreel soon came to think of it as the most insidiously menacing of all.

*I like coffee, I like tea,  
I like things you do with me.*

*Tell her that*, the voice swooned, and rang off. Another day it returned with another jingle:

*I like butter, I like toast,  
You're the one I love the most.*

*Give her that message too; if you'd be so kind.* There was something demonic, Gibreel decided, something profoundly immoral about cloaking corruption in this greetings-card tum-ti-tum.

*Rosy apple, lemon tart,  
Here's the name of my sweetheart.*

A...l...l... Gibreel, in disgust and fear, banged down the receiver, and trembled...

...One by one, [the voices] dripped into Gibreel ears, weakening his hold on the real world, drawing him back little by little in to their obscene web, so that little by little their obscene, invented women began to coat the real women like a viscous, green film, and in spite of his protestations to the contrary he started slipping away from her; and then it was time for the return of the little, satanic verses that made him mad.

*Roses are red, violets are blue,  
Sugar never tasted as sweet as you.*

And lastly, when...Allie was absent at the ceremonial opening of a freezer food mart in Hounslow, the last rhyme

*Violets are blue, roses are red,  
I've got her right here in my bed.*

*Goodbye sucker.*

Dialling tone.

Alleluia Cone returned to find Gibreel gone, and in the vandalized silence of her apartment she determined that this time she would not have him back, no matter what the sorry condition or how wheedlingly he came crawling to her, pleading for forgiveness and for love; because before he left he had wrought a terrible vengeance upon her, destroying every one of the surrogate Himalayas she had collected over the years...

[W]eeping, she rang [her friend and Gibreel's,] Saladin Chamcha, to tell him the bad news..."<sup>5</sup>

Now, I might be inclined to ask at this point, to strengthen my case: It might be debatable whether Gibreel's actions were really unforgivable; but how could what Chamcha did even be *imagined* to be forgiven? How could one ever forgive a demonic set of actions like that, like the story detailed above? But such questions may even yet in a certain sense be premature; it may be clearer to us that something like the example just given involves unforgivability than it could be clear to us *how* it could imaginably be adjusted so as to encompass the possibility of forgiveness. For again, we do not yet have,

in the present paper at least, a clear example of what it is like to forgive things. Ought we to presuppose that one can forgive things at all? What is it to forgive?

Of course, this seems absurd. "Of course we know what forgiveness is." But any reader who has (e.g.) read Plato will know from Socrates that such matters of course sometimes, paradoxically, have to be earned rather than assumed, if they are questioned.<sup>6</sup> What is this thing called forgiveness?

Let us try to examine it.

It is, conceptually, *more* than to forget ("Forgive *and* forget" - there is a distinction. If Gibreel, in his rage and madness, were to throw himself off a balcony and hit his head, we would not say that in virtue of his then forgetting he would have forgiven Chamcha!).<sup>7</sup> *More* than to understand (To understand everything is *not* to forgive everything, for clearly we sometimes understand things and then are precisely unable to forgive, now that we understand. If Gibreel were to be explained to him WHO it was that was persecuting him, and for what *malicious* purposes, it would be even harder for him to forgive than if it were just 'some crank phone-caller'.). *More* than to merely accept. (One accepts that something has happened. (Sometimes). And, in another sense, one accepts someone back into one's circle of friends, for example. But neither is *tantamount* to forgiving.) *More* in particular than to accept an apology. (For apologies can be accepted through gritted teeth. One might say that in such a case one has not really apologized - but this would fly in the face of ordinary usage (i.e. this is *not* what we normally say! I think we would often say instead something like: "I accept your apology. *But I can't forgive you*; at least, not yet.") To accept an apology is to perform felicitously a particular speech act (and/or a response to a speech act) of apology. To forgive is much more than this.)

Speech acts can be explained, analysed, comprehended. There might be some promise in the idea that, if we can understand the speech act involved in utterances like "I...forgive...you", than we can understand forgiveness, its conception and its possibility. But *can* we comprehend forgiveness analogously to how we can comprehend speech acts? How can one escape the tyranny of the past in the way that seems necessary for forgiveness, how can one *achieve the overcoming of resentment* that it requires? One might say: each and every instance of forgiving involves changing one's life, involves working on oneself (and it must be in circumstances that are propitious for such work, too). One's feelings must change/have changed in a way that will not normally even be accessible to one or guaranteed at the time when one says to someone, "I forgive you." In sum, forgiveness is not, *contra* Joram Haber,<sup>8</sup> directly akin to promising. It has more gravity, and more conditions, than that. What is required for forgiveness is rather akin to a promise *and its fulfillment*, which is something that only happens over time, often a long period of time.

And there is a further problem: that an intention not to hold something against someone most typically be put into *practice*, or at least not contradicted by one's practice, by one's behaviour toward the forgivee.

Thus the feelings and practice(s) over time, reaching into the future, that are required to 'validate' - constitute - an instance of forgiveness are substantive; a speech act, even if

felicitous, can never be enough. *One can always turn out to have been mistaken* in saying, "I forgive you" even sincerely, in appropriate circumstances, *etc.*; while one cannot have been *mistaken* in having said "I promise you".

What is the additional factor? What guarantees an instance of forgiving, makes it authentic? It can seem to be something metaphysical. Recall the sense in which for Hegel, as for many less important and less abstruse theologians and moralists, the right punishment literally cancels out a crime, theoretically literally redresses it, wipes it away. Can we effect a tight comparison between such a view of punishment and a like take on forgiveness?

