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“Bastardizing” *The Conference of the Birds* in Salman Rushdie’s *Grimus*

Grimus has been largely ignored by postcolonial critics and is seldom studied on its own terms. This paper examines the iconoclastic, pattern-breaking pattern of Rushdie’s first novel. A parody of *The Conference of the Birds* – an allegory by the major twelfth-century Persian poet Attar – *Grimus* is characterized by a carnivalesque sense of the world. The novel challenges the foundation upon which this masterpiece of Sufi literature is constructed, revealing Rushdie’s deep-seated aversion to the bogey of authenticity.

Nothing comes from nothing, Thieftlet; no story
comes from nowhere; new stories are born from old –
it is the new combinations that make them new.

Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* 86

Grimus is Salman Rushdie’s least read novel. It occupies a special place in Rushdie’s opus. Not only is it the author’s first novel, but it also seems to be rather depreciated, as if fated to suffer a peculiar kind of oblivion.¹ It was not enthusiastically received when it was first published in 1975, and Rushdie’s own subsequent estimation of the novel was likewise very harsh.² When compared to later works, it is true that *Grimus* seems to lack confidence in what it is attempting to be, as if the novel did not dare rely on the power of fiction. Rushdie’s ostentatious display of mastery – reminiscent of a young peacock flaunting its colorful feathers – and his heavy, abstruse pronouncements certainly lack the humor and linguistic exuberance distinctive of his later fiction, and have an unfortunate effect on the novel, stripping it of emotion and preventing any real engagement in the narrative. *Grimus* is rarely studied on its own terms, either because the novel is viewed solely as a womb in which later concerns of Rushdie’s writing gestate, or because it does not comply with currently fashionable issues and looks suspect, as it were, in terms of its postcolonial credentials. The critics who have delved into *Grimus* have privileged a polarized, somewhat schematic reading of the text, as is epitomized by Mujeedbuddin Syed’s analysis of the novel which first envisions *Grimus* as an “early manifesto of Rushdie’s heterodoxical themes and innovative techniques” only to end up chastizing the novel for giving no indication of the author’s future interests as it fails “to countenance postcolonial concerns” (148). As a matter of fact, it is precisely because the novel resists pigeonholing that this all-encompassing, protean work – torn as it is between its futurist aspects³ and its impudent variation on a poetical, mystical tradition

1. Many critics have expressed doubts about *Grimus*. Catherine Cundy rates it poorly in comparison to Rushdie’s subsequent works: “Its indebtedness to other literary forms exceeds the cleverly allusive to overstretch itself in often tedious mimicry of other writers. With its adolescent conceits and punning, its loss of narrative control and its uninvolved characters, it is very much a test-run for the successful novels of the 1980s” (12). Timothy Brennan suggests that “*Grimus* fails even though it is carried off with professional brilliance simply because it lacks *habitus*.” “It doesn’t know where it is,” Brennan contends, but “‘tries’ on cultures like used clothing” (70).

2. “As a writer, my worst mistake was my first novel. My first novel, *Grimus* – the one, mercifully, no one reads” (Chauhan 157).

3. The author submitted his manuscript of *Grimus* to a science fiction writing contest. Many critics have noted the limits of this classification, arguing that science fiction cannot work except with actuality as a springboard: “In *Grimus*,

– deserves minute examination. *Grimus* draws heavily on the carnivalized folklore analyzed by Bakhtin:⁴ this paper explores the process of bastardization that is the novel's most crucial dynamic. Whilst the verb "bastardize" appears only once in the novel,⁵ this phenomenon, which is invested with a highly positive significance in Rushdie's works,⁶ as it bespeaks the interpenetration of cultures and inveighs against any cultural or literary paradigm based on purity, operates at a structural level in *Grimus*. Through a parodic transcontextualization that is foremost an act of translation from the realm of the absolute to the precarious space of the fictional, the author opens up a reinterpretative space, playfully subverting the authority of the canon.

