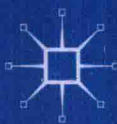


Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel Between Faith and Irreverence



Christopher Warnes



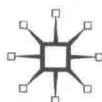
Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel

Between Faith and Irreverence

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First published in hardback 2009

First published in paperback 2014 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978–0–230–54528–1 hardback

ISBN 978–1–137–44086–0 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Transferred to Digital Printing in 2014

Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel

Preface

The term magical realism is an oxymoron, an appropriate condition given that it designates a narrative strategy that stretches or ruptures altogether the boundaries of reality. By contrast, literary criticism, in its institutional forms, is tasked with rational interpretation, explanation and clarification. The language of magical realist fiction and the language of traditional criticism part company over the former's decision to take seriously the claims of unreason. This makes magical realism an intriguing, exasperating, sometimes terrifying topic about which to write a work of serious literary analysis.

Fortunately, I have had a great deal of help from family, teachers, colleagues, friends and students on the road to getting this book, finally, to the point at which I have resolved to leave it alone. Without the support and encouragement of my parents this book would never have materialised. Many years ago Jill Arnott, David Attwell, Barbara Harlow, Don Beale, Anton van der Hoven, Bill Bizley and Liz Gunner put me in touch with ideas and contexts which surface from time to time in this study. Ato Quayson and Tim Cribb supervised my first steps with grace and good humour. Benjamin Cornford made me aware of how fitting a place Cambridge is for the study of magical realism. Kevin Durham, Georgina Evans, Gudrun Freese, Jana Giles, Priya Gopal, Lucy Graham, Christian Holler, Doug McCabe, Elizabeth Vlossak, and Astrid Swenson provided friendship, advice, proofreading, conversation, and translation assistance. Colleagues in Stellenbosch, in Cambridge and in the Postcolonial Studies Association offered encouragement and helpful feedback. For financial support, I am grateful to the Cambridge Trusts and to St John's College. In the course of writing this book I spent several happy months in Spain and Cuba and I am grateful to the friends and teachers there who generously and enthusiastically discussed these texts with me. Several anonymous reviewers made suggestions that proved extremely useful. I also owe a huge debt of gratitude to the students from three continents on whom, at various points, I have tested many of the ideas in this book.

Translations in this book are taken where possible from published sources. For their commitment to making these texts available to a wider audience I am grateful to, among others, Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (Borges), Harriet de Onís, Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Carpentier), Gerald Martin (Asturias) and Gregory Rabassa (García Márquez). Where no published translations exist, or where modification was required, I have provided my own translations.

Parts of what follows have appeared in print in different forms as: "Magical Realism and the Legacy of German Idealism." *Modern Language Review* 101.2 (2006): 488–98; "Avatars of Amadis: Magical Realism as Postcolonial Romance," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40.3 (2005): 7–20; "Naturalizing the Supernatural: Faith, Irreverence and Magical Realism." *Literature Compass* 2.1 (2005): 1–16; "The Hermeneutics of Vagueness: Magical Realism in Current Literary Critical Discourse" *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 41.1 (2005): 1–13. I am grateful to these journals for permission to reprint.

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1

Introduction: Re-thinking Magical Realism

The term magical realism has appeared in print with increasing frequency over the last few decades. It can be found in a vast number of university course descriptions, dissertations, academic articles, in the popular press, and it is now familiar to millions through the appearance on Oprah Winfrey's Book Club of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Even the advertising industry has begun to take an interest in the term, though it long ago learned how to capitalise on magical realist visual techniques in its quest for ever more novel ways of marketing products.¹ But in the domain of literary studies this popularity has, until recently, not been matched by any certainty over what magical realism actually is and what it does.

Scholars new to the field are thus likely to be confronted by a number of contradictory attitudes. Thus, we find Homi Bhabha referring to magical realism as "the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world" (*Nation* 6), while for Jean Franco it is "little more than a brand name for exoticism" (204). According to Matei Calinescu, it can be "a major, perhaps *the* major, component of postmodernist fiction" (Zamora and Faris, dustcover). But Fredric Jameson sees it as "a possible alternative to the narrative logic of contemporary postmodernism" ("Film" 302). Magical realism has by turns been praised for founding "a new multicultural artistic reality" (Durix 162) and it has been denigrated as "dangerous and shallow" (Barker 14). It has even been accused of being underpinned by "pernicious – even racist – ideologies" (Martin "Magical" 104). At the heart of the critical uncertainty about magical realism are the meanings that the term is assumed to signify: ideas clustered around notions of narrative and representation, culture,

history, identity, what is natural and what is supernatural. There are, in the final analysis, very few realms of modern thought not undergirded by assumptions about the nature of what is real and what is not, and it is to these very assumptions that serious magical realist literature claims to speak. With such an enormous scope of reference, it is not difficult to understand why disagreement and confusion proliferate.

