Introduction

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Magical realism is a concept that has proved stubbornly resistant to processes of naming and definition. In the narrow sense in which the term is used by literary critics, magical realism refers to a mode or a style – sometimes a genre – of writing in which magical elements are presented alongside realistic ones as if there were no difference of kind between them. A magical realist text will treat supernatural occurrences as if they were perfectly natural. It will incorporate, without surprise, fantastic elements into the realm of history and objective materiality.

In a broader sense, magical realism seeks to engage not only with a history of textual representation, but also with the implications and the categories that underpin that representation. Magical realism's close affiliation – by turns sympathetic and antagonistic – with realism itself allows magical realism to partake in the logic that governs realism and to utilise the conceptual resources that realism makes available. At the heart of this logic – and at the centre of the conceptual problems it generates – is the word *real*. Real derives ultimately from the Latin *res*, meaning simply 'thing': the real is that which is palpable, unlike the imaginary. But, as Raymond Williams points out in *Keywords*, at least since the sixteenth century, real has meant more than this, being positioned in opposition to 'apparent' and taking on an additional sense of 'fundamental' and 'true'. Williams concludes that there is 'almost endless play in the word', but the direction of travel is towards the equation of tangible and true.[1]

This play identified by Williams takes on greater significance as realism emerges as a concept, suggesting a doctrine, system, ideology or movement. Philosophical realism has a long and convoluted history, but its features most readily relevant to magical realism lie in the emphasis, after Descartes and Locke, on reason and the senses. Realism in both

[1] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* [1976] (London: Fontana, 1988), p. 258.

philosophy and art is distrusting of prior models of thought and representation. It is, as Ian Watt points out, 'critical, anti-traditional, and innovating; its method has been the study of the particulars of experience by the individual, who ideally at least, is free from the body of past assumptions and traditional beliefs'.[2] Watt's emphasis throughout his foundational study is on realism as 'an epistemological problem', one inevitably bound up with questions about what is real and how this real should be conceived and represented, questions in which the empirical plays the most significant part. Here, one must distinguish between realism defined narrowly as simply a body of nineteenth-century artistic production, which has its heyday in the novels of Balzac, Dickens, Gaskell and Zola,[3] and the broader sense encouraged by Watt, which sees realism so strongly correlated with an aspiration to objectivity as to be inseparable from it. It is part and parcel of the rise of scientific, secular, rational modes of thought in the Western world from the eighteenth century onwards.

Understanding realism in a wider historical context allows us to perceive continuity between realism and modernity. From an early twentieth-century perspective, realism came to be seen by some as being in an epistemological alliance with imperialism, industrialism and renewed forms of patriarchy. That European colonialism accelerated dramatically in this period is no coincidence. Modern thought, insisting as it does on the instrumental, the efficient, the measurable, the quantifiable and the empirical, lends itself very well to the development of technologies of production, conquest and control.

Realism's imperial alliances made it a necessary form for writers from the (post)colony to reclaim. As Zoe Norridge describes, 'It is perhaps unsurprising that in response to over a hundred years of realist European novels that sidelined, contorted, or denied the voices of colonized people, writers from colonised countries would adapt the tools of realist narrative to their own advantage in contesting and redressing a long-established mimetic imbalance'.[4] The most well-known example here is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, though, as Norridge points out, realism by colonised writers precedes decolonisation. From this angle, postcolonial

[2] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* [1957] (London: Penguin, 1974), p. 13.
[3] See Lilian R. Furst (ed.), *Realism* (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 1–3.
[4] Zoe Norridge, 'Magical/Realist Novels and "The Politics of the Possible"', in Ato Quayson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Postcolonial Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 60–80.

magical realism and realism are part of a similar project: the seizing of narrative power over one's own reality.

In the wake of Euro-America's early twentieth-century crises of empire, of faith and world war, a different kind of art emerged: one consequent on, as Bradbury and McFarlane put it, 'the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character, on the linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions'.[5] Disillusionment with modernity went hand in hand with disillusionment with realism.

Among the plethora of '-isms' that rushed into the spaces left behind by realism in the early decades of the twentieth century in Europe, the most important, from a magical realist perspective, is undoubtedly surrealism. Surrealism's antagonism to rationalism derived from a variety of sources, but it was especially World War I that produced a generation of thinkers and artists deeply sceptical of the claims of reason, progress and technology and committed to finding different routes to knowledge and expression. Among their number were two of the founding figures of postcolonial magical realism: Alejo Carpentier and Miguel Ángel Asturias. Both lived in Paris in the 1920s, both were deeply immersed in surrealist thinking and both brought to the conversation detailed knowledge of the cultures of their home countries – Cuba and Guatemala, respectively. Surrealism, already shot through with primitivist and exoticist tendencies, was deeply receptive to non-Western cultural elements, especially when these related to myth-based cosmologies.

