

HELL ANDBACK

Selected Essays

Tim Parks

Also by Tim Parks

Fiction

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Loving Roger
Family Planning
Goodness
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Here Comes Salman

[Salman Rushdie]

'The art [of the novel], wrote Schopenhauer, 'lies in setting the inner life into the most violent motion with the smallest possible expenditure of outer life.' Salman Rushdie would not agree. It is not that there is no inner life in his novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. Nor indeed does one feel that Rushdie would require any external occurrences at all to set his fertile mind in motion. It is just that the sheer quantity of events that crowd these 575 pages is such as to overwhelm any depiction of inner life or any mind's attempt to grasp the half of them. For brevity's sake, more elaborate syntax will have to give way to the list – as so often it does in Rushdie's prose – if we are to offer the slightest idea of what is between these covers.

We have, in the first third of the book: Bombay in the forties and fifties, with the immensely complex shenanigans of various extended families, scams, superstitions, Zoroastrianism, arson, cricket, politics, suicides, murders, love at first sight, cinema interiors, mythology, rock music and goat farming (the inner life is present most strikingly in the form of bizarre psychic experiences).

Then: London in the sixties with more of most of the above, plus drugs, sex, pirate radio stations, music business entrepreneurs, a delightfully erotic young lady who can pass through walls, Chelsea boutiques, record contracts, a car accident, deep coma and intimations of a variety of catastrophes. In the Bombay section I omitted to mention an earthquake and some lessons in photography. We discover that Lou Reed is a woman and that

Kennedy survived both Lee Harvey Oswald and the second gunman on the grassy knoll, only to be murdered later by the same bullet that slew his brother (and incumbent president) Bobby.

Finally we have New York and the US in general through the seventies, eighties and nineties, with more selections of the above (especially the mythology), plus some rock concerts (though still fewer than the murders and earthquakes). There is stardom and its penthouses, the discovery that 'alternative worlds' are in 'tectonic collision', a recording-contract dispute with global ramifications, more extremely weird psychic experiences and even Orphic expeditions to bring back the dead (though this may just be a morbid form of voyeurism), and – to close – earthquake, death, murder and, at the last – why not? – happy love.

In his novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Rushdie has his charming young protagonist say: 'I always thought storytelling was like juggling . . . You keep a lot of different tales in the air, and juggle them up and down, and if you're good you don't drop any.' In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* Rushdie tosses up a great many balls, most of them very large and decidedly colourful. Certainly he is determined to dazzle. Whether he manages to keep them usefully in the air or not is something it is hard at first for the reader to judge, since the pages are very soon, with respect, so full of balls that the mind can only boggle. Rushdie's dazzle is not of the variety that illuminates or clarifies. He seems nervous of letting more than a page or two go by without some melodramatic event to distract our attention. In the London section, I see I forgot to mention a potion-brewing, fashion-queen witch-murderer. I also forgot to say that the whole story is told by one who declares himself one of the world's great sceptics and rationalists.

Along with a considerable school of critical thought, Rushdie is among those who have sought over recent years to turn the energy of the 'multicultural' and the hybrid into an elaborate

aesthetic with a serious moral and political slant. Most readers will be familiar with the way his books mix different narrative traditions, confuse the historical and fantastical, East and West, gods and men and, not least, characters and author. So when something over halfway through *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, its Indian rock-star hero, now resident in England, finally records the song that will make him famous, it is evident from the novel's discussion of this turning point that Rushdie is inviting analogies with his own work. Shortly before the recording we read: 'He hasn't fully grasped how to make of multiplicity an accumulating strength rather than a frittery weakness.'

But when the breakthrough comes, with the psychic hero boldly firing his support musicians and recording instrument after instrument one over the other all on his own, the new star is able to announce:

What I want the music to say is that I don't have to choose . . . I need it to show that I don't have to be this guy or that guy, the fellow from over there or the fellow from here, the person within me that I call my twin, or whoever's out there in whatever it is I get flashes of beyond the sky, or just the man standing in front of you right now. I'll be all of them, I can do that. Here comes everybody, right? That's where it came from the idea of playing all the instruments. It was to prove that point.

