

The Troublesome Offspring of Louis de Bernières

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A PROMINENT CHARACTERISTIC OF contemporary literature is its very internationality — its cosmopolitan syncreticity and heterogeneity. The intersection and blending of different literary traditions, indeed, is one of the most exciting, but also often controversial, aspects of this cosmopolitanism. This is particularly the case with writing coming out of postcolonial cultures — which, as a legacy of colonialism, are marked by a complex and vital interaction between different cultural traditions and literary and mythological heritages. At the same time, however, postcolonial writing has come into prominence within an increasingly global commodity culture, in which that cosmopolitanism masks a complex set of power relations; national and local cultures have become increasingly deracinated, prone to questionable exportations and appropriations that amount to a kind of neocolonialism. As a result, cosmopolitanism evokes very different reactions.

Homi Bhabha, one of the notable advocates of contemporary culture's cosmopolitan hybridity, conceives of "an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter' — the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space — that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (38). In contrast, critics such as Aijaz Ahmad and Timothy Brennan question such a privileging of hybridity, migration, and liminality, and the anti-national postcolonialism that often accompanies it, as being potentially complicit with a homogenizing globalism dominated by multinational capitalism. "How is it possible," Brennan asks, "to divorce the near unanimity in humanistic theory of the tropes of traversing, being between, migrating, and so forth, from the climate created by

the 'global vision of a capitalist or technocratic monoculture'?" (AH 18). In the wake of these debates, an important question becomes, where does cosmopolitanism as a positive emergence out of defensive, reactionary, essentialist national formations of culture end, and where does cosmopolitanism as an internationalist, expropriative free-for-all begin?

Magic realism is an ideal genre for exploring the difficulties of answering such a question, and the magic realist novels of contemporary English writer Louis de Bernières provide a particularly interesting test case.¹ With its syncretic blending of the real and the mythical or supernatural, magic realism provides a good example of the Janus-face of cosmopolitanism. Magic realism, of course, has been associated predominantly with the writers of the so-called boom in Latin America: Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Amado, Alejo Carpentier, Mario Vargas Llosa, and, somewhat more recently, Isabel Allende. For these writers and others, the genre has been a key mode for exploring and contesting the legacy of colonialism, as well as for giving Latin American writing an international profile. At the same time, however, magic realism can be seen as the epitome of the postmodern cosmopolitanism of contemporary writing, as it is evident in, or associated with, the work of such far-flung writers as Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Ben Okri, Toni Morrison, Jack Hodgins, and many others. Furthermore, while the most prominent practitioners of magic realism have been displaced, Third-World writers writing about the contexts from which they have emigrated or have been exiled (as in the case of Rushdie, Márquez, and Allende), magic realism is increasingly being adopted or adapted by others to write about their domestic contexts (as in the case of Carter, Hodgins, Morrison, and others).

An interesting exception to this rough scheme is Louis de Bernières, whose literary output to this point consistently engages with parts elsewhere. His trilogy of magic realist novels about the utopian community of Cochadebajo de los Gatos — *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts* (1990), *Señor Vivo and the Coca Lord* (1991), and *The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzman* (1992) — is set in a fictionalized Latin American country (any resemblance to Colombia, where de Bernières lived for a

few years in the early 1970s, working as a cowboy and teacher, is entirely intentional), and his brilliantly seriocomic realist novel *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (1994) is set in Greece during World War Two. While the phantasmagoric setting and Byzantine plots of de Bernières's trilogy clearly affiliate him with Latin American writers like Márquez and Vargas Llosa, the dissertative sociological tone of the trilogy is reminiscent of writers in the English tradition such as Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, and Graham Greene, whose anatomies of Third-World societies — however detailed, perceptive, and engaging — are nonetheless marked by the spectre of colonial condescension.

This liminal position raises important questions about the dynamics of the cosmopolitan syncretism of contemporary literature. When do literary influence, hybridity, and cosmopolitanism spill over into appropriation? If an important part of postcolonial resistance is a subversive appropriation of imperial discourses, what about when that appropriation is effected by a writer who comes from the imperial centre? In short, what kinds of restrictions, if any, should there be on international trade? Have we reached a state of literary cosmopolitanism and postcolonial enlightenment in which such "travel restrictions" — intensified but also problematized during decades of postcolonial debate — might be altogether lifted? De Bernières's literary treatment of Colombia (and, to some degree, Latin America as a whole) offers an opportunity to gauge the degree to which global cultural interchange has produced an environment that is open to hybridity and transcultural migration from all comers and the degree to which the legacy of postcolonialism and the current neocolonial domination of the "developing" world modify and limit that atmosphere and interchange.

Combining magic and realism is hardly a phenomenon restricted to modern literature. What makes magic realism distinct as a contemporary literary mode and clearly affiliated with postcolonialism as a more general cultural and historical phenomenon is the fact that, as a number of critics have pointed out, it has developed in conjunction with a vertiginous modernization in postcolonial societies. Fredric Jameson suggests that "magic realism depends on a content which betrays the overlap or the

coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features" (311). Rushdie, in his essay "Gabriel García Márquez," describes magic realism as "a development out of surrealism that expresses a genuinely 'Third World' consciousness. It deals with what V. S. Naipaul has called 'half-made' societies, in which the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new" (301). Magic realism's juxtaposing of the traditional and the modern, the mythological and the real, then, provides a crucial means of dramatizing the tumultuous and inequitable legacy of colonization and progress in predominantly rural "developing" societies. De Bernières's *Cochadebajo de los Gatos* trilogy — reminiscent of Marquéz's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Vargas Llosa's apocalyptic *The War of the End of the World* — is exemplary in this regard, as de Bernières's fictional nation is scarred by the cultural and social pathologies of colonialism and the highly unequal — and violently regulated — distribution of the technological, cultural, and material benefits of modern society.

