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Catálogos de exposiciones


a dialogue with various cultural theories currently in vogue among academic critics. In particular, Coelho's novella-length expansion of the Bible's sketchy treatment of Elijah's exile in Zarephath reflects the recent interest practitioners of literary theory and criticism have shown in the study of ethics and its relevance to categories such as the other, writing, and literature in general. To be sure, O monte cinco's overt intertextuality with the scriptural code of conduct of the Judeo-Christian tradition foregrounds its "ethical" dimension, at least in the broadest sense of the term (the study of right vs. wrong). However, a reading of O monte cinco informed by a more theoretical perspective shows that its treatment of ethics is anchored at a deeper level in—as the ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas would have it—the notion of otherness. In this paper I will examine the ethical underpinnings in various encounters with the other in O monte cinco. These include the struggle between Elijah's agency and the mandates of the Hebrew deity, the exiled prophet's encounter with a nationality and religion that are other in Zarephath, and his amorous attraction for the foreign widow that takes him in. More significant, however, is the text's treatment of the otherness of the written word, which occurs in a critical place and period of its history: in Phoenicia just as that nation's alphabet begins to assert itself as the most accessible means of representation the world had ever known. I will analyze the representation of the written word in O monte cinco in terms of what Aníbal González has called the "graphophobic" tradition of Western civilization, which he sees as especially acute in the consciousness of Latin American writers. I will also demonstrate parallels between the characterization of writing in Coelho's text and the ideas about writing expressed by Jacques Derrida in texts like "The Violence of the Letter" and "Plato's Pharmacy." These considerations will help us to see that although the violent and even venomous nature of writing are certainly explored in O monte cinco, Elijah and the text itself ultimately cast writing as a sort of therapeutic cure. Given this emphasis on the "positive" virtues of writing as remedy, coupled with the confidence Coelho's own style supposes in the medium, O monte cinco must be seen as a telling deviation from the general tendency that González describes. Likewise, O monte cinco's overall narrative structure and style, which, as we have noted, are straightforward and relatively closed (or "readerly" in Roland Barthes' idiom), raise other questions of an ethical nature that relate to the scarcity of institutional interest in Coelho. Does the resistance to integrate this type of text and author into the academic canon or critical discourse reflect or reveal a certain exclusionary ethic rooted in an ideal of linguistic and structural "openness" or "undecidability" as Wayne Booth has recently argued? Do those in positions to open the canon continue to enforce a rigid (and elitist) high culture-low culture distinction between "literary" and "popular/commercial" books? As we will see, the allegorization of writing in O monte cinco demonstrates that its author is well-aware of such canonical concerns.

As the scope of issues from O monte cinco that I assign ethical importance to suggests, the term "ethics" tends to defy definition. As Lawrence Buell observes, although it "already belongs to common usage, the challenge of pinning down what counts as ethics intensifies as more parties lay claim to it" (7). Similarly, Geoffrey Galt Harpham writes that "ethics had clearly been understood in radically antithetical ways" and that "the real paradox of ethics is that a discourse
that seems to promise answers is so obsessed with questions” (394, 395). One thing various commentators tend to agree on is the centrality of otherness in any discussion of ethics, a notion Levinas insists on.4 For Derrida, who knew and read Levinas, “there is no ethics without the presence of the other” (“The Violence of the Letter” 139-40). Harpham likewise equates the “decentered center of ethics” with “its concern for ‘the other’” and states that ethics “is the arena in which the claims of otherness—the moral law, the human other, cultural norms, the Good-in-Itself, etc.—are articulated and negotiated” (394).

