

AN INTERVIEW WITH PAULO COELHO THE COMING OF AGE OF A BRAZILIAN PHENOMENON

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Paulo Coelho

Courtesy: HarperCollins

WHEN I FIRST READ about Paulo Coelho's confirmation as the newest member of the prestigious Academia Brasileira de Letras (ABL), I immediately contacted him, first to congratulate him for the outstanding achievement, and then to extend an invitation to do a short interview for *WLT*, which he graciously accepted. For me in particular, it was a great pleasure to hear about his confirmation, mainly because I had received some severe criticism from more conservative critics for including his work *The Alchemist* in a recent top-ten list of Brazilian novels for the past twenty years (see *WLT* 75:3-4, pp. 89-91). Some of his answers—transcribed in the interview below, which I have translated—will address this issue of prejudice with his own personal insight.

PAULO COELHO (b. 1947, Rio de Janeiro) is not only one of the most widely read but also most influential writers in the world today, not only in my opinion but also in the opinion of numerous prize juries—in Germany, Italy, Poland, France, Spain, Ireland, Brazil, and Yugoslavia—that have honored Coelho with over a dozen international awards over the past several years. Why is it then that some critics opposed his election to the Academy or the selection of his works as some of the best examples of contemporary Brazilian literature? I suspect that some of these critics simply disparage Coelho's narrative simplicity—a very powerful technique that he has continually mastered over the years. *The Alchemist*, for example, employs a fablelike language that has won the author recognition around the globe. He seldom uses complex allegories, metaphors, or idioms. All his work is simple, and, as I wrote in my previous essay, his style captures not only the

imagination but also the hearts of his readers. His message is also very simple and millennial: happiness lies in finding ourselves. Simply put, Paulo Coelho is an author in search of himself, a trait that epitomizes his literary truth.

This Brazilian phenomenon, as he has come to be known, has been very consistent not only in his personal quest but also in becoming one of the most important writers of our time—perhaps to his own mother's amazement, since she always discouraged him from taking up a profession that often offers very meager financial remuneration in countries like Brazil. It seems the more he writes, the more he earns the acclaim of important critics, like Umberto Eco, and of an ever-increasing number of readers around the world. To date, some 43 million copies of his books have been sold in 150 countries and in 56 languages, according to information found on his Web site. That places Coelho as the second most-read contemporary author, based on a poll taken by the French magazine *Lire* in 1999. The body of his work consists of thirteen books (nine novels, three short-story collections, and two adaptations); the following titles, all published by HarperCollins, have been translated into English:

- The Pilgrimage: A Contemporary Quest for Ancient Wisdom* (1987, Eng. 1992)
- The Alchemist* (1988, Eng. 1993)
- The Valkyries: An Encounter with Angels* (1992, Eng. 1995)
- By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* (1994, Eng. 1996)
- The Fifth Mountain* (1996, Eng. 1998)
- Warrior of the Light: A Manual* (1997, Eng. 2003)
- Veronika Decides to Die* (1998, Eng. 1999)
- The Devil and Miss Prym* (2000, Eng. 2001)

Paulo Coelho's coming of age as a writer is marked by his confirmation as the newest member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, despite all the controversy surrounding his nomination. The 104-year-old Academy, founded by Machado de Assis (1839–1908)—an author considered by many the greatest writer of the Western hemisphere during his lifetime—has been famously restrictive in selecting its new members since its inception. Coelho had to undergo two consecutive rounds of voting prior to his receiving an absolute majority of votes and confirmation as a member of the ABL, most likely to the surprise of many conservative Brazilian critics. No matter what those critics say, however, Coelho is today the most influential representative of Brazilian belles lettres, even though his works are almost never set in Brazil. This does not make his work less Brazilian, just more universal. Coelho writes in Portuguese, his native language, and with the psyche of a true contemporary *carrioca*.

What follows is a brief interview with Coelho that took place at the end of July 2002, which was originally conducted in Portuguese.

Glauco Ortolano Nobel Prize winner Ōe Kenzaburō once said that Paulo Coelho had discovered the secret of literary alchemy. I'm sure there are younger writers interested in learning about these secrets. Would you mind sharing them with us?

Paulo Coelho The average print run for a novel in the United States or France is about three thousand copies—the same as in Brazil. As for a secret formula, it does not exist: an author who tries to express herself thinking only about the market may have a successful book once, but she most likely will not repeat the same success, which will not allow her to make a living by writing. In my case, I did the only thing I should have done, which is to use my writings to get to know myself better. As long as I continue to be loyal to myself, without looking for formulas, my readers also remain loyal. Literature has gotten further away from criticism exactly because, instead of being more traditional, criticism has become reactionary. As a result, literary criticism has neither the power to sell nor to impede the sale of books. The reader, on the other hand, observes reality more closely and buys whatever reflects his or her state of mind or the status quo. Consequently, two factions have emerged: those who want to relive the past in the present (many academics are still tied to a series of old traditions) and those who truly live in the present (the readers).

GO During your formative years, what Brazilian or foreign authors were to influence your future writing?

PC Jorge Luis Borges, Jorge Amado, Henry Miller, and William Blake.

GO Your stories rarely take place in Brazil, which makes some critics exclude your writings from the canon of Brazilian litera-

ture. How do you view this attitude? Do you see yourself as a Brazilian writer?

PC Interestingly, my work is being used in schools throughout Brazil, and any textbook that deals with post-1990 Brazilian literature will certainly make reference to one of my works. It is one thing to write about Brazil and quite another to see the world through the eyes of a Brazilian—something that is present in each line I write. Nobody ever thought that Hemingway was a Spanish writer, or that Henry Miller was French, even though both authors have written about countries other than the United States.