De Bernières's work is set in a contemporary Latin America which, in the interim since the appearance of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, has witnessed the spread of liberation theology, the protracted violence of the political dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s, the Reagan-era brand of American imperialist intervention, and the ascendancy of the drug cartels. The story of the founding and defense of the utopian Andean community of Cochadebajo de los Gatos stretches across the three novels, with each book reflecting a particular threat to the people that is the offspring of a corrupt, self-serving, and embattled state, but also of the larger neocolonial new world order that shapes its behaviour. In this fashion, the trilogy follows a familiar pattern in which, as Jean-Pierre Durix argues, in order "to repossess their alienated reality, magic realistic writers frequently go back to the origins of their cultures; echoing the post-colonial desire to start with a clean slate, they set their novels in communities which are just coming into existence and whose foundation becomes a replaying of genesis" (121).

The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts introduces readers to the ongoing, cataclysmic civil war between the military and rural

guerillas, during which the resistance of the inhabitants of the villagers of Chiriguana to the depredations of the military leads to their exodus into the mountains, where they establish the new community on the site of an ancient Inca city. *Señor Vivo and the Coca Lord* charts secular philosophy professor Dionisio Vivo's public crusade against the homicidal paragovernment of the coca barons, the brutal murders of his fiancée Anica and his best friend Ramon, and his departure for Cochadebajo de los Gatos after his defeat of the coca lord Pablo Ecobandodo (a character clearly evocative of Colombian drug czar Pablo Escobar). Finally, in *The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzman*, Cardinal Guzman, in his desire to stamp out heresy and paganism, unwittingly unleashes a maverick and inquisitorial "crusade of preaching" whose final destination is Cochadebajo de los Gatos.

The trilogy, in short, pits an unlikely coalition of dispossessed peasants, rural guerillas, disaffected military officers, and uprooted landowners against the agents of pathologically corrupt and brutal political, social, religious, and criminal élites. With such heavily stacked odds, reinforcements are necessary, and for those reinforcements de Bernières reaches into Latin American history and mythology. Magic realism, according to Amryll Chanady, "integrates the supernatural into the code of the natural, which must redefine its borders" (30). In this fashion, de Bernières's relatively realistic (if often satirically hyperbolic) representations of these contemporary sociopolitical upheavals coexist with marvellous and magical elements associated with colonial and precolonial history and culture: resuscitated conquistadors, indigenous shamans, and indestructible jaguars. These supernatural forces are generally ranged on the side of the inhabitants of Cochadebajo de los Gatos (most notably the aforementioned jaguars, from which the community takes its name), suggesting that in their struggle against the agents of modernity, they seem to have the blessing of the gods.

In *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts*, various supernatural forces contribute to the success of the inhabitants of Chiriguana in humiliating and then eluding a homicidal military bent on revenge. The refugees are guided by the Aymara

shaman Aurelio, whose mystical powers ensure the ultimate success of their exodus. Aurelio's daughter, Parlanchina — killed when she pursues her pet ocelot onto a path mined by the army — returns as a ghost to harrass and keep tabs on the army and continues her romance with the similarly spectral Federico, likewise a casualty of the military's gratuitous violence. Natural disasters, which are a recurring element in magic realist fiction, also work in the villagers' favor: Chiriguana is submerged by a flood which prevents the army from pursuing the escaping residents, and later, in the mountains, an avalanche uncovers the bodies of fifty conquistadors and their Indian slaves, "naturally refrigerated" since their deaths during a 1533 expedition. In a typically magic realist historical reversal, these conquistadors are subsequently resurrected by Aurelio and, after waking up "believing they were in charge of everything" (357), are put to work as manual labourers during the building of Cochadebajo de los Gatos.

The most significant supernatural element of the trilogy is *los gatos*, the black jaguars who first appear during a plague of cats in Chiriguana (with their biblical resonances, plagues are also a common trope of magic realist fiction, this one perhaps gesturing to the plague of cats in *Midnight's Children*)². As the exodus begins, the cats start growing bigger and subsequently metamorphose into large, imperturbable, and indestructible jaguars, which adopt various members of the community and are seen as a sign of supernatural favour. The jaguar, as Elizabeth Benson notes, was probably the most significant animal in precolonial Mesoamerica, often associated with shamanism and seen as "an intermediary in dealing with earth and sky gods," and the jaguars' attachment to various members of the community in the trilogy reflects the common concept of the *nahual*, a "companion spirit" or "animal other" (47). In their indolent, playful hedonism, the cats symbolize the spirit of the community, but also signify its retention of precolonial mythological and religious beliefs that have since syncretized with Christianity. The jaguars' participation in battle on the side of the community, particularly during the climactic confrontation with the crusaders at the end of the third novel, reflects their allegorical role throughout the

trilogy: they signify a genuine supernatural favour, which starkly contrasts the crusaders' homicidal belief that their mission is an expression of divine will.

In *Señor Vivo*, Dionisio Vivo embarks on a one-man crusade against the terror of the coca barons by writing scathing letters to *La Prensa* which turn the tide of public opinion against the coca trade. As the novel progresses, Dionisio increasingly takes on a supernatural aura because of his apparently miraculous indestructibility, his ability to survive the attempts of El Jerarca (Ecobandodo) to silence him. In his portrayal of Dionisio, de Bernières plays with the line between superstition and the supernatural, creating a hesitation, visible in so many other magic realist texts, "between two contradictory understandings of events" (Faris 171), as Dionisio's reputation as a *brujo* or sorcerer grows largely out of explicable, if uncanny, occurrences. Already larger than life to the public because of his determination not to be cowed by the violence of the drug lords, Dionisio becomes a legend by surviving a series of assassination attempts through his own bravery and luck but also through the cowardice, superstition, and incompetence of his attackers. For instance, he unwittingly detaches a car bomb while searching for Anica's purse and later confirms the popular suspicion that "one suffered in one's own flesh the wounds intended for him" (113) when he is shot in the arm and his assailant is in turn shot in the arm by Ramon, concealed inside a doorway. These carefully contrived episodes give Dionisio an aura of supernatural invincibility that ultimately allows him to overcome El Jerarca, but not until after Anica has been brutally raped, tortured, mutilated, and murdered by the drug lord's minions, and Ramon has suffered much the same fate.