The Conference of the Birds as a Decisive Hypotext

Significantly, *Grimus* is the only novel by Salman Rushdie that originates from another book, with a purely literary beginning, thus ironically questioning the very notion of "conceptualization" – which refers to the power of willing something out of nothing – on which the novel relies. In fact, the undetermined topography of the novel – an imaginary island situated somewhere in the Mediterranean, straddling the West and the East – reveals *Grimus* to be a literary experiment, in compliance with the traditional function of islands in literature as experimental laboratories. More than a mere setting, Calf Island points to Rushdie's palimpsest-like condensation of eastern and western references, an "international compendium of myth" (Brennan 74) that creates innumerable layers of meaning, investing the narrative with a peculiar universality. Although this network of embedded subtexts has infinite resonances, *The Conference of the Birds* undoubtedly supplies the main model for Flapping Eagle's journey: *Grimus* reads like a fictional reworking and refashioning of Attar's twelfth-century Persian poem which relates the ascension of thirty birds towards mystical unity and annihilation on the Mountain of Qâf, the seat of the Sovereign Bird. In Attar's allegory, a large flock of birds, symbolizing human souls, have set their hearts on attending the mysterious court of the Simurg, the king of birds embodying God or Reality, and embracing all plurality.⁷ They have gathered under the banner of their leader, the Hoopoe, who has undertaken to guide them through the vales and wildernesses of the Mountain. The journey, however, is long, and the path is rugged: thus it is that thousands of birds lag behind or find a grave in the valleys. Out of millions of birds, only thirty survive and reach the Simurg's

science fiction is [...] not in its usual guise. Eric S. Rabkin observes: 'a good work of science fiction makes one and only one assumption about its narrative world that violates our knowledge about our own world and then extrapolates the whole narrative world from that difference.' In *Grimus*, however, there are several areas of difference. Time is arrested. There is life in different dimensions" (Goonetilleke 14).

4. As many critics have noted, *Grimus* shares the outstanding features of the Menippean satire – notably its commingling of jarring genres, "presented at various distances from the ultimate authorial position, that is, with varying degrees of parodying and objectification" (Bakhtin 118) and its propensity to digress gratuitously into pornographic situations.

5. "[...] I'm afraid we bastardize the name to Calf" (211). This name is homonymous with Attar's Mountain of Qâf. Rushdie's unique note in the novel revolves around the author's inaccurate rendering of the Arabic letter referred to as "K": "I have chosen to refer to it as K (Kâf) and risk confusion with the quite distinct letter Kaf..." (209). This erroneous spelling is compounded by the fact that Rushdie has anglicized the letter and transformed it into "Calf", a scarcely recognizable travesty of the original letter! Rushdie thus asserts the prevalence of the signifier over the signified, exploring language's potential for confusion.

6. Thus, in *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie underlines the richness and productiveness of bastardization: "[The *Satanic Verses*] rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. [...] It is a love-song to our mongrel selves" (394).

7. Attar did not invent the Simurg. Ferdowsi, the great eleventh-century Persian poet, had convoked it in his *Book of Kings*, inscribing the royal bird in a double tradition at one and the same time, the heroic epic and the mystical one.

court. At the end of Attar’s poem, the birds see their own images reflected as though in a clear mirror and, in a flash of insight, they realize that the external entity they were searching for had always been within them, though dormant, and that to find God they had to discover themselves.⁸ Little of what happens in *Grimus* is intelligible without a recognition of this crucial hypotext. That *The Conference of the Birds* provided the model for *Grimus* is implied by the very title of the novel, an anagram for the Simurg. Rushdie’s debt to the Persian poet is barely veiled, for the novel incorporates the key to decipher the title and supplies the Western reader who is unfamiliar with the significance of the mythical bird with more information, as *Grimus* makes a direct, hermeneutic reference to *The Conference of the Birds*:

There is a Sufi poem in which thirty birds set out to find the Simurg on the mountain where he lives. When they reach the peak, they find that they themselves are, or rather have become, the Simurg. The name, you see, means Thirty Birds. Si, thirty. Murg, birds. Fascinating. Fascinating. The myth of the Mountain of Kâf. (209)