Attempts to claim an artistic space for non-Western cultures and beliefs, which were often tied to the desire to articulate cultural difference from Europe, were considerably aided by surrealism's vigorous rejection of the old association between the tangible and the true. If there is no inherent link between 'realism' and 'the real', then it is by no means clear where exactly the boundaries of 'the real' lie. 'Realism', with its emphasis on the empirical, the familiar and the accumulation of everyday detail, has, despite appearances, no greater claim to 'truth' than do modes that make space for the supernatural or the mythical. Realism, as Guy de Maupassant recognised in 1888, is better called 'illusionism'.[6] On the other hand, 'magic', so often associated with illusion, can, in important ways, be a

[5] Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, *Modernism 1890–1930* [1976] (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 27.
[6] Quoted in Furst, *Realism*, p. 45.

reservoir for 'truth'. What magical realism has the capacity to do, and what makes it a serious form of philosophical inquiry, is call upon its readers to reflect on the ways claims to truth function in literary domains.

Carpentier's preface to his 1949 novel, *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*), later revised and extended, provides a fascinating articulation of these ideas.[7] Although he ostensibly rejects the artifice of European surrealism, Carpentier's use throughout of the term 'marvellous' is just one mark of his indebtedness to the ideas of André Breton and his circle. Carpentier famously claimed that his magical realism was merely a reflection of the inherently marvellous history and geography of Latin America. He sees medieval chivalric romances as offering a far more useful narrative template than that presented by the early forms of realism emerging in a novel like Cervantes' classic *Don Quixote*. Thus, Carpentier deliberately aligns himself with Cervantes' protagonist, rather than the author, precisely because Alonso Quexana, who renames himself Don Quixote, is able to 'enter body, soul and possessions into the world of [the chivalric hero] Amadís of Gaul', thus directly accessing the marvellous real. Some years later, in an act of homage from one major Latin American novelist to another, Mario Vargas Llosa was to praise Gabriel García Márquez for 'restoring a narrative tradition interrupted centuries ago, reviving the broad, exuberant, majestic notion of literary realism held by the founders of the novelistic genre in the Middle Ages'.[8] Quixotic in more senses than one, magical realism expands and subverts the limitations of literary realism.

There are contradictions in Carpentier's position, of course, but what his early work establishes is a clear link between narrative technique and the desire to articulate what we might call a postcolonial position. As later chapters of this volume will show, at the exact time Carpentier was developing his ideas about the marvellous real, two other major Latin American writers were exploring similar questions. Asturias, like Carpentier, was influenced by surrealism. He was also steeped in anthropological knowledge of his native Guatemala. Asturias' *Hombres de maíz*, published in the very same year as Carpentier's *El reino*, uses magical realism to grant profound levels of insight into indigenous Central American worldviews. The final member of this pioneering trio is the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges. Borges differs from Asturias and Carpentier in that he was less

[7] Alejo Carpentier, *El reino de este mundo* [1949] (Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, 1969).
[8] Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Amadís in America', in Robin Fiddian (ed.), *García Márquez* (London: Longman, 1995), pp. 56–57.

interested in ethnography and cultural nationalism and more overtly Eurocentric and philosophical in his outlook. His short fictions and essays play exquisite games with time, space and identity, generating potent templates for many subsequent magical realist writers.

Gabriel García Márquez is without doubt the most renowned of the magical realist novelists to follow in the footsteps of Asturias, Borges and Carpentier, though other notable figures include Isabel Allende and Juan Rulfo. So successful a novel is *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) that it is often assumed to be the definitive – even normative – work of magical realism. García Márquez draws on many sources in developing his style, but the influence of both Borges and Carpentier looms large. Critics have noted a tension in the novel between enchantment and disenchantment, myth-making and myth-busting.[9] On the one hand, if the novel is read as being fundamentally sympathetic to its characters' magical worldviews, readers will likely be charmed by its magical realist defamiliarisation of time, beauty, technology, art and progress. If, on the other hand, the characters of the novel are interpreted unsympathetically, the reading is likely to highlight the dangers of conceiving of the world in a magical way.