"But surely we needn't resort to such desperate measures, we need not cite or posit a hopeless metaphysic: the 'additional factor' is the will of the person in a position to forgive; their will must be a good will, and they must be ready not to think ill any more of the offender they are forgiving. That is the 'authenticity' required to validate forgiveness."<sup>9</sup> Well, indeed, quite probably so; but does this enable us to understand how a particular act that was wrong and has been conceded to be wrong can be removed of its 'sting', of its harmful attachment to the committer of the act? That is to say: having a good and no-longer-angry will seems to be reasonably called a precondition for forgiveness, but does its mention manage to *explicate* or paraphrase or yield comprehension of it even in the fashion which the 'Hegelian' proposal above at least *pretends* to? (Metaphysics is an appealing substitute for a sound and full conceptual/grammatical understanding of a term's use (that is, for instance, one rooted-in-our-lives). It is among other things the latter that we need here).

Even something that looks like a correct 'analysis' of forgiveness does not *satisfy* us. It does not enable us to understand it; any more perhaps than a knowledge of the English language enables someone truly to understand the sentence "Love your enemy."

"But look, you must at least concede that in the case of relatively trivial harms, forgiveness is frequent, straightforward, comprehensible."

But here's the rub: don't we tend to say in such cases, "Forget it/Don't worry about it; *there's nothing to forgive*"? Who is to say that such a locution ought not itself to be taken straightforwardly, literally?<sup>10</sup> The problem that is emerging into focus is this; that one can only forgive when one acknowledges that there is something to forgive. But then how can even a humble and genuine admission of wrong-doing, together perhaps with acts of contrition; how can these lead right into forgiveness, *even of small/middling offences*? For, just insofar as there remains something to forgive, just insofar as the wrong act has not been literally wiped away<sup>11</sup> or utterly redressed, it seems that forgiveness has not really taken place; but once there is nothing left to forgive, then there is no forgiveness either.

Taking stock, we should recall that an understanding of partial forgiveness cannot, for the sake of understanding the grammar/nature of 'forgiveness', be satisfactory; but our efforts to comprehend and effectually define forgiveness ('complete/full' forgiveness, if you prefer) seem to have reached something of an *impasse*. We have made some negative progress (we now know a little about what forgiveness is not), and a tiny bit of positive

progress (we have found some slightly useful paraphrases, and fragments for/toward a definition); but these do not yield for us what we wanted. It seems, remarkably, far easier both to exemplify and to explain unforgiveness than to do the same for forgiveness! And this may well be connected with our perhaps too-easy pre-reflective self-assurance that we are correct in assuming that we actually are (a) forgiving people.

It seems, we might now say, that forgiveness is always approaching but never arrives; that the wish to forgive flies toward the vanishing point on a horizon, but can never reach that point because, just insofar as the approach, the flight, is on target, the act to be forgiven fades away into nothingness. It is a vanishing point (or it keeps on receding - the things, the bits, the aspects of an act awaiting forgiveness, remaining to be forgiven, can, it seems, never be reached, grasped. They float away on a sea of non-explicitiveness, they vanish - they dis-appear - on the one hand into the not-requiring-forgiveness and on the other hand into the unforgivable). More prosaically, its description comes to alter such that it is no longer relevantly the same act, no longer an act requiring forgiveness.<sup>12</sup> But then, whence forgiveness? The landscape is barren - what we are looking for cannot be found; or, at least, cannot be described.

In sum, it seems that forgiveness is only possible (or, at least, only explicable) when there is no longer anything to forgive - but then this is not forgiveness. Complete forgiving always vanishes completely, at any point where it appears to be actually occurring. We can describe unforgivability, and name instances of unforgiveness, but if we try to comprehend its opposite, which I think seems pre-reflectively as though it ought to be far more common, we come up short. We come up, almost, with nothing - because we come up with nothing we can grasp.

It seems that we want - (it seems) that we *rightly* want - an understanding of forgiveness (a concept with perhaps a profound bearing, a noble history, a vital role to play in many human relations) which tugs against the actual criteria for its usage, in the following sense: forgiveness now appears to be a concept that, insofar as we understand it, is not instantiatable, and may (thus) only be instantiated in cases where we do not understand it! To put the point more polemically: when we succeed in forgiving (and - what does not quite go without saying, but which we will say no more of in the present context - in accepting the benediction of forgiveness), we cannot say what we are doing, we literally *do not know what we are doing*. If one apparently understands their own act of forgiveness, as a corollary, paradoxically, their act has not been successful, and has not been what they take it to have been.

And now we are in a position to state what one might dub *the paradox of forgiveness*:

Any act of forgiveness that is *comprehensible* (and acts which are not, of course, we cannot ultimately succeed in discussing) must involve the forgiver coming to think-feel about the act in question that it is not too bad to forgive (any more/after all). But such re-conceptualisation of the act means that it is never the same act that is forgiven as was originally meant to be forgiven (but was actually at that point unforgiven). And this will apply to any act, however large or small. So then it seems that there is no such thing as forgiving. Because anything still requiring forgiveness is *ipso facto* too big to have been forgiven.



But it also seems as though forgiving is an important human behaviour and attitude, and that it is quite absurd to deny its occurrence. A veritable paradox.<sup>13</sup>

How might this paradox be eliminated? Perhaps the most obvious and best possibility, already hinted at, is a construal of forgiveness as (a) process. Forgiveness is less a thing than a process that must normally be temporally extended, and thus resists analysis, at least along anything remotely resembling traditional philosophical lines.