Though Dionisio's reputation develops principally because the general populace and even those as cynical as El Jerarca and his thugs are prone to superstition, certain aspects of Dionisio's career suggest that his status as *brujo* is genuine. For instance, when Anica dumps Dionisio to protect her family, in his despair he tries to hang himself. Rescued by a goatherd, Dionisio is left forever after with the scar of the goatherd's knife on his throat

and the mark of the rope around his neck. Both marks are explicable but nonetheless confirm Dionisio's messianic status in the public mind. Later, however, the nine sons Dionisio fathers by Las Locas (women who have intuitively gravitated to Ipasueno to aid him in his mission) all bear upon their necks "the henceforth hereditary scar of the rope and the six-centimetre gash" (244) — a magical occurrence clearly reminiscent of the mark of the cross of ashes on the foreheads of the seventeen Aurelios, the sons of Colonel Aurelio Buendia in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. At the end of the novel, Dionisio kills El Jerarca by holding three fingers over the latter's heart (though this is conveyed by a reporter witnessing the scene and may be a result of the obese caudrillo's physical decrepitude). After scattering El Jerarca's followers, Dionisio departs with his entourage for Cochadebajo de los Gatos, where, during a santerian candomblé earlier in the novel, his powers have been handed down by the gods, and his fate, as well as his role as Deliverer, has been forecast. Despite the hesitation between the explicable and the inexplicable in the charting of Dionisio's career, then, the charmingly bohemian and somewhat ingenuous Dionisio is clearly portrayed as a sorcerer and saviour, a role he fulfils at the end of the trilogy.

In the final volume of the trilogy, *Cardinal Guzman*, de Bernières levels magic against the church. Magical realist texts, as Wendy Faris argues, are generally antiauthoritarian, taking "a position that is antibureaucratic" and often using "magic against the established order" (179). Through a series of supernatural interventions that work in favor of his eclectic, unorthodox protagonists and against the interests of the establishment, de Bernières develops a sustained, irreverent critique of a repressive, dogmatic, and corrupt Catholic hierarchy. For instance, Father García, a renegade heretical priest who preaches that the founding of Cochadebajo de los Gatos is the beginning of a New Creation and advocates unbounded procreation, is capable of spontaneously levitating. Cardinal Guzman's brother Salvador, a "false priest" ejected from the church for his irreverent views, is beheaded by the sadistic monsignor El Inocente, who heads the crusade, and during the ensuing battle for control of Cochadebajo de los Gatos, Salvador's head

shines incandescently through the rainclouds that shroud the battlefield, prefacing the defeat of the thoroughly unrighteous crusaders.

Cardinal Guzman's "troublesome offspring" illustrate the flip side of this supernatural intervention, which dramatizes the degree to which the church does *not* have God on its side. A hypocrite with a trail of repressive, self-serving decisions behind him, Guzman is plagued by a series of demons straight out of Hieronymus Bosch. These hallucinations — a kind of surrealist, Rabelaisian parade of the cardinal's sins which includes the Obscene Ass, a projection of his lasciviousness — continually agonize and distract the cardinal, and even prompt him to accidentally drown his illegitimate son Cristobal, whom he mistakes for the Ass and pitches into the river. When a remorseful Guzman finally renounces his position in the church, the demons are exorcised. Furthermore, in a parodic antithesis of the immaculate conception, a surgeon removes from the cardinal's agonizingly extended belly a monstrous, disaggregated fetus, an allegorical embodiment of the cardinal's perverted theology.

The cardinal, who finds sanctuary in Cochadebajo de los Gatos after his abdication, ultimately makes amends for his repressive past. The same, however, cannot be said for El Inocente. His sense of conviction in his campaign to conquer heresy "clarified and grew until he was veritably a man who . . . would know no peace until he had drowned evil in its own blood" (CG 334); like an evangelical Macbeth, he wades so deep that "[r]eturning were as tedious as go o'er." Divine disfavor of the monsignor's inquisitorial tactics is signalled — with a telling theological irony — by the appearance of the spirit of El Inocente's mentor, St. Thomas Aquinas. Dogging El Inocente as his crusaders massacre community after community, Aquinas renounces the suppressed texts of his theological *oeuvre* that recommend violent punishment for heretics and had so inspired El Inocente. The homicidally self-righteous monsignor responds by denouncing Aquinas as a demon. At the end of the novel, after the defeat of the crusade, El Inocente is cast into a pit beneath the decomposing bodies of his fellow crusaders — the point being that, "if a man wishes to wallow in death, he should be made to wallow

in it properly," observes Dionisio (*CG* 377) — and Aquinas reappears to appeal for clemency and leads the disgraced and demented monsignor away.

Just as the crusade flourishes within the political vacuum created by the departure of President Veracruz on an extended sabbatical (during which he has an operation to install a pump allowing him to become sexually aroused at will), religious intolerance and repression, which the crusade takes to extreme ends, signal the vacuum created by the Catholic hierarchy's analogous sabbatical from moral responsibility. Instead, those qualities the church abrogates to itself — divinity, magic, and by extension, righteousness — are clearly ranged on the side of the libertine, animist faithful of Cochadebajo de los Gatos, "a place where one could palpably feel the presence of the ancient gods and the spirits of nature" but also "a place where, when in the appropriate mood, one could find spectacular revelry and good humour" (*CG* 12).

