

## Magic Realism Revisited: The Deconstruction of Antinomies

After the publication of my 1985 monograph on magic realism and the fantastic, I quickly abandoned the formalist-idealist quest for generic certainty. There were several reasons for this. The first was the continuing proliferation of definitions of magic realism. Another was my increasing interest in critical and theoretical studies on metafiction and narratives usually described as such (Earth, Calvino), in which the literary imagination, unfettered by the constraints of realism, was accompanied by self-reflexive comments on various aspects of the text, as well as on the production and reception of literature and the role of the author and reader. The impossible, improbable or supernatural events were thus explicitly presented as fictitious. My subsequent interest in the postmodernism debate, and then postcolonialism, made me relinquish all attempts at arriving at a satisfactory definition of magic realism, since the same books and literary techniques were variously termed magic realist, metafictional, postmodern or even postcolonial — and each of these concepts was equally vague and controversial in itself. Most of Linda Hutcheon's observations in her various studies on the "poetics of postmodernism," for example, would apply to narratives considered as magic realist.

Finally, postmodern theory had made me increasingly suspicious of taxonomic fervor in literary criticism. The Foucauldian emphasis on the constructed nature of the object of knowledge removed the foundations of any strict generic typology. Studying a certain number of narratives intuitively considered magic realist, determining their defining characteristics, sufficient and essential, and then using this construct to include or exclude other texts, appeared to me as a pleasant, but somewhat idle, enterprise, far less useful and exciting than the emerging interdisciplinary debates on postcolonialism, subalternity, identity, alterity and cultural studies. Magic realism had thus

become "anything you want it to mean" to me, without arousing any particular nostalgia for the Utopian certainties of earlier formalist endeavors.

However, my imperfect relic of another (albeit relatively recent) age, written as a student and published without significant revisions, refused to die what many contemporary critics undoubtedly would have considered a well-deserved death of irrelevance. Students and established scholars are still (in 2003) regularly asking me for photocopies of my long out-of-print book. Some of these requests come from African critics, who are looking for approaches to new literary forms that emerged in colonial and postcolonial contexts, in which European models were adopted and adapted to deal with local issues and establish links with indigenous traditions. Some came from Europe; one scholar, for example, was interested in my discussion of the Soviet novel *The Master and Margarita* by Bulgakov as magic realist. What many critics were looking for was precisely what I had rejected as *passé* — a methodology, based on a literary typology, suitable for studying non-realist fiction, mainly, but not exclusively, from outside Europe. The present collective volume thus seems to answer an obvious need — to return to a (provisional) working definition of magic realism, a term that has proliferated to varying degrees in the critical discourse in many parts of the world. Postmodern suspicions of fixed meanings, binary distinctions and categories do not eliminate the need for some common denominators in order to establish meaningful communication in literary criticism. In fact, describing a certain "literary competence" necessary for the reader's understanding of fiction as well as for the production of fiction within a particular set of conventions was precisely what I had proposed in the introduction to my study.

I will therefore return to my own model of magic realism, partly to dispel certain misunderstandings, but mainly to criticize certain aspects of it in the light of my more recent work, as well as in the light of some of the important ideas put forward by the contributors to this volume. In my thesis on *Magical Realism and the fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy*, I attempted, somewhat optimistically, to clear up some of the confusion surrounding literary criticism on the fantastic as well as magic realism. I thus distinguished between the two literary modes on the basis of the narrative representation of what most Western readers would consider as antinomious — the natural and the supernatural. Whereas the fantastic (in a very restricted sense based on the work of numerous French theoreticians such as Tzvetan Todorov and Irene Bessiere) reaffirmed hegemonic Western rational paradigms by portraying the

supernatural in a contradictory manner as both terrifying and logically impossible, magic realist fiction presented radically different world views (rational and magical) as well as natural and supernatural events, without explicitly problematizing them as in the fantastic. Since magic realist authors such as Kafka and even Garcia Marquez, as well as their readers, hardly believed in the actual possibility of transformation of men into insects or puddles of pitch, their fiction demanded a strong suspension of disbelief and enjoyment of fictionality not restricted by realist prescriptions. Hesitation and disbelief had no place in the reaction of a reader who was very much aware of the imaginary nature of the fictitious events and played the magic realist "game" of fiction.