The Conference of the Birds was to haunt Salman Rushdie’s later novels, a ghost denoting the author’s fascination for Attar’s poem. *Shame* includes a covert homage to *The Conference of the Birds*: “And one day the three mothers sent a servant into the study to remove from their lives an exquisitely carved walnut screen on which was portrayed the mythical circular mountain of Qâf, complete with the thirty birds playing God thereupon” (29). While the reference to Attar is allusive in *Shame*, it is structural in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, a tale in which the motif of the mystical quest is transparent (just as in *The Conference of the Birds*, all the characters muster strong under the banner of their leader, the hoopoe). *The Satanic Verses* also draw on Attar’s poem as they stage Alleluya the “ice-queen” whose unwavering devotion to her impossible Mountain of Everest (which is ironically twenty-nine thousand feet high, just one thousand feet short of Attar’s thirty) gives yet another version of Attar’s Qâf. Alleluya’s “Sufi” idealism is expressed in the following passage, although in a style quite different from Attar’s:

Us fairies haven’t a fucking notion what’s going on. So how do we know if it’s right or wrong? [...] So what I thought was, you can either break your heart trying to work it all out, or you can go sit on a mountain, because that’s where all the truth went, believe it or not, it just upped and ran away from these cities where even the stuff under our feet is all made up, a lie, and it hid up there in the thin thin air where the liars don’t dare come after it in case their brains explode.” (*The Satanic Verses* 313)

The author’s interest in Attar’s work thus proves to be a real obsession — a term that is emphatically used in Rushdie’s first novel — but after all, as Ignatius Gribb declaims in *Grimus*, “How many geniuses have you heard of who were in no way obsessive?” (160) In *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie states: “[...] it is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents” (21). It is by no means coincidental that our fledgling author should inscribe his first novel in the filiation of the Persian poet, as *The Conference of the Birds* stages the Sufi traveler’s return

8. The whole poem relies on a play on the word Simurg, which expresses the crucial Sufi concept of immanence, according to which reality is the knower, the known and the process. This fundamental pun, to which Salman Rushdie gives prominence, is clarified by the etymology of the term Simurg, derived from the Avestan *saena meregha*. In Avestan *saena* means “eagle”; in modern Persian, the word has been transformed into *shahin*, “royal.” It so happens that *see* also means “thirty” in Persian, and Attar manipulates this interlinguistic pun, displaying the king of birds as the Thirty Bird(s).

“home,” a metaphor depicting man’s ultimate immersion in the bosom of deity.⁹ Since *Grimus* is a novel which tirelessly comments on its own genesis, the “womb-obsession [...] this inquiry into birth” (148) which characterizes it may actually describe Salman Rushdie’s experience as a young writer practicing his notes among the English or, to borrow from the novel, “searching for a suitable voice to speak in” (32).

“Welcome to Kosh-mar” (*Haroun* 40)

In *Grimus*, Salman Rushdie’s rewriting of *The Conference of the Birds* is characterized by a combination of repetition and disparity, respectful homage and utter irreverence. The title of the novel articulates these striking interrelations between same and other, insofar as, although a word and its anagrams contain the same letters, an anagram is also a distortion (Parameswaran 58). In this respect, it is significant that the author should have chosen “Grimus” over other possible permutations of letters (Urgims, Rumgis, Srigum...), as one of the title’s undeniable connotations is “grimace”! Through paronomasia, Rushdie immediately inscribes *Grimus* in the literary tradition of parody – defined by Linda Hutcheon (who is clearly averse to giving any transhistorical definition of parody and restricting its range of intent)¹⁰ as “a modern recoding which establishes difference at the heart of similarity” (Hutcheon 8) – thus marking the beginning of a polyphonic conception of literature.¹¹ This first novel is distinguished by its iconoclastic, pattern-breaking pattern. With *Grimus*, Rushdie composes a distorted reflection of *The Conference of the Birds*, magnified by a casual allusion to the misshapen birds which people “Grimushome” at the end of the novel, and indulges in a methodical, flippant undercutting of Attar’s epic poem.