Ranging the forces of the supernatural on the side of those opposed to the corruption and depravity of the forces that so thoroughly shape the social order of contemporary Latin America — the church, the army, the political establishment, and the drug trade — de Bernières highlights the injustices and inequities of a modernity shaped by the dubious legacies of colonialism and Western progress. In this fashion, like so many magic realist writers, de Bernières helps to cultivate a way "of seeing with a third eye," as Brenda Cooper phrases it, which "entails celebrating the rich, sensuous irreverence of carnival, revelling in the riotous imagination, in the truths of mysteries and imponderables" but also "entails a vision that can perceive oppression and can focus on systems of exploitation" (25). The trilogy reflects what Cooper sees as a characteristically magic realist syncretic interplay "of the history of cruelty and imperialist oppression as well as the celebration of indigenous culture and beliefs, especially those which contradict a modern, 'Western' 'scientific' view of reality. It is a utopian imagining of a society that is simultaneously modernizing and also returning to an original, nurturing source" (36). This syncretism thus enables magic realism to serve as a significant and effective mode of

postcolonial critique. Furthermore, as various critics have suggested, by syncretically juxtaposing and blurring the borders between the binary opposites so favored in colonial discourse (primitive/civilized, historical/contemporary, Christian/pagan, real/mythological), magic realism helps to contest that discourse without returning to a romanticized primitivism or an essentialist view of precolonial cultures.

De Bernières's trilogy, in a fashion similar to novels like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Allende's *The House of Spirits*, and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, recovers or resuscitates precolonial cultures and beliefs suppressed under colonialism, but without seriously entertaining a return to a utopian precolonial state. Thus, in its very hybridity and cosmopolitanism, magic realism — so much of which is written by cosmopolitan, migrant, Third-World writers — generally differs as a postcolonial discourse “from the more exclusionary ethnic strategies to which nationalist struggles are vulnerable” (Cooper 22). This cosmopolitan hybridity, however, has troublesome implications. Though magic realist writers tend to celebrate that which is “uncontaminated by European domination,” Cooper argues, they are “inevitably a hybrid mixture” (17) and their work tends to reflect a contamination by colonialism and/or a sense of distance from those precolonial cultures they celebrate. Cooper summarizes the uneasy position of magic realist writers in debates about postcolonialism, postmodernism, and cosmopolitanism by observing that magic realists “are postcolonials who avail themselves most forcefully of the devices of postmodernism” and who are “alternatively recognized as oppositional to cultural imperialism, but also as reactionaries, who perpetuate the retention of the Western stereotype of the exotic Other” (29).

That the juxtaposing of ostensibly mutually exclusive worlds (that is, the magical and the real) is usually effected from the perspective of an urbane, “contaminated,” contemporary denizen of the real is one of the central tensions of magic realist fiction. “Seeing with a third eye” that is unmistakably cosmopolitan and hybrid requires some delicate manoeuvres at the level of narration. While Chanady argues that magical realism requires “authorial reticence, or absence of obvious judgments

about the veracity of events and the authenticity of the world view expressed by characters in the text" (30), a more compelling view is that magic realist narrators, while generally willing to uphold the integrity of the magical, also tend to reflect a certain ironic distance from it. Cooper, for one, maintains that "it is precisely the mix of authorial reticence with authorial irony that is a defining feature of the magical realist text" (34). Narrators of magic realist texts tend to balance a respect for and lack of patronization of indigenous beliefs with "the almost inevitable, simultaneous scepticism of Western educated writers who assume an ironic distance from the lack of a 'scientific' understanding" (Cooper 33). This description fits the uneasy balance of the narration in de Bernières's trilogy to a tee, but the issue is further complicated by de Bernières's being not just Western-educated but Western *per se*. If de Bernières can be seen as a hybrid cosmopolitan, the tangents of that cosmopolitanism differ from those of his Third-World magic realist colleagues. The urbane detachment in the trilogy, in short, is that of the visitor rather than of the resident or the exile. De Bernières is clearly on familiar terms with Colombian society and history, but it seems fair to describe his work as that of at best a temporary resident.

In that sense, de Bernières has affiliations with those intermediaries who, as Durix argues, serve to render the Third-World other more palatable for Western readers. This means not only that colonial writers such as Forster, Conrad, Stevenson, Cary and others "may carry more weight in their opinion than the visions of contemporary artists writing from within the culture described" but also that many readers "still prefer to approach distant literary shores in the company of professional Western travelling writers (such as Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham, Paul Theroux) who offer apparently more alluring packages. . . . The Western eye in this case is the necessary mediator of perception" (Durix 74, 5-6). As this list reflects, Englishmen providing synoptic representations of Third-World societies have less than a stellar reputation, at least from the perspective of many postcolonial critics. Thus it becomes an important question in what relation de Bernières stands to this

controversial tradition. Is his trilogy closer to a postmodern variant of such colonial travelogues or to the hybrid cosmopolitanism of Third-World magic realism?

This liminal position is highly evident in the narration in the trilogy, which consistently emphasizes the strangeness — both the exoticism and irrationality — of its fictional Latin American terrain and foregrounds the need for narratorial mediation and interpretation. That interpretation reflects the usual difficult balance of reticence and irony in magic realist texts, not just in the treatment of the premodern “unscientific” elements but also in the treatment of the Westernized, modern society it depicts. De Bernières walks a thin narrative tightrope throughout the trilogy, modulating between the informative tone of a *Fodor’s Guide* and scathing carnivalesque satire, alternately running the risk of romantically fetishizing the mystic and exotic and of projecting an Olympian colonial *hauteur* in dissecting the ills of a pathological society.