My study thus established a distinction between magic realism and the fantastic (in a very restricted sense), and not fantasy, which I considered as belonging to the marvelous. I distinguished between the marvelous (including fantasy), in which the supernatural is accepted, the uncanny, in which it is actually absent, and the fantastic, in which the natural and natural are seen as antinomious (Chanady 1985, 2-3). None of the texts I studied were popular fantasies of the kind that Dixon discusses in the present collective volume. If I had taken into consideration this category, my theory would of course have been very different. Dixon is quite correct in pointing out that popular fantasy, whether the plot is set in the past, in the present, or in a world radically removed from our own, illustrates a seamless merging of the possible and the impossible, or the natural and the supernatural. There is no antinomy expressed in these texts about magicians and supernatural acts which reject the conventions of realism. A discussion of popular fantasy would have led me to formulate other distinctions, which may have led to a better understanding of the specificity of texts considered as magic realist.

My interest, however, was not in this kind of popular fantasy. My examples of the fantastic were drawn from the work of major French writers such as Merimee and Maupassant usually associated with the realist tradition, but who also had an interest in the supernatural and the occult. In this particular type of fiction a rational narrator-protagonist witnesses inexplicable events, which, however, he cannot accept because he does not believe in the supernatural. This type of fantastic, which also interested numerous French critics (such as Tzvetan Todorov, Irene Bessiere and Roger Caillois), can be related to the transformations brought about by modernity, in which rational investigation and the increasing secularization of society coexisted with religious beliefs, as well as folklore and superstition. While rationalism was

rapidly becoming dominant in certain sectors of society, earlier beliefs by no means disappeared, and still formed part of the cultural tradition of even the educated elite.

The parallel between "pre-modern mentalities" in Europe and the beliefs of indigenous civilizations in Latin America that coexisted with modern worldviews provided me with a basic common denominator for both modes, and thus justified their comparison. At the same time, an analysis of their rhetorical strategies and the way in which the texts are constructed pointed to major and obvious differences between the modes. While the supernatural is represented as a threat to reason (as well as to personal safety) in the European fantastic in the restricted sense, and is thus explicitly presented in the text as antinomious with respect to the laws of reason, the supernatural, as well as highly improbable events, are presented without any comment by the magic realist narrator. What I argued in my study was that whereas fictitious characters in magic realism sometimes marvel at realistic events and objects, as several contributors to this volume have also correctly pointed out (ice, for example, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*), while they accept the supernatural as normal (the flying carpets in the same novel), the antinomy between the real and the unreal, or the natural and the supernatural, is not explicitly thematized as it is in the fantastic (in the restricted sense, which excludes fantasy fiction).

In the fantastic texts I studied, ghosts, vampires and malevolent statues all belong to a world of superstition and are seen as a problem to sanity, safety and reason by a hyper-rational narrator, while in magic realism, this is not the case, although the new and unconventional may initially be seen as amazing, but are eventually accepted (as in the case of Garcia Marquez' story about the man with wings, to give an example adduced by a contributor to this volume). The text functions quite differently in the two modes as exemplified by the narratives I had chosen. In both modes, however, implicit explanations can be found, which is why I referred to the logical codes of the natural and supernatural. Not only do ghosts and vampires act according to the conventions of folklore; the supernatural beings and events in some magic realist fictions may also conform to mythical and religious codes. What is important is that in the fantastic the presence of the supernatural is unexplainable and unacceptable by definition in a world ruled by reason, and this places contradiction at the center of many stories by Maupassant and especially Merimee, which are characterized by sustained discourses on reason and empirical observation. An interesting example is Merimee's "La Venus

d'Ille," in which a research trip to Spain by the erudite Parisian archaeologist leads not only to learned disquisitions on classical art, but also ethnographic observation of a rural culture seen as Other and less evolved. In Bulgakov's novel, on the contrary, the Devil encountered in the streets of Moscow is presented in a mater-of-fact manner that is far removed from the somewhat pedantic elucubrations of the hyper-rational narrator in Merimee's story.

