Cultural Hybridity,
Magical Realism, and
the Language of Magic in
Paulo Coelho's The Alchemist

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We are nothing: imitations, copies, phantoms; repeaters of what we understand badly, that is, hardly at all; deaf organ grinders; the animated fossils of a prehistory that we have lived neither here nor, consequently, anywhere, for we are aboriginal foreigners, transplanted from birth in our respective countries of origin. (Lihn, El arte de la palabra qtd. in Yúdice 8)

O Alquimista (1988) by the Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho is one of the best-selling novels of all time. Coelho’s work has to date sold 31 million copies in fifty-one different countries, making him what one reviewer in The Independent on Sunday called a “publishing phenomenon” (qtd. on the book’s back cover). A reviewer in The Times said his books have had a “life-enhancing impact on millions of people,” and another in the Express observed that The Alchemist “gives me hope and puts a smile on my face” (both qtd. on the book’s back cover). One possible explanation for Coelho’s popularity is that he uses the shorthand of literary cliché expertly. Consider the following passage that occurs halfway through The Alchemist:

The boy couldn’t believe what he was seeing: the oasis, rather than being just a well surrounded by a few palm trees—as he had seen once in a geography book—was much larger than many towns back in Spain. There were three hundred wells, fifty thousand date trees, and innumerable coloured tents spread among them.

“It looks like The Thousand and One Nights,” said the Englishman, impatient to meet with the Alchemist. (Coelho 91–92)

Here are a young Spanish shepherd boy who has sold all his sheep to look for treasure in the Egyptian pyramids, an oasis worthy of The Arabian Nights, and
even an English Orientalist looking for the Alchemist: a passage that clearly
presses all the buttons of the easy read.

This play with stereotypes, indeed, is one of the reasons Coelho's work has not
always endeared itself to academic audiences, who often see it as pandering to pop-
ular taste. Coelho has a column in the online version of the Brazilian newspaper O
Globo, and he regularly includes a horoscope column (see http://oglobo.globo.com).
In some ways his fiction expresses the rather simplistic ideology of the
horoscope writ large; his novels are animated horoscopes.

It is also true that Coelho's work is often full of grammatical errors when sub-
mitted to his Brazilian publishers. Coelho resists having his “errors” corrected,
because it changes the “numerology” of the text. Publishers routinely give in to his
demands. (I am grateful to João Cézar de Rocha for this information provided in
an interview in London, June 24, 2003.) Whatever the literary quality of Coelho's
fiction—and many argue it is minimal—there is no doubt that Coelho is a soci-
ological phenomenon. His books have changed what it means nowadays to be a
Latin American author (for more discussion on this, see Hart, “Isabel”).

Coelho's fiction indeed has broken out of the shell of a mere novel. It now is sold
routinely in bookshops on the new age philosophy bookshelf; in my local book-
shop, The Alchemist appears in the “Mind, Body, Soul” section under the heading
of “Visionary Fiction,” and alongside Richard Bach’s Jonathan Livingston Seagull.

There are, moreover, a few delicate hints of magical realism in The Alchemist.
Magical realism possesses a broadly based public appeal. Indeed, it was the only
“foreign” fiction genre chosen by Bloomsbury when the publisher launched the
new Reading Group Internet books on various aspects of world literature. The
genre of J. K. Rowling's hugely successful Harry Potter and the Philosopher's
Stone is listed as none other than “magical realism” (see http://silicontenge.com/
recommendedreading/reviews/philosophersstone.html).

The alchemist functions in Coelho's novel in a way reminiscent of Melquiádes
in García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude—that is, as the sage who
knows the answer to all of life's questions. Omens in The Alchemist are used simi-
larly to those in Chronicle of a Death Foretold (see Hart, Gabriel 43–47), and the
appearance of the King of Salem to Santiago smacks of the appearance from
beyond the grave of Clara's ghost to Alba when she is in prison in Isabel Allende's
The House of Spirits.