De Bernières’s narrators consistently serve as interlocutors, providing alternately historical, ethnological, sociological, and natural scientific dissertations in a voice that is encyclopaedic and informative, essentially mediating Latin America for an international readership. At various points in the trilogy, for instance, de Bernières’s narrators provide overviews, both serious and parodic, of recent Latin American history, such as the summary in *Don Emmanuel* of La Violencia in Colombia, the brutal civil conflict which stretched from the late 1940s into the 1960s and claimed some 200,000 lives. Likewise, readers are constantly provided with brief explanations of and observations about the natural environment and about local customs and traditions. For instance, in *Don Emmanuel*, de Bernières provides a brief primer on the mythological significance and carnivorous behaviour of the jaguar, another on the varieties and uses of the machete, and another on the nature of siestas. Such lessons are ubiquitous in the trilogy.

In this manner, especially in *Don Emmanuel*, but in the other two novels as well, the narrators (and on occasion the characters themselves) serve as guides. This gesture clearly indicates that the readership de Bernières assumes is that of the wider English-

speaking world unfamiliar with Latin America, and it emphasizes his role as mediator. For instance, the narrator observes of the tradition of siestas that it "was nothing to do with the 'natural indolence' imputed to Latins by the rest of the world; it was to do with not being able to breathe, not being able to move without pouring with perspiration, not being able to see anything . . . , and it was to do with not being able to touch anything outdoors for fear of being burnt" (*DE* 146). In *Señor Vivo*, the narrator similarly serves as intermediary in describing the role of santería in the life of the villagers: "The world is well stocked with legends of the times when deities walked the earth and when saints performed miracles in Jesus' name. For the most part these legends are a quaint echo of nostalgia for times which now seem naive. But for the population of Cochadebajo de los Gatos and for millions of santeros of all races and colours all over the Hispanic Western hemisphere they walk the earth in broad daylight, still performing miracles, still discoursing with ordinary folk, still arguing, fighting, having love affairs, dispensing favours and punishments, still being greeted with cries of 'Ache'" (99).

However, de Bernières's satiric style complicates this mediating function, as his dissertations alternate between the informative, the facetious, and the witheringly ironic. For instance, the narrator of *Cardinal Guzman* provides a reductive history of ideological conflict in the nation:

Central to the national mythology was the idea that the great historical struggles were simple conflicts of good and evil. Leftists, for example, excoriated the conquistadors and canonized the Incas, while for rightists it was obvious that the conquistadors were bringing civilization to barbarians. To any informed outsider it was perfectly evident that both sides consisted of no one but cynical opportunists, and that this was largely true of all the other conflicts as well. (223)

This is one of many often hilarious overviews which present the nation as Orwellian in its absurd self-destructiveness. So do episodes such as in *Señor Vivo* when the mayor of Ipasueno outlaws the wearing of visors on motorcycle helmets, because the incidence of murders by assassins protected by the anonymity the

visors provide has "increased to such an extent that whenever a motorcyclist with a visor appeared in the streets everybody automatically flung themselves to the ground or dived for doorways" (112).

Given the obvious parallels (geographical, historical, and sociological) between de Bernières's fictional world and Colombia, one implication of de Bernière's satire is that the latter is pathologically dysfunctional. Such a performance review, needless to say, might not be particularly appreciated coming from a gringo, particularly given the role of gringos in contributing to and sustaining the political and economic power relations that cultivate that dysfunction. This response is likely to be compounded by the fact that de Bernières's satire is not confined to the behaviour of the establishment. His treatment of liberation movements and the left in general is similarly, if not equally, scathing. The left is repeatedly depicted as ineffective and paralyzed by internecine bickering and ideological hairsplitting — particularly the revolutionary left, whose tactics are bumbling, arbitrarily destructive, and generally counterproductive to a cause which is foggy at best. In short, the left is admirable only in light of the prior, endemic, and epic corruption and violence of the right.³

Such liberality of satire — which arguably serves to level traditional political distinctions — is unlikely to make de Bernières many friends among those who continue to abide by those distinctions; it suggests the "stance of unbelonging" that Aijaz Ahmad sees in Rushdie's writing, "the lone individual occupying a moral high ground above the 'chimeras of politics'" (156). Yet the very heterogeneity of the coalition that comprises *Cochadebajo de los Gatos* — which includes disaffected guerillas as well as disaffected members of the military — suggests that, in de Bernières's eyes, part of the problem is the rigidity of those distinctions and the inclination of those in political camps to engage in mindless and (for all intents and purposes) aimless violence. The castigation of the left in de Bernières's portrait, moreover, accords with recent reports on the violence in Colombia by human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which recognize the degree of human rights violations by armed opposition groups but place the

lion's share of the responsibility for such violations on the military and paramilitary groups.⁴ Furthermore, de Bernières certainly provides sympathetic histories of various characters who join the guerillas, underlining the harsh social, economic, and political circumstances that have given rise to armed opposition. Ultimately, though, Anthony Brennan's reservations about the new cosmopolitanism of Third-World writers can be extended to de Bernières as well. Cosmopolitanism, Brennan argues, tends towards political liberalism and "displays impatience, at times even hostility, to the legacy of decolonization and is filled with parodic or even dismissive references to the exalted 'people' of liberation movements" (*AH* 39).