Other stories I discussed as magic realist were not connected in any way to rural, pre-modern or non-Western cultures, but the formal similarities with other reputedly magic realist fictions was obvious. My insistence on the coherence of the "code of the supernatural" was problematic in this light, and several contributors to this volume have pointed out that magic realism often presents the supernatural and improbable in the form of unconnected events that cannot be systematized in any way (see Bortolussi's chapter). The main problem of my distinction between the two modes, however, is related to the concept of antinomy. The binary distinction based on resolved versus unresolved antinomy was rather infelicitous and inspired by the classificatory excesses of formalism and structuralist dichotomies. While antinomy is explicitly thematized in the fantastic (in the restricted sense), which is governed by a strong discourse of reason in which opposites cannot be reconciled, magic realism rejects the certainties of Western reason with its dichotomies (rather than resolving them), or at least ignores the rigidity of rational codes and conventions in favor of the imagination, literary, popular or religious. A concept such as antinomy, with its strong implication of logic and rationality, is in fact irrelevant to most magic realist writing. My later work on magic realism abandons the concept of antinomy in favor of a broader reflection on the mode. In my analysis of some of the earliest critical works on magic realism in Latin America, I stressed other aspects relevant to the mode, including a "critical stance with respect to canonical rational and especially positivistic paradigms," and established links with the "tradition of the artist's vindication of the imagination and subversion of hegemonic models, the French Surrealists' indictment of restrictive empirical knowledge and [...] the general delegitimation of values and conceptual frameworks [...]" (Chanady 1995, 141).

There were other problems involved in the rigorous delimitation of my object of study beside the binary constructions. My category of the fantastic was circumscribed in several ways: it excluded not only fantasy, but also horror fiction (in which the supernatural, if present, is described and accepted as real), and ghost stories in which the supernatural is also accepted. The latter belong

to oral traditions as well as to a well-defined genre, generally in popular fiction. The fantastic as defined in my study was in fact very rigidly circumscribed. Although this restriction was due to my particular interest in the hyper-rational reaction to the supernatural seen as a threat to reason and the spirit of modernity (in contrast to magic realism with its celebration of different cultural imaginaries and the literary imagination unrestricted by realist conventions), it can also be seen as a shortcoming. The term "fantastic" has always been used in a much broader sense. Although obvious distinctions can be and have been made between different kinds of non-realist writing, thus allowing us to set up parameters for establishing a coherent object of analysis, a lengthier discussion of related modes and genres would have led to interesting reflections that also shed light on magic realism.

In ghost stories and many examples of the uncanny and horror fiction, the supernatural or improbable is considered not only as a threat, but also as an intrusion from another world — the world of the dead, of the spirits, of the unknown, the invisible, even the extra-terrestrial. All these fictions can thus be contrasted with fairy tales, in which the supernatural and the natural coexist in a seamless world, or the intrusion of the supernatural is not dwelled upon with fear, trepidation and horror. The formulaic narration of the fairy tale bears little resemblance to the particular rhetorical strategies of horror fiction, ghost stories or the fantastic in the restricted sense. A more useful distinction could thus have been made between all modes and genres in which the emphasis is on sustained fear, trepidation and bewilderment in the face of the unknown and the transgression of "normal" reality, especially by the supernatural (and of which the fantastic is but one manifestation, in which the supernatural is rejected but still feared), and modes such as popular fantasy and magic realism that celebrate the exuberance of the imagination by creating impossible worlds or subverting initially realistic ones. Both establish a pact with the reader, but this differs according to the diverse rhetorical strategies employed. While the suspension of disbelief is required in both cases (few readers would seriously reflect on the possible existence of flying carpets, or, for that matter, Maupassant's murderous severed hand), ghost stories and the fantastic in the restricted sense refer to beliefs that have not quite disappeared, and may in fact be widespread in some societies, including our own.