The energy of the Rushdie aesthetic is thus to come from a rejection of the pathos of choice, of that need, with which most of us will be all too familiar, to become one thing or another, 'this guy or that guy', taking decisions from day to day. Instead, everything is to be maintained in a fizz of promise, potential, multiplicity and openness. It will be noted at once that such an attitude, repeatedly expressed throughout Rushdie's work, falls easily into line with that area of contemporary culture which likes

to associate its desire to remain for ever young with the political ideals of tolerance and peaceful cohabitation. And indeed for Rushdie, the hybrid, or simply the multiform, comes to be seen as an antidote to that fundamentalism which has treated him so scandalously. Of the Moor in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, he remarked in an interview, 'he was a poetic type, which means, I suppose, that he was someone in whom all the cultures flowed and therefore was unable to take absolutist views'. Albeit with the uncertain glue of that 'I suppose', the aesthetic and the political are wedded together. Being 'poetic' has to do with entertaining various cultures and remaining, as it were, suspended between them and their various implications. In the confrontation between 'the pure and the impure, the sacred and the profane', Rushdie is, he tells us, 'on the side of the profane', the melting pot.

The more one considers this line of argument, the more one suspects that certain of its assumptions are flawed. In *Haroun*, Rushdie posits a world where all the stories there are flow together in beautiful harmony in one great ocean. An evil 'cultmaster' wishes to destroy this ocean. Novelist and critic Hilary Mantel glossed the idea appreciatively thus: 'This tyrant hates stories because he aims to rule the world, and fiction creates an alternative world, a multiplicity of worlds he can never command.' In this view of things – almost a critical orthodoxy these days – storytelling is seen as inherently liberal in so far as it offers alternatives to some outside-the-story reality. The story is thus understood as of its nature a hybrid on the factual world we know, its alternatives affording imaginative escape from that world's political powers.

But is this the case? Do stories flow together in tolerant harmony distinct from our 'factual' world? Aren't they rather, with their rival visions, in urgent conflict with each other to establish what the nature of our world is, what the 'facts' really are? Aren't evil 'cultmasters' themselves supported by elaborate

stories within the terms of which they do not consider themselves evil at all? Far from objecting to stories in general (usually they will be well content to have people read innocuous tales that have nothing to do with anything), don't they rather object to those particular stories that undermine their own? Good storytelling is always seductive and potentially coercive (*Midnight's Children* was a most seductive tale). It draws us, powerfully, to its own position, which, however complex and open to interpretation, may be very far from compatible with other positions. Its enchantments, like Prospero's, are enchantments that bind as much as they please, insisting that reality is this way or that. It is in this sense that Shelley thought of poets, not as charmingly sensitive people unwilling, as Rushdie's Moor, to choose between rival systems, but as 'the unacknowledged legislators of the World'.

'The only leaps of faith I'm capable of,' we read in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, 'are those required by the creative imagination, by fictions that don't pretend to be fact, and so end up telling the truth.' Perhaps when one begins to feel that it is enough to write fiction to be engaged on the right side of some global moral battle and indeed to 'end up telling the truth', then there is a risk of growing careless. For just as it is notoriously difficult to do anything without making choices and becoming this guy or that (Rushdie's musician, after all, becomes the guy who dismissed his support musicians), so, and this is particularly true of writing, the things one merely 'ends up' saying will rarely bear examination.

The Ground Beneath Her Feet is narrated in the first person by the self-styled rationalist and war photographer Rai Merchant, the secret third in a love triangle whose other members, Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara, are the book's larger-than-life rock-star heroes. Vina dies in an earthquake at the beginning of the book and Rai explains his decision to tell his tale thus:

We all looked to her [Vina] for peace, yet she herself was not at

peace. And so I've chosen to write here, publicly, what I can no longer whisper into her private ear: that is, everything. I have chosen to tell our story, hers and mine and Ormus Cama's, all of it, every last detail, and then maybe she can find a sort of peace here, on the page, in this underworld of ink and lies, that respite which was denied her by life. So I stand at the gate of the inferno of language, there's a barking dog and a ferryman waiting and a coin under my tongue for the fare.