De Bernières's obvious admiration for the campesinos and campesinas, the utopian triumphs of his determined idealists, and his romance with the countryside modify this critical edge in his fiction and evoke his appreciation for the thwarted potential of Latin America. At the same time, however, that admiration also makes him susceptible to charges of a mystifying romanticism. That is, if de Bernières might be taken to task for his cynicism, he is likewise vulnerable for his idealism. This is especially applicable to his representation of non-European cultures (indigenous and syncretic), which are treated with a delicate balance of irony and respect. This is most notable in the portrait of Aurelio, the principal indigenous character in the trilogy. Aurelio is able to be in two places at once, can transform himself into an eagle, and effects a series of miraculous cures by plunging his arm into the stomachs of the afflicted. During the founding of Cochadebajo de los Gatos, he revives the ancient art of softening stones with herbs "so that they could be worked like clay" and "harden[ing] them again into stone" (*DE* 328) and in general serves as a repository of precolonial wisdom. Throughout the trilogy, Aurelio exudes a quiet but profound aura of mystical power and indigenous integrity.

However, de Bernières also punctures that mystification of indigeneity through his trademark humour. For instance, in *Cardinal Guzman*, when army deserter General Fuerte is writing down stories that Aurelio tells of his people, Aurelio relates a scatological story about a monkey who wipes his behind with a

rabbit, and when Fuerte asks whether it is a story of his people, Aurelio responds, "It is now, because I just made it up" (269) — poking fun at the fetishizing, museumizing tendencies of Western anthropology. In *Don Emmanuel*, the narrator reverses the terms of the perspectival imposition typical of Western anthropology in his description of the Navantes, a tribe who are capable of telepathic travel courtesy of ayahuasca potions and are "particularly fond of going to New York, where there were millions of boxes that moved by themselves, and huge termite mounds where people lived like ants in vast colonies" (83).

Through such satire and his resistance to a binary opposition between the traditional and the contemporary, the civilized and the primitive — which are thoroughly carnivalized throughout the trilogy — de Bernières undercuts the seriousness of his position as interlocutor and comes closer to achieving that middle way between a demystifying documentary realism and an essentialist romanticizing of the indigene. In magic realism, as Durix argues of García Márquez's work, the "presence of the two radically antithetic — but nevertheless equally essentialist — discourses [the magic and the real] in the same fictional structure results in a mutual questioning of each one's pretensions to totality and unproblematic sense. The seriousness of political discourse is duplicated and somewhat undermined by the equally serious — at least on the surface — conventions of magic" (188).

As a result of this delicate narratorial navigation, the tone of the trilogy is perhaps the most striking aspect of de Bernières's work. It is unusual to see so much cynicism and so much optimism in such close proximity, but so it is: scathing political satire, depictions of brutal, gratuitous torture and violence, and chronicles of the miserable deprivation and repression of urban and rural peasants alike, take their place alongside utopian sentiments, touching portraits of hyperbolic romantics, and paeans to "the cheerful, anarchic poverty of village life" (*DE* 20). In this respect, de Bernières's work takes to precipitous extremes the delicate, carnivalesque balance that David Danow sees as characteristic of magic realism: "While negotiating the tortuous terrain of credibility, magical realism manages to present a view of

life that exudes a sense of energy and vitality in a world that promises not only joy but a fair share of misery as well" (66-67).

The upshot of de Bernières's trilogy is that grim violence and deprivation need not give rise to grim resignation, to a fatalistic acquiescence to the despairing, repressive cynicism that characterizes the political, religious, military, and criminal élites in the three novels. If there is one thing that the residents of Cochadebajo de los Gatos have in common (aside from a generally unbounded appetite for sex), it is a sense of optimism and zest for life, rare commodities in the scorched earth of de Bernières's fictional terrain. "Dionisio Vivo," indeed, is the unofficial motto not just of Cochadebajo de los Gatos but of de Bernières's fiction as a whole.

Nonetheless, the task of balancing reticence and irony is complicated in de Bernières's case by the need to mediate — to make Latin America, or at least part of it, comprehensible to an international readership. The narratorial mediation in the trilogy emphasizes, all the same, the essential otherness of that which needs explaining, as well as the sense that, whereas Latin America is the "Other" for readers of English, de Bernières, being an Englishman, is not. In some ways, this mediation puts de Bernières in the same camp as writers like Forster, Conrad, and Greene. One might be tempted to distinguish de Bernières from the others on the grounds that a fair bit of the satire in the trilogy is directed at the larger neocolonial context that sustains such corruption: the economic and military interference of the US, and the hypocritical self-interest of other Western nations such as Britain. Yet both Conrad and Forster are also substantially critical of empire and of presumptions of colonial superiority. As Brennan argues, though, they "could see and even diagnose imperialism, but not finally stand against it, however much they involved themselves passionately, unevenly and contradictorily in some of its inhuman realities" (*SR* 6), and de Bernières's anti-imperialism is much less ambivalent.

Nonetheless, it can be argued, de Bernières remains an outsider in what tends to be an outsider's game. As hybrid cosmopolitans, Cooper maintains, "Western educated and well travelled writers of magical realism are not themselves inserted

within these indigenous, pre-technological cultures that provide their inspiration. Although connected to such communities by their own history, such writers are separated from them by their class, despite claims they make for an 'authenticity' derived from a unity with indigenous culture" (16). Such a relatively privileged position, Cooper argues, fosters a political ambiguity, "the ambiguity of being both opposed to cultural imperialism and also aloof from any organized political engagement, of being implicated in the outlooks of ordinary people back home and also alienated from them culturally and distanced from them by privilege and global experience" (19).

Thus, though these writers may lay claim to a deeper historical, cultural, and, in some cases, racial attachment to the societies of which they write than can de Bernières, there is nonetheless a certain sense of distance and alienation that complicates their representations of those societies. "Magical realism," Cooper observes, "attempts to capture reality by way of a depiction of life's many dimensions, seen and unseen, visible and invisible, rational and mysterious. In the process, such writers walk a political tightrope between capturing this reality and providing precisely the exotic escape from reality desired by some of their Western readership" (32). While on the one hand this can be seen as reducing the distinction between de Bernières and his magic realist colleagues, on the other it can be taken as redoubling the possibility of appropriation, given the fact that de Bernières is writing as an outsider (and as a resident of the Empire at that).

