

# “Magical Realism” in Spanish-American Fiction

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The term “magical realism” first appeared in the criticism of the plastic arts and only afterwards was it extended to literature. In 1925 the German critic Franz Roh coined it to characterize a group of German painters.

According to Roh, the impressionist painters, faithful to the nature of objects and to their own chromatic sensations, painted what they saw (e.g. Camille Pissarro). As a reaction, expressionist painters rebelled against nature, painting objects that were either nonexistent or so disfigured as to appear extraterrestrial (e.g. Marc Chagall). And what Roh discovered in 1925 was that postexpressionist painters (Max Beckmann, George Grosz, Otto Dix) were once again painting ordinary objects, only they were now doing it with wonderstruck eyes, because, rather than turning again to reality, they were contemplating the world as if it had just sprung again from the void in a magic re-creation. In other words, the postexpressionists, after the fantastic Apocalypse of the expressionists, saw things enveloped in the innocent, early morning light of a second Genesis. It was an art of reality and magic, which Franz Roh baptized *Magischer Realismus* (“magical realism”). It is true that, years later, in 1958, when referring to the same painters, he replaced the term *Magischer Realismus* with that of *Neue Sachlichkeit* which could be translated as “new objectivity.” By then, however, the term “magical realism” had been adopted into the language of literary criticism. It is not surprising that a term of art criticism should pass to literary criticism; what is surprising is that while art historians no longer use it, literary historians abuse it. Now, when a term conceived with respect to the plastic arts is transposed to the literary arts, it must adjust to its new conditions. Painting is a spacial art which makes use of line and color. Literature is a temporal art which makes use of words and rhythm. To compare a painting with a story is to play with mere metaphors. At best, one can look for an aesthetic ideal which is common to both painting and writing. What ideal could this be?

Franz Roh saw in the historical process of painting a dialectic which would have pleased Hegel: a thesis: “impressionism”; an antithesis: “expressionism”; and a synthesis: “magical realism.”

Anyone who enjoys these games of criticism could transfer them from painting to literature and say that in the historical process of the narrative art Roh’s dialectic is achieved through three categories: a thesis: the category of the veridical which produces realism; an antithesis: the category of the supernatural which produces fantastic literature; and a synthesis: the category of the strange which produces the literature of “magical realism.”

A narrator of realism, respectful of the order of nature, stands in the midst of daily life, observes everyday things with the perspective of an ordinary man, and relates a tale which is true or probable. A narrator of the fantastic dispenses with the laws of logic and the physical world and, without further explanation (other than that of his own whims), recounts an action which is absurd or supernatural. A narrator of “magical realism,” to create for us the illusion of the unreal, pretends to escape from nature and recounts an action that, however explicable it may be, unsettles us with its strangeness.

In case this classification of the veridical, the supernatural, and the strange sounds too abstract, I shall illustrate it with concrete examples; these are the three ways in which Alejo Carpentier tells us about a journey:

(a) *Category of the veridical*: Sofia's journey, related very realistically in *El siglo de las luces*, chapter VI, section XLIII.

(b) *Category of the supernatural*: the fantastic journey as in "Viaje a la semilla," in which an old man becomes a child, enters his mother's womb, and disappears.

(c) *Category of the strange*: the journey from New York to the Venezuelan jungle which is undertaken in *Los pasos perdidos* by a Cuban musician. It is a real journey through a geographical setting, but it is also a magic journey through history, as the protagonist retraces epochs from the twentieth century, through the Romantic era, the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, and ancient times, to a lost paradise . . . This journey through a reversible time arouses a feeling of strangeness which is characteristic of "magical realism."

The term "magical realism" has become fashionable to the point where it would be unusual for a review dedicated to the study of Spanish-American literature not to publish an article on the "magical realism" of García Márquez or of one of his contemporaries. Sometimes I quietly tell myself (of course, without believing it), that perhaps I was the first to associate Roh, who coined the term half a century ago, with the "magical realism" of a Spanish-American writer. Permit me to relate how this came about.

In 1927 Ortega y Gasset had Franz Roh's book translated for his *Revista de Occidente*; and then, what was merely a subtitle in German—*Nach-Expressionismus (Magischer Realismus)*—became a title in Spanish: *Realismo mágico*.<sup>2</sup> This term was, then, well-known in the Buenos Aires literary circles which I frequented in my adolescence. The first time I heard it applied to a novel was in 1928, when my friend Aníbal Sanchez Reulet—of my own age—recommended that I read *Les enfants terribles* by Jean Cocteau: "pure 'magical realism,'" he told me. Within the circle of my friends, then, we talked about the "magical realism" of Jean Cocteau, G. K. Chesterton, Franz Kafka, Massimo Bontempelli, Benjamín Jarnés et al. I, who had been publishing antirealist short stories since 1927, was very conscious of the degrees of verisimilitude which run from the improbable to the impossible. It would never have occurred to me to confuse the "magical realism" of my story "Luna de la ceniza," (1934),—which is explicable by natural physical laws but which suggests a possible end of the world—with the fantasy "El leve Pedro," (1938), in which the protagonist, inexplicably liberated from the laws of gravity, rises through the air and is lost in space.<sup>3</sup> It was because I was accustomed to such distinctions, that, in 1956, when I applied the term "magical realism" to a Spanish-American writer, I did so retaining the meaning which Roh had given it. I was referring then to Arturo Usler Pietri's short stories, and I said: "In 'La lluvia' we appreciate the originality of his 'magical realism,' to use the term coined by the German critic Franz Roh in his study of one phase of contemporary art. Everyday objects appear enveloped in such a strange atmosphere that, although recognizable they shock us as if they were fantastic."<sup>4</sup>