Dixon's essay on popular fantasy raises some important questions in this context. In what way does fantasy (and not the fantastic in the restricted sense) differ from magic realism? Is it simply a question of the increasingly problematized distinction between popular and canonized literature, or low

and high culture, or between escapist or adolescent fiction and serious fiction? Is the celebration of the imagination in magic realism thus accompanied, in contrast to popular fantasy, by important reflections about our world, delivered not in serious authorial intrusions and didactic musings, but in the form of allegory, narrative excess and exaggeration? Gesicka's emphasis on the carnivalesque in this volume indicates an interesting direction of inquiry, inspired by Danow's work. To what extent is magic realism connected to earlier satiric and carnivalesque writing in which irreverent laughter accompanies criticism of social institutions, established hierarchies, received wisdom and stereotypes? Danow's important work on the poetics of excess, so characteristic of the major magic realist novels including those of Garcia Marquez and Rushdie, allows us to establish an important link with Menippean satire, Rabelaisian exuberance, Cervantes' ground-breaking novel, and eighteenth-century comic fiction in England and France. Magic realism thus revives the long tradition of storytelling and the pleasure of fabulation, while at the same time providing a critical perspective on society.

While carnivalesque laughter and scatological references often accompany the conjunction of fabulation and social criticism in magic realism, however, it is by no means essential, if we consider Kafka's "Metamorphosis" as an example of the mode. Bortolussi's caveats toward the end of her chapter, Danow's comments on *Pedro Páramo* and Gesicka's final remarks on Asturias also question the ubiquity of laughter, satire and the carnivalesque in magic realism. Danow's poetics of excess also suggests links with the baroque style of Carpentier, which is certainly characterized by what many would consider descriptive excess, but hardly by laughter and the carnivalesque. Fabulation and social criticism, however, can be found in most fiction considered magic realist, although I am cautious about identifying anything as the essential characteristic of a literary category which we construct for heuristic reasons. The transformation of Kafka's protagonist into an insect is not merely an extraordinary feat of the literary imagination, but an allegorical depiction of the miseries of modern urbanized and industrialized society in which individuals are subjected to the mind-numbing routine of earning a living in insignificant occupations. The grotesque insect form of the sales representative expresses his utter sense of alienation and despair at the endless procession of days that begin at the crack of dawn, and involve tedious travel as well as humiliating office intrigue and rumor, and the certainty that the only alternative is joblessness and the loss of the family's dwelling. Although many readers would also consider Kafka's story as an example of fantasy (albeit belonging

to the literary canon), this text illustrates a profound reflection on society, as well as a strong preoccupation with textuality, literariness and esthetics, that does not characterize popular fantasy, although the latter may certainly indicate a critical stance toward society. Like many other magic realist fictions, Kafka's work does not present the reader with a simple fantasy plot, but stimulates reflection and elicits complex and diverse interpretations. The surprise created by the transformation of the salesman into an insect is akin to the Russian notion of *ostranyenie* or defamiliarization (and which I mentioned in my 1985 study) that forces us to rethink the way we perceive reality. Reddall's paper on "epistemological fallibilism" in this volume develops this further.

One aspect of my study that seemed increasingly problematic to me over the years was the excessive emphasis on the formal characteristics of the texts analysed, which led to questionable parallels between very heterogeneous narratives. The ongoing debate on postmodernism and postcolonialism were particularly relevant to this reflection, because many texts considered magic realist have also been described as postmodern as well as postcolonial. The history of these two concepts differs, of course, as do their theoretical ramifications, although there are also obvious parallels. This brought me to the question of cultural tradition and positionality. While widespread intercultural exchanges intensified by globalization make it inevitable that literary practices in one society (especially a hegemonic one) will influence those in others, thus making it impossible to restrict postmodernism to the "First World" and postcolonialism to the "Third," many novels considered postcolonial explicitly position themselves in the "periphery" and incorporate anticolonial discourses that had existed for a long time. The postmodernism debate, on the contrary, was initiated by philosophers in a thoroughly modernized and increasingly self-critical West (Habermas, Lyotard, Jameson), even though it was subsequently very influential elsewhere.