At this point, the inevitable question arises: What is magical realism? My point
of departure is the following observation that appears in Julian Barnes's novel,
Flaubert's Parrot:

A quota system is to be introduced on fiction set in South America. The intention
is to curb the spread of package-tour baroque and heavy irony. Ah, the propinquity
of cheap life and expensive principles, of religion and banditry, or surprising honour
and random cruelty. Ah, the daquiri bird which incubates its eggs on the wing; ah
the fredonna tree whose roots grow at the tips of its branches, and whose fibres assist
the hunchback to impregnate by telepathy the haughty wife of the hacienda owner:
ah, the opera house now overgrown by the jungle. (Barnes 104)
Though witty, Barnes's point is misleading because he misses a sense of how the genre has evolved over time and place. This is precisely because of the ways in which magical realism has crossed national, linguistic, and genre boundaries. In addition to the Spanish American variety, there have been studies of magical realism in West African fiction (Cooper); in German, Italian, Flemish, Spanish, French, Polish, and Hungarian literatures (see Hart, Reading); and in the visual arts, painting, and cinema (Jameson). In fact, quite a strong case can be made for seeing magical realism's favored genre being the visual arts; it had its indisputable roots in the German art movement Neue Sachlichkeit in the 1920s (Weisgerber). But where did the term come from?

The period from the mid 1920s until the mid 1940s might be called the pre-baptismal stage of magical realism. The term was first used by Franz Roh, a German art critic, in his book Nach Expressionismus (Magischer Realismus) in 1925. Roh argued that post-expressionist artists painted concrete, real objects in such a way as to reveal their hidden mystery, that is, the magic that lies just beneath the surface of everyday things. Roh's work had an impact in Spanish-speaking countries when translated into Spanish by Fernando Vela and published by the prestigious cultural magazine Revista de Occidente. However, the idea only bore fruit some twenty years later, not in Spain but Latin America. What Roh identified as the combination of a crisp, sharply defined phenomenal world with a metaphysical dimension—evident, in his view, in the works of Chirico and Otto Dix—emerged some forty years later as the hallmark of Latin America's version of magical realism. Hence the standard definition, which is evident in the work of critics such as Luis Leal (for further discussion, see below), whose influences can be traced back to Roh and which may be summarized thus: “[T]he secret of magical realism lies in its ability to depict reality objectively but with a magical dimension” (Hart, “Magical Realism in the Americas” 115).

Its first real breakthrough came in the form of Alejo Carpentier's classic essay “De lo real maravilloso,” published in the Venezuelan newspaper El Nacional in 1948 and republished a year later in the preface to Carpentier's novel The Kingdom of This World. Carpentier proposed that the marvellous real defines, no less, the most appropriate way of seeing the history of Latin America:

The marvellous real comes into existence in an undeniable way when it is born from an unexpected change in reality (a miracle), from an enhanced revelation of reality, or from an illumination which is unusual or singularly able to reveal the hitherto unnoticed richness of reality. (Carpentier 108, my translation)

Carpentier went on to say that the marvellous real is not a mere literary fabrication: rather, it is a question of the people in Latin America actually believing in the supernatural, miracles, and ghosts, even in the twentieth century. As if on cue, one of Carpentier's compatriots, Esteban Montejo, gave the following account to Cuban sociologist Miguel Barnet of the most supernatural breed of creature, the Caribbean witch:
In Ariosa I saw them catch a witch. They caught her with some sesame seeds and mustard, and she was trapped to the spot. As long as there's a little grain of sesame on the floor, they can't move. [. . .] So they could fly off the witches used to leave their skins behind. They would hang them up behind the door and then they would fly off, just wearing their bare flesh. All of them were from the Canary Islands. I've never seen any Cuban witches. They would fly here every night from the Canary Islands to Havana in a few seconds. (Barner 125—26, my translation)

During the 1960s the Latin American variant of magical realism finally came into its own. Following Carpentier’s 1949 novel, a number of works, including Juan Rulfo’s Pedro Páramo (1955), José María Arguedas’s The Deep Rivers (1958), and especially García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) set the mold for years to come. The criticism written about the movement during the 1960s and 1970s was basically concerned with elucidating the formal mechanics of the work, rather in the style of the new critics. Highly influential during this period was Luis Leal’s definition of magical realism as “capturing the mystery which palpitates within things” (Leal 234). This interest in the formal qualities of the work also was evident in the structuralist readings of the 1980s (for examples, see Chiampi; Ricci; for discussion of their approaches, see Angulo 8—18).