A fundamental question concerns the type of category that is constituted by magical realism. Is magical realism simply a mode of narration that may be sporadically engaged by an author; is it a literary movement with a specific agenda and defined geographical and cultural boundaries; or is it a genre of fiction that can be compared across continents and languages? Before these questions can be addressed, we must acknowledge that magical realism's problems are rooted yet more deeply in the fact that both magical and realism are terms fraught with a complex history of contradictory usage.² And, of course, central to critical discourse's problems with magical realism is that the term is an oxymoron: magic is thought of as that which lies outside of the realm of the real; realism excludes the magical. Magical realism, in its very name, flouts philosophical conventions of non-contradiction. How should one begin to pick a path through such cluttered terrain?

Some critics have suggested that we ought to do away with the term altogether (González Echevarría *Carpentier* 108; Connell 95–110). The problem with such a suggestion, even if it were possible to implement, is that it ignores the fact that the tenacity of the term is due in large measure to its explanatory value. There is a growing corpus of literary works that draws upon the conventions of both realism and fantasy or folktale, yet does so in such a way that neither of these two realms is able to assert a greater claim to truth than the other. This capacity to resolve the tension between two discursive systems usually thought of as mutually exclusive must constitute the starting point for any inquiry into magical realism. A brief survey of canonical magical realist texts – Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, among others – will reveal that what these otherwise different texts all have in common is that each treats the supernatural as if it were a perfectly

acceptable and understandable aspect of everyday life. As Rushdie says, talking of García Márquez, "impossible things happen constantly and quite plausibly, out in the open under the midday sun" ("García Márquez" 301–302). A basic definition of magical realism, then, sees it as a mode of narration that naturalises or normalises the supernatural;³ that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence. On the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality.

Notwithstanding the confusion that the oxymoronic nature of the term continues to attract in some circles, the literary boundaries of magical realism are in fact clearly delimited, and have been for some time. As Erik Camayd-Freixas points out, Todorov's identification in the 1970s of the structure of the fantastic provided the impetus for formal definitions of magical realism to be developed. The most important of these early structural approaches, Irlemar Chiampi's 1980 book, *O Realismo Maravilhoso: Forma e Ideologia no Romance Hispano-Americano* (a Spanish translation appeared in 1983), was, ironically, an attempt to supplant the term magical realism with the Carpentier-derived term marvellous realism. Nevertheless, Chiampi's approach made it possible for her to describe in detail the operations of a literary mode in which natural and supernatural were presented in a non-disjunctive manner, facilitating "the denaturalisation of the real and the naturalisation of the marvellous" (205). In 1985 Amaryll Chanady continued in the structuralist vein. Her book, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* identifies a three-part taxonomy of magical realism: the text must display coherently developed codes of the natural and supernatural, the antinomy between these codes must be resolved, and a measure of authorial reticence must facilitate the co-existence and legitimacy of both codes (3–6).

As her title suggests, Chanady is concerned with distinguishing magical realism from fantastic literature, and in this regard her theory is useful both in understanding the formal dimensions of the mode and in distinguishing magical realism from its neighbouring genres. One can show, for example, how fantasy, fairy-tales and science fiction de-privilege codes of the real by taking as settings realms removed from our recognisable, empirical world. Or one might show how the Gothic novel, the uncanny and some examples

of horror make coherent use of codes of the natural and of the supernatural, yet present them in such a way that their co-existence is rendered a source of unease or anxiety – thus leaving the antinomy unresolved. Finally, with regard to Chanady's third criterion, it needs to be emphasised that if the supernatural is in any way explicable – such as when Lewis Carroll's Alice awakes to find that her adventures were all a dream, or when the fantastic bats swooping down on one of Hunter S. Thompson's characters are revealed to be the result of drug-induced hallucination – then the code of the real is effectively privileged over that of the fantastic, and magical realism is therefore not the best category within which to consider the text.