A postcolonial positioning was often accompanied by the delegitimation of hegemonic Western paradigms and criticism of political, cultural and economic practices that contributed to the continuing marginality of many postcolonial societies. It also emphasized the complexity of unequal intercultural relations and attempted to reconceptualize transculture not as a source of exploitation or degeneration, but as one of cultural richness, thus presenting obvious points of intersection with postmodernism. In their desire to forge an empowering national paradigm, many postcolonial intellectuals valorized concepts such as hybridity and *mestizaje*, in a reversal of the

nineteenth-century Western pejorative view of human "mingling." Many Latin American authors considered as magic realists tried to represent indigenous *subjectivity* in conscious opposition to the study of the Indian as an *object* of Western learned discourse (ethnographic or literary). It is no coincidence that the Guatemalan author Miguel Angel Asturias gave a very sympathetic portrayal of the "inner world" and "mythico-magical worldview" of native people as if it were as worthy of interest as a Western rational world view, while at the same time virulently criticizing neo-imperialism and the exploitation of marginalized societies. While Asturias used literary techniques from contemporary surrealist and expressionist practices in Europe and was consequently sometimes criticized for what was considered a Western portrayal of indigenous society, his magic realism positions itself as a postcolonial, anti-imperialist and intercultural practice — and not merely an autonomous literary practice — that revalorizes marginalized cultures and conceptualizes Latin American identity as heterogeneous and hybrid, and not exclusively Western. The Cuban Alejo Carpentier's fictional presentation of Afro-Cuban religious beliefs and practices in magic realist scenes in which men are transformed into animal form is also an attempt to stress the importance of non-Western cultures in the Americas.

Although the writing of these authors is obviously informed by Western literary techniques, the reaffirmation of an imaginative narrative tradition before the restrictive precepts of European realism (or the renewed emphasis of poesis within mimesis), metafictional textual play already found in Diderot and Sterne, metropolitan depictions of the New World, and the search for new types of literary expression that would consecrate Latin American fiction as a major global literary contribution, one of the major emphases of many magic realists was thus to reconceptualize alterity. From its construction as the Other of civilization, non-Western culture became the internal Other of a new postcolonial national or continental consciousness. Indigenous society was not seen from the explicitly affirmed position of the rational West ("us versus them"), but from that of a peripheral society in the process of consolidation as a new imagined community, of which the indigene was a part ("them as part of us").

In spite of the fact that most magic realist authors had been educated in the Western tradition, and even spent many years living in Europe, which frequently led to an ambiguous position, their quest for new paradigms for the imagined postcolonial community — based on indigenous and Western cultural traditions — was quite different from the self-critical deconstruction

of rational paradigms and Western values in European and North American philosophical discourses and narrative. Deconstructive strategies in these magic realist fictions often focused on specific discourses and values, and rarely became a postmodern free-play of signs; nor did they always involve a delegitimation of all values and discourses. Even when influenced by the postmodernism debate, and using some of its arguments, many postcolonial magic realist texts can be situated with respect to the modern project of constructing a collective imaginary (symbolic nation-building), even if they also valorized hybridity and drew on heterogeneous cultural practices. The writing of Kafka and Asturias, while characterized by a similar non-problematic juxtaposition of the natural and the supernatural, thus differs significantly in terms of positionality and cultural practice.