Through a device of “ironic inversion” characteristic of parody (Hutcheon 6), Flapping Eagle’s ascent up the Mountain of Calf thus becomes a sinking into hell.¹² The lexical field of failure pervades the novel, as illustrated by the fairly depressing song one of the prostitutes whispers to the sleeping Virgil:

And shall ye attempt to climb
The inaccessible mountain of Kâf?
It bruises all men in its time

9. In *Grimus*, the protagonist’s obsession with “home” is conveyed by a metaphor that owes much to *The Conference of the Birds*, as Grimus points out Flapping Eagle’s urge to home to roost: “Once you were nidifugous, fleeing the nest which bore you. But not by choice, so you have once more become nidipetal. Seeking a new nest, eh? Admirable. Most admirable.” (231) Fundamentally, the orphaned protagonist is driven by the hope to join his “mother-substitute” (150). The novel as a whole is thus impregnated with the issue of origins, as is also evinced by a seemingly casual allusion to Virgil’s frustrated vocation: “—I always wanted to be an archaeologist, you know, said Virgil Jones, changing the subject” (42). It is typical of the novel’s irony that Virgil should have ended up a gravedigger, interring instead of exhuming.

10. Hutcheon stands in sharp contrast to Genette, who is heedless of the pragmatic context of parody (the author’s intent, the effect upon the reader, the competence involved in the encoding and decoding of parody, etc.). In *Palimpsestes* (1982), a comprehensive survey of the different modes of intertextuality based on the differing formal relations between texts, the French theorist gives a transhistorical definition of parody. Genette carefully distinguishes parody from the related forms of travesty, transposition, pastiche, skit and forgery: parody emerges as a playful practice that is transformational (rather than imitative) in its relationship to the “target” text.

11. Owing to the two meanings of the prefix *para-*, which means both “counter, against” and “beside,” parody literally means “to sing along,” “out of tune”. Linda Hutcheon stresses that only one meaning of *para-* is generally mentioned (that of “counter”): hence the usual inclusion of a component of ridicule in the definition of parody. For instance, in *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern*, Margaret Rose attempts to reconnect parody with the fully comic practice to be found in Rabelais’s or Sterne’s writing, and underlines the act of implicit criticism that parody performs. Hutcheon, however, contends that parody need not have that ridiculing or critical edge.

12. Significantly, the topography of the novel – “a series of ‘concentric circles’” (83) – is reminiscent of Dante’s description of Hell in *The Divine Comedy*.

It shatters the strongest staff
 It brings an end to all rhyme
 And crushes the lightest laugh
 O do not attempt then to climb
 The inaccessible mountain of Kâf.
 In time all must climb it, in time. (133)

Here the use of alliterations and violent verbs lays the emphasis on the destruction of the wayfarer by the personified mountain. A Kafkaesque sense of the absurd permeates the quest, creating an impression of gratuitousness,¹³ confirmed by Flapping Eagle’s weariness: “O hell, he said. I’ll do it anyway. Why not?” (192)¹⁴ In *Grimus*, the quest thus seems to be carried out mechanically, recalling Sisyphus’s punishment, as perpetual ascension is required to reach “Grimushome.” If the transparent topography of the island – whose only item of topographical importance is Calf Mountain – unveils a yearning for evasion and a reversal of man’s Fall, Rushdie strips the island of its potential for plenitude. As evinced by the “overtly phallic” (56) shape of the island, which undercuts the traditional representation of the utopian island as a womb, *Grimus* is a striking departure from utopia. Indeed, K provides an ironic version of the Island of the Blessed. Though the town is peopled by immortals who have drunk Grimus’s “Elixir of Life,” it is nothing but a “coffin of an island” (*The Satanic Verses* 146), a hell of unending patterns of thought and behaviour representing the horror of permanence. Immortality – the divine prerogative the Sufi yearns for – appears as a burden, as Flapping Eagle’s strong death urge suggests: “I want to return to the human race” (55).¹⁵ Whereas the Sufi views death as a spiritual event, Flapping Eagle only longs for biological extinction. Rushdie thus subverts the ultimate goal of the quest in Attar’s allegory, remorselessly degrading its spiritual purport.