But as the structuralists reached their conclusions, the carpet was being swept from beneath them. The Chilean journalist turned novelist Isabel Allende asserted a new brand of magical realism. Her The House of Spirits became an instant best-seller in 1982, as did its English translation published a year later. The 1980s were a decade of transition for both the critical analysis and creative writing of magical realism; in turn, Allende’s feminized version of the magical-realist formula led to a further spin-off version by Laura Esquivel. Her Like Water for Chocolate, published in 1989, was an enormous bestseller when published in English, in particular when her (now ex-) husband’s film version of the novel came out in 1994. I use the word transitional because new theories of magical realism were on the horizon, theories that initially were inspired by cultural studies and later by postcolonial theory. These theories provided new readings that honed in on the portrayal of cultural boundaries, the cross-mixing of cultures, the mixing of races, the mixing of high and low cultural styles, and a whole new gamut of issues that were as far from the structuralist readings of the 1980s as much as the new criticism that preceded it.

A landmark study was Lois Parkinson Zamora and W. B. Faris’s edition of Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, which came out to great acclaim in 1995. To make things even more complicated, hot on the heels of this new version of magical realism were the final stages of the internationalization of the movement that had begun in the 1960s with García Márquez and that meant that the term no longer just referred to Latin America. It now included the fiction of various postcolonial nations of the world. As Aijaz Ahmad puts it (with ill-disguised sarcasm):

The bastion of Englishness crumbles at the sign of immigrants and factory workers. The great Whitmanesque sensorium of America is exchanged for a Warhol blowup, a Kruger installation, or Mapplethorpe’s naked bodies. “Magical Realism,” after the Latin American boom, becomes the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world. (qtd. in Cooper 30—31)
This internationalization often was accompanied by a flagrant promotion of the mixing of races and cultures, what Salman Rushdie called “mongrelization.” As Rushdie said of his masterpiece:

*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves. (qtd. in Cooper 20)

There has been a growth in this approach since the 1990s and beyond of a group of writers whom Timothy Brennan has called the “Third-World cosmopolitans.” Brennan began his book on Rushdie “by looking at a group of literary celebrities from the Third World who all seemed to share something in common. Originally, this included Mario Vargas Llosa, Derek Walcott, Salman Rushdie, Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez, Bharati Mukherjee, and a few others—a group I would call “Third-World cosmopolitans”” (qtd. in Cooper 20).

So what distinguishes the traditional approach to magical realism and the new cultural studies approach? Are they that different? The traditional approach sees magical realism in terms of a conflation of two literary genres—realism and the fantastic. So in the master narratives of the nineteenth century—Dickens, Balzac, Perez Galdós, for example—the realist mode leaves room for the emergence of the magical, but it is done in such a way that the monofocal vision of the text is not undermined. Prosper Mérimée’s *La Statue de Vénus* is an excellent example of what is meant here. Magical events are reported, alluded to, and discussed, but they are separated from the world of the narrator by an invisible line; that is, they occupy the realm of the bizarre, the strange, the “Other” (see Hart, “Magical Realism in Gabriel” 40–42). In a text such as García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, however, it is not immediately clear from which side of the invisible line the narrative speaks. In this novel, what the cosmopolitans regard as fantastic—ghosts, young beautiful girls going up to heaven when hanging the sheets on a line, gypsies disappearing into a puddle of tar—are not seen by the locals as magical in any sense. What is magical for them is what the cosmopolitan sees as ordinary—railways, trains, the cinema, false teeth.

