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Speaking the Despicable: Blasphemy in Literature



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Abstract:

This article examines the controversial issue of blasphemy in literature from the viewpoint of reception inside and outside the academia. The thesis of the article is that blasphemy in literature, though inherently related to religion and language, has a plurality of connotations and interpretations (dissidence, intertextuality, critique of colonialism, discursive strategy, alterity/Otherness, ethnicity, subversive text). Consequently, blasphemy in literature is an incentive for fruitful discussions regarding tolerance, freedom of expression, and the re-situation of the (post)modern self in today's world, dominated by an uncanny admixture of secular and religious values.

Key words:
blasphemy, literature, freedom of expression, secularism, postmodernism, subversive narratives

> Blasphemy is an artistic effect, because blasphemy depends upon a philosophical conviction. Blasphemy depends upon belief and is fading with it. If any one doubts it, let him sit down seriously and try to think blasphemous thoughts about Thor.
>
> (Gilbert Keith Chesterton[1])
>
> ...it may well be that the only scandal that remains in the postmodern world is that of religious seriousness.
>
> (Malise Ruthven[2])

An apple of discord and an always renewable source of irrepressible conflict between religious authorities, scholars and writers, blasphemy continues to be a transgressive notion, relativising the boundaries between literature, religion, and ideology. Whether intended as a direct or indirect attack on religious institutions or deployed in literature as a motif, discursive strategy, or subversive mechanism, what has been termed *blasphemy* emerges as the underpinning of an impressive number of fictional and philosophical works such as John Donne's *Biathanatos* (posthumously printed in 1647 by Donne's son), Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* (1794-1796), Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911[3])., Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (completed in 1940), Bertrand Russel's *Why I am not a Christian* (1957[4]), Naguib Mahfouz' *Children of Gebelawi* (1959), Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), José Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991), and Norman Mailer's *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997), to randomly name just a few. In the past twenty-five years blasphemy has come under serious academic scrutiny outside the inherently religious context[5], being analysed and correlated with other major postcolonial and (post)modern concerns such as Otherness/Alterity, ethnicity (and implicit critique of colonialism[6]), dissidence, iden-

tity, freedom of speech, and tolerance.

The purpose of this article is to show that blasphemy, although a religious concept, has not been confined to a religious context but, on the contrary, it has been rather successfully used as a charge against writers and thinkers as recently as the twenty-first century. Whilst it is beyond reasonable doubt that literature belongs to the realm of aesthetics and not to that of religion, sometimes the two realms intersect. The situation becomes particularly problematic when aesthetics and religion clash and such cherished secular values as the judicial system is the impact area. Blasphemy laws still exist in the penal codes of many countries[7], including European states that boast secular democratic values, and where there is a legal basis for the charge of blasphemy, writers, artists, philosophers and scholars can be prosecuted for what is essentially a religious crime. Consequently, what is at stake is nothing less than such highly praised notions as freedom of speech and autonomy of art. Under these circumstances, blasphemy has come under academic scrutiny since the second half of the twentieth century not only as a verbal offense against what is deemed sacred, but also as a question of freedom of expression.

Since this freedom is a prerequisite for writers, I shall focus on blasphemy in literature, particularly as there has been a significant increase in the number of literary works for whose publication their authors have been accused of blasphemy. The relatively recent controversies and violent incidents (including murder and the destruction of property[8]) triggered by "blasphemy cases" involving writers prove that blasphemy is not a mere modernist and postmodernist cliché, but a serious issue with surprising implications and upshots.[9].

Scholarly studies such as Leonard W. Levy's *Treason Against God: A History of the Offense of Blasphemy* (1981) and *Verbal Offence Against the Sacred, from Moses to Salman Rushdie* (1993), David Lawton's *Blasphemy* (1993), Marjorie Heins' *Sex, Sin and Blasphemy: A Guide to America's Censorship Wars* (1993), Joss March's *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England* (1998), David S. Nash's *Blasphemy in Modern Britain: 1789 to the Present* (1999), Neville Cox's *Blasphemy and the Law in Ireland* (2000), Abdullah and Hassan Saeed's *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy, and Islam* (2004), and S. Brent Plate's *Blasphemy: Art That Offends* (2006), among many others, approach the hotly-debated issue of blasphemy from a variety of standpoints – historical, secular, ethical, literary, etc. Whether incisive or mildly cautious, these works testify to the emergence of blasphemy as one of the trademarks of the postmodern *Zeitgeist*, one more reason (if such a reason was requisite) to include blasphemy in Religious Studies curricula and to investigate it as a complex phenomenon that transgresses religious fundamentalism. While blasphemy cannot be separated from the religious context in which it emerges, its implications reach far beyond the confines of religion.