When these tensions in the interpretation of García Márquez's novel are traced back to Carpentier and Borges, what becomes clear is that there are two different strands in magical realism: one leading towards myth and faith and the other towards a protean and playful scepticism. It has been argued that these tendencies can to varying degrees also be detected in later works of magical realism, though they are often entangled.[10] This has especially been the case in the postcolonial world, where García Márquez's influence was towering and where, from the 1980s, frustration with the limits of narrative realism created the grounds for experiments in magical realism that were to prove highly successful. Examples include the writings of Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy, Keri Hulme, Louise Erdrich, Alexis Wright and Ben Okri, among countless others. Later chapters in the book will explore some of these works in detail.

As the above examples illustrate, in the mid to late twentieth century, magical realist writers in several languages were reading each other's works and were often conscious of the term 'magical realism' (or the marvellous real), even if they were sometimes embracing it and at other times rejecting

[9] Gerald Martin, 'On "Magical" and Social Realism in García Márquez', in Fiddian, *García Márquez*, pp. 100–120.

[10] Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009).

it as a descriptor of their own work. Certainly, scholars and publishers were using the term during this time. In other words, not only does the current of magical realist history we have just traced isolate a vital series of events in the development of magical realist literature, but also it circumscribes a self-conscious development and moment of rich transnational cross-pollination. And yet, this narrative of magical realism's development comes up lacking when considered in relation to several issues.

To begin, how do we account for antecedents, or instances of magical realist literature that predate the Latin American writers? Many sacred works mix otherworldly elements with the tangible world known to the senses. Works from classical antiquity, including those by Apuleius and Ovid, for example, have been described as examples of magical realism. The medieval romance often places the supernatural in everyday settings. And even in the eighteenth century, as reason was celebrated as the centrepiece of Enlightenment, *The Arabian Nights* enjoyed unprecedented popularity and influence. It is possible to discount examples like these as they fit better under other, related literary critical rubrics. But F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote 'The Curious Case of Benjamin Button' in the USA in 1922. Mikhail Bulgakov wrote his magical realist masterwork *The Master and Margarita* in Soviet Russia in the 1920s and 1930s. Johan Daisne and Herbert Lampo, Flemish authors writing from the 1940s to the 1970s, were self-proclaimed magical realists. These and other early to mid-twentieth-century European writers have been largely absent in Anglophone scholarship on magical realism. This absence is the result, we posit, of a model of understanding magical realism that sees it originating in Latin America before spreading across the globe. This 'global spread' model obscures non-conforming cases.

Besides the simultaneous European flowering of magical realism, which clearly did not depend upon Latin American developments, the global spread model of magical realism can make all instances of magical realism that postdate mid-twentieth-century Latin American magical realist narratives appear derivative. With the use of 'derivative', we mean that the link of influence between Latin American writers and subsequent non-Latin American writers becomes too strong. It discourages serious attention to both the agency and creativity of those other writers and downplays the particular geo-cultural traditions that have nourished their writing. This is true, we want to stress, even in situations where non-Latin American authors have voiced the impact of Latin American magical realism on their work.

It is for these reasons that the development of magical realism, considered in Part II of this volume, needs to be thought of in the plural. When

thinking from a region-specific point of view, the limits of the global spread model become immediately obvious. No writer, nor literary tradition worth its name, wishes to be considered derivative. Magical realism, wherever it is from, is the product of multiple currents of thought and influence, local and global. Examples abound in each of the chapters in Part II of this volume. In this respect, we insist on treating magical realism as a mode of narration, in distinction from broader categories like genre and movement, which tend to be more determined and determining. Instead of the global spread model, we propose an alternative account of magical realism's development, namely one based on polygenesis.[11] Magical realism has emerged independently across time and space. There are no geographical limits on it, just as there are in principle no restrictions on the purposes to which it might be put.

We do not wish to diminish the impact of Latin American magical realism and its authors. Instead, we believe that the polygenesis model opens up the possibilities for conceiving not only of the diffuse historical and geographical manifestations of this narrative mode, but also for better contextualising the emergence of Latin American magical realism itself. The polygenesis model offers an analytical framework for conceiving of all magical realism in comparative transgeographical ways. Moreover, it opens up questions such as: why did magical realism become cohesive in this particular place and this time? What specific conditions of possibility enabled it, and how does it engage with these factors?

Besides helping to contextualise Latin American magical realism better, a polygenesis model opens up transhistorical ground. There are productive insights to be generated here in terms of readership. What would it mean for a work to integrate features of (what we now call) literary realism with features of the marvellous (the irreducible element, or magic)[12] prior to the Enlightenment and prior to literary realism? Rather than discrediting the idea that magical realism surfaced earlier, this problem produces a welcome complexity, one that is already evident in the rich and varied history of the term 'magical realism', as later chapters will show.

