

Book Reviews

Margareta Petersson. *Unending Metamorphoses: Myth, Satire and Religion in Salman Rushdie's Novels*. Sweden: Lund UP, 1996. Pp. 357. SEK 230.

Since 14 February 1989, when the Ayatollah Khomeini invoked the death penalty against the author of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie criticism has understandably taken on an air of urgency and solemnity not usually associated with academic critical exercises. To say that this circumstance sometimes has been unfortunate for the state of Rushdie criticism is neither to trivialize the (increasingly) dangerous predicament of the author nor to dismiss the legitimate concern of some critics, but rather to suggest that defensiveness is not always the most productive stance for literary critics. So when I saw that the jacket copy of Margareta Petersson's monograph promises "a discussion of whether it is possible for the literary critic to find answers in [Rushdie's] novels concerning the various accusations against Rushdie for blasphemy, calumny, orientalism and misogyny," I was skeptical. But I was also intrigued and hopeful: the book is lavishly produced (the dust-jacket for this soft-cover book features a colorful reproduction of "The Conference of the Birds" and there are 11 illustrations inside) and heavily documented (27 pages of notes and 11 pages of bibliography).

However, the argument of Petersson's book fails to deliver on the promise of its dust-jacket and apparatus. Petersson's agenda is too packed: in her 59-page introduction to her analysis of four of Rushdie's novels—*Grimus*, *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, and *The Satanic Verses*—Petersson promises to situate the novels, using Austin's speech act theory, in the contexts of Indian literary tradition, postmodernity, postcoloniality, carnival (and Menippean satire), and alchemy (via Jung). And while it is the latter context that seems to inform her claim for this book's unique contribution to the field of Rushdie criticism, Petersson's analysis of alchemical themes in Rushdie's texts often amounts to little more than an exercise in allusion hunting. Petersson repeatedly claims, in one form or another, that "Certain descriptions

in the novel[s] are difficult to understand without reference to the symbols of alchemy" (180); however, in passages such as the one below, she fails to achieve elucidation:

Grimus obtains power over the Rose; he is a magician and a master of disguise. This is also characteristic of a literary relative, Kinbote, a Mercury figure with an anagram name in *Pale Fire*. Grimus is like him an emigrant, but from a Central European country, and has been exposed to torture, which has given him a strong mind, he says, containing no secrets for him. This is a judgement which is not confirmed in the novel. Eagle finds him childish, immature, and the voice of the narrator notes his megalomania and insanity. (In a similar way Kinbote's status is subverted in Nabokov's novel.) A mark of this might be that he has taken the name Grimus (an anagram of Simurg which he identifies with the phoenix)—and that he wants to mould Eagle's life as a fulfilment of his own.

He is associated in various ways with birds. At the very first encounter with the gravedigger Virgil he carries a bird which is to be buried, a strongly coloured bird of paradise. This bird is later in the novel associated with the Simurg. The process of death and rebirth is thus underlined. In his house in the ordinary world he has a great deal of ornithological attributes, stressed especially at the end. These bird attributes arouse associations with Hermes and are well known in alchemical tradition. Melquiades in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* has for the same reason a large-brimmed black hat—several times it is compared to the widespread wings of a raven; Buck Mulligan has a Mercury hat, utters bird cries and waves with wing-like hands in *Ulysses*. The poet Shade's both parents in *Pale Fire* are ornithologists. Birds and ornithological interests recur in Rushdie's works. (72)

Some paradigmatic aspects of this passage include the unelaborated and therefore unenlightening allusions to other novels, the liberal and sometimes undocumented use of paraphrase, passive sentence structure, weak transitions, and faulty syntax and pronoun reference. And while Petersson here, and elsewhere in the book, appears to uncover allusions to alchemical symbols and ideas in Rushdie's work, she fails to offer a sustained analysis of their significance, except to imply that the language of alchemy, like that of the carnivalesque, "is ambiguous, full of contradictions and intentionally deceptive, thus completely the opposite of monological language" (59). Petersson admits that "All these themes [in Rushdie's work] are comprehensible without reference to alchemy. But this tradition elucidates the theme and clothes it in a powerful symbolic language" (59). The book is elsewhere riddled with accidental neologisms (such as "paradisiac" [72], "despoticism" (73), "claustrophobian" (157), "blasphemic" (203), "polemizes" (239)) and basic grammatical errors such as verb disagreement and comma splice. This lack of attention to detail extends to one section of the End Notes, where the notes are not precisely synchronized with numbers in the text. And while the book is heavily documented, Petersson's frequent failure to distinguish between paraphrase and direct citation and the occasional error in transcription raise significant doubts about overall accuracy.

Notwithstanding these flaws, Petersson's essential argument is sound, if not entirely original: through discursive strategies that draw on traditions that mix and invert high and low, sacred and profane, Rushdie "demonstrate[s] the similarities between revelation and inspiration, religion, art and love" and "transpos[es] the high to the level of the everyday, seriousness to joke, the elevated to the bodily" (308) in order to counter "the monologic religion, where *one* version or *one* language is favoured." Therefore, Petersson implies, neither Rushdie himself nor individual characters or episodes in his novels can be held accountable to accusations of "blasphemy, calumny, orientalism and misogyny" (309).

But I doubt that these reassurances can satisfy reactionary Muslim critics of Rushdie, many of whom have admittedly not even read *The Satanic Verses* and who are unlikely to read Petersson's book. Nor, if they did read it, would such critics be placated by Petersson's endorsement of such ideas that "Religion, too, in a way, seems to belong to childhood, since Rushdie has claimed in an essay that it preserves man's childlike, subordinated relation to a father, a God" (277). But neither, I think, would Petersson's interpretations be capable of addressing the concerns of an astute Muslim literary critic such as Amin Malak who, as early as 1989, recognized both the "quintessentially polyphonic" (181) nature of *The Satanic Verses* and that "the book contains a bombshell" (177) in its "inflammatory and offensive . . . ridiculing [of] Islam's most sanctified figure" (183). It is the agonizing complexity suggested by the word "and" to which both critics and defenders of Rushdie must now attend.

Ultimately, there is little new in Petersson's book: critics have long agreed that Rushdie, as a postmodernist artist, is concerned with the mixing of forms and is opposed to notions of purity. Petersson's contribution to the discussion is her notice of the alchemical traditions informing Rushdie's work: at the risk of sounding too much a purist myself, I wish that the focus on alchemy had been sharper and its significance to Rushdie's work more clearly elaborated.

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