Alicia Llarena's contribution is a poignant reminder that we should reflect on our own construction of objects of knowledge. Echoing the question in Arun Mukherjee's title, "Whose Post-Colonialism and Whose Postmodernism?" (Mukherjee 1990), would ask: whose magic realism? While Llarena discusses the rejection of magic realism by some Latin American critics who see it as a negative portrayal of Latin America as backward, she also points out that there are vastly divergent attitudes to it. Furthermore, many critics within Latin America do not consider magic realism as a universal phenomenon. In an interesting recent study, Erik Camayd-Freixas (1998) situates the mode in the context of primitivism, the early twentieth-century European infatuation with non-Western cultures that greatly influenced Latin American authors such as Asturias and Carpentier. The latter had close links with the French surrealists, who were particularly interested not only in non-Western cultures, but also in transgressing literary, cultural and cognitive conventions in their quest for a more "authentic" way of apprehending the world. Camayd-Freixas rejects the conflation of (primitivist) magic realism and other forms of non-realist writing. He sees Asturias, for example, as a magic realist because of the way in which he depicted Guatemalan indigenous cultures, while Carpentier belongs to the mode through his portrayal of Afro-Cuban beliefs. As for Rulfo, his description of rural society is very similar in many respects to primitivist descriptions of indigenous cultures, which is also the case with Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which legend and folklore are an essential aspect of non-indigenous village life.

It is interesting to note that while Carpentier attacks the surrealists in an attempt to distinguish his literary practice from theirs, even though he points out in 1964 that surrealism was widely imitated in Latin America, the

Guatemalan novelist Miguel Angel Asturias, who studied ethnology in Paris and first read Mayan indigenous texts in French translation, openly asserts that his own magic realist fiction, which, he believes, represents the "original mentality" of the Indians, "is similar to what the surrealists around Breton wanted" ("Hearing the Scream" 58). Carpentier's progressive substitution of the term *lo real maravilloso* by that of the baroque, especially in his 1964 essay on Latin American fiction in which he claims that the "legitimate style of the contemporary Latin American novelist is the baroque" (43), suggests that the Cuban author's rejection of the surrealists and his insistence on Latin American specificity expresses a desire to initiate a literary mode that could be considered as specifically Latin American, and thus contribute to the construction of cultural identity and the development of an adequate form for figuring Latin America. In his essay entitled "De lo real maravillosamente americano," Carpentier argues that a Latin American style has progressively emerged throughout its history (127) and that surrealism is no longer generally imitated: "[...] we are left with *lo real maravilloso* which is of a very different nature, constantly more palpable and discernible, which is starting to proliferate in the narrative of some young novelists of our continent" (129). The ambiguous term *lo real maravilloso* cannot be translated in this text as "marvelous reality," since it is explicitly contrasted with a particular literary practice, namely surrealism, and thus would be more correctly rendered by "marvelous realism," a term that Irlemar Chiampi adopts in her study of Carpentier. Instead of denoting, as it did in the 1949 Prologue, a particular perception of reality, expressed in ontological and phenomenological terms, *lo real maravilloso* has come to designate a literary style, technique, and thematic emphasis that supposedly characterize contemporary Latin American narrative.

In his essay "Problemática de la actual novela latinoamericana," Carpentier further develops his ideas on the necessity for Latin America to develop an autonomous and unique literary language. He argues that Latin American novelists must recreate their reality in a language that is both specific and at the same time accessible to the European reader. Latin American fauna and flora, for example, should not be designated by indigenous terms and explained in footnotes or glossaries, as was often the case in regionalist novels, but by words belonging to what he calls a universal vocabulary, that is, standard (or rather metropolitan) Spanish. Carpentier advocates a new and original figuration of the continent that would ensure that Latin American literature would no longer be considered as a marginalized regional

production: "[...] now we Latin American novelists must name everything — everything that defines us, envelops us, and surrounds us: everything that operates with the energy of *context* — in order to situate it in the universal" ("Problemática" 42).