This is all the more so since the concept of blasphemy is inextricably linked both with religion and with language, with all the predicaments this double "affiliation" entails. As the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998) shows, unlike heresy, which is doctrinal, blasphemy is mainly textual, of linguistic rather than ideological nature.[10]

In Michel Foucault's view, the entire religious, sexual, and magical series of blasphemous words falls under an *interdiction of articulation*.[11] John Wright, a Unitarian minister charged with blasphemy in 1817, replied:

> Blasphemy is a word of such terrible sound that it frightens men of weak mind and

> weak nerves. It has been applied so variously, that all who make use of it attach their own signification... Blasphemy is essentially rhetorical... Blasphemy stands for whatever a society most abhors and has the power to prosecute. It is a form of religious vituperation against those who have transgressed the timeless truths that a society most cherishes.[12]

Distrust in language itself is part of the etymological development of the word *blasphemy*. The terms *blasphemy* and *blaspheme* are Late Greek (*blasphemein*, from *blasphemos* "evil-speaking") and remain largely inactive until they are used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew verbs *nakob* and *qillel*, "to pronounce aloud" and, respectively, "to curse", in classic formulation of the Mosaic law of blasphemy in *Leviticus 24*. In Greek it functions as the opposite of the more common religious word *euphemizein* "use auspicious words" (from which *euphemize* and *euphemism* are derived), although in English the opposite of *euphemism* is *dysphemism*.[13] The Jewish and Christian traditions are uniquely logocentric in believing that the most abominable form of profanation is the linguistic one, and the Christian notion of blasphemy is the first to be so extensive and supreme. As late as the twentieth century the *Catholic Encyclopedia* defines blasphemy as "a mortal sin, the gravest that may be committed against religion".[14]

Historically, the religious and social punishments and sentences have undergone dramatic changes. Nevertheless, the abuses and violence committed by the clergy in the Middle Ages still strike the contemporary mind as instances of extreme intolerance. G. G. Coulton proposes an interesting justification for the persecution of the blasphemers and "heretics" in the Middle Ages. The British scholar argues that the "Apocalyptic spirit" that dominated the age is responsible for the gruesome abuses of the medieval epoch:

> It is difficult to realize the extent to which medieval minds were influenced by Apocalyptic ideas, and the haunting fear of Antichrist and Last Judgement at any moment. St Thomas More himself was inclined to believe that those must be imminent in his own day.[15]

Even great theologians and Christian philosophers like St Augustine went as far as to assert that "whatever knowledge man has acquired outside the Holy Writ, if it be harmful is there condemned; if it be wholesome it is there contained".[16]

Indeed, as Coulton notes, St Augustine's idea is strikingly similar to the words ascribed by tradition to Caliph Omar Ibn al Kattab[17], by which he condemned to the flames, in 642 A.D., the Library of Alexandria: "If all those volumes contain that which is written in the Koran, they are superfluous; if anything contrary, then they are mischievous: burn them all."[18]

Unfortunately, bibliopyromania beset Christian authorities as well. In 1236 Pope Gregory IX condemned the *Talmud* as blasphemy against the Christian dogma. In 1242 in Paris thousands of *Talmuds* were confiscated and burned publicly in Place de Grčve.[19] Moreover, many Christians executed for holding "unacceptable" views on Christianity[20] as, under the "totalitarian tenets" of the Church, "theological differences were in themselves sufficient to bring a man to the stake."[21]