A cultural studies approach to magical realism, by contrast, is one that focuses on the cultural politics underlying the ideology of representation. According to this methodology, the emergence of the magical-real is predicated on the existence of cultural bi- or trifocality—that is, a cultural system in which no one single system of thought is given precedence over another. It is not that the savage is magical and the nonsavage refuses to see this, or that the narrator—in a gesture of anticolonialist recuperation—brings the savage’s worldview to the fore in his or her fiction. For this in itself would still be monofocalism, not colonial but anticolonial. Rather, it is that the novel presents a worldview that is characterized
by hybridity, in which no one of the competing visions is accorded preeminence (see Rowe). It is, indeed, from within the jaws of the Lacanian bénance that the magical-real emerges.

In my view, however, there is an aspect of magical realism that runs deeper than whether one takes a close reading or a cultural studies view of the genre and that concerns the ambiguous way in which magic appears within the economy of the magical real novel. Often it is at odds with stereotypical views about what magic is. The inevitable question arises: What is magic? When a magician does a conjuring trick—creating magic before our eyes—he does something ordinary, hoping we will miss the trick and see the magic. As we all know, the conjurer uses apparatus of three types: apparatus that is exactly as it appears to the audience, equipment that has been prepared to aid the performance of the trick without altering its appearances, and equipment that is hidden from sight and used without the knowledge of the audience. The knowledge possessed by the conjurer is in direct proportion to the audience’s ignorance—in other words, if the audience sees behind the scenes, the trick fails and the magic is dispelled. This relationship between the magician and the audience is very different from the “magic”—if such a word is permissible—that is found, for example, in the Old Testament. Here it is as if the conjurer does not know what he is doing but the audience does.

There is a famous story in the Book of Exodus when Joseph correctly divines the meaning of the dreams of the baker and the butcher. Both men tell their dreams to Joseph, but they do not know what the dreams mean. Joseph—who listens to the dreams in the way an audience witnesses a story—does know what they mean and correctly predicts the stories as omens: The baker will be spared and the butcher hanged. The baker and the butcher have no idea what the magic means, although it comes from within them, and yet somebody external to the process does. The unconscious speaks a language that the subject misunderstands but the Other divines. The unconscious, to quote Lacan, is the language of the Other.

It ought to be added that Joseph fulfills the role of Other in the Old Testament in another far more fundamental way. He is a Hebrew in a foreign country (Egypt): “I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon” (Genesis 40.15). It is not only butchers and bakers who do not understand their dreams, but also the pharaoh of Egypt who is ignorant of the meaning of his dream about the seven fat and the seven lean cows. In the Old Testament the Hebrew is the one able to see the magic depth within external phenomena, whereas the Egyptian simply sees the surface reality of things and reads dreams literally. To use a metaphor quoted from Luis Leal’s definition of magical realism, we could say that Joseph “captures the mystery which palpitates within things” (Leal 234).

Santiago, the protagonist of The Alchemist, operates in the story of his own life in a way that is reminiscent of Joseph’s role in the Old Testament, although he takes divination one step further. He is able to interpret objective phenomena, rather than simply dreams, as omens of future events. When he sees a hawk swooping down to make a kill, he “knows” the oasis will be attacked:
Suddenly, one of the hawks made a flashing dive through the sky, attacking the other. As it did so, a sudden, fleeting image came to the boy: an army, with its swords at the ready, riding into the oasis. The vision vanished immediately, but it had shaken him. (Coelho 105)

What is intriguing about this vision—which turns out to be a correct premonition—is that it came to a boy who only recently arrived in the oasis. Like Joseph, Santiago is a foreigner. The chieftains want to know why this has happened:

"Who is this stranger who speaks of omens?" asked one of the chieftains, eyeing the boy.

"It is I," the boy answered. And he told what he had seen.

"Why should the desert reveal such a thing to a stranger, when it knows that we have been here for generations?" said another of the chieftains.

"Because my eyes are not yet accustomed to the desert," the boy said. "I can see things that eyes habituated to the desert might not see." (Coelho 111)

It is precisely because Santiago is a stranger—because he sees with the eyes of a foreigner the land he inhabits—that he is able to divine the future, to see the divine within the everyday.