His replacement of the term *lo real maravilloso* by that of the baroque in his comments on the necessity of naming a "previously unnamed" reality partly reflects his realization that what is at stake is not so much an ontological difference between Latin America and Europe, or even a particular perception, but a difference in literary practice, seen as the authentic expression of its people. Conscious of the belatedness of Latin American culture (29-30), he identifies marvelous realism (my translation of *lo real* as realism instead of "reality" reflects the semantic transformation undergone by the term in Carpentier's writings, although the later meaning is already implied in his 1949 essay) with the birth of an original and mature literary production, attesting to a specific cultural identity. Further on in the same essay, he emphasizes the necessity for Latin Americans to develop their own epic (46). Since this genre has always been closely affiliated with the constitution of national identity, it is obvious that Carpentier is very concerned with developing what Naomi Sakai calls a "subjective technology" designed to foster a sense of collective identity in a diverse and conflict-riven continent. What may be considered as an external perspective inspired by a rereading of European discourses on the New World and the "primitive" thus becomes instrumental in a self-representation intended to include the Other within Latin America. But the importance of the global context is never absent, since the creation of an "authentic voice" also creates cultural capital. The celebration of an autonomous literature pervades the writings of numerous Latin American critics, and several consider *lo real maravilloso* as a "modality of contemporary Latin American narrative" (Bravo, 6) that allows it to acquire the status of world literature.

Other Latin American critics deplore the fact that many Europeans and North Americans equate Latin American literature with magic realism, of which Gabriel Garcia Marquez is considered to be the most celebrated exponent. However, the Colombian Nobel Prize winner has helped maintain that perception by his own literary endeavor as well as by essays such as "Fantasia y creación artística en América latina y el Caribe," in which he claims that the Latin American continent is more marvelous than any fiction, and this attribute becomes the basis for a configuration of the New World as Europe's opposite. In a desire for specificity, the affirmation of difference sometimes

leads to the proclamation of a total incommensurability between Latin America and other cultures, as in the following passage by the Guatemalan novelist Asturias:

For a translator really to put himself into my books is as difficult as for a European who has never seen America to understand *our landscape*. *Our landscape* is alive in a way *entirely different* from his, which makes *our reality different*. One has to be very intimate with *our cosmic world*, this world of terrestrial battles in which one still has to struggle simply in order to live. [...] I don't doubt that most translators do speak excellent Spanish, but they do not speak *our Spanish* and therefore do not have *our feelings and our spirit*. Thus, they are likely to make strict Castilian translations of our books. They translate them as if they had been written in a Spanish province that is very foreign to *our temperament and our life, to our character and our way of speaking*. (Asturias 58; italics mine)

The repetitive nature of this passage, in which the possessive adjective "our" recurs eleven times, demonstrates an almost obsessive desire for difference, culminating in the essentialist image of a culture that is intrinsically distinct and absolutely inaccessible to readers and translators outside Latin America. His admission that his fiction resembles what the French surrealists had in mind, however, emphasizes the importance of European discourses in his own subjective figuration of an indigenous culture seen as central to a specific Latin American identity.

In light of these novelists' comments on magic realism and the supposedly marvelous nature of Latin America, as well as the enormous volume of criticism within Latin America that equates magic realism with the literary expression of a continent that has been largely formed by the contact between Western and non-Western cultures, it is somewhat problematic to place Kafka, Asturias, Kroetsch and others associated with magic realism in the same category, and especially to claim that the Latin American novelists and critics who consider magic realism as a specific expression of their society are incorrect. There are several conflicting definitions of magic realism today, and no absolute criteria allow us to determine which ones are "right" or "wrong." Furthermore, modes develop differently in different contexts. Particularly interesting in this regard is Alicia Larena's analysis of magic realist women's writing in modern urban settings in the present volume. More importantly, however, Western critical paradigms applied to Latin American literature may be considered as an act of epistemic violence by those who consider magic realism as an important literary mode developed on their

continent and abundantly theorized by their critics. Postmodern discussions of Latin American literature in North America have also been criticized for what some Latin American critics consider as homogenizing, totalizing and reductive appropriations of their literature in the global market of academic discourse. However, the parallels are obvious between Latin American texts considered as magic realist and many other narratives written in other parts of the world, in the past and the present. And a common denominator does seem to emerge in the way in which critics outside Latin America have used the term since it started to become popular in other parts of the world in the nineteen eighties.