The Church was the main institution responsible for censorship until the rise of totalitarian regimes, and the number of books and periodicals banned on account of religious differences is staggering. A history of blasphemy in literature is, of course, beyond

the scope of this article, but I could give just a few examples: Michael Servetus was burnt for publishing *De Trinitas Erroribus* (1531), a book considered blasphemous and heretical; Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* (published in 1794) was labelled blasphemous and the author was forced to leave America and return to Europe[22]; for publishing *The Necessity of Atheism* Shelley was dismissed from Oxford in 1811, and his *Queen Mab* was prosecuted for blasphemy in 1842 (Shelley was long dead but the publisher was convicted); Charles Southwell (1814-1860) was prosecuted for a blasphemous denunciation of the Bible – in the periodical *Oracle of Reason* –, which he described as "that revoltingly odious Jew production"[23], and was sentenced to a year in gaol; Joyce's *Ulysses* was banned or charged with obscenity, or, where obscenity failed, with irreligion, successfully in Britain, and unsuccessfully in the United States; on February 14, 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini declared Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* blasphemous, and passed a death sentence against the author and all those involved in the publishing of the book; José Saramago's *O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo* (1991) was deemed blasphemous and its author was forced to leave Portugal and move to Spain (moreover, for the same reason, in 1998 the Pope objected to Saramago's being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature); in 1977, Denis Lemon, the editor of *Gay News* was found guilty of for publishing James Kirkup's poem *The Love that Dares to Speak its Name*, and was fined Ł500 and sentenced to a suspended sentence of nine months imprisonment. Curiously, rewritings of the Old Testament are not considered *loci classici* of blasphemy. Julian Barnes' novel *A History of the World in* ***10˝*** *Chapters* (1989), which presents the story of Noah and the Flood from the viewpoint of a woodworm, was never interpreted as blasphemous, although Noah is portrayed as a tyrannical and whimsy patriarch with very few, if at all, holy things about him. Barnes' novel is a perfect example of parodic desacralization, but one that escaped acid debates and religious dilemmas.

Whereas such books as the ones enumerated above are studied at major universities throughout the world, the sensitive issue they touch upon or explore at length, blasphemy, is not particularly popular with Religious Studies (especially in Romania), even though some of the excellent tomes on this topic were published by scholars who teach Religious Studies (David A. Lawton, S. Brent Plate, Abdullah Saeed et al.). The Church representatives have heterogeneous - even discordant - views on "blasphemous books". While the Diocese of Braga, for instance, declared Saramago's novel "blasphemous", a Dominican cleric contended that *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* would "awake" the Portuguese people from their "theological lethargy", and the Diocese of Porto praised the book for the same reasons.[24] In a similar vein, Norman Mailer, author of *The Gospel According to the Son* (published six years after Saramago's novel), explains what prompted him to write the book:

> Since nothing is more important to half of all Americans than the Gospels, I thought it was worth posing the theme dramatically.[25]

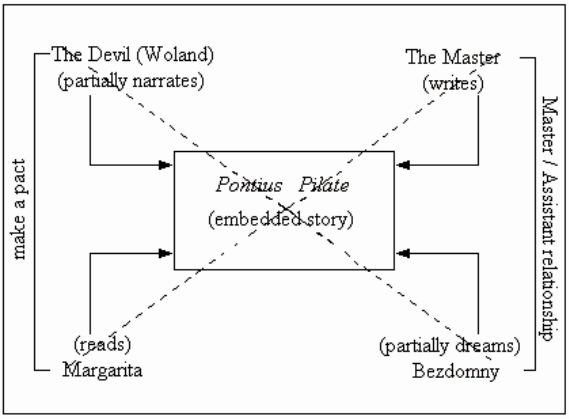
On the other hand, many Muslim theologians and all Muslim fundamentalists have a far more radical view on blasphemy. The "Rushdie Affair" was not an isolated incident; citation of Mahfouz' *Children of Gebelawi* in the Swedish Academy's declaration of award of the Nobel Prize to Naguib Mahfouz in 1988 enraged Muslim fundamentalists and, shortly after the Rushdie Affair had erupted, the then leading fundamentalist Omar Abd al-Rahman (currently imprisoned in the United States for his role in the September 11th attacks) declared that had they killed Mahfouz in 1959 for having writ-