Well, sure, maybe this is all we can say; but do we now really understand forgiveness any better? Do we understand the *transitions* in this process? I do not think we do. The move toward a processive 'account' of forgiveness is fine, perhaps; but it is essentially a major move away from any substantive account of forgiveness. It is essentially to admit one of my main claims; that, insofar as forgiveness as we imagine it actually occurs, it is incomprehensible, a mystery.

The only other obvious strategy which might avoid this admission is to distinguish rigorously between act and actor ("love the sinner, hate the sin"). Perhaps we might dissolve the paradox by having it be only *acts* whose forgiveness we cannot clearly envision. But it is not clear that this proposal makes sense. As R.G. Collingwood once put it, "[We cannot] escape by an abstraction distinguishing the sinner from the sin. We punish not the sin, but the sinner for his sin; and we forgive not the sinner distinguished from his sin but identified with it and manifested in it. If we punish the sin, we must forgive the sin too..."<sup>14</sup>

So far, then, we are no nearer to understanding how the paradox of forgiveness can be dealt with. We are forced back toward a more 'indirect' route. Let us return to examples which *might* enable us to reach a resolution if there is one available, if only we can understand them aright.

Stanley Cavell's strong misreading of 'Walden' as being *about* writing (and about writing (as living) as (a) moral/perfectionistic endeavour) suggests the following: that we might, with profit, consider whether the writing of 'Walden' was a 'speech act' - a linguistic act of a fairly distinctive illocutionary character - that anyone of his time (or, indeed, of other times) who was in any strong sense a subject of Thoreau's powerful 'critique' could really forgive. If one were the object of one of Thoreau's savage and uncompromising indictments, *could* one, in actual fact, forgive the indicter his savagery?<sup>15</sup>

Think again of Thoreau's Indians. As hinted above, it seems reasonable to suggest that Thoreau is identifying himself much more closely with them than with their persecutors, who purportedly come with the intent of doing good, of being philanthropic. He does not want to play the language-game of philanthropy, of Christianity - and so he mocks it by having the Indians turn out to be more forgiving and Christian than the Jesuits. What the worldly Jesuit torturers are doing is hypocritical, probably unforgivable. But now, how will a Christian be able to take Thoreau's savage wordly mockery here? Can Thoreau possibly be forgiven for writing as he does? He says that there is no odor so bad as that emerging from the 'consoling' voices and the 'persuasive' fires of Christian missionaries. He says that philanthropy, that Christian good works, ought to be run away from with the

desperation with which one flees a desert storm. How can someone working from within a Christian *weltanschauung* forgive such criticism, such near-blasphemy?

And what, similarly, of 'The Satanic Verses'? Well, what are the satanic verses? They are: First, the sections of what became the Koran expressing a willingness to 'compromise' and allow there to be three Gods rather than one, sections that were *withdrawn* as satanic (in origin and nature), after a further revelation in which it was 'shown' to the Prophet that the first revelation in which the compromises were granted was from the voice of the devil, not from Gabriel, not from Allah.

Second, in Rushdie's text, the blasphemous verses written and sung by Baal against Mahound (the Prophet), prompted in part by Mahound's withdrawal of the (first) satanic verses. Baal, who will later in the novel be depicted as in disguise, treating Mahound's wives as prostitutes.

And third, the cruel doggerel and ditties quoted earlier, penned by Saladin Chamcha out of a malicious desire to get revenge on Gibreel for previous perhaps-unforgivable harms and perhaps also with a view to stealing his woman, and sent or voiced anonymously to Farishta Gibreel (Gibreel, who dreamed and lived both the first and second sets of verses). These verses wreck his partnership and love by playing remorselessly on his jealousies and insecurities, thus driving him mad. Perhaps the most unforgivable of all the verses presented in the book.

And more? The senses of (the title) 'The Satanic Verses': might there be another? Well, we have also in 'The Satanic Verses' a distinctive authorial voice, one that tells a tale that is in some measure explicitly satirical, explicitly political, explicitly (though, surprisingly to some of its readers, not by any means exclusively<sup>16</sup>) anti-fundamentalist-Islam, not entirely outside of the space of ethics and politics in the manner which Milan Kundera would like us to be. (Kundera's provocative aestheticist account of 'the novel', one might say, applies quite marvellously to some literature, but surprisingly awkwardly and limitedly to the work of Kundera himself, and of his fellow poetical 'Magical Realists' (such as Rushdie)). It is much *more* plausible, at least in relative terms, to claim, of 'Absalom, ABSALOM!', or of 'Finnegan's Wake', or even of 'The Sea, the Sea', than it is of 'The Joke', or of 'The Unbearable Lightness of being', or of 'The Moor's Last Sigh' (or of 'The Satanic Verses'), that what one is reading is a piece of art which *quite resists* any form of 'translation' of the text into the philosophical, ethical, or political ideas surely animating it, dramatized in its pages. What is 'The Joke' if not a very critical meditation on Stalinism?<sup>17</sup> Likewise, what is 'The Satanic Verses' if not, among other things, a fairly critical meditation on Islam?)

Rushdie's 'authorial voice' will be familiar to all who know his work, but it is perhaps unusually insistent, at certain key points, in (his creation (of),) the peculiar narrative and 'discussions' that go to make up - that *constitute* - 'The Satanic Verses'. I quote here a few central examples, the first being, in effect, a dialogue between Rushdie and his reader:

"Out of thin air: a big bang followed by falling stars. A universal beginning, a miniature echo of the birth of time...the jumbo jet Bostan, Flight A I-420, blew apart without any warning, high above the great, rotting, snow-white illuminated city,

Mahagonny, Babylon, Alphaville. But Gibreel has already named it, I mustn't interfere: Proper London...