On the whole, it has proved difficult for literary criticism to make peace with what appears to be magical realism's deliberate flouting of the principle of non-contradiction. More specifically, criticism has been

[11] Ben Holgate recently arrived at a similar conclusion in *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019).

[12] Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), pp. 7–14.

troubled by two features. First, as we have noted, until the mid-1990s, the close association of magical realism with Latin America impeded attempts to understand magical realism's international scope. The association was buttressed by claims – sometimes serious, sometimes playful – that there was really nothing magical about Latin American magical realism: this is simply how the world is in that region. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that many Latin American writers turned away from magical realism just as it was embraced by Anglophone writers.

Second, the question of definition itself has proved a productively thorny one: early definitions tended to be vague and overly inclusive on the one hand and restrictive and overly particular on the other. Both sides of this proverbial coin are present in Angel Flores' foundational essay 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction' (1955), wherein Flores delimits magical realism as 'the amalgamation of realism and fantasy', a seemingly universal phenomenon that he locates in authors from Europe to Latin America, but that nevertheless represents 'a genuinely Latin American fiction'.[13] More precise definitions emerged with perspicacity only in the 1980s, the most influential being Amaryll Chanady's tripartite definition set out in 1985.[14] These definitions sharpened our ability to say with clarity what magical realism is and does, but it is only in our current century that criticism has been able to distinguish with real substance between different registers and orientations of magical realism. The attempt to isolate and define different strands of magical realism is ongoing, and many such strands appear in the pages that follow. The worth of such work lies in its ability to help us not only to understand why magical realism appears in certain places and times, but also to explain what creative and conceptual resources it contributes to literary and cultural criticism.

The close focus in this volume on magical realism *as a concept* has proven productive because it allows us to consolidate and extend our understanding of what magical realism is, where it has come from, how it has developed and what it does. How exactly does magical realism function? Why does it flourish in certain places and times? Why do some writers choose to utilise this particular technique over others? What are the implications – cultural, philosophical, historical, aesthetic and

[13] Angel Flores, 'Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction' [1955], in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (eds.), *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community Magical Realism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 112, 116.

[14] Amaryll Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy* (New York: Garland, 1985).

affective – of magical realism's distinctive naturalisation of the supernatural? Here, magical realism's affiliation with both the postcolonial and the modernist helps us to understand its epistemological challenge: by what right does enlightenment thought claim such exclusive access to truth? In whose name is traditional realism's claim to knowledge made? Conversely, in the wake of modernism, relativity and quantum physics, what remains of the once-powerful resources of literary realism?

This book answers these questions through a variety of approaches. The chapters in Part I plumb the history and genesis of the concept. The separation of 'reality' from 'magic' – and the consequent relegation of the latter to the domain of the archaic, the primitive, the feminine or the Oriental – was the product of the thought of specific times and places. In Chapters 1 and 2, a conceptual genealogy of magical realism traces the mechanisms by which this separation was enacted (traditional literary realism being one) and explains and contextualises the motivations for and implications of magical realism's attempts to dissolve the binary between real and non-real, paying special attention to the legacies of primitivism and ethnography. Key topics in magical realism's origins are then examined in detail in relation to indigeneity (Chapter 3), selfhood (Chapter 4) and space and time (Chapter 5).

Wherever magical realism has appeared, it has been marked and altered by specific features characteristic of local cultural, political and intellectual factors. The chapters in Part II explore the ways magical realism has flowered in distinctive regional–historical contexts, namely Latin America (Chapter 6), Europe (Chapter 7), Australasia (Chapter 8), Africa (Chapter 9), North America (Chapter 10), East Asia (Chapter 11), South Asia (Chapter 12) and the Middle East (Chapter 13). Anglophone magical realist scholarship has been lacking in relation to the mode's development in many of these regions. While making no claims at comprehensiveness, Part II nevertheless represents a much-needed response to gaps in our understanding of the mode's diverse regional incarnations. We hope that readers will consider thinking about Part II as a unit, together creating a rich comparative analysis, and also how they might continue examining how magical realism has developed within these locales, as well as others.

Part III of the volume, entitled Application, identifies, explores and extends the ideas magical realism makes available to writers and critics. Magical realism is an extraordinarily enabling mode of narration. Its insistence on conjoining realms of thought and representation that would otherwise be deemed separate has significant consequences for the

examination of specific themes, topics and critical concepts. It is the goal of Part III to show how the application of the concept of magical realism can generate new insights into a range of critical areas, including religion (Chapter 14), trauma (Chapter 15), nation and diaspora (Chapter 16), ecology and ecocriticism (Chapter 17), the Japanese megalopolis (Chapter 18) and the literary marketplace (Chapter 19).