In his 1982 book Invitación a la ética, the contemporary Spanish thinker Fernando Savater deploys a four-tiered model of self-other relations in his defense of otherness as the central component of ethics. Savater posits that what drives individual subjects is an insatiable will to be: “Lo que el yo quiere es ser, acercar y amplificar su ser. Éste no es un querer entre otros, sino su querer fundante y esencial” (27). He is quick to point out, however, that neither self-exploration nor one’s contact with mere objects satisfies the will to be:

La paradoja del yo no puede resolverse puramente en éste, ni tampoco en la relación del yo con cosa alguna. El yo se desgarra a sí mismo y se duele en las cosas; necesita ser confirmado desde fuera, pero confirmado por algo semejante a él mismo, por otro objeto infinito fruto y víctima de su misma contradicción entre totalidad y posibilidad. (27)

From quite a different perspective than Levinas or Derrida, then, Savater arrives at the same conclusion: “No hay ética más que frente a los otros: se trata de un empeño rabiosamente social” (37). Savater’s categories of otherness provide a useful set of critical lenses for bringing the various ethical relationships of O monte cinco into focus.

Savater holds that not all variants of self-other interaction are “ethical” (32). According to Savater, “los diversos tipos de relación con el (o con lo) otro pueden graduarse según una creciente reciprocidad y una mayor igualación de los sujetos relacionados” (32). The first level of Savater’s model lies outside of what he considers ethical relationships because the unequal nature of the subjects precludes any reciprocity between them: “En primer término, puede considerarse la relación con lo absolutamente otro: con el dios, con la tempestad, con la fiera, con lo inhumano . . .” (32). In O monte cinco, this first level corresponds to the relationship between Elijah the prophet and the Hebrew god. Throughout the novel, Elijah struggles to come to terms with the mandates of the faceless god that sends him into exile and obliges him to make a terrible choice between saving the city and the woman he has come to love and freeing his own people from spiritual bondage. Ironically, this apparently non-ethical or unequal interaction between Elijah and his god hinges on the notion of a choice between two equally worthy alternatives, a defining condition of the ethical.6 The prophet’s struggle with god and with his god-given “escolha” produce a heightened understanding of agency and responsibility. The narrator puts it in no uncertain terms: “Mas o Senhor era generoso e o conduzia ao abismo do inevitável, para mostrar-lhe que o homem precisa escolher —e não aceitar— o seu destino” (154; italics in original).

The otherness forced on Elijah through the experience of exile in Zarephath exemplifies the second level of self-
other relations identified by Savater, who holds that “un segundo plano de la relación con el otro establece el mutuo reconocimiento de las autoconsciencias humanas, pero como necesariamente enfrentadas” (33; my italics). According to Savater, this type of non-ethical interaction is typified by “un reconocimiento de lo humano . . . pero se trata exclusivamente de un reconocimiento del otro, no en el otro” (33; italics in original). With a few notable exceptions, this is an accurate characterization of the relationships Elijah encounters in exile, at least in the chapters leading up to the Syrian invasion. Despite gaining the trust of many in the city, Elijah is always regarded as an outsider. His otherness is simultaneously viewed as a threat by the priest, who plots his murder, and used as a political instrument by the governor, who seeks his counsel. The treatment Elijah receives in exile is consistent with Savater’s observations of second-level relations: “La forma de esta relación es, pues, la violencia y el ámbito simbólico/operativo en que se ejerce es lo que llamamos política” (33; italics in original).