Who am I?

What else is there?

...Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha, condemned to this endless but also ending angelicdevilish fall, did not become aware of the moment at which the processes of their transmutation began.

Mutation?

Yessir, but not random...changes took place that would have gladdened the heart of old Mr Lamarck: under extreme environmental pressure, characteristics were acquired.

What characteristics which? Slow down; you think Creation happens in a rush? So then, neither does revelation...take a look at the pair of them. Notice anything unusual? Just two brown men falling hard, nothing so new about that, you may think; climbed too high, got above themselves, flew too close to the sun, is that it?

That's not it. Listen:"<sup>18</sup>

[We then have an account, the *logos* of Rushdie, of how Chamcha and Farishta mysteriously survive the fall from their wrecked jumbo jet, which ends thus:]

"God we were lucky", [Chamcha] said, "How lucky can you get?"

I know the truth, obviously, I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and - potence, I'm making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope. Chamcha willed it and Farishta did what was willed.

Which was the miracle worker?

Of what type - angelic, satanic - was Farishta's song?

Who am I?"<sup>19</sup>

[And here is 'the authorial voice' again, in the allegory of the birth of Islam (in God (or is it God? how could one tell? - the central theological question in 'The Satanic Verses') talking through Gabriel/Gibreel) given us under the heading, 'Mahound' (cf. 'Mohammed'):]

"Question: What is the opposite of faith?

Not disbelief. Too final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief.

Doubt.

The human condition, but what of the angelic? Halfway between Allahgod and homosap, did they ever doubt? They did: challenging God's will one day they hid muttering beneath the Throne, daring to ask forbidden things, antiquations. Is it right that. Could it be argued that...// [But] Angels are easily pacified; turn them into instruments and they'll play your harpy tune. Human beings are tougher nuts, can doubt anything, even the evidence of their own eyes. Of behind-their-own-eyes. Of what, as they sink heavy-lidded, transpires behind closed peepers...angels, they don't have much in the way of a will. To will is to disagree; not to submit; to dissent.

I know: devil talk. Shaitan interrupting Gibreel.

Me?"<sup>20</sup>

[Above, Rushdie toys explicitly with the satanic voice being his. As again, perhaps, here]:

"In this city, the businessman-turned-prophet, Mahound, is founding one of the world's great religions; and has arrived, on this day, his birthday, at the crisis of life. There is a voice whispering in his ear: *what kind of idea are you? Man-or-mouse?* We know that voice. We've heard it once before."<sup>21</sup>

And, further, let us ask directly what has been written by the author 'for whom' this authorial voice perhaps speaks? Well, among other things, the three sets of verses mentioned above, the first two of which are of course quite unacceptable to much of mainstream Islam. Now, one of course ought not simplistically to identify Rushdie with the words of his characters - to this degree he ought to escape the kind of responsibility for his words that Thoreau could less easily avoid. But what of 'The Satanic Verses'? A book, a book *'of verses'*, penned by Rushdie - can its production, given much of its method, expect understanding, let alone forgiveness, from those who must (for instance) see part of its essence (if they get as far as reading it) to be both a mockery of the Prophet by having it be 'as though' his wives were prostitutes (who really loved a writer more than him or God), and (still worse) a virtually explicit claim (*via* a caustic and brilliant dramatisation of the scene and context of revelation) that the central Muslim revelations ought to be considered unreliable, given that *no-one* can infallibly identify the valid ones as opposed to the fake ones. Is Rushdie's creation itself satanic? Satanic verses, through containing certain particular satiric verses and atheistic *etc.* discussions?

These issues boil down to the following question: Can Rushdie's brilliant panoramic novel of allegories, whose central 'question' is perhaps 'What is unforgivable?', escape the reading anyone at all worldly is naturally drawn to: the reading of the book is an allegory (in part, a self-fulfilling one) of its author's fate? The inquiry, 'What is unforgivability?', what makes an act unforgivable?, can anyone forgive 'the unforgivable?', becomes the question, '*Do we have any example to help us answer these questions better than the example of Salman Rushdie's penning of 'The Satanic Verses'?*'

There of course is a massive risk here, in this re-interpretation of the question concerning forgiveness; in this interpretation of 'The Satanic Verses'; in this, my own allegory of reading. The risk is in mentioning Rushdie in *this* way: That one will be complicit in the occlusion of his novel as literary achievement by the fate of its author. Must Rushdie suffer the fate of Shade in V. Nabokov's 'Pale Fire', his poem marvellously transfigured and horribly wrecked by an accident of death and the consequent extraordinary misreading foisted upon him by a mad genius of criticism (Kinbote)? More salient still in the present case (because non-fictive): Must he suffer the fate of Kurt Cobain, Anne Sexton, or (still more so) of Sylvia Plath, the reading of whose poetry has been almost entirely constructed around the (chance) fact of her self-inflicted death (and in certain respects pretty awful life)? People seem to find it impossible to read wonderful poems, magical verses such as 'The Birthday Present', 'The Rabbit-Catcher', 'Words', or 'The Applicant', without reading into them the catastrophes that had 'spawned' these works - and the one dread 'catastrophe' that succeeded them, her suicide.<sup>22</sup>