GO You have recently been confirmed as the newest member of the prestigious Brazilian Academy of Letters in spite of a certain resistance by some of the more conservative members. What, in your opinion, was the key factor in changing their attitude?

PC Any resistance is not only normal but necessary—it is part of the creative process. The body of the ABL is composed of forty members, and I received an absolute majority of votes (twenty-three votes), although the other candidate had excellent literary qualifications. The Brazilian Academy does not need the market and does not give in to anything; the reason for my acceptance, therefore, is a concrete fact: the parameters of the criteria for induction have changed. And because we find in today's Academy individuals who are sensitive to current issues (and not to the past, as the legend goes), this has made my acceptance possible. The cultural scene has changed, and people have realized that it is important to put prejudices aside and to try to evaluate literature as a mirror of the present and not something that lies in some concept of the past.

GO Your work does not seem to embrace any political or ideological stance. Would it be correct to assume that you really don't have an allegiance to any particular group, or am I the one who can't read between the lines?

PC My literature is totally committed to a new political attitude: man in search of his own identity. It does not deal with the old and worn-out categories of right and left. There is a revolution that is slowly setting up, which the press doesn't seem to have detected yet. If I had to sum up the whole idea in only one expression, I'd say that the new political attitude for our era is to "die alive." In other words, being aware of and participating in things until the day we die—something that does not occur very often. People end up dying to the world on the day they renounce their dreams. After that, one departs on a journey as did Ulysses, accepting the challenges and knowing that sometimes one must fight alone, yet understanding he stands in for the entire human race.

GO Within the so-called *boom* of Latin American literature—which produced such great authors as Mario Vargas Llosa,

Gabriel García Márquez, and Julio Cortázar, among others—many writers were accused of having sacrificed literary quality for a larger readership. Would you say this attitude is justifiable in our era of mass communication?

PC I would say that whoever criticized these writers does not know much about literature. Not one of these writers has given in to commercial pressures. These are wholesome individuals who are very honest in their work.

GO Now that you have become more widely read than Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez, thus becoming the most widely read Latin American author of all time, could we suppose that the hour of the Brazilian literary *boom* has finally arrived?

PC My books have sold internationally for seven years now. My case is not a matter of a national *boom*, mainly because Brazilian authors are very different and reflect many different realities. The famous Latin American *boom* was an invention of the critics, and it never left the confines of Latin America. The authors who have achieved notoriety—namely, Borges, García Márquez, and Vargas Llosa—were completely different in terms of themes and in writing styles. One cannot generalize or create a fad by using literature as a tool to catalyze: these authors gained notoriety because they have written quality literature and not because they came from the same continent.

GO Many attribute the success of your work, at least in part, to the times in which we live. Since the pronouncement of the death of all ideologies, it seems there is a desire to return to a time in which there was greater concern for the human condition. Your work, in all its simplicity, seems to have met this desire. How do you respond to such comments?

PC The death of ideologies has not been declared. What has taken place is the death of a whole system of archaic thoughts. Men will always need an ideal, for it is part of human nature. All men in my view are like volcanoes. The mass accumulates but nothing is transformed on the surface. A man asks himself: Will my life always be like this? In a given moment the process of eruption begins. If he is intelligent, this man will allow the lava in the interior to flow out and change the scenery of his surroundings; if he is not, then he will try to control the explosion. From then on, he will use all his energy in trying to keep the volcano under control. I have been pragmatic enough to understand that at certain moments in my life, it is necessary to withstand the pain caused by the explosion in order to enjoy the new scenery around me. There are many opinions as to why humanity is always searching for its own ethics. A friend of mine sent me a story once about a man who used to tell his granddaughter about two animals that used to inhabit his soul: a dog that protected it and a wolf that would devour anything it could find. The granddaughter then asked him which one of

the two was the strongest, to which the man answered that the strongest is always the one I feed the most, depending on the circumstances. The central ideology of the human race, from the beginning of time, is this: respect your neighbor.

GO You have received important recognitions in several countries, such as France, Germany, Italy, Israel, and Brazil. What is the importance of such recognition to you? Do you feel you now have a greater social responsibility than when you first started your career as a writer?

PC Who I am is found in each one of my books. They represent several different aspects of my life, each one with its own agony and ecstasy. They do not represent a universe that I idealized, but one that I've lived. Therefore, I'm responsible for each line I write. On the other hand, existence is always in constant change, and I need to remain attentive to these changes in order to continue to be worthy of what I write. This is my responsibility: to be honest with myself. And now that I have achieved celebrity status hardly imagined for a writer, I understand that I can use my notoriety to fight for things I believe in. That's why I decided to create the Paulo Coelho Institute, which cares for children and the elderly in Brazil with an annual endowment of \$300,000. I have also accepted to be involved with some institutions whose ideals I believe in. I am a special advisor to the UNESCO program on Spiritual Convergence and Intercultural Dialogue, a member of the Shimon Peres Foundation, and serve on the board of the Schwab Foundation, which has been creating a new structure for social entrepreneurship—that is, people who are responsible not only for production but also for how production is achieved.

GO As a writer myself, I know well that each work is like a child for us and that we don't usually like to speak publicly of our favorite children. But if I could ask you to allow an exception here and talk about some of your favorite works, which ones would they be?

PC The answer here lies in the question: we love our children equally. Some do require more care than the others—but it would be unfair to try to classify this or that work. We should not judge love, we should just live it. **WLT**

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