For Savater, only third- and fourth-order relations imply sufficient reciprocity between the self and the other to be considered “relaciones éticas”. At the third or “ethical” level, “se da . . . un reconocimiento en el otro y no sólo del otro, mediante el cual cada yo constata fuera de sí su propia autodeterminación y quiere ese ajeno querer como objeto infinito” (34; italics in original). Whereas Savater relates second-level relations between the self and other to violence and political instrumentality, he equates third-level interaction with linguistic communication: “La relativa instrumentalización que hacemos unos de otros en la sociedad . . . y que se convierte en franca manipulación bajo la coacción violenta, se trasciende, por el contrario,
a colaboración libre mediante la efectiva aceptación de la palabra del otro en la relación ética” (37). In O monte cinco, the only relationships Elijah forges in Zarephath that could be described by Savater as ethical are his interactions with the widow and the orphan, two characters whose interest in language and writing he awakens and encourages. Elijah suggests that the widow take up writing as a way to occupy her time, but this encouragement is also linked to his desire that she accompany him when he departs for Israel: “A escrita de Biblos. Será útil, se tiver que viajar um dia” (54). The woman, who gives Elijah a clay tablet with the word amor inscribed on it, also associates writing with love, which, incidentally, is the fourth level of self-other relations in Savater’s model.7 Following the destruction of Zarephath, the widow’s son, now orphaned, baptizes himself with the new name Alfabeto and continues his mother’s passion for the written word under Elijah’s instruction and care. The narrator tells us that, “O garoto aprendeu a desenhar as letras rapidamente, e já conseguia criar palavras que faziam sentido; Elia encarregou-o de escrever em tabletes de barro a história da reconstrução da cidade” (161). It is the widow’s son who, within a city rebuilt upon its own ruins, engages in the foundational/mythical/archival use of writing that might, following Roberto González Echevarría’s ideas, allow us to trace an implicit link between this text and the Latin American tradition it seems to avoid explicitly.8

Aside from the confluence of ethical relationships and an interest in “la palabra” that unites Elijah, the widow, and the orphan in O monte cinco, Coelho’s text concerns itself directly with what Derrida, in his discussion of the Phaedrus, has called the “morality” of the written word (“Plato’s Pharmacy” 74)—what we have referred to as the ethics
of writing. Despite claims that deconstruction’s insistence on textuality is incompatible with ethical considerations, especially those pertaining to authors, 9 Derrida has dedicated many pages to the intersection of writing and ethics. Even in early texts, such as “The Violence of the Letter” and “Plato’s Pharmacy”, Derrida’s comments convey a concern for the ethics of writing. In the former, he considers the apparently inherent relation between the differential system of writing and intersubjective violence; in the latter, he demonstrates how Plato sought to condemn writing on moral/ethical grounds by equating it with the negative connotations of the Greek word pharmakon. In both texts he argues that writing has occupied a secondary position in relation to speech and voice in Western metaphysical thought, which, since Plato, has privileged presence over absence. Informed by these Derridian perspectives on writing, Aníbal González observes that many authors—and he is concerned particularly with writers in Latin America—adopt a problematic posture toward the otherness of writing, “a distrust that often goes beyond mere logocentrism to become a virtual graphophobia” (2; italics in original). González further defines “graphophobia” as “an attitude towards the written word that mixes respect, caution, and dread, with revulsion and contempt” (2). González points out that “graphophobia” is nothing new since “Suspicion of writing... dates from as far back as Plato, and resurfaces during periods of cultural and artistic crisis...” Feelings of dread and outright fear associated with the letter go back even farther, to the very dawn of writing” (4). As we have already mentioned, O monte cinco takes up the problem of writing at the moment of a critical transition in its development. It is therefore not surprising that in Coelho’s novel we find writing itself embroiled in conflict and characters who express Platonic disdain and graphophobic suspicion and fear toward the letter and its proliferation.

O monte cinco puts forward two opposing views or ethics of writing which seem to take into account the dual nature of the pharmakon that Derrida sees as being simultaneously present in the Phaedrus. Writing—and especially the simplicity and accessibility of Phoenician writing, “a invenção de Biblos”—is seen by the priest of Baal in Zarephath as a dangerous threat to secular and religious order. Graphophobic characterizations of writing in O monte cinco, focalised through the priest’s perspective, reach truly paranoid levels:

Seu páis havia desenvolvido uma forma de escrita acessível a todos —mesmo aqueles que não estavam preparados para utilizá-la. Qualquer pessoa podia aprendê-la em pouco tempo, e isto seria o fim da civilização.

O sacerdote sabia que, de todas as armas de destruição que o homem foi capaz de inventar, a mais terrível —e a mais poderosa— era a palavra. Punhais e lanças deixavam vestígios de sangue; flechas podiam ser vistas à distância. Venenos terminavam por ser detectados e evitados.