The question is, then, can a "First World" writer work in a mode that is seen to be "a genuine expression of 'Third World' consciousness"? Obviously, a writer like de Bernières provides an interesting twist to Bhabha's reconfiguration of "the location of culture," in which, in place of the preoccupation with

the transmission of national traditions . . . , transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees — these border and frontier conditions — may be the terrains of world literature. The centre of such a study would neither be the "sovereignty" of national cultures, nor the universalism of human culture, but a focus on . . . "freak social and cultural displacements." (12)

But the displacement, hybridity, and liminality Bhabha has in mind tend to be defined from the minority position, and de Bernières, as an Englishman writing magic realism set in Latin America, seems to represent a very different kind of cosmopolitan displacement — one moving voluntarily outwards from the centre of power.

These judgements, of course, must be tempered by a recognition of the larger context of the double-edge of cultural globalization. As Durix warns at the end of his investigation of magic realism, the internationalizing of culture is a potentially neocolonial development, because the “cultures of the world are now intertwined, involved in a possibly unprecedented power struggle, but also in an accelerated process of hybridization. This situation may lead to a new form of cultural and economic colonization, this time extending around the globe” (3). Ultimately, though, Durix shares Bhabha’s optimism about hybridity and his skepticism about nationalism — postcolonial and otherwise. He feels this hybridization “also contains the seeds of cross-fertilization, provided other people’s right to their specificities is respected. Such a process requires an acknowledgment of the dangers inherent in ‘pure’ national cultures, a major problem not only in Western nations threatened by the resurgence of neo-fascist ideologies but also in recently decolonized states struggling for an original sense of self-definition or simply attempting to solve through authoritarian means the problem of the artificial boundaries imposed by colonization” (3).

Durix’s inclination to dissolve boundaries and to promote an international cross-fertilization does not sit altogether easily with his questioning of those Western mediaries, who can be seen, at least to some degree, as the products of a cross-fertilization, and a writer like de Bernières complicates the situation even further. As a very different “borderline case,” de Bernières suggests that within the context of the increasing cosmopolitanism of the international literary scene there is a distinction to be made between condemning a defensive, essentialist clinging to literary sovereignty and condoning a neocolonialist, globe-trotting literary commodification. In Brennan’s mind, the latter is certainly an occupational hazard of the new cosmopolitanism, in which the West’s literary influence has

been reversed, and "U.S. and European novelists now eagerly cop the metafictional extravaganzas and multilingual and multiracial cross-dressing of work from non-European countries" (AH 38). When is it cross-fertilization, when is it being a mediar, and when is it poaching? How do we determine when "other people's right to their specificities" is being compromised or violated rather than respected?

Some might take issue with Brennan's presentation of literary influence as poaching on the grounds that it appeals to discredited notions of cultural authenticity and proprietary rights, but these are the kinds of questions that the success of a writer like de Bernières certainly raises. Consider, for instance, the implications of Richard Gehr's review of de Bernières's trilogy in *The Village Voice*. Gehr suggests that, with Latin American magic realism running out of steam, de Bernières "sneaks up on Latin American turf with an outsider's detached regard" and "reinvigorates magical realism by taking both parts of this apparent oxymoron literally and pushing them to their limits" (59). Would one be as likely to take such a celebratory tone if de Bernières had achieved his success in, say, Inuit sculpture? In the context of a global culture dominated by multinational corporations which have a vested interest in the portability of culture and the interchangeability of its producers, cultural dissemination and cross-fertilization may not be as salutary as they seem. As Ahmad argues, the celebration of multiplicity and liminality prevalent in poststructuralist theory and postmodern literature, in tandem with the increasing dismissal of myths of origin, is all too compatible with multinational capitalism's mobility and drive to extract surplus value regardless of borders (130).

The issue of portability is a key one in trying to situate de Bernières's work within magic realism as a cosmopolitan phenomenon developing in the wake of the Latin American boom. Unlike de Bernières, the heirs of Márquez have generally been adaptive. That is, however much Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel, say, inherit Márquez's ontological disruptions, his fantastic weaving of political history into the fabric of romance and family epic, his materialization of emotional states and philosophical concepts, they do so on their own terms and in their

own contexts — Chile and Mexico, respectively. Further afield, Toni Morrison employs the spectral figure of Beloved and disrupts the chronological rigidity of linear time in *Beloved* in ways that evoke West African mythology and spirituality and interrogate the legacy of slavery in the US, and Jack Hodgins parodies Celtic mythology and makes use of such magic realist tropes as ghosts, doppelgangers, and the parodic, hyperbolic list of wedding presents in *The Invention of the World* to present a postcolonial image of Vancouver Island as an eccentric, larger-than-life place of “new growth.” To the extent that the writing of Rushdie, Erdrich, and Carter can be considered magic realist, it is likewise distinctly adaptive.

What differentiates de Bernières is that he inherits not just the texture, tropes, and strategies of Márquezian magic realism but the territory as well. This is not to suggest that Colombia belongs to Márquez, but rather that, in many respects, de Bernières moves into Macondo and claims squatter’s rights. Not only does de Bernières’s literary landscape resemble Macondo, but also there are frequent evocations of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: the repetition of names (Aurelio, Remedios); the proliferation of plagues (of cats, of laughing, of pigs, of literary criticism); the mark on Dionisio’s sons; the fatal beauty of Leticia Aragon, reminiscent of Remedios the Beauty; the resuscitated conquistador Conde Pompeyo Xavier de Estramadura being tied to a stake in Cochadebajo de los Gatos, bringing to mind the figure of the impossibly old Aurelio Buendía. de Bernières owes quite a debt to Márquez and is quite conscious of it, as suggested by his nod to Macondo when a character in *Don Emmanuel* refers to earlier plagues in the area: “a plague of falling leaves, a plague of sleeplessness, on of invisible hailstones, a plague of amnesia, and another time there was a rainstorm for several years that reduced everything to rust and mould” (233).