Young and Holloman's *Magical Realist Fiction: An Anthology*, for example, includes fiction by Gogol, Tolstoy, Thomas Mann, Henry James, Kafka, Nabokov, Faulkner, Borges, Cortazar, Calvino and Kundera. In their introduction, the editors explain that they apply the term magic realism to fiction that can be placed neither in the category of realism or naturalism, nor in that of traditional genres such as ghost stories, the gothic, fairy tales and science fiction. They add that magic realism transgresses the restrictions of realism and is a hybrid mode that combines realism with myth and folklore, explicitly acknowledging their debt to Angel Flores (1955). In the introduction to a special issue on magic realism of the Canadian review *The New Quarterly*, Linda Kenyon describes the mode as one in which no distinction is made between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the real and the magical (again, not differing significantly from Flores' definition), and that can be linked to a new direction in Canadian fiction. An important emphasis here is on the imagination, freed from the constraints of realism. Valerie Henitiuk's contribution to the present volume refers to this aspect when she signals Angela Carter's comments on her own fiction, which the novelist sees as an incentive for readers to participate in the game of fictional invention. Henitiuk points out the importance of the act of narration in Carter's novel, as well as of the emancipatory project of questioning dichotomies of rational/irrational and natural/unnatural.

In the introduction to their anthology, however, Young and Holloman adduce an additional signification, which is not only literary or formal, but also cultural in the wider sense. They argue that magic realism is characterized by the juxtaposition of two cultures, one mythical and the other rational. Magic realism thus challenges not only realist convention, but also positivist thought and modernity in general. They mention the Amerindians and European peasants, for whom magic presumably still exists, as well as unfamiliar, exotic

worlds, as inspiration for magic realism. Crucial here is the presence of intercultural contact, and not just a transgression of realism. Other critics link magic realism with marginality. Stanley McMullin, for example, situates it in the Canadian west, which has never had a dominant position in the country. Whereas the center of the country represented an "imperial identity" (16), the *hinterland* tried to survive culturally by using mythology to construct a regional identity. As for Robert Kroetsch, he argues that magic realism opens narrative possibilities and modes of perception, and adds that there is little magic realism in the United States, but many examples in Canada and Latin America, because both are situated at the margins (14). According to Kroetsch, it is easier to innovate in the margins, and he acknowledges his debt to Borges and Garcia Marquez.

As for Homi Bhabha, he sees magic realism as the literary language of the postcolonial world (6) while Salman Rushdie considers magic realism as the expression of a Third-world consciousness, arising in a world in which the new coexists with the old and in which political, social and economic problems seem more extreme than in the West (301). Finally, in a study of the novels of Jean-Louis Baghio'o, Charles Scheel argues that magic realism expresses the encounter of different and often conflictual socio-cultural systems, as in America and the Caribbean, where literature is written in a European language, but where non-Western beliefs and customs, of Amerindian, African and Asian origin, are still very much alive (46). Alicia Llarena's comments in the present volume on Rushdie and the African writer Moses Isegawa also point to the important connection between magic realism and postcolonial societies.

In spite of the differences between the various conceptions of magic realism, all stress literary innovation, the importance of the imagination and the transgression of traditional literary forms. Furthermore, none sees magic realism as a mere exercise in verbal brilliance and the free-play of signs, accompanied by an appeal to the reader to indulge in the infinite semiosis of textuality, or as escapist literature. On the contrary, the critics and novelists I have looked at all see magic realism as a mode that expresses important points of view, often related to marginality and subalternity. In this sense, it is a contemporary and increasingly globalized version of a long tradition of literature that gives free reign to the imagination while critically reflecting on the ailments of society and the predicament of the human condition. As for establishing a poetics of magic realism, I wonder whether it may not contravene the very spirit of the mode, which refuses to submit to any

constricting forms and conventions and constantly invents new ways of expressing our complex reality.

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