Distorting Mirrors

A parody of Attar’s bird-pilgrim, Flapping Eagle enters an ontological void when he professes to neither own nor lack all qualities, as well as an epistemological void in which all claims for meaning disappear. His fundamental hollowness and malleability are recurrently stressed. In “A Shell without a Form,” (192) the protagonist thus adopts various

13. Kafkaesque nightmare elements – the theme of struggle and helplessness against an unfathomable cause – pervade the novel. In fact, *Grimus* could be read as a variation on *The Castle*, as the situations of the novels’ cores are quite similar: Kafka’s novel relates K’s desperate search for Klammer, the Castle superior, who could be viewed as K’s double (as suggested by his name). Besides, the town of K is strongly reminiscent of Kafka’s work; this link continues to enrich the narrative even after the reader has been told about Attar’s Qâf.

14. The deep, anguished sense of doubt that pervades *Grimus* makes Salman Rushdie closer to a skeptic like Khayyam. This analogy is substantiated by an excerpt from Khayyam’s “Rubaiyyat of Nihilism”: “Suppose you reach your heart’s desire — what then? / Or read your script of life entire — what then? / Or live four hundred years with dreams fulfilled / Then add a thousand more, my sire, what then? / Who can this secret of our being resolve? / This riddle read, or this enigma solve? / There is some talk of you and me and then / The curtain falls and you and I dissolve” (qtd in Nakosteen 225).

15. *Grimus* offers striking similarities with Simone de Beauvoir’s *Tous les hommes sont mortels*, a novel in which immortality is secured by an elixir and emerges as a curse stripping life of its meaning. Simone de Beauvoir’s influence also transpires in Grimus’s statement: “The Mountain of Kâf, in short, is a place where death is neither natural nor easy. It must be chosen, and it must be an act of violence against the body. That, after all, is what it always is in truth” (232). This contention echoes the very last lines of *A Very Easy Death*: “All men must die: but for every man his death is an accident and, even if he knows it and consents to it, an unjustifiable violation” (106). The original reads as follows: “Tous les hommes sont mortels: mais pour chaque homme sa mort est un accident et, même s’il la connaît et y consent, une violence indue” (*Une mort très douce* 151). A submerged reference to Simone de Beauvoir is also to be found in one of Virgil’s first names, as the narrator notes that “He had three initials: V. B. C. Jones, Esq. The B was for Beauvoir...” (13)

guises, mimicking the transforming qualities of the eagle in the *Avesta* and other Zoroastrian books.¹⁶ In fact, according to these sources, the eagle is endowed with divine, miraculous powers: the mere burning of one of its feathers is believed to cause its immediate appearance to cure the most deadly of maladies instantly. Far from being blessed with curative powers, the protagonist — ironically nicknamed “Born-From-Dead” — is doomed to be a “murderous eagle” (179). The curse that plagues him is strikingly expressed by the god Axona through the juxtaposition of terse, anaphoric prophecies: “Whatsoever you touch, is soiled; whatsoever you grasp, you break; any person you love is stifled by your love; any person you hate is purified by your loathing” (87). Flapping Eagle, the pilgrim bird in search of the Simurg, is therefore clearly presented as an anti-hero. Although he is depicted from the outset as a deviant — he is too white for the (fictitious) Amerindian tribe of the Axona and different from them by the manner of his birth — thus representing a minority man, there is nothing about him to suggest any fundamental difference from the figures of oppression that appear in the novel. His remarkable commonness is epitomized by the first description that the reader is given of him:

It should be pointed out that Flapping Eagle was averagely kind and good; but he would soon be responsible for a large number of deaths. He was also as sane as the next man, but then the next man was Mr Virgil Jones. (14)

The repeated use of the conjunction “but” and the binary rhythm create sharp contrasts which enhance the character’s absolute mediocrity. In fact, the young man rarely initiates action and is acted upon most of the time, as is suggested by the statement “the stage was set” (147), hinting at the protagonist’s function as a mere puppet. The most grotesque expression of the character’s passivity, however, lies in the parallel the narrator draws between Flapping Eagle and his ill-treated donkey: “In a way, he felt as sodomized by events as his unfortunate steed” (151).