In various guises this idea—that individuals are often unaware of the magic staring them in the face and need a nudge to see it—weaves its way through Coelho's novel. This is especially evident at the point of anagnorisis when, after years of searching, Santiago suddenly realizes where the treasure is hidden. Thus, when Santiago is discovered digging for treasure near the Pyramids he is attacked and nearly left for dead. But then the leader comes back and says to him:

You're not going to die. You'll live, and you'll learn that a man shouldn't be so stupid. Two years ago, right here on this spot, I had a recurrent dream, too. I dreamed that I should travel to the fields of Spain and look for a ruined church where shepherds and their sheep slept. In my dream, there was a sycamore growing out of the ruins of the sacristy, and I was told that, if I dug at the roots of the sycamore, I would find a hidden treasure. But I'm not so stupid as to cross an entire desert just because of a recurrent dream. (Coelho 172)

Again, while the Egyptian sees nothing in his dream—that is, interprets it as meaningless—the foreigner, the Spaniard, sees that it contains the truth. The real suddenly has burst open to reveal its magic. Santiago discovered his treasure, which was—the whole time—just beneath his feet near the sycamore tree. The leader is the unknowing recipient of treasure, and although the answer comes from within him in the form of a dream, he is unable to decipher its meaning. It is the foreigner who is able to decipher the rebus that comes from the unconscious. The system whereby the subject's unconscious needs to be interpreted by the Other is echoed by the rule whereby the events of a national culture need to be deciphered by a foreigner to function as omens.
There are a number of ways in which *The Alchemist* overlaps with the ideology and techniques of magical realism—in the use of the omen to structure the story and its vision of magic just palpitating beneath the surface of things. But perhaps just as important is the sense in which the novel reenacts the drama of cultural hybridity that lies at the core of magical realism. In an interview Coelho pointed out, “Even if I don’t write about Brazil, I see the world with Brazilian eyes. [. . .] I don’t have this wall. I believe that everything is magic and profane at the same time, everything is sacred and mundane” (Coelho, “Interview,” http://www.fire-andwater.com/microsites/coelho). This admixture of the magical and the profane is echoed in Coelho’s novel by the collision of cultures; *The Alchemist*, to use Rushdie’s words, is, after all, “a bit of this and a bit of that.”

First, it is important to note that Santiago’s name is chosen deliberately— alluding to the patron saint of Spain—and yet his journey will take him to the heart of Arabian culture, understood in a generic sense, through Morocco and on toward the Pyramids of Egypt, such that his journey reenacts some of the topoi of *The Arabian Nights* (for more about these topoi, see Irwin). The first person he meets is a mysterious individual who turns out to be a high priest of the Old Testament (because he possesses the Urim and the Thummin, that is, the divinatory devices contained within the breastplate of judgment worn by the high priest described in the Book of Exodus 28.15). Right from the beginning, therefore, the protagonist is portrayed as standing at the crossroads between various ancient cultures; he simultaneously is intersected by Christian, Hebraic, and Arabian cultures. This is what I think Coelho means when he says that he sees the world with Brazilian eyes. His eyes are those of the hybrid in which there is no single, overriding monofocal vision of reality. Instead, it is a culture of palimpsest in which different cultural surfaces slide over one another, supplanting each other momentarily. Just as one day is followed by its successor in historical time, so each day is proved retroactively to be an omen of the following day, and so the faces of different cultures melt into each other.

In this brief analysis I have shown some similarities between the magical realism in Coelho’s fiction and the fiction of, for example, García Márquez. Some differences are in tone. Whereas the Colombian’s fiction is predicated on an ideology that verges on the nihilistic, viewing Latin American history as repeating the mistakes of its past with depressing regularity, Coelho’s fiction grows from a vision of reality that is, as *The Times* critic put it, “life-enhancing.” Coelho’s fiction uses the techniques of magical realism, but endows them with a visionary quality, promoting the notion that each of us is destined for treasure, that each of us has a magical dream buried deep down within us, and that it is up to us to search the reality around us until we finally discover where the magic is.

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