The landmark publication in English-language critical discourse on magical realism is Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris's 1995 anthology, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. The volume treats magical realism for the first time as an international phenomenon, bringing together literary contexts as diverse as Europe, Asia, North and South America, the Caribbean, Africa and Australia. One of the main strengths of the anthology is that it presents alongside one another founding texts of magical realist discourse by Roh, Carpentier, Flores and Leal. A useful history of the term – straddling literary and art historical contexts – is provided by Irene Guenther, and Chanady contextualises the Latin American debate helpfully by interpreting it as a "territorialisation of the imaginary." Also noteworthy is Faris's attempt at constructing a coherent set of generic defining features for the mode, an effort she has renewed and extended in her 2004 monograph.

The Zamora and Faris anthology suffers, however, from an inability to sustain consistency of definition across the range of essays. A similar charge must be levelled at the two critical anthologies that have followed it, edited by Linguanti, Casotti and Concilio (1999) and by Hart and Ouyang (2005), respectively. The result is often a vague and arbitrary approach which allows vastly different texts to be grouped under the same rubric with no measure of caution as to the distorting consequences this generates.⁴ Second, essays in edited volumes are seldom able to pursue in any great detail comparative approaches based on close and contextualised readings of magical realist texts. Monographs are better positioned to do this, and indeed recent works of criticism by Erik Camayd-Freixas (1998), Brenda Cooper (1998), Shannin Schroeder (2004), Maggie Ann Bowers

(2004) Wendy B. Faris (2004) and Anne C. Hegerfeldt (2005), could be said to be in broad agreement about the crucial issue of definition. Vastly different though they are in their choices of materials, methodologies and in the conclusions they reach, on the question of definition none of these critics could be said to diverge substantially from Chanady's 1985 account of the key attributes of magical realism.

In Camayd-Freixas's account, magical realism is understood to be a sophisticated aesthetic expression of primitivism that served the yearnings of Latin American writers for identity and cultural emancipation. The magical realism of Carpentier, Asturias, Rulfo and García Márquez is shown to develop from an urge to reclaim a space of otherness by appealing to myths of difference (49). Importantly, Camayd-Freixas's approach differs from that of the early formalists in that he treats magical realism as a historical style deriving from an "‘ethnological version’ based on the presence of myth, legend, the syncretism of Indian, black and peasant from the most isolated and remote regions of the Americas" (320). His attempts to ground the mode in the literary and cultural contexts from which it emerges, while productive in terms of the texts he studies, does not, however, attempt to account for the ways magical realism has become an international phenomenon, nor how his ethnological version would apply to non-Latin American texts.

Faris adopts exactly the global perspective lacking in Camayd-Freixas's account, asserting that magical realism is "perhaps the most important contemporary trend in international fiction" (1). She is at pains to define her understanding of magical realism in the clearest fashion possible. Thus, for her magical realism is a mode of narration primarily characterised by five features.

First, the text contains an "irreducible element" of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space and identity. (7). Of these five elements, I would argue that only the first two are crucial, but the point is that Faris's approach shows a full appreciation of the necessity of starting with a clear and unambiguous definition of magical realism.

The books by Camayd-Freixas and Faris represent two different critical approaches to magical realism. The former is anthropological (in the broad sense of the term) and seeks to interpret the magic in magical realism culturally, as an expression of particular belief systems or ways of seeing the world. The latter perspective sees magical realism as akin to a form of epistemological scepticism, a productive fictional mode of critique. The two books differ in scope, too, with the former confining itself to the study of just four writers, while the latter incorporates a dizzying range of texts from around the world. The consequences are predictable: Camayd-Freixas has been criticised as having too restrictive an approach (Shaw 578). Faris is to be faulted for showing too little interest in the specific cultural contexts from which her texts emerge, and for being content to assign a single paragraph, or in some cases even less, to the discussion of individual works of magical realism.