(This of course is part of what Kundera rightly rails against. The tyranny of the artist's perceived life over his or her work is a particularly disastrous instance of the excessive

invasion of the private by the public in a modern world whose intellectual elites *at least* ought to know better.<sup>23</sup>)

Again, then: Should we not try to read Rushdie's works as though the (possible) death of their author has no relevance to them? And this is certainly what Rushdie himself has asked us to do.<sup>24</sup>

And indeed, I think we should - try. It is, of course, difficult - try reading "Pale Fire" without thinking of Zembla. 'The Satanic Verses' is unavailable - irrecoverable - in its pre-(anti)-religious-propaganda state; but that by no means implies that we have to treat it as that *and nothing else*, that we have to regard it as a focus for historical study as the centre-piece of a famous dispute, and (e.g.) mine it reductively for salacious evidence for Rushdie's guilt! For it is: a great *novel*, a uniquely-valuable *dramatic* meditation on the concepts of revelation, of forgiveness, of personal change; and it is often very funny, or quirky, or beautiful, besides.

So, we certainly ought to (try to) read 'The Satanic Verses' as much more than the premonition of a death sentence.

But we can hardly help it if we read it as that too.<sup>25</sup>

And, while we surely ought most vociferously to defend Rushdie's right to publish, and even more so given that what he has written here is arguably not bad art, but great art (for bad art shades into not being art at all, and thus not being so worthy of defence; the greater the art, the more vigorously the rights of all of access to it must be supported and preserved), and while we ought therefore I think to speak out against those (such as John Le Carré) who serves as apologists for the *fatwa-istas*, and engage, if necessary, in Thoreauvian risks to preserve the possibility of loudly saying the unpalatable, of pursuing one's vision (e.g.) of free art and of a free, just, secular society; *nevertheless*, one ought perhaps simultaneously to maintain that Rushdie must in some sense - perhaps in a sense familiar to readers of Cavell - take *responsibility* for his words. What does this amount to? It amounts, among other things, to recognising plainly that the *genre* of the novel does not provide *carte blanche*, that Kundera's (and Rushdie's) dream of art as non-truth without consequences is an unrealizable ideal (at least, that its realisation would have many costs - e.g. the elimination of the category of the novel rightly legible as having a moral point (compare for example Rorty on Nabokov and Orwell; and note, as I have already implied, that Rushdie and Kundera do not 'escape' being morality-minded, and, PLAINLY, dramatise *ideas*, including political and religious ideas, in their texts)); above all, that Rushdie's act of writing must have *been predictably unforgivable* (as far as many, from particular communities, are concerned). Yes, in regretful sum: Rushdie's act of writing 'The Satanic Verses' was, for many adherents of one of the world's leading religions - and must have been known ahead of time, to a considerable extent, to have been - unforgivable, heretical, satan-esque.

The pessimistic conclusion that I draw from my general arguments, and from the specific case both of the drama enacted in the pages of 'The Satanic Verses', and from the very fact of the book's composition (of the self-conscious composition of a book like that), and from the lovely irony in and of the example from Thoreau with which I began,

is: *everything wrong is unforgivable*; only some things manage to leave the category of wrong; and sometimes people simply move on. I think that we will not escape the paradox of forgiveness through meditating on Thoreau or Rushdie or Kundera; I think, rather, they *illustrate* to us its depth.

"But this is more absurd than ever. We plainly have all encountered real examples of forgiveness, indeed we meet them even in parts of 'The Satanic Verses' (that you have not quoted), too. One may think something was wrong, but yet forgive the perpetrator, especially in cases where the wrong was not as desperately serious as those you have tended to focus on." Well, I don't know. Those plain-spoken, plain-speaking sentences 'read' well; but I still think that what we have seen is that there is an important sense in which we don't know what forgiveness *is*, what it means. We have no explication of it, as one might have grounds to expect of a complex concept (And whereas we do have available to us an explication of, e.g., apology). Forgiveness is possible, presumably - though we have touched on the extent to which it is, for example, certainly relative to a cultural *milieu* - but in any case I don't think we understand *how* it is possible.

My conclusion, insofar as I have reached one, is perhaps best expressed thus: that *there is the unforgivable*. It shows itself...it thrusts itself into people's faces, lives; but it is not as mystical as its counterpart: forgiveness. Forgiveness, forgiving, is, I want to say, *a mystery*, something that only a saint can hope consistently to practice, and that not even a saint can understand. It is not mere Popery to insist that to err IS human; to forgive, *divine*. And so one is reminded finally and again of the appalling odor of goodness tainted, of which Thoreau speaks. His 'reductio' of the pretensions of the Jesuits to having a Christian (a forgiving) spirit is intriguingly open-textured: their smell is one of carrion, human *and* divine. In a certain sense, my point is that forgiveness even among humans is always as impenetrable a phenomenon as the instance of near-forgiveness ironically described by Thoreau. Forgiveness may be said to be divine, saintly, whenever it occurs: it is a mystery, albeit one played out among (certain) ordinary people.<sup>26</sup>

Forgiving is something that is *sui generis*, marvellous, unique. There are other similarly *sui generis* phenomena 'directed' backward in time, such as punishment and revenge; but one feels that it would be little loss to the world if these were lost (or not understood).<sup>27</sup> How *wonderful* it would be to understand forgiveness, to understand how the paradox of forgiveness is resolved. (Because, in many people's lives, astonishingly, it does seem on a myriad occasions to be resolved, or at least dissolved through being passed over, in acts of love and practical wisdom). But the fact is that we do *not* really understand what forgiveness is. Or, at very best, we understand it only imminently to our experience of it.