As is now obvious, Rushdie’s trite protagonists do not match Attar’s mythical framework, which is expressed by Virgil’s disenchanted aphorisms: “A sad fact, said Virgil Jones as they climbed. One’s environment is a great deal more epic than oneself. Events may be epic: people rarely are” (96). Virgil Jones, who stands for the hoopoe in *The Conference of the Birds*, is in fact a parody of the Sufi guide, insofar as he embodies the very opposite of a qualified Sufi teacher:

The master should be the paragon of wisdom. It is incumbent on him to remain ever an investigator. He must have the most subtle of minds, be endowed with the healing touch, and have a life-bestowing breath. He should have contented and satisfied eyes. His speech should be open and frank; he should be in all events fearless of hardship and its consequences; he should avoid fruitless dialogues and wasteful arguments; he should be oblivious to praise or blame. (Nakosteen 64-65)

What a grotesque discrepancy between Rushdie’s pedestrian version of the great classical poet and such a perfect guide! In Virgil’s defence, it must be said that he saves Flapping Eagle on several occasions. At the beginning of *Grimus*, he gives him the kiss of life, showing that he is literally endowed with “life-bestowing breath.” Further in the novel, he dances the ecstatic sama, a dance typical of Sufi brotherhoods, to heal the first rift in Flapping Eagle’s psyche. On the whole, however, Virgil proves so dramatically

16. The character’s pliability anticipates Isky’s cobra-like transformation from flamboyant playboy to responsible party-chair in *Shame* and the depiction of Saladin Chamcha in *The Satanic Verses*.

short-sighted that the relationship between the teacher and his disciple is reversed on several occasions. This is exemplified by Virgil’s cry of despair when he does not feel equal to resuming his search for the Stone Rose: “You are the straw, Flapping Eagle [...], and I am the drowning man” (74). Contrary to Nakosteen’s prescriptions, Virgil renounces being an “investigator.” Far from epitomizing human reason, as in Dante’s poem, Virgil is actually likened to a pathetic buffoon — “the village idiot” (120) — when he recalls his past: “I ran around town once with my sex hanging out. I dyed my nose blue. I farted into women’s faces with my trousers down. Poor forked creature that I was. Am” (190). This passage stresses how obscenely irrelevant Virgil is (the fact that he is deeply wounded by such an implication on the Gorf’s part proves that he is not impervious to blame, as he should be). The character’s fundamental inadequacy is made blatant from the outset through the reference to “the thoughts and the tongue which were both too large for his head to hold” (15). Likewise, his trousers, for lack of a belt, are too large, obliging him to “use both his hands to hold his trousers up” (13). Significantly, as the novel unfolds, this Beckettian vagabond seems to lose his individuality. This is highlighted by a shift in periphrases, from “the fat, blinking man” (120) to “a bruised man” (132), in which the indefinite article stresses Virgil’s sinking into anonymity.