I have attempted, in this book, to incorporate Camayd-Freixas's depth of analysis with Faris's international range by treating magical realism as a global phenomenon, while at the same time respecting the local currents – cultural, literary, political, historical – that always run through any fictional text. I have preferred to run the risk of being criticised for adopting too limited an approach to definition and text selection than the opposite. Generalising accounts abound describing the ways magical realism represents the “writing back” of the margins to the centre, how it blurs the binaries of modern thought, how it critiques the assumptions of the Enlightenment, how it shows up the limitations of European rationalism, how it reveals the ethical failings of realism. Neil Lazarus has pointed to the ways that the “politics of postcolonial modernism” have constrained current approaches in postcolonial literary studies, and I believe that many of his criticisms are applicable to the study of magical realism. Lazarus argues that “the tendentiousness and partiality of the theoretical assumptions that have structured postcolonial studies hitherto” have resulted in a “leadendy reductive” approach to the few texts that are read. “To read across postcolonial literary studies,” he asserts, “is to find, to an extraordinary degree, the same questions asked, the same methods, techniques, and conventions used, the same concepts mobilized, the same conclusions drawn” (424). For too long a similar case has prevailed in the study of magical realism, with the term being simply a drudge for a postmodernist postcolonialism obsessed with

hybridity, liminality, and what Peter Hallward calls "the facile denunciation of binaries" (xv). By limiting the range of texts to be discussed I am attempting to provide the space for specific texts to be considered in the detail required to shift thinking about magical realism from programmatic responses to more nuanced conceptions of the origins, nature, and functions of the mode.

While Lazarus singles out several of the authors studied in this book as being part of the "woefully restricted and attenuated corpus of works" dominant in postcolonial studies, he also concedes that the problem lies not so much in the fact that these authors are so much read, as in the ways in which they are read. To various degrees the opportunism, narrowness and inappropriateness decried by Lazarus can be seen in much of the criticism on magical realism: the endlessly repeated potted histories of the term; the vague and indeterminate ways questions of definition have been treated; the assumption that there is a single kind of magical realism – usually that of García Márquez or Rushdie; the distorting comparisons that result from this normative approach; the ways magical realism is so often automatically seen to deconstruct notions of subjectivity, history, nationhood, reality, without any sense of how it can also construct these notions; a general inability to relate magical realism to its specific cultural contexts. It is only by returning to the key novels of magical realism, and by affording them the time and attention they require, that a theory of magical realism can progress beyond these critical dead ends. Importantly, this theory needs to emerge from the novels rather than imposing itself on them.

The kind of formalism I am recommending, which requires lucid and consistent definition and a close attention to the semantics of structure, faces immediate epistemological and political objections. First, the definition of magical realism being used here makes possible a focus on the interplay between certain key concepts while avoiding the very significant question of what cultural reference points and assumptions are being invoked. In other words, this definition dodges the fact that the signifiers, *natural* and *supernatural*, *real* and *fantastic*, depend for their meanings on a stable point of comparison – a shared notion of reality – that is undermined by the relativising effects of magical realism. This crucial issue, discussed below, demands careful contextualisation in terms of questions about culture, relativism and referentiality. Second, close attention

to questions of form and structure is to be conceived of as an antidote to inappropriate generalisation, not as a substitute for engagement with the cultural, political and historical fields with which any novel is inevitably in dialogue. The challenge is, as always, to reconcile these two levels throughout the analysis.

In its concern with a dialectic between natural and supernatural, literary criticism overlaps with the disciplines of anthropology, religious studies and sociology. In particular, the revisions made to anthropology over the past half a century allow us to rescue the term magic from its relegation to the domain of the illusionary, the primitive and the childish. Ever since the armchair intellectualism of Victorians like Spencer, Tylor and Frazer yielded to phenomenological and participant-based approaches, anthropology has had to confront its use of rationalist approaches to understand the beliefs and actions of others. A very important consequence of this confrontation has been the development of models of understanding based on a contrast between two different modes of thought and being, one "sacred," the other "profane," to use the terms introduced by Durkheim and developed by Eliade. It is possible to trace this distinction, or related versions of it, in the work of a great number of thinkers, from the structuralist-functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard to the more symbolic approaches of Lévy-Bruhl, Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz and others.⁵ This distinction is one of the most dominant preoccupations of anthropology and religious studies and provides a significant – and as yet largely unexplored – point of intersection with magical realism's treatment of the relationships between natural and supernatural.