But, a consolation: how much more *wonderful simply to behold or to give or to receive forgiveness*, despite (and because of?) its costs.

Though that is not always possible. Could one blame Rushdie at all if *he* were unable to forgive those who claim, *somewhat* plausibly (except that they mostly haven't read it to know that their claim is plausible), that his great book on unforgivability - his sparkling meditation on 'the unforgivable' - is itself unforgivable. If I were him, I would in turn not

be able to forgive those who, unlike Thoreau's Indians, cannot (and do not even want to (try to)) perform the preternatural and *sui generis* task of forgiving (the unforgivable) - in this case, the writing of a book that, as I have suggested Rushdie *clearly* must have foreseen, strikes to the very core of their *weltanschauung*.

So one should not blame Salman Rushdie (or, likewise, the apparently-misanthropic Thoreau), for not forgiving those who would deaden or kill his words, or even him. Even if, to paraphrase Ludwig Wittgenstein,<sup>28</sup> those he cannot forgive would have fighting words such as these that follow that they could say back: "I see a man saying over and to himself, "This is unforgivable, this is unforgivable," while pointing to a book. It would surely not be absurd of me to say: "Do not think that this man is insane. He is not exactly doing philosophy. He is enacting part of the world as he and many others have found it.""

## Endnotes

1. I wish to thank and acknowledge here all those many good hearts who have taught me so much, directly and indirectly, (I am thinking here *particularly* perhaps of Graham Read and of Anne de Vivo), about forgiveness (*and its limits*). Without these people this paper would never have been written - for I would not have known enough concerning its subject-matter. Thanks also to Doug Sobers, Kayli Rogers, Rachel Young, Jackie Dawson and Richard Samuels, for discussion.
2. *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton U.Press, 1971; ed. Shanley. Cf. also the entry for Dec. 30 1856 in Thoreau's *Journal*). We shall not in the present context take time to consider the question of the *historical accuracy* of Thoreau's story concerning certain Native Americans' purported peculiar reactions to their being tortured. Though it might at least be worth mentioning that the vast scale of the atrocities suffered by the native peoples of the Americas at the hands of various invaders of European extraction could *quite* as easily stand as an instance of unforgivability as others we shall consider below. For documentation, see e.g. Noam Chomsky's *Year 501: The conquest continues* (Boston: South End, 1992).
3. We do not imagine these Indians saying to themselves, "That's unforgivable!" One might of course ask here rather more insistently: but *do/did* the Indians forgive? Is that the correct description of the concept they were operating with? A reason for doubting that it is, though not one we shall have space here to explore or support: perhaps their *weltanschauung* was much more different from the Christian one than was, say Thoreau's or Nietzsche's. On the other hand, perhaps, consider the words of this traditional Sioux prayer: "Before I judge my friend, let me wear his moccasins for two long weeks and share the path that he would take in wearing them. Then I should understand and not condemn." (See also n.2, above).
4. One notes, here as elsewhere, the insistently mythological, literary-referential, light-humorous quality of Rushdie's writing. But neither this nor his emphasis on the plurality of human (and others') voices in his text precludes his writing about plausibly legible as making for example certain theological points, as containing certain pointed satires, *etc.*, as we shall see. The duality here is partly captured in Nadime Gordimer's blurb on the dust-jacket of the book: "Abundant in enchanting narratives and amazingly peopled, *The Satanic Verses* is both a philosophy and an Arabian nights entertainment."
5. *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking, 1988), pp.442-7. It may be worth noting that the novel closes with some remarkable apparent mutual forgiveness between Chamcha and his father, Chamcha having been remarkably granted life - a rebirth - by a mad (and murderous? suicidal?) Gibreel. (Though not having been forgiven).
6. One matter which I will but barely address here is: What are the special features characterizing self-forgiveness? We might distinguish two types of self-forgiveness: (1) A type without very many special features: forgiveness of one's past self, of oneself treated as another (see notes 28, below; and also p.260 of Ian Hacking's *Re-writing the soul: Multiple Personality Disorder and the sciences of memory* (Princeton: Princeton U.Press,



1995)); (2) A more special (would-be? ultimately incoherent?) type: forgiveness of one's present self for some fault or disposition.

Just one more word on this in the present context: "Forgive thyself" arguably must be a harder precept to live by even than "Know thyself". For the latter is arguably a prerequisite for the former, which thus requires additional work.

7. For a real-life example in a different register, consider these quotations from Bishop D. Tutu, the Head of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission: "The point about forgiveness is that we are opening the door to a new beginning. This is different from justice - which says that we are doling out just deserts." Tutu illustrates the concept of justice with a story. "This man posed for a portrait to be painted and, when he came to see the finished article, he said to the artist, 'Oh, this doesn't do me any justice.' And the artist says, 'Sir, you don't need any justice, you need mercy.' ... Tutu favours as broad a process of forgiveness as possible, provided that those who perpetrated murders and tortures can prove they did it for political motives... "If you don't look the beast in the eye, then that beast is going to haunt you forever. Forgetting is dangerous. You cease to be a human being if you forget." ("Sweet Truth," interview with Phillip van Niekirk, *The Observer*, 24 Dec. 95.)

8. The latest book-length effort to comprehend forgiveness philosophically is Haber's *Forgiveness* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991). Haber claims, amazingly, that *trying* to forgive can be a sufficient condition for forgiving, and that a speech act analysis of forgiveness can thus cope fully with the concept, i.e. To say sincerely at a moment "I forgive you" (or even just "I'm trying to forgive you!") amounts normally to forgiveness. Clearly, I consider this position to be wrong, to be hopelessly over-optimistic.