The archetype of a limited, anthropomorphic God, Grimus is a blatant distortion of the Simurg. The reader’s first view of the title-figure is deliberately unimpressive — he is knitting — and Grimus does not rise to any kind of exceptional stature: “Remember this: he’s only a man,” (192) Virgil Jones tells the disheartened Flapping Eagle. Ironically, even Bird-Dog, Grimus’s worshipping slave, views him only as a “demi-god” (217). Grimus overlooks the selflessness that lies at the heart of Sufi idealism; his hubris and megalomania transpire through the religious undertones permeating his words when he asks Flapping Eagle: “*Which of your Lord’s blessings would you deny?*” (233) Furthermore, Grimus subverts mysticism by taking its prescriptions literally. His detachment is a degradation of Attar’s notion of indifference, which is expounded in the fourth valley — “the valley of independence and detachment”:

In this Valley nothing old or new has value [...]. If you saw a whole world burning until hearts were only shish kabab, it would be only a dream compared to reality. If myriads of souls were to fall into this boundless ocean it would be as a drop of dew. If heaven and earth were to burst into minute particles it would be no more than a leaf falling from a tree; and if everything were to be annihilated, from the fish to the moon, would there be found in the depths of a pit the leg of a lame ant? (*The Conference of the Birds* 111)

Grimus takes a literary conceit — the idea that the universe is irrelevant once one reaches mystical union with God — and turns it into a personal, egotistical conceit.

Straightening Figures of Speech¹⁷

In fact, Rushdie’s parodic reworking of *The Conference of the Birds* literalizes the main features of the crucial Sufi concept of union with God. In Attar’s poem, the birds’ ecstatic union with the Simurg is likened to the experience of love, as shown from the outset by the hoopoe’s injunctions: “For your beloved, renounce this dear life of yours, as worthy men. If you submit with grace, the beloved will give his life for you” (*The Con-*

17. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, an interesting play on the literal and the figurative meanings is to be noticed: “‘It was a figure of speech,’ Mr. Butt replied. ‘But but but I will stand by it! A figure of speech is a shifty thing; it can be twisted or it can be straight. But Butt’s a straight man, not a twister!’” (33)

ference of the Birds 13). In *Grimus*, the metaphor of love is literalised in Flapping Eagle's physical "unions" with Irina and Elfrida. While *The Conference of the Birds* undermines carnal love – "Sensual love is a game. Love which is inspired by passing beauty is itself fleeting" (64) – *Grimus* replaces mystical fusion with sexual intercourse. As Flapping Eagle reflects on the nature of his relationships with Irina and Elfrida, he likens the two women to "moths to his candle," (147) implicitly identifying himself with the Simurg. The metaphor is elaborated on by Attar to depict man's irresistible attraction to God: "We are like the moth who wished for union with the flame of the candle. They told him not to sacrifice himself so foolishly and for such an impossible aim, but he [...] told them that since his heart was given to the flame forever, nothing else mattered" (131). More explicitly, the protagonist describes himself as the one through whom wholeness is reached: "In themselves, neither was complete; through him, they both attained completion" (172). The adjective "complete" is stressed by the use of the polyptoton "completion," foreshadowing Grimus's creed: "That which is complete is also dead" (225), and thus tightly bounding up union with annihilation. This is confirmed further in the text, as Flapping Eagle unwittingly calls Irina by another name, marring their romance: "The moment of perfection had spawned its own destruction" (172). Naturally, such a statement foreshadows the very end of the novel, in which Calf Mountain dissolves as Flapping Eagle and Media make love. In compliance with *The Conference of the Birds*, union and annihilation are therefore closely linked, although Sufi fusion is transposed from the spiritual to the material realm. In the light of such mock mystical unions, the description of the protagonist's merging with Grimus also appears as a literalization of the Sufi metaphor of love. Indeed, sexual ecstasy is unequivocally conveyed by the following passage:

Self. My self. Myself and he alone. [...] Myself and himself pouring out of ourselves into the glowing bowl. Easy does it. You swallow me, I swallow you. Mingle, commingle. Come mingle. Grow together, come. You into me into you. His thoughts. (242)

Flapping Eagle's union with Grimus is accomplished through a "Subsumer," that is a commingling device conceptualized by Grimus in order to communicate telepathically with his double. This technical term materialises and turns into ridicule the Sufi process of unification, as the need for a tool suggests a highly artificial process. While the motif of the mirror plays a symbolic role of paramount importance in Attar's masterpiece, where it stands for the indwelling of God in man, Rushdie takes this motif at face value (it is no coincidence that every window in "Grimushome" is also a mirror), shattering Attar's concept of immanence into smithereens.

