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The Antinomian Prophecy

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Review of Aabid Surati, *The Black Book*, trans. Rima Kashyap (Mumbai: English Edition, 2003).

Even laughter may yet have a future.
Nietzsche

The barren, biblical landscapes and the abstract, archetypal figures of Aabid Surati’s *The Black Book* are perfectly suited for generating any number of allegorical readings. Like the classical prophetic works of the Judeo-Islamic-Christian past, *The Black Book* would also seem to accommodate a variety of interpretive frameworks, determinations, and contradictions, if not a plethora of uses and abuses as well. Yet, despite the work’s invitation to fantastic speculation and infinite allegoresis – or, in other words, to making the meaning of the text ultimately indeterminate – *The Black Book* has rather tended to provoke self-certain understandings that bring the rolling analogies to a quick halt. This became clear from the encouragement the author received early on from *Sarika* and *Playboy*, publications that solicited the translations of the work from the original Gujarati to Hindi (1975) and English (1978, left unpublished), respectively. Whereas the editors of these journals saw in the work healthy social criticism or a good dose of bacchanalian irreverence, more pious readers interpreted the prophecy negatively. They leveled charges of Satanism, among other things, against the author and often threatened him with death.

Something about the work delimited the range of possible meanings for its immediate audience. Its history of reception only confirms that everyone knew what *The Black Book* was about, despite its elusive surface, such that social and political divisions in Indian society in the late seventies could crystallize around it. It touched a socio-political nerve of sorts; it brought to light a system of pressure points that revealed the vulnerability of the body politic. Thus it is no coincidence that the work was originally published in the same turbulent year Indira Gandhi declared the Emergency, which resulted in a whole chain of censors and closures, clamping down the press where *The Black Book* first saw the light of day. Could it be the case that *The Black Book*’s antinomian vision was more realistic than the officially sponsored realism, getting to the heart of the matter rather than veiling it like the latter? Perhaps it would be only slightly hyperbolic to suggest that its Dionysian excess was deteriorative of the ruling order and could spur all the bad elements towards a different social constitution; that its prophecy of evil marked the opening toward a radically alternative social system that is depicted more accurately the more it is depicted negatively.

Told in a series of numbered sentence fragments that mock the divisions of canonical scripture, the story is not written, as one friendly reviewer thought, in “the classical style of the epics”. Rather the fantastic tale of *The Black Book* is conveyed in a style that parodies and reduces to size the grandeur of the old epic form. Moreover, the new English edition exhibits alongside the text for the first time a number of amusing minor sketches produced by the author, as well as a map of the story’s setting: some cities of the imaginary kingdom of Oparkoman, which happens to be on the Arabian peninsula. Here on “(16) . . . a night as dark as sin itself” a voice from the heavens declares the coming of a new lord to save the world. Soon after the oracular declaration, Satan appears in the dream of the maiden Kaishali, who awaited anxiously the coming of the lord, and tells her she will bear his son. Kaishali, as it happens, had recently been inseminated by an animal. She later conceives Satan’s child, Yam-Zalal, on a night of two moons. The sight of two full moons in the night sky trouble the king of Oparkoman, Balbon, who takes it to be an omen. The king’s courtiers advise him to imprison every pregnant women in the area where Kaishali lives and to have each child slain upon birth lest the child of the Devil enter the world. In the

meantime Kaishali, secluded in a mountain cave, succeeds in giving birth to Yam-Zalal. Though a mere babe, Yam Zalal promises to avenge the people who have suffered on account of his birth. After a childhood of mischievous miracles performed and ordeals of faith overcome, Yam-Zalal reveals the word of Satan and propagates it as “The Black Book.”

The message of “The Black Book” is mixed. It demands the most outrageous sacrifices of its followers, feeding thus on the piety produced by already established religions. But it also encourages the most socially destructive human practices, traits and states of mind such as incest, murder, cannibalism, greed and intoxication. The “Black Book” subsumes all this chaos by consistently maintaining, on account of his awesome creative energy, the superiority of Satan over God. Spell-bound by his miracles and mix of specious logic and commonsense, overcome by the extremity of his vision and his total destruction of existing temples, Yam-Zalal’s followers increase rapidly throughout the Oparkoman Kingdom, as does the consternation of King Balbon. The King challenges Yam-Zalal to prove the truth of “The Black Book” and a magic competition ensues, resulting in total chaos, in the midst of which Yam-Zalal and his followers flee beyond the kingdom’s borders. There in the outskirts, The Church of Satan is established to the accompaniment of tantra-like ritual performances, ending in a mass orgy. Yet, despite the establishment of this Church – which begins to resemble any other established form of worship, with a hierarchy of officials, a fixed set of practices and rigid articles of faith – Yam-Zalal begins to intimate betrayal among one of his seven disciples and impending doom. In any case, King Balbon has been deposed by his own ruthless son, whose repression of Yam-Zalal’s followers in the kingdom knows no restraint. Thus the future of Yam-Zalal and The Church of Satan become shrouded in uncertainty and the tricks up Satan’s sleeve have yet to reveal themselves before a confused and bewildered throng of followers and opponents as the story winds towards its conclusion.