9. This interlocutorial remark is again roughly the position argued for in Haber, *op.cit.*

10. And if it be objected that such a locution is invariably a cover for a feeling of hurt or resentment that continues, then we have not as yet in any case been presented with a genuine case of forgiveness! (Forgiveness requires not bearing ill will. Saying that there is nothing to forgive *insincerely* thus obviously does not qualify!) In cases where there actually *was* no fault, and saying "Sorry" is recognised even by the person saying it as a mere politeness, it is even clearer that there is no cause (and no space) here for forgiveness to be required or given.

11. And, *contra* Haber, an act that is still in one's mind - that has not been forgotten - and is still thought of as wrong, only needs mental rehearsal oftentimes for one to be back resenting again. Forgiveness arguably cannot withstand reminescence.

12. When you've (apparently) forgiven something, haven't you necessarily reconceptualised it such that it doesn't need forgiving any more?! My point hereabouts is supported by the line taken by Jeffrie Murphy in his debate with Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge: U.Cambridge Pr., 1988); though I would not wish to foist on him my Zenoian metaphors here.

13. The closest I have found in 'the literature' to a recognition of this putative paradox is the approach sometimes taken by sophisticated theological thinkers of forgiveness. Cf. for instance the following quotation from T.N. Trzyna's *Forgiveness: A review of a moral conflict in eighteenth century English thought* (University of Washington Ph.D., 1977): "[Reinhold] Niebuhr finds the imperative to forgive paradoxical, and yet he identifies it as the keystone of Christian morality: 'The crown of Christian ethics is the doctrine of forgiveness... Love as forgiveness is the most difficult and impossible of oral achievements. Yet it is a possibility of the impossibility of love is recognised and sin in the self is acknowledged. Therefore an ethic culminating in an impossible possibility produces its choicest fruit in terms of the doctrine of forgiveness, the demand that the evil in the other shall be borne without vindictiveness because the evil in the self is known.'"

14. "Punishment and Forgiveness," p.128, from *Essays in Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Pr., 1989; ed. Boucher). Moreover, could the act be separated/eliminated from the actor without essentially treating that person as mad or at least dissociative? We don't respect the integrity of persons if we say - "That wasn't you"; rather, we treat them as akin to sufferers from Multiple Personality Disorder...

15. Consider for instance the following quote from S. Mulhall's "Thoreau: Writing, Mourning, Neighbouring," in his *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's recounting of the ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994). "The religion and civilization which are barbaric and heathenish build splendid temples; but what you might call Christianity does not" (*Walden*, ch. 1, para. 78). Cavell comments: 'The point is to get us to withhold a word, to hold ourselves before it, so that we may assess our allegiance to it, to the criteria in terms of which we apply it.' (*Senses of Walden*, p.66)." Cf. also Thoreau's ferocious *Journal* entries for (e.g.) Nov. 16, 1851, Aug. 18, 1858, and Nov. 16, 1858. If Thoreau had been writing a few centuries earlier - or mainly with Islam in mind - it seems likely that he would have spent more than one night in jail; it seems likely that he would have more or less shared Rushdie's fate. Especially (? - contrast p.26 of Kundera's *Testaments Betrayed*) as Thoreau lacked the 'alibi' of being a novelist.

16. I am thinking for instance of the often powerfully moving portrayal of the pilgrimage to the sea, which ends with sceptical onlookers seeing the pilgrims march across the sea bed to Mecca - at the same time as the pilgrims drown. See also p.27 of Kundera's *Testaments Betrayed* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), and n.17, below.

17. Thinking of unbearable lightness: though Tomas's and Tereza's political acts rebound to haunt them, are they not shown, even argued, to have been the right thing to have done all the same, even in a Universe where things only happen once? (Kundera likes to portray himself as an aestheticist, one might argue, just because so little of his writing is easily read as simply aesthetic, and he likes to regret this fact! Cf. for example p.174f. of his (*op.cit.*)); a book which also includes a spirited and fairly effective defence against the charge that *The Satanic Verses* can be charged with the crime of blasphemy. Kundera's defence centres on the novelistic/aesthetic orientation of Rushdie's book, in which, so he argues, there are no heroes - and certainly no lauding of the West over the Middle East. See below, including note 23 & n.24.

18. *The Satanic Verses*, pp.4-5. [Spaced out ellipses are in the original].

19. *Ibid.*, p.10. The next, deflationary, line reads: "Let's put it this way: who has the best tunes?" We hear some (of Salman Rushdie's) different tunes later in the novel, for example in the next passage quoted. We might also note one of the sections of the book in which Saladin Chamcha becomes devilish: "Stories rushed across the city in every direction...*no smoke without fire*, people said; it was a precarious state of affairs...that would send the whole thing higher than the sky. Priests became involved, adding another unstable element - the linkage between the term *black* and the sin *blasphemy* - to the mix...He opened his eyes; which still glowed pale and red." (*Ibid.*, p.288, and p.294).

20. *Ibid.*, p.92.

21. *Ibid.*, p.95. If there were space, it would be interesting here to enter into a whole discourse on analogies and differences between the creation of the novel/the Creation of the world/the creation of a religion, and to speak also the democracy of dreaming, of dream-creation. See p.390f. On p.392, we find a quite startling anticipation of a possible fate of Rushdie: "In the old days you mocked the recitation," Mahound said in the hush. "Then, too, these people enjoyed your mockery. Now you return to dishonour my house, and it seems that once again you succeed in bringing the worst out of the people." So [Baal] was sentenced to be beheaded, within the hour, and as soldier manhandled him out of the tent towards the killing ground, he shouted over his shoulder: "Whores and writers, Mahound. We are the people you can't forgive." Mahound replied, "Writers and whores. I see no difference here."