Rushdie loves the grand narrative gesture and there is a sprint for the portentous in his writing which often comes at the expense of sense. Rai chooses to tell the story so that Vina can find 'peace on the page'. Presumably, as a man who insistently pronounces himself a rationalist, he means so that *he* can find peace (the dead, after all, for a rationalist, are beyond our reach). As we approach the end of the book, however, we discover that Rai is now blissfully happy with a new girlfriend. Why then is he writing? Whose peace is at stake? And why, if the book is inspired by a need to get a grip on their love triangle, will it have to include so much extraneous material? Again, if the page is, as he so melodramatically claims, an 'underworld of ink and lies', is it reasonably a place where one would expect to find peace anyway?

Then what are we to make of the word 'lies' after Rai's confessional solemnity in the opening lines of the paragraph? And why does he use the word 'respite', a temporary cessation of the painful, if what we are talking about here is a final laying to rest? The more one progresses with Rushdie's novel the more one feels that its most formidable enemy will not be any evil fundamentalism, but simply a moment's attention on the part of the wakeful reader.

There are further questions to ask about this passage. Since the story of Orpheus has been amply introduced only a few pages earlier with Vina singing Eurydice's part from Gluck's opera shortly before disappearing, presumably swallowed up by the

shaky ground beneath her feet, must we then understand the narrator's entry to the underworld as an Orphic expedition to recover the lost lover rather than, as he claims, to lay her to rest? What would Rai's new girlfriend think about such a project? The idea of a narrative as a doomed expedition of retrieval is one I find fascinating, but this particular ball is quickly dropped, the analogy is not repeated, and in any event we will shortly discover that Rai is tone-deaf and hence hardly an Orpheus candidate. It is rather his friend and rival, Ormus the musician, who will assume the roll of Orpheus obsessively seeking the dead Vina (by casting about for lookalikes) in the final chapters of the book. Why then was the parallel so dramatically invited?

The love triangle is fairly static and its story is quickly told. Growing up in Bombay, the awesomely handsome and musically talented Ormus Cama fritters away his teens seducing the local girls. After spending her early childhood in the USA, the slightly younger Vina Apsara, of mixed Asian-Indian and Greek-American parentage, comes to Bombay where she will eventually find herself living with the family of the, again slightly younger, Rai Merchant. Vina is awesomely beautiful and has an extraordinary voice. The nine-year-old Rai falls immediately and ir retrievably in love with her. Shortly afterwards the twelve-year-old Vina and the nineteen-year-old Ormus fall immediately and ir retrievably in love with each other.

From this point on, a series of delays stretches out developments over a lifetime (thus allowing Rushdie to fill the spaces with all kinds of digressions and sub-plots). With surprising chivalry, Ormus agrees to wait until Vina is sixteen before so much as kissing her. Four years. They enjoy a night's delirious pleasure (which Rai is able to describe in detail), but then Ormus's hasty offer of marriage causes Vina to run off and the following morning complicated coincidences lead the couple to lose sight of each other for ten years, during which time Vina will, if only fleetingly, become Rai's lover. Having moved to America,

continuation (for the claim is frequently made) of a satisfying oral tradition, this only reminds us of certain prevailing and largely literary notions of the modern. In short, and again like his rock star Ormus, Rushdie makes no secrets of 'playing all the instruments. 'Here comes everybody' – an improbable quotation from *Finnegans Wake*, afforded through a first-person narrator (not present when the words were spoken) to a young Indian rock musician – thus tends to mean, here comes Salman.

While the mixed and hybrid is justified both by its liberal openness and its reflection of a contemporary global situation, Rushdie's insistent use of hyperbole is to take us to those extremes where nature may betray what lies beyond the 'curtain of *maya*'. The two vocations come together in the book's use of mythology. Inflated by frequent comparison to mythological figures taken from both Western and Eastern traditions, Ormus and Vina, Eastern practitioners of what we have always thought of as a Western musical form, are to be held up as potential archetypes, suggesting a deep pattern of truth beneath the superficial clutter of daily reality. Typical passages read thus: 'Glistening serpents of hair lay across the wooden veranda. Medusa. It crossed my mind [Rai is referring to a time when he was nine years old] that we should look at her [Vina's] face only in a burnished shield lest we be turned to stone.' Or again: 'Many different versions of the first encounter between Vina Apsara and Ormus Cama are presently in circulation . . . depending on which journal you read you might have heard that he transformed himself into a white bull and carried her away on his back . . .'