A useful anthropological intertext for the study of magical realism is Stanley Tambiah's *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality*. Tambiah returns, rather unfashionably, to the work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in order to develop the notion of "world view" as an indicator of a collective, cultural, pattern of thought and outlook, and in order to account for cultural differences in the perceptions of reality. Collective patterns of thought, indicated by other concepts like "mentality" or "ordering of reality," are ways of demarcating the scope and limits of knowledge construction at different times and within different societies and depend on a very different model of understanding from that utilised by the Victorian intellectualists, still common in some quarters today. Spencer, Tylor and Frazer developed an approach that was

predominantly psychological, and which tended towards a unifying theory of culture that did not have to accommodate difficult questions about difference. Magic, religion and science were all considered to be rational attempts to make sense of the world, and were therefore arranged according to their efficacy. When the Victorians related magic, religion and science to their cultural contexts, they came up with an evolutionary sequence that took the shape of a single line from barbarism to civilisation. Tambiah returns to Lévy-Bruhl because of his early attempts to contest such social evolutionism. For all their faults, Lévy-Bruhl's theories offer a pluralist attempt to account for belief and action, paving the way for later theorists to grapple with the dynamics of cultural difference – dynamics which also often underlie the practice of magical realist writing.

Contemplating examples like that of the Bororo of the Amazon, whose claims to be parakeets he refused to see as metaphorical, but as expressions of belief in an inexplicable union, Lévy-Bruhl proposed the possibility of a "mystic" mentality, quite different from modern causal logic. For Lévy-Bruhl, mystic "implies a belief in forces and influences and actions which, though imperceptible to sense, are nevertheless real" (38). This belief is pervasive, and implies that there is no distinction between natural and supernatural: "The primitive's mentality does not recognise two distinct worlds in contact with one another and more or less penetrating. To him there is but one" (68). The organisation of this type of thought was determined by what Lévy-Bruhl called the "law of participation," the characteristic quality of which was spatial and temporal fusion. "Logical mentality," by contrast, is characterised by a law of causality that seeks to identify and eliminate contradictions, and is conceptual, empirical and scientifically rational in nature.

In response to criticisms from colleagues, and especially from Evans-Pritchard, Lévy-Bruhl modified his ideas in ways that move them away from a simple dichotomy. Evans-Pritchard pointed out that it was a mistake to describe "primitive" culture only in terms of its mystical qualities, or Western cultures as exclusively scientific and rational, since both mentalities could be identified in each culture, and to different levels of complexity (Tambiah 92). Lévy-Bruhl came to conceive of these two mentalities as co-existing, rather than in a relationship of succession, and he named them "participation" and "causality."

Tambiah shows how Lévy-Bruhl's ideas about participation have been useful to anthropologists like Maurice Leenhardt, who formulated ideas about "mythic landscape" and "sacred geography" to understand Melanesian village life (87, 106–108). But Tambiah also takes Lévy-Bruhl's ideas about the co-existence of mentalities, which he prefers to call "orientations to reality" or "orderings of reality," outside of the domain of anthropology by comparing them with Freud's primary and secondary thought processes, and by relating them to common threads in aesthetic theory, phenomenology, feminism, contemporary psychoanalysis and Nelson Goodman's theories of "worldmaking" (93–105). Importantly, Tambiah, following Lévy-Bruhl, refuses to dichotomise: causality and participation become, in his account, expressions of "two modes of ordering the world that are simultaneously available to human beings as complementary cognitive and affective interests" (108). Some of the concepts and characteristics that Tambiah attaches to causality are:

Ego against the world. Egocentricity. Atomistic individualism. The language of distancing and neutrality of action and reaction. The paradigm of evolution in space and time. Instrumental action that changes matter and the causal efficacy of technical acts. The successive fragmentation of phenomena, and their atomization, in the construction of scientific knowledge.

Participation, in contrast, is characterised by:

Ego/person with the world, a product of the world. Sociocentrism. The language of solidarity, unity, holism and continuity in space and time. Expressive action that is manifest through conventional intersubjective understandings, the telling of myths and the enactment of rituals. The performative efficacy of communicative acts. Pattern recognition, and the totalisation of phenomena. The sense of encompassing cosmic oneness. (109)

Participation and causality, then, are "contrasting and complementary and coexisting orientations to the world, perhaps best illustrated by complexes labelled 'religion' and 'science'" (110). These labels are used for convenience, rather than precision, and "religion" here can be assumed to include "magic" in its ambit.⁶ What is notable about