These and other elements that bring to mind not just Márquez but also Vargas Llosa, Carpentier, Rushdie and others highlight the extent to which de Bernières is digging into a storehouse of Latin American and/or magic realist characters, scenes, and tropes. De Bernières thus extends his mediation of Colombia and Latin America to their literary representations as well, particularly the most famous, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

On the one hand, this signals his expectation of his readers' familiarity with that corpus, implicitly and respectfully positing it as having textual priority to his work. On the other hand, this borrowing (which seems more apt here than "intertextuality") is uncomfortably extensive; we know from Northrop Frye that all literature is made of other literature, but perhaps one should not be so shameless about it (and there is such a thing as plagiarism). This prompts one to consider just what de Bernières brings to a line of magic realism that some see as nearing exhaustion. Is he just putting up new drapes in the ramshackle house of Márquez?

What de Bernières does bring to that line (which is, to my mind, far from exhausted) is a much more extravagant sense of the carnivalesque and a unique, engaging cynical utopianism and *joie de vivre*. Furthermore, however much one might take issue with de Bernières's legitimacy as interlocutor and however much de Bernières may lay himself open to charges of political reactionism, in the final analysis, the trilogy's sustained engagement with the horrific political and social realities of contemporary Colombia specifically, and Latin America generally, is something to be appreciated. Indeed, weighing concerns about cultural appropriation in the context of a neocolonial new world order seems like a rarefied exercise given the genocidal dimensions of the physical appropriations and assorted other violences which characterize the place of a country like Colombia in that new world order.

And yet, as Brennan argues, even such political engagement is part of a problematic cosmopolitan mediation of Third-World struggles. The "prominence of politics in Third-World fiction — or rather, our own tendentious projection of politics on to a mythical 'Third World' — is exactly what Western critics find attractive. It is a mark of novelty, shock value, contemporary relevance and the exotic"; more importantly, those concerns get exposure "only within a field of reception already defined by metropolitan tastes and agendas" (SR 38). De Bernières's fictional offspring may be troublesome in much the same manner as Rushdie's are for Ahmad and Brennan, because de Bernières, like Rushdie, takes on a responsibility "to the decolonisation struggles he interprets (and translates) for a Western

reading public, "but the fulness and complexity of their collective visions are often foreshortened in the personal filter" of that fiction (Brennan, *SR* 166). Yet de Bernières's work, like that of Rushdie and Latin American fabulists like Márquez and Allende, reflects how literary cosmopolitanism, while susceptible to compromise within and complicity with global commodity culture, can also be the staging ground for strategies of resistance to it.

This ambivalence underlines how, if de Bernières's contribution to magic realism might seem a modest one, assessing his work provides a useful exercise in the complicated politics of a much more cosmopolitan, international, and hybrid literary culture. What makes de Bernières such an interesting study is that he does riotously succeed in the same mode and on the same terrain as Márquez, and yet, at the same time, as the trope of invasion ("sneaks up on Latin American turf") Gehr slips into highlights, that success has definite political and cultural implications. It dramatizes, indeed, how the reception of cosmopolitanism in contemporary global culture is clearly complicated by, on the one hand, postcolonial suspicion of Western mediaries and neocolonial commodification of the Third-World other, but also, on the other, by the increasing rejection of an essentialist postcolonial nationalism. Respecting specificities, in short, is a whole lot more challenging in practice than in theory. Particularly because his fiction raises these concerns, Louis de Bernières deserves more serious and sustained attention than he has received thus far. Whether that attention will be more orderly than the "plague of literary criticism, never a pretty thing at the best of times" (120), that sets the inhabitants of Cochadebajo de los Gatos at each other's throats in *Cardinal Guzman* remains to be seen.

NOTES

- ¹ To label de Bernières an "English writer," of course, is a bit of shorthand, since his background is English and French and since, as was pointed out when I presented a shorter version of this paper at the conference of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE) in May, 2000, in Edmonton, even the notion of "English" is a problematic one (my thanks to Diana Austin for her helpful reminder on that score).

- ² In the "Alpha and Omega" chapter of *Midnight's Children*, Methwold Estate is overrun by cats, which are subsequently exterminated by Saleem Sinai's *femme fatale* Evie Burns and her trusty Daisy air-gun.
- ³ De Bernières's portrait of the left in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* is even more critical. The Greek resistance is depicted as ineffective, brutal, and cowardly — little better, essentially, than the Nazis they resisted and certainly worse than the happy-go-lucky Italian occupiers on whom the novel centres. As Seumas Milne writes, the novel has been received by many Greeks as a reactionary, revisionist history of the occupation, particularly on Cephalonia, which provides the setting for the novel and also the location for the Hollywood film made from the novel. The firestorm of criticism, Milne reports, has de Bernières somewhat back on his heels, and it will be little surprise if his portrait of the left in the trilogy generates controversy as well. My thanks to Ann Quéma for bringing this article to my attention.
- ⁴ See Amnesty International, *Political Violence*, and Human Rights Watch, *War Without Quarter*. Both reports suggest that "dysfunctional" would be at the euphemistic extreme for characterizing the state of democracy in Colombia, which, as Javier Giraldo points out, is celebrated as one of the most stable democracies in Latin America because of the absence of military dictatorships during the second half of the twentieth century (an era in which dictatorships were ubiquitous), yet has a vastly greater level of political violence, perpetrated primarily by the state (57).

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