Mas a palavra conseguia destruir sem pistas.(32)

At this point, Coelho’s dialogue with Plato’s Phaedrus and/or Derrida’s “Plato’s Pharmacy” is readily apparent. For the priest, the venomous connotations of the pharmakon are insufficient for describing the evils of the written word. The word, in his view, is deadlier than any poison.
The priest's graphophobic leanings are further antagonized by the availability of newer, more permanent (and portable) mediums on which to inscribe the characters of the Phoenician alphabet. When he notices that the widow writes commercial messages on papyrus, he is quick to point out the more dubious implications of the medium. "São apenas transações comerciais," the widow assures him. To which the priest responds:

Mas podiam ser planos de batalha. Ou uma relação de nossas riquezas. Ou nossas preces secretas. Hoje em dia, com as letras e os papiros, ficou fácil roubar a inspiração de um povo. É difícil esconder os tabletes de barro, ou o couro de animais; mas a combinação do papiro com o alfabeto de Biblos pode acabar com a cultura de cada país, e destruir o mundo. (92)

In the priest's mind "o alfabeto de Biblos" threatens to undermine the control that his elite caste exercises over the inhabitants of the city. His fear of writing becomes so intense that he plots to facilitate a Syrian invasion, a tactical move he believes will halt the spread of the Phoenician alphabet: "A vitória assíria acabaria para sempre com a ameaça do alfabeto" (107). The priest prophesies of "um mundo melhor" after the Syrian plundering of Akbar, when "os escribas de Biblos estarão mortos" and the sacred texts "continuarão em poder apenas daqueles que nasceram para aprendê-los" (107).

Opposed to priest's elitist and graphophobic view of writing are the attitudes expressed by Elijah, the widow, and the orphan, who function as proponents of a more democratic, "graphophilial" perspective. Throughout the novel, Elijah's view of writing is unproblematic and the exiled prophet is instrumental in initiating first the widow and later the boy and the rest of the survivors of Zarephath into the practice of writing. Passages narrated through the focalized perspective of these characters tend to emphasize what they perceive to be the positive implications of the Phoenician script and its accessibility. As the widow discovers the simplicity of alphabetic writing, she becomes critical of the priesthood's control over its uses: "'Todo está ficando mais simple', pensou. Pena que era necessária a autorização do governo para usar o alfabeto de Biblos no papiro" (91). Whereas the priest foresees only violence and destruction in writing's proliferation, the widow discovers the purpose of her life through her contact with the letter: "Voltei a ter uma imensa vontade de viver. Você [Elijah] mandou-me estudar os caracteres de Biblos, e eu fiz. Pensava apenas em agradá-lo, mas me entusiasmei pelo que fazia, e descobri: o sentido de minha vida era o que eu quisesse dar a ela" (103: italics in original).

For Elijah, who learns to write the characters of the Phoenician alphabet by watching the widow work, the benefits of the new system lie in its simplicity and adaptability, characteristics which inspire suspicion and fear in the priest. While many in Akbar lament the Greek adaptations of the Phoenician system, Elijah prefers to see them as improvements "a adaptação que eles tinham feito, ao incluir as vogais, transformara o alfabeto em algo que todos os povos e nações poderiam usar" (109). The fact that Elijah's only criticism of the Greeks centers on their choice of perishable materials on which to write only underscores his regard for writing inasmuch as he seeks to endow written inscriptions with longevity:
As bíblias gregas eram escritas em couro de animais. Elas acreditavam que era uma maneira muito frágil de guardar as palavras; o couro não era tão resistente quanto os tabletas de barro, e podiam ser roubados facilmente. Os papiros rasgavam-se depois de algum tempo de manuseio, e eram destruídos pela água. “As bíblias e papiros não darão certo; só os tabletas de barro estão destinados a permanecer para sempre”, refletiu. (110)