This partial summary should give one a taste of Surati’s masala-laden dish, which continues, not unsurprisingly, to fire up many readers’ indignation, if not indigestion. This is, after all, a product of an artist who has become quite adept at courting controversy by generally pushing against the Victorian functionalist notion of literature as a means for moral betterment. Surati’s work drives occasionally toward something more carnivalesque and disturbing, something that can potentially get at the foundations of the socio-political order.

Yet, it is worth pointing out that before and alongside the public controversies surrounding some of his work, Surati attained recognition for filling the cartoon corner of the magazine *Dharm-yug* with the delightfully droll “Dhabuji” series. “Dhabuji” debuted in 1963 and remained a regular feature for a few decades. Over the years, Surati’s extensive, unevenly rich oeuvre, spanned theatre, television, illustration, painting, travelogue, autobiography, satire, and historical novel. It has generally tended toward more nuanced parodies of Indian middle class mores, as in *Bahattar Sal ka Bacca* (A Seventy Two Year Old Child) and curious reflections on marginal figures in society, such as the prostitute in *Vasak Sajja* (All Dressed Up). (I myself witnessed first hand the degree to which these works can be enjoyed by people of all walks of life when after finishing *Bahattar Sal ka Bacca* on a train from Bhubaneswar, a middle class Hindu housewife sharing my compartment asked to borrow it and giggled her way to its end in a few hours.)

The Black Book, with its combination of grotesque discourses and disorienting illustration, can thus be seen to manifest only some of Surati’s traits as a thinker and artist. What we have here is his more feverish creative energy boiling over on the threshold of a deeply disturbing moment in recent history, the Emergency. The latter could be construed as an attempt on the part of the ruling bloc in India to contain the socio-political unrest that brought all the contradictory global tendencies of revolution and counter-revolution of the previous decade to boiling point within the state. My sense is that something of the ideological discord, contradictoriness of crisis, ambivalence with regard to the good old things and the bad new ones can be glimpsed in *The Black Book*. These unresolved points of contention disclose

themselves between the text and image, between the genuine social criticism and the irony of Satan's gospel, or between the simultaneous deployment and demotion of the prophecy-form, which is certainly one of the most utopian of genres of all time. In any case, we can leave the author aside and profit more from looking at the larger historical dynamics at play, for Surati himself is quoted as saying with respect to *The Black Book*, "This is one of those books which was clearly not written by me, it was written through me – by God or by the devil, I don't know."

A close examination of the work's mutually opposing energies would demonstrate the degree to which its own logic outstrips and undermines the self-certainties of moralistic readings, positive or negative. Somehow what Surati has conjured up with his mix of media and motifs is nothing less than a visceral sense of the resistances that religious orders, ethical systems and cosmological schemes of all sorts present to revolutionary transformations of the socio-political order. This is a simple enough point, to be sure, and is captured here by the failure of antinomianism – which is what The Church of Satan amounts to anyway – to break out of the dominant code of religiosity. Yet, Surati seems to be suggesting with his potent composite genre – mediating satire and prophecy – that some element of the disinherited past must inevitably figure or be translated into the making of the new and as-yet unimaginable future. Something of the old order must remain. The author wishes to have his book received as a diatribe against established religion, including faith in modernity and progress, yet the theme of religion comes to comprise much ambivalence and is never relinquished completely in *The Black Book*. The author is quoted as saying as much in remarking that the aim of the work was not against religion pure and simple, but "to provoke doubt, which is the foundation of the true religion."

Religion is a particularly vexed thematic in the work then, what is at one level excoriated but at another arises phoenix-like from its remains. The elaboration of the theme of religion in the work as a broad set of irrational and repressive practices, demanding incredible sacrifices from its supporters in exchange for miracles and magic, applicable to all the vast variety of spiritual belief systems in the world, is made possible by the long process of modernization itself. The exchange of ideas, translation of practices, distillation of common or interchangeable cosmologies and the common exertion against the onslaught of secularization allowed religion to be abstracted from any particular set of practices, semiotic systems or ethical values and to appear, perhaps for the first time, as such. Each religion became commensurate and exchangeable with the other. The dynamic history of *The Black Book* itself, traversing now a number of languages, furthers this abstraction of religion as a category.

Yet the work is all the while mindful of the violence of this process of abstraction. *The Black Book* never entirely buries the original body of religious inspiration, but rather prolongs it in its prophecy-form, in the system of transference it sets up with images, and the latter – in their excessive number and thematic repetitiveness resembling something like a parade of phalluses – seem to have interiorized that will to survive of the originary religious impulse. It is this impulse that continues to evade the abstraction-process and ultimately promises to provide a way beyond the deadlock of hackneyed ideological systems, blunted from constantly clashing against one another.

Obviously those who saw *The Black Book* as the work of the Devil alone may wish to reread it, as well as those who understood it to be a sure paean to progress, secularism and science. But perhaps, before we know it, both of these opponents of one another may be vanquished by "waves of uncountable laughter", to cite Aeschylus as Nietzsche did, and we may find ourselves happy to harvest the bounty that survives in *The Black Book*.