ten *Children of Gebelawi*, Rushdie would have never dared write his novel [*The Satanic Verses*].[26] On October 13, 2002, BBC correspondent from Dhaka, Moazzem Hossain, related that the Bangladeshi feminist writer Taslima Nasrin had been given one-year prison sentence on a charge of writing derogatory comments about Islam in several of her books (*Lajja* (Shame), *My Childhood Days* and *Wild Wind*)[27]. Nasrin had been tried in her absence by a magistrate court in Gopalganj (a hundred kilometres from the capital Dhaka). Her books have been banned after Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's government charged her (1994) with blasphemy for some of her controversial comments about Islam. The same year (on July 14, 1994) the *New York Times* published Salman Rushdie's open letter to Taslima Nasrin, ensuring her of his and other writers' (such as Milan Kundera, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Czeslaw Milosz) support. Rushdie wrote:

> How sad it must be to believe in a God of blood! What an Islam they have made, these apostles of death, and how important it is to have the courage to dissent from it! ... You have spoken out about the oppression of women under Islam, and what you said needed saying.[28]

Despite some obvious ideological implications, blasphemy in literature is mainly (but not exclusively, as postcolonialist literary works show[29] that blasphemy is part of the process of cultural anamnesis[30], a prerequisite for historical and cultural 'recovery' from the traumatic experience of colonialism) a discursive strategy, a narrative artifice employed to defamiliarize readers.[31] One instance of such deployment of blasphemy as artifice is exemplified by Mikhail Bulgakov's masterpiece *The Master and Margarita* (completed in 1940, shortly before the writer's death, and published by his wife twenty-six years later; censored by the Soviet regime, the book circulated underground, as *samizdat*). With a flamboyant narrative architecture, Bulgakov's novel is a *mélange* of fantastic ingredients, esoteric elements, intertextual allusions, metatextual references, blasphemy, folk beliefs, Christian Orthodox dogma, literary clichés, and erudite innuendos. The Russian novelist gives a heterodox account of the birth of Christianity (as Saramago and Mailer would give more than half a century later, and as Rushdie would produce a heterodox account of the beginnings of Islam), by no means liable to accusations of blasphemy. Bulgakov envisions nothing less than a *gospel according to the devil*. The main technique is that of *mise-en-abyme*: within *The Master and Margarita* (the frame story) there is the embedded story of Pilate, which is a story written by the Master (named Faust in some earlier versions), partially narrated by the Devil (Woland[32]), partially dreamed by Bezdomny (the Master's assistant), and read by Margarita (the Master's lover). The narrative design could be graphically represented as follows:

The Master and Margarita
(frame story)



The interrupted lines mark the other relationships between the characters, in addition to those already highlighted in the graphic representation of the novel. The Devil, who could be interpreted as the true protagonist of the story, introduces himself, from the very first chapter, as "Professor of black magic"[33] and casually tells Bezdomny and Berlioz – who were having an argument about the existence of Jesus - that he had just had breakfast with Immanuel Kant. The German philosopher is known for having found the sixth argument for the existence of God – after he had dismissed the other five as false. The Devil finds fault with Kant's argument, and brings his own:

> The fact is ... I was there myself. On the balcony with Pontius Pilate, in the garden when he talked to Caiaphas, and near the gallows, but secretly, incognito so to speak... (Bulgakov, 47-48)

In the Devil's account, Jesus-Yeshua, surnamed Ha-Notsri, is a frightened man. During Pilate's interrogation, he says he had been wrongly accused, as his words had been "untruthfully" transcribed by Matthew the Levite. This entails that the "truth" had been distorted, history had been fictionalized by Matthew, and that his gospel is a gross perversion of "reality." In other words, the versatile narrator of *The Master and Margarita* "blasphemously" implies that the New Testament is a misrepresentation, a forgery, mere fiction.