As we have already mentioned, the widow’s son eventually learns writing in order to make a durable record or archive of his people and their city on plates of clay. The orphan’s use of writing as a tool to aid memory corresponds to a certain faith in the positive connotations of the pharmakon, specifically that “it repairs and produces, accumulates and remedies, increases knowledge and reduces forgetfulness” (Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy” 97). Since it is this latter use of the pharmakon/writing as a remedy or cure that ultimately triumphs over the graphophbic panic of the priest in O monte cinco, we must conclude that although Coelho’s text incorporates both ethics of writing, it represents a fairly optimistic departure from the graphophobic tradition in which writing is viewed as “a potentially subversive, malevolent, and rebellious form of language” (González 4).

A final area of ethical inquiry related to writing and authorship in O monte cinco is the possibility of reading parts of the novel as a polemical allegory of the processes of canonization, a reading authorized by the text’s constant dialogue with the emblem of canonization in Western civilization, the Bible. In its simplest terms, O monte cinco’s exposé of canonization involves a clash between uses of writing produced, consumed, and deemed artistic by a privileged few and more popular uses of writing intended for mass distribution and consumption. It is a symbolic struggle of the “literary” or artistic vs. the commercial or popular. In O monte cinco, the Egyptian and Phoenician systems of writing, respectively, symbolize these two tendencies. Egyptian writing, although used in commerce, appears as an emblem for a type of artistic writing practiced and interpreted by a handful of skilled insiders such as the priest (78). The Egyptian writing safeguarded by priests is reserved for “sacred” texts and other transcendent matters. The Phoenician alphabet, said to be proliferating at home and in neighboring nations because of its accessibility and utility in commerce (78), becomes the common language that the survivors of Akbar appropriate in order to record their experiences for posterity’s sake. It is characterized by its ability to blur differences between nations, classes, religions, and genders.

Recently, Wayne Booth has argued that evaluations of works of fiction invariably involve an ethical component, even when few critics will admit it (62). In an attempt to lay bare the ethical biases of contemporary criticism, Booth maintains that the evaluation of texts extends to the realm of narrative form and literary techniques and that texts considered as “good literature” are “of course the kind that produce greatest openness” (63). On the other hand, “techniques or styles that ‘close’ questions are always inferior, the very mark of the nonliterary or nonaesthetic or didactic” (63). This type of critical preference for openness or undecidability is inherent in many influential models of literary evaluation. Roland Barthes’ distinction between readerly and writerly texts is just one ethically charged
binarism that has influenced an entire generation of literary critics and canon keepers.\(^1\) If, as Booth argues, an (ethical) bias for “open” texts does exist among literary critics, it would be easy to see how Coelho’s transparent, simple narrative style works against the inclusion of his texts in the canon while more overtly experimental texts by other Brazilian authors—such as Mario de Andrade’s *Macunaíma* or João Guimarães Rosa’s *Grande Sertão: Veredas*—make the grade. An allegorical reading of the opposition of the exclusionary politics associated with Egyptian writing vs. the accessibility of the Phoenician alphabet in *O monte cinco* suggests that Coelho resists the legitimacy of the current canon-formation criteria that exclude him by attacking and eliminating the distinctions that inform them. By privileging the second term of the open/closed dichotomy in *O monte cinco* Coelho makes the novel’s denouncement of a Platonic or graphophobic “ethics” of writing all the more clear even as he calls into question canonical distinctions between the literary and the popular, the artistic and the commercial.

**Notas**

1. Given the scarcity of critical work on Coelho, the best source of information on the author is his own official web-page, http://www.paulocoelho.com, from which the publication and sales information I cite is taken.

2. In his entry on “Modernism and Postmodernism,” Jeremy Hawthorn observes that, “many postmodernists are fascinated with rather than repelled by technology, do not reject the ‘popular’ as being beneath them, and are very much concerned with the immediate effect of their works:

3. In his introductory essay to the January 1999 issue of *PMLA*, which was dedicated to the special topic of “Ethics and Literary Study,” Lawrence Buell writes, “Ethics has gained new resonance in literary studies during the past dozen years, even if it has not—at least not yet—become the paradigm-defining concept that textuality was for the 1970s and historicism was for the 1980s” (7).