The Triumph of Scission

While every vestige of individuality ultimately vanishes in *The Conference of the Birds*, the surrender of the protagonist's selfhood is never complete in *Grimus*. That the ego remains a barrier is made clear by Flapping Eagle's statement after the process of unification with Grimus has taken place: "There is still an *I*. An *I* within me that is not *him*" (243). Flapping Eagle retains his identity, frustrating Grimus's will to merge with him. The failure of the fusion is emphasized by the clash between "I" and "him." This assertion is a cross-grain reading of a parallel quote from Attar's work: "If there is unity there cannot be duality; neither 'I' nor 'Thou' has significance" (115). The realm

of the relative is therefore substituted for that of the absolute. This is supported by the description of Grimus's cloven self: "But in his high, shrill voice was the uncertainty of the subsumed Eagle within him, the second self protesting. It had not chosen his death" (247). Likewise, at the very end of the novel, the protagonist is referred to as "the man who had been Flapping Eagle and was now part-Eagle, part-Grimus" (253). The balanced, binary rhythm in the segment "part-Eagle, part-Grimus" underlines the duality denounced by Attar. The notion of the individual as a centered subject, an "I," seems to be shattered to pieces, as Rushdie constantly changes point of view in order to highlight the contrapuntal movement of his protagonist's identity. The juxtaposition of the first and the third person in a sentence such as "It was Joe-Sue's birthday: I got up and went outside" (19) stresses the division inherent in Flapping Eagle. Talking about the magic bottles his sister brings to him, the character also asserts: "They were his, mine," (21) a formula which echoes his earlier statement — "It was my (his) twenty-first birthday" (16) — but reverses the order of the first and third person possessive adjectives, uncovering a complete equivalence between them. The use of parentheses to emphasize Flapping Eagle's divided self is a device the author resorts to at the end of the novel as well, showing that there is no evolution whatsoever from scission to union: "(I was Flapping Eagle.) / (I was Grimus)" (242). The symbol of the mirror is therefore subverted, since it does not stand for osmosis but sheds light on the proliferation of doubles. Indeed, the depiction of the would-be fusion between Flapping-Eagle and Grimus underlines duality while it mimics unity. In the above-cited excerpt, symmetry is suggested by an epanalepsis, in which the first term, "come," is also the last ("Come mingle. Grow together, come."), but the text is not devoid of ambiguity, insofar as it takes two parallel formulas to assert unity: "You swallow me, I swallow you." Likewise, the splitting of the imperative "commingle" into two different verbs — "Come mingle" — makes the reader visualize the process of decomposition that takes place in language at the very moment when unity is supposed to be reached. The triumph of scission is compounded by the *doppelgänger* motif. Itself a distorting mirror, *Grimus* abounds in doubles fomenting disharmony.

The Conference of the Birds is thus bastardized with materialism, sexuality, plurality and doubt, as *Grimus* — a novel which is "not afraid of any of life's filth"! (Bakhtin 115) — is clearly invested with a carnivalesque sense of the world. *Grimus* certainly occupies a unique place in Salman Rushdie's literary production, owing notably to its ahistorical quality, which makes it more difficult to grasp the author's intent: "it is less immediately apparent what the reality is that Rushdie is seeking to smash, and why it is that he wishes to smash it" (Teverson 112). But reading this palimpsestic novel through the prism of Attar's allegory offers compelling insight into Rushdie's nascent conception of literature. "That which is complete is also dead" (225): the iconoclastic character of Rushdie's first novel challenges the notion that literary or cultural paradigms should be viewed as immune from change and keep an immutable form. Beyond its idiosyncratic antics, *Grimus* thus evinces the author's deep-seated abhorrence of the "absolutism of the pure" (*Imaginary Homelands* 394). This adamant rejection of the "disease of fixity" (*Shame* 70) anticipates *The Satanic Verses* and emerges as a capital feature of Salman Rushdie's writing.

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