The Devil's account of Christ's trial could be considered an original *Gospel According to the Devil*. Yet, by means of a subtle narrative shift, the story of Yeshua and Pilate as narrated by the Devil becomes part of the fiction created by the intuitive and insightful Master. The Master writes a novel about Pontius Pilate imagining the characters, the setting, the events and the dialogue in the exact way the Devil recounted them. Blasphemy here (as in Rushdie's case) is part of a strategy of deliberate mystification of the readers by means of an intricate narrative stratagem: the Devil, who tells a blasphemous story about Jesus, is apparently a reliable authority, since he is supposed to have witnessed the events as they occurred; however, the Devil is "the Prince of Lies," the antonym of "truth," the classic trickster never-to-be-trusted, which is to say the Devil *is the archetype of the unreliable narrator*. Moreover, Woland's account is part of the fiction concocted by the Master – who is "accommodated" in a mental institution - which, in turn, is embedded in another fiction, *The Master and Margarita*. The Master wants his novel to end with the phrase "Procurator of Judea, fifth in that office, the knight Pontius Pilate," which is the final sentence of the excipit of *The Master and Margarita*.

The two intertwined narratives, both constructed around blasphemous topics (the

myth of Faust in *The Master and Margarita*, and a heterodox rewriting of the Gospels in Pilate), are linked by the presence of Satan. As in Saramago's *Gospel* and Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, the Devil in Bulgakov's novel is an ambiguous figure, best characterised by the epigraph (from Goethe's *Faust*) that stands as a motto for Bulgakov's novel:

> „Say at last–who art thou?"
> „That Power I serve
> Which wills forever evil
> Yet does forever good."[34]

The same lines are quoted in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, though in a slightly different form – "Who art thou, then? / Part of that Power, not understood, / Which always wills the Bad, and always works the Good".[35]

Bulgakov's Satan is a powerful, entertaining and vengeful creature, punishing communists, atheists, bureaucrats, and the Muscovites who are complacent with an ordinary life and afflicted with moral lethargy. He brings justice in a world corrupted by the Stalinist regime, and tries to persuade people of the existence of God and of the necessity of faith. Bulgakov (again, like Saramago and Rushdie would do half a century later) advocates the dialectical relationship between Good and Evil, between God and Satan. Thus, the Devil becomes *necessary* because Evil is a mechanistic requisite for Good in Bulgakov's view (a Manichean idea). Bulgakov's Devil never utters injurious words against God; on the contrary, he assumes the role of Christ's advocate right from the beginning of the novel. However, it is Matthew the Levite who rebels against God, cursing and blaspheming.

The Master and Margarita is intertextually built on Goethe's *Faust*, but Bulgakov finds an original expression for the Faustian myth. The chief technique is parody intermingled with ironic inversions and reversions. It is not the Master who makes a pact with Satan in exchange for knowledge and gratification; in Bulgakov's burlesque of the medieval myth, Margarita is the one who, out of love for the Master, assents to transacting with the Devil. Metamorphosed into a witch, Margarita avenges the Master's humiliation, persecution, and rejection. Like the *Faust* witches, she flies on a broomstick around Moscow, naked and invisible at will.

Perhaps the most offending element for Christians is the parody of transubstantiation – baron Meigel's blood is transformed into wine and drunk during Satan's feast. Parody functions at other levels as well: whereas in Goethe's *Faust* there is divine intercession, in *The Master and Margarit*a it is the devil's intercession. Although the narrative contrivance is the same, deus ex machina or, in Bulgakov's case, *diabolum ex machina*, there is a reversal: the supernatural forces do not intervene with the exclusive purposes of *saving* characters and *solving* the problems. Woland and his accomplices interfere with the lives of the Muscovites in order to save the Master's manuscript – though not his life – and mostly to punish the wicked.