22. This in my view entails a tragic loss of much of the great quality of Plath's art. I hope to ignore the occlusion of her work by her life and death in a futurer paper on her work that will focus obsessively on that work as poetic/dream-work, and (most of all) as fine literary/grammatical display, in something like Kundera's non-ethical and non-political space.

23. Cf. p.20f, p.37f and p.123ff of Kundera's *op.cit.* But my question here again has to be: When Kundera brilliantly attacks the *roman à clef* (p.264f), or the reading of novels as allegories of the author's lives (*passim*), or indeed the kind of writing found in the likes of Orwell (on p.224f.; "it is political thought disguised as a novel"), *does* his attack successfully establish that Rushdie's work (or indeed his own) contains none of these elements (is it clear that Rushdie's 'Mahound' is a figure of a totally different *genre* from Brod's St. Garta (or Orwell's O'Brien)?)? Or, indeed, on the other foot, does Kundera establish that these elements can never be of value, even within what is transparently or transcendently a novel? Plainly, I believe the answer to these questions has to be 'No'.

24. In his pamphlet, "Is nothing sacred?"

Our task is made no easier by the course of some of Rushdie's recent writings, however - I refer to his fiction, not to his non-fictional addressings of and reckonings with the *fatwa*, etc. For example, his *Haroun and the sea of stories* is easily legible as a *morality tale* in which Haroun and his guru(s) have their lives threatened while they take on the

Shah of Blah, who is trying to drain the world of all art and storry-writing. The ruler of the country which issued the *fatwa* on Rushdie prior to its issuer (Ayatollah Khomeini) was of course the Shah of *Iran*. It can hardly be to Rushdie's surprise, surely, that the Shah of *Blah*, who turns all talk and art into anodyne stuff, *is* legible as a thin veil of Khomeini. *Haroun and the sea of stories* is easily read, then, as a wish-fulfillment allegorisation of Salman's sea of troubles and desert of light stories and hopes of release from his condition, of possibilities of being read as an aesthete (as Kundera also dreams of being read), as a story-teller not responsible to any state etc., etc.

25. I think that Kundera's harsh tone in addressing those who read Rushdie's book as the invitation to his own possible future beheading - or (worse still) who don't read the book at all, pronounce against it on grounds of taste, not offending people, or religion, and then defend it merely on the abstract grounds of free speech rights - is to some extent justified; but his tone is too harsh. For, as I say, the historical situation in which this novel (in which Rushdie too) finds itself (himself) is not one which we can avoid or wish away by invoking Rabelasian days gone by.

26. One thing that comes to mind here as Joyce Carol Oates's "Introduction" to *Walden* (*op.cit.*, p.ix): "Of our classic American writers, Henry David Thoreau is the supreme poet of...mystery. Who is he? Where does he stand?...He boasts of having the capacity to stand as remote from himself as from another."

27. Cf. also the difficulty (an inadequate word) in comprehending altruism. Though what one ought NOT to say here is: "So certain things are cognitively closed to us" (As though it would help AT ALL to imagine that (say) Martians apparently have no problem comprehending forgiveness (or altruism).).

28. Wittgenstein, of whom it might be said that, due to a certain excess of zeal and obsession with 'purity' on his part, he more than any other philosopher found difficulty forgiving himself for his intellectual sins. Arguably, for instance, he castigated himself even for sins he had not committed, sins which were only attributable to him through the kind of harsh misreading - the kind of abstraction from a nuanced position of a dubious picture - that he (more or less knowingly - and problematically) practised on Augustine and others. He strongly misread his past self in an unfortunately reductive fashion, thus bucking the usual trend among philosophers - to read oneself as having always been basically saying *the same thing*, which one is continually saying better than ever. This tendency on Wittgenstein's part comes over particularly strongly in some of his alienated treatments of 'the author of the 'Tractatus'', in which he reads pictures that he entertained as though they were systematic theories; in which he ignores the passages in which he anticipated many of his later 'positions'; and above all in which he singularly neglects to consider the 'frame' (the Preface and concluding sections) of the 'Tractatus', a 'frame' which is best read as acknowledging that the 'Tractatus', like Wittgenstein's later work, *engages* our temptations to mire ourselves in nonsense, for the purpose of enabling us to work through and avoid such temptations. Such was Wittgenstein's unjustified repugnance for his early masterpiece, that it is reasonable to go so far as to say, as I have suggested elsewhere, that his uniqueness goes further than was indicated above: he is the only writer I know of who can quite plausibly be said to suffer from an anxiety of influence

*from himself.* He couldn't forgive his own earlier tendencies toward error, and so, unable to forgive himself, he blasted his almost flawless early product, the 'Tractatus', as though it were written by another. He feared in his later work being tainted by (the odor of, the (reified) substance of) his early work; he feared being influence by his (earlier) self; and thus he tried to distance that self, 'the author of the 'Tractatus', far more from himself than is actually reasonable, based on the best available readings of the texts. He thought at the time of writing 'Philosophical Investigations' that he was looking at the reality of his great early work, when actually he was looking only at a frame through which one could choose, uncharitably, to look at it (as opposed, unfortunately, to noticing *its* frame).