4. Anthony F. Beavers provides the following summary of Levinas’ thinking on the ethical encounter between self and other: “The ethical moment, the moment in which the moral ‘ought’ shows itself, is found, for Levinas, on the level of sensibility when the egoist self comes across something it wants to enjoy, something that it wants to make part of itself, but cannot. That which the self wants to enjoy but cannot is the other person. The reason that it cannot enjoy the other person is not rooted in some deficiency of sensibility, but in the other person who pushes back, as it were, who does not allow him/herself to be consumed by the egoism of my enjoyment. The other resists consumption. . . . The other person is encountered as a felt weight against me.” (par. 16)

5. Not surprisingly, Derrida extends Levinas’ notion of an otherness that is latently violent to include writing. In the second half of the phrase cited here, Derrida concludes that there can be no ethics “without absence, dissimulation, detour, differance, writing. The arche-writing is the origin of morality as immorality. The nonethical opening of ethics. A violent opening” (140).

6. Harpham states that “the ethical choice is never a matter of selecting right over wrong, the good over the evil, . . . a choice is ‘ethical’ insofar as both options available for
choosing embody principles that can be considered worthy’ (395-96).

7 In Savater’s view, love is the most complex self-other relation “en cuya complejidad se funden la piedad, la violencia y la comunicación” that characterize the preceding three types of relations (37).

8 In Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative, González Echevarría emphasizes the prominence and influence of archival fictions such as Alejo Carpentier’s The Lost Steps and Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude in the Latin American novelistic tradition. The appearance of the Archive in such texts often corresponds to the razing and/or foundation of cities (17-18), both of which occur in O monte cinco. The telling of stories and their inscription in the newly rebuilt and demystified Zarephath constitutes an example of Archive formation. The final phase of Akbar’s reconstruction, as it were, consists of the production of an immense and ever-growing library: “Toda noite, os habitantes de Akbar sentavam-se em torno de uma fogueira na praça principal, e contavam histórias que haviam escutado durante a vida; junto com o menino ele notava tudo nos tabletes — que coziam no dia seguinte. A biblioteca crescia a oitocinhos vistos” (167).

9 Harpham observes that Derrida and other “leading voices of the Theoretical Era . . . organized their critiques of humanism as exposés of ethics” (388) and that prior to the infamous 1987 discovery of Paul de Man’s collaborationist writings in Belgian news sources, “Deconstruction’s dominance had discouraged any ethical evaluation of the author” (389).

10 The fact is duly noted by John Guillory: “The sense of the word ‘[canon]’ important to literary critics first appeared in the fourth century A.D., when ‘canon’ was used to signify a list of texts or authors, specifically the books of the Bible . . . In this context, ‘canon’ suggested to its users a principle of selection by which some authors or texts were deemed worthier of preservation than others” (233). Guillory observes that many scholars believe that the literary canon has traditionally been formed in much the same (institutional) way as the biblical canon (233, 237), but warns that “The analogy between the biblical canon and the literary canon has proven to be misleading at best” (239). In any case, the use of the Bible as an emblem of the literary canon is commonplace.

11 In a section of the introductory pages to S/Z aptly subtitled “Evaluation”, Barthes makes explicit his preference for “writerly texts,” which because of their plurality, must actually be written by readers (4). Barthes is anything but subtle in his disdain for closed texts: “Opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the readerly” (4). Interestingly, Barthes’ language in reference to readerly texts reveals an association between these and commercialized forms of writing: “They [readerly texts] are products (and not productions), they make up the enormous mass of our literature” (5; my italics). For Booth, such “Systematic correlations between a given technique, open or closed, and a given ethical (or for that matter aesthetic) effect are . . . always suspect” (75).
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