Furthermore, there are other subtle implications in Bulgakov's fictional discourse. As stated in the opening epigraph, Satan is part of "that Power," a mysterious signifier without a clear signified. Yet, the novel has a distinct political dimension and it is pervaded with criticism of all forms of power, perceived as essentially corrupting. Foucauldian *avant la lettre*, Bulgakov's Jesus maintains that

> All power is a form of violence exercised over people ... (Bulgakov, 33)

Again as in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Saramago's *Gospel*, in *The Master and Margarita* the chief effect achieved is *carnivalization*.[36] Bulgakov's novel is, in fact, a Menippean satire, mingling humour, parody and satire with philosophical topics, comical discussions, subversive narratives, esoteric knowledge, folklore, demonology, and intertextual references – to Goethe, the Bible, Pushkin, Tacitus, Kant, Lermontov, Gogol, Cervantes, Dostoevsky, *Apocrypha* (*The Gospel According to Nicodemus*), etc. The text displays an impressive narrative sorcery and the two stories merge, literally insinuating that between reality and fiction there is only an elusive, almost evanescent border. Blasphemy in *The Master and Margarita* is a means of carnivalization and, at the same time, a form of dialogue with the fundamental texts of the Christian world (although subverting the grand/master/metanarrative[37] of Christianity). The parody here is not directed at the faithful; on the contrary, it is form of criticizing atheist claims and fallacies. Bulgakov's polemic is not with Christian faith but with *history*, perceived as subjective, contrived. Matthew the Levite is the fallible "untruthful" historian, and *Pontius Pilate* denounces the traditional claims that the Scripture is historically accurate.

As proven in this analysis of Bulgakov's novel, blasphemy in literature is more than plentiful food for thought. Although easily liable to misinterpretation outside the confinements of academic studies (and sometimes even inside), blasphemy in literature is, implicitly, a dissimulated appeal to tolerance, and a powerful assertion of the essential freedom of speech a writer should enjoy. It is perhaps symptomatic that no Romanian scholar has undertaken a systematic study of blasphemy.[38]

Notes

1. Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Heretics* (1905), Chapter 1, "Introductory Remarks on the Importance of Orthodoxy", text available at http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/470 (13.02.2007).

2. Malise Ruthven, *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Rage of Islam*, Chatto, London, 1990, p. 48. The book was republished in 1991 as *A Satanic Affair: Salman Rushdie and the Wrath of Islam.*.

3. The *Devil's Dictionary* was first published in a partial form in 1906, with the title *The Cynic's Word Book*, "a name which the author had not the power to reject nor the happiness to approve" (Ambrose Bierce, "Preface" to *The Devil's Dictionary* of 1911, in Ambrose Bierce, *The Enlarged Devil's Dictionary* (1967), Research and editing by Ernest Jerome Hopkins, Penguin Books, 2001, p. 27.

4. A lecture entitled "Why I am not a Christian" was delivered by Bertrand Russell in Battersea Town Hall (South London) on March 6, 1927.

5. An interesting and much-needed scholarly article about blasphemy jurisprudence in the United States is Sarah Barringer Gordon's *Blasphemy and the Law of Religious Liberty in Nineteenth-Century America* (*American Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 4, December 2000, pp. 682-719). Professor Gordon notes that "While blasphemy jurisprudence remains a largely overlooked piece of American legal history, those historians who have studied the case law have dismissed it as a meaningless vestige of English law or attacked it as a blatant violation of civil liberties. (...) Through the investigation of the controversies that gave rise to blasphemy prosecutions, we recover a richer sense of the history of constitutional law and theory, as well as a view of religious dissent that is oth-

erwise screened from historians' gaze" (683-684). Although blasphemy is a religious concept, as the cases of writers accused of blasphemy by various institutions other than the Church prove, and as Professor Gordon shows, "the reasoning and doctrines that underlie blasphemy opinions have survived" in the twenty-first century (684).

6. See A. Lawson and C. Tiffin (eds.), *Describing Empire: Postcolonialism and Textuality*, Routledge, London, 1994. Lawson and Tiffin contend that „Just as fire can be fought by fire, textual control can be fought by textuality... The post-colonial is especially and pressingly concerned with the power that resides in discourse and textuality; its resistance, then, quite appropriately takes place in – and from – the domain of textuality, in (among other things) motivated acts of reading" (p. 10). Also, David Lawton maintains that "... the discourse of blasphemy and that of colonialism are ... related: practically, it is a conviction that native cultures are blasphemous per se that silently licensed their destruction" (David Lawton, *Blasphemy*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1993, p. 42).