These mythological allusions are then set off against the narrator's declared scepticism to generate a dialectic between two opposed interpretations of life, the one usually, though not exclusively, associated with the mystical East, the other with the rationalist tradition of the West. The two views come into most immediate conflict in Rai's relationship with the mythical and myth-hungry Vina. Of her interest in the sacred music of India,

the narrator announces: 'I must conclude – and this is hard for a lifelong sceptic like me to write – that what Vina wanted was a glimpse of the unknowable.'

However interesting Rushdie's intentions – and there can be little doubt that he means this to be the intellectual core of the book – the dialectic never convinces. The project is dogged by two extravagant decisions, or perhaps they might best be described, within the terms of Rushdie's poetics, as protracted 'indecisions'. The first involves the sheer weight of mythical reference that is foisted upon the central characters (all of whom are themselves remarkably well versed in both Western and Eastern mythologies). Vina, for example, a girl whose father turned gay and abandoned her mother who later hanged herself after slaughtering her second husband and his family (Rushdie is anything but ungenerous with background), a girl, then, whose early life is presented along the lines of the most gruesome and sensationalist 'realism', will be compared with (among others): Medusa, Cinderella, Eurydice, the Egyptian Queen Hatshepsut, Europa, Rati (wife of the Indian god of love), Helen of Troy, an apsara (semi-divine nymph in Indian mythology), Pallas Athena, Psyche, Dionysus, Galatea and Pygmalion.

The same wearisome profligacy of interconnection is afforded both to other characters and to the book's many events. (Of one girl who predicts an earthquake we read: 'If she was our Cassandra, then maybe – just maybe – Bombay was about to fall like Troy.') Instead of finding a suggestive and potentially convincing structure in myth, the reader begins to suspect only fuzzy thinking and overkill. It may be that the problem of establishing the characters' identities is more Rushdie's than theirs.

The other obstacle set before our engagement with this presentation of rival interpretations of reality is the decision to have our sceptical narrator give credence to events that, if accepted as factual, eliminate a priori the very possibility of

scepticism. Of Ormus Cama we read that 'within moments of his birth (he) began making the strange, rapid finger movements with both hands which any guitarist could have identified as chord progressions'. These movements, Rai tells us, were filmed and are now available on video. Later we learn that Ormus (his name is a Latin hybridisation of the Zoroastrian god Ormazd or Ahura Mazda), in contact with his dead twin Gayomart (another Zoroastrian figure), is being given the words and music to many of the greatest rock songs exactly two years, eight months and twenty-eight days before they are released in the West. He actually plays 'Yesterday' as his own song in a Bombay club before it appears as the work of the Beatles. Rai remarks: 'I am the least supernaturally inclined of men, but this tall story I have no option but to believe.' While the inspiration here is presumably comic, the result in terms of the book's larger debate is that the position of the sceptic is untenable and the proposed dialectic spurious. It is rather as if Browning's Karshish were to declare his familiarity with well-documented miracles before being presented with the enigma of the resurrected Lazarus.

Critics championing Rushdie will often suggest that we have difficulty understanding him because we are unfamiliar with the tradition he is working in (though they rarely remark that he is most successful precisely where that tradition is least understood). It would seem appropriate then to consider how he uses some of his Indian material.

Alienated from family affections 'like an astronaut floating away from a space capsule', Ormus Cama is saved by Vina Apsara's love. Rai remarks in a long parenthesis:

(It is said that when Kama, the love god, committed the crime of trying to shoot mighty Shiva with a dart of love, the great god burned him to ashes with a thunderbolt. Kama's wife, the goddess Rati, pleaded for his life, and softened Shiva's heart. In an inversion of the Orpheus myth, it was the woman who

interceded with the deity and brought Love - Love itself - back from the dead . . . So also Ormus Cama, exiled from love by the parents whom he had failed to transfix with love's arrow, shrivelled by their lack of affection, is restored to the world of love by Vina.)