7. Some countries in which there still exist blasphemy laws include: Austria (Articles 188, 189 of the penal code), Finland (Section 10 of chapter 17 of the penal code - unsuccessful attempts were made to rescind the law in 1914, 1917, 1965, 1970 and 1998 –), Germany (Article 166 of the penal code) – on February 23, 2006 Manfred van H. was convicted of "defamation of religious convictions in a manner suitable to disturb the public peace", under Article 166 of the German Penal Code, a controversial article called the "blasphemy clause" –, The Netherlands (Article 147 of the penal code), Spain (Article 525 of the penal code), Switzerland (Article 261 of the penal code), Denmark (Paragraph 140 of the penal code – was up to revision in 2004, but failed to gain majority). Cf. (19.04.2007).

8. See, for instance, „The Rushdie Affair".

9. I shall not refer to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* as a relevant example of blasphemy in literature for at least two reasons: firstly, Dan Brown's thriller is a perfect example of cheap commercial literature of no literary virtue, the literary equivalent of fast food; secondly, the claims made in *The Da Vinci Code* are not original and the historical background inaccurate and distorted, despite the author's statements.

10. The definition of blasphemy given in the *New Oxford Dictionary of English*, Edited by Judy Pearsall (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998), is: "the action or offense of speaking sacrilegiously about God or sacred things; profane talk". Also, for an excellent contrastive discussion of blasphemy and heresy, see Lawton 1993, pp. 3-5 et passim.

11. Cf. Michel Foucault, "*Nebunia, absența operei*", in *Theatrum philosophicum. Studii, eseuri, interviuri* (1963-1984), trad. de Bogdan Ghiu (Casa Cărții de știință, Cluj Napoca, 2001), p. 52.

12. Apud David Lawton 1993, pp. 2-3.

13. Cf. Liddell and Scott's Greek Lexicon, quoted in David Lawton 1993, p. 14. Also, for the pair euphemism – dysphemism, see *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*.

14. Apud David Lawton 1993, p. 6.

15. G. G. Coulton, *Medieval Panorama*, vol. II., *Horizons of Thought*, (First Edition: Cambridge University Press, 1938), Collins, The Fontana Library, London & Glasgow, 1961, p. 70.

16. Quoted in G. G. Coulton 1961, p. 70.

17. Cf. Andrei Oișteanu, „O istorie a bibliocidului", in *Mythos şi Logos. Studii şi eseuri de antropologie culturală*, Nemira, Bucureşti , 1998, p. 313.

18. Cf. G. G. Coulton 1961, p. 70.

19. Cf. Andrei Oişteanu 1998, p. 316.

20 See Ioan Petru Culianu, *Gnozele dualiste ale Occidentului. Istorie şi mituri*, Ediția a doua, Trad. de Tereza Culianu-Petrescu, Polirom, Iaşi, 2002.

21. G. G. Coulton 1961, p. 98.

22. In *A Chronology of the Life and Work of Thomas Paine* Edward J. Dodson notes that Paine's *The Age of Reason*, completed in 1793, was an "attack on established religion" and was "condemned (on both sides of the Atlantic) as an atheistic manifesto, although what it really condemns is the influence of organized religion. Similar views are quietly held by Jefferson, Franklin, Adams and others. Paine challenged the Bible as a book of second hand tales interpreted and rewritten to serve those who sought to put themselves between the individual and their god" ((13.04.2007)). Nevertheless, Theodore Roosevelt denounces Paine as a "filthy little atheist" (Quoted in George Perkins and Barbara Perkins, *The American Tradition in Literature* (Instructor's Manual), Shorter Edition in One Volume, The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 1999, p. 69), while Philip S. Foner believes that Paine "was doing for the English world what had already been done in France by men like Voltaire and Diderot. Moreover, he was doing what Jefferson had advised his nephew Peter Carr to do as early as August 10, 1787. 'Fix reason firmly in her seat,' wrote Jefferson in his letter of advice, 'and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because if there be one, He must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfold fear. You will naturally examine first, the religion of your own country. Read the Bible, then, as you would read Livy or Tacitus. . . . Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable, not for the rightness, but the uprightness of the decision'" (Philip S. Foner (ed.), Thomas Jefferson: Selections from His Writings, p. 76, quoted at (13.04.2007).

23. Cf. Edward Royle, *Secularists and Rationalists, 1800-1940*, in Sheridan Gilley and W. J. Sheils (eds.), *A History of Religion in Britain: Practice and Belief from Pre-Roman Times to the Present*, Oxford (UK) and Cambridge (USA): Blackwell, 1994, p. 410.

24. Cf. Mioara Caragea's "Evanghelia eretică a lui José Saramago", the preface to *Evanghelia după Isus Cristos*, trad. de Mioara Caragea, Univers, Bucureşti, 1999, p. 10.

25. Cf. Barbara Probst Solomon, *Struggling with God: A Conversation with Norman Mailer*, "Culturefront," vol. 6, #3, http://www.culturefront.org/culturefront/magazine/98/winter/article.8.html (20.03.2000).

26. Cf. Sabry Hafez's comprehensive article published in "New Left Review" (2000) at http://www.newleftreview.net/NLR23908.shtml (20.01.2003).

27. Cf. the BBC News October 13, 2002 report at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/2324245.stm (22.01.2003).

28. Cf. Salman Rushdie's open letter to Taslima Nasrin at http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet/news/nasrin.html#rushdie (22.01.2003).

29. See, for instance, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) for the African experience of colonialism, Rudolfo Anaya's novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) for the Chicano identity conundrum, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) for the aftermath of imperialism on the Native-Americans, Alice Walker's *The color Purple* (1982) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) for the African-American ordeal caused by slavery, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) for the Indian colonial encounter with British imperialism.

30. Cf. Leela Gandhi, Postcolonial Theory: *A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh

University Press, Edinburgh, 1998, p. 4-8 et passim.

31. The concept of "defamiliarization" (ostranenie, "making strange") was introduced by the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky in the essay *Art as Device* (1917). He claims that the habitual nature of everyday experience makes perception trite and automatic, but art enables us to 'see' things afresh: "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life ... The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important." (Quoted in Peter Childs and Roger Fowler, *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1973, 1987), Routledge, London and New York, 2006, pp. 93-94). For defamiliarization, see also Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1990.

32. In Goethe's *Faust* there is a reference to a demonic Junker Voland ("Platz! Junker Voland kommt. Platz!"). Thus, the name Woland is an intertextual reference to Faust.

33. Cf. Mikhail Bulgakov, *Maestrul şi Margareta*, trad. de Natalia Radovici, postf. de Ion Vartic, Univers, Bucureşti , 1995, p. 19. All subsequent references are to this edition.

34. The English version of Goethe's epigraph is available at http://www.davar.net/EXTRACTS/FICTION/NEVRTALK.HTM (13.02.2006).

35 Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Vintage, Great Britain, 1998, p. 417.

36. Chris Baldick explains Bakhtin's concept of carnivalization as "the liberating and subversive influence of popular humour on the literary tradition, according to the theory propounded by the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin in his works *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) and *Rabelais and his World* (1965). Bakhtin argued that the overturning of hierarchies in popular carnival – its mingling of the sacred with the profane, the sublime with the ridiculous – lies behind the most 'open' (dialogic or polyphonic) literary genres, notably Menippean satire and the novel, especially since the Renaissance. Carnivalized literary forms allow alternative voices to dethrone the authority of official culture..." in Chris Baldick 1990, p. 30.

37.The term was coined by Jean-Franeois Lyotard in *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir* (1979; translated into English in 1984), in which he says: 'simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives' (emphasis in the original). In this seminal study, Lyotard interrogates the "foundationalist" project of Western civilization and argues that its main strategy, the appeal to grand narratives (constructs that serve to legitimize, authorize cultural practices and institutions) has reached a point of crisis, and are now groundless and indefensible. Cf. Jean-Franeois Lyotard, *Condiția postmoderna. Raport asupra cunoașterii*, traducere de Ciprian Mihali, Editura Babel, Bucureşti, 1993, p. 15 and Jean-Franeois Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?' in Thomas Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1993, pp. 38-39.

38. An interesting study, though not on blasphemy but on curse, is Dan Horia Mazilu's *O istorie a blestemului*, Polirom, Iaşi, 2001.