Even those unfamiliar with Indian myth will have grounds for suspecting that the analogy cannot hold. Kama's attempt to shoot a love dart at Shiva is presented as a crime, while it could hardly be considered a crime for Ormus to seek affection from his parents. The reference to darts should also alert us to the fact that Kama is akin to the Greek Eros and has nothing at all to do with filial love. One does not fire off Eros's arrows at one's folks (there has been no suggestion of a desire for incest!). The parallel thus becomes doubly inappropriate, indeed triply so if one further considers that while Rati can only appeal to Shiva's clemency, Vina saves Ormus directly herself. Nor could it be claimed that this distortion is a deliberate attempt on Rushdie's part to develop the character of his narrator Rai, whose erudition, on the contrary, appears to be coextensive with his author's and whose point of view generally coincides with Rushdie's as presented in interviews. Some two hundred pages later Rushdie remembers that his narrator is sceptical of these mythological interpretations and gives us this: 'When Vina starts with her fanciful mysteries, all you can do is lie back and wait for her to lose interest, which never takes too long. Here she is, back again at the story of Kama and Rati.' But previously it was Rai/Rushdie using this particular analogy, not Vina/Rushdie.

The story of Kama and Rati is worth considering in a little more detail. Warned by Brahma that they would be destroyed by the anti-god Taraka unless Shiva bore a son to destroy him, the gods begged Kama to shoot one of his darts at Shiva so that he would fall in love with the girl Parvati who could then bear the great creator and destroyer a son. The idea of crime doesn't enter

and inflation everywhere evident in this prose. Here it is the sheer rashness of Rushdie's writing that takes the breath away. I shall not presume to come to Plato's defence; the most cursory reading of the *Symposium*, witty, fluent, ever as precise as it is profound, will show how inappropriate these remarks are. In contrast, the imprecision of Rushdie's work – Alcectis is *not* a martyr – is, at this point, no more than we expected. Yet one would have thought that he would have hesitated a moment before the word 'ayatollah'. There at least, one would have expected a moment's attention, a truly pertinent comment. Not so. The temptation of the flourish is too much for him. Plato is the 'ayatollah of love'. At one point in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, a minor character speaks of myth as 'the software of universal consciousness'. Are we then to refer to Rushdie as 'the Bill Gates of mythology'? Or, since a good parallel should be reversible, can we from now on think of the ayatollah as the Plato of Islam?

We live in an age where initiation into the mysteries of a religion or cult has very largely been replaced by initiation into the notion that there is no such mystery into which to be initiated. As it turns out this may prove to be the hardest initiation of all into the most trying of mysteries. By making his double gesture of appearing clear-sighted and then filling his pages with supernatural incident and metaphysical muddle that could mean anything or nothing, Rushdie appeals to those who, while understandably unwilling to subscribe to any belief so well defined as to be easily knocked down, nevertheless yearn to have all the mystical balls kept perpetually spinning in the air before them. Closet New Agers will be thrilled. The potential readership is huge.

Surviving Giacomo

[Giacomo Leopardi]

His mother rejoiced when her children died in infancy. They would go straight to heaven and would not weigh upon the family budget. Faith and thrift would always be problems for Giacomo. His father, Count Monaldo Leopardi, had squandered the family fortune through 'generosity, pride, or folly' and was deprived by papal order of the right to handle money. Pious and penny-pinching, his wife, Marchesa Adelaide, took over the management of their estates. This was in 1803, on the dusty hills above the southern Adriatic, scorching in summer, freezing in winter. The noble couple were in their mid-twenties and their first-born son just five.

To assert offended manhood, Monaldo cultivated literary ambitions – an interminable production of bigoted and reactionary tracts – which it was felt could not lead to the same economic catastrophe as his previous sallies into politics and trade. Nevertheless, he lavished considerable sums on building up what, for the very small town of Recanati, was a vast library of 25,000 volumes. Through this library he entered into a relationship with young Giacomo that was at once one of complicity, against Adelaide, and competition, with each other. For the next thirty years, when Giacomo the poet asked Monaldo the pamphleteer for money, Monaldo could make a point of surreptitiously conceding it to a fellow sufferer behind his wife's stiff back, or of informing his young rival that he would have to confront the formidable matriarch in person.

The story of Giacomo's youth spent entirely in his father's