I suspect that in these last few years there are those who do not associate the term "magical realism" with Roh, and when they do, they do not always distinguish between "magical realism" and "fantastic literature." Arturo Usler Pietri, for instance, did not mention Franz Roh in 1948 when he pointed out a mysterious element in Venezuelan short stories and called it "realismo mágico."<sup>5</sup> Nor did Angel Flores mention Franz Roh in his article of 1955, "Magical Realism in Spanish-American Fiction."<sup>6</sup> In 1959 he was to replace the term "magical realism" with that of "fantastic literature" for to him they were one and the same.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, another term had appeared which, as time went on, became associated with the two which I have just mentioned; this led to an even greater confusion in the language of criticism. I refer to "the marvelously real" ("lo real maravilloso") which Alejo Carpentier defined in the prologue to *El reino de este mundo*<sup>8</sup> and later repeated in his essay "De lo real maravillosamente americano."<sup>9</sup> Carpentier believes (1) that there is a literature of the "marvelous," European in origin, which refers to supernatural events; (2) that the American reality is more "marvelous" than that literature, and, as a result, one must refer to "that which is marvelously real in America"; (3) that the "marvelously real" of America can be transposed to literature only on the condition that writers believe that, in truth, America is "really marvelous" (or "marvelously real"). Now let us look at this in more detail.

The Europeans as much as the europeanized Americans—says Carpentier in his essay—use a formula for fantasy which consists of turning the world inside out, and which is merely a mechanism of inversion. ("A fuerza de querer suscitar lo maravilloso a todo trance los taumaturgos se hacen burocratas," p. 130.) Their artistic efforts are surpassed by natural wonders. Furthermore, Carpentier writes that: "There is a moment, in the sixth canto of *Maldoror*, when the hero, pursued by all the police in the world, escapes from 'an army of agents and spies' by assuming various animal forms and by making use of his ability to transport himself instantly to Peking, Madrid, or Saint Petersburg. This is very much literature of the 'marvelous.' But in America, where nothing similar has been written, there did exist a Mackandal endowed with the same powers by the faith of his contemporaries, who brought about with this magic one of the strangest and most dramatic uprisings in history. . . . But what is America's history if it is not a chronicle of the 'marvelously real?'" (pp. 134-135). Carpentier has also suggested that "the sensation of the 'marvelous' presupposes a faith. Those who do not believe in saints cannot be cured by the miracles of saints, nor can those who are not Quixotes become, body and soul, a part of the world of *Amadis de Gaula* or *Tirante el Blanco*. . . . Hence, those who invoke the 'marvelous' without believing in it—as did the surrealists for so many years—do so only as a literary gimmick" (p. 132).

Evidently Carpentier has written a literary essay without any philosophical pretensions; but since there are people who will read it as philosophy and not as literature, its fallacies should be pointed out.

Above all, it is a fallacy that art is a mere imitation of reality and that, therefore, reality surpasses art. When Carpentier says that in America the writer puts himself "into contact with the 'marvelous'" (p. 133), he is assuming that the "marvelous" is as tangible as physical objects. With the same logic—or lack of logic—it could be said that the astronaut Neil Armstrong touched upon the romantic nature of the moon, when in fact the moon is only romantic for a person who contemplates it with the eyes of a poet. The geography and history of America only appear "marvelous" when they stimulate Carpentier who, with his imagination thus aroused, writes that wonder which is his novel *Los pasos perdidos*.

Carpentier's second fallacy is that of assuming that in order to narrate portentous events one must have faith. The opposite is true. The religious individual remains insensitive to the esoteric nature of his superstitions. At best, superstitions constitute good material for tales of horror, but in order to convert

them into stories, an unbeliever must stop taking them seriously and must retell them with a new purpose. Fantastic literature arose when men of an artistic community ceased to believe in the stories they related. Not even Homer believed in the truth of the myths which he used to narrate for the amusement of unbelievers.

To summarize: the idea of the “marvelously real,” since it is detached from Aesthetics, should not be confused with the category “magical realism” which is indeed aesthetic. I hasten to add that “magical realism” should not be confused with fantastic literature, either.

Some people do so, and undoubtedly they have their reasons. Erwin Dale Carter, adhering to the criterion of Flores, includes “short stories of fantasy” in his doctoral thesis on *Magical Realism in Contemporary Argentine Fiction*.<sup>10</sup> Juan Loveluck uses “magical realism” or “the marvelously real” indiscriminately.<sup>11</sup> Luis Leal thinks that the definition of “magical realism” (in Franz Roh) coincides with that of “the marvelously real” (in Carpentier); and when it seems that he is going to separate “magical realism” from fantastic literature he brings them together again by giving as an example of “magical realism” Carpentier’s tale “Viaje a la semilla,” which, since it relates a miraculous reversing of physical time, belongs to fantastic literature.<sup>12</sup> Miguel Angel Asturias, with the term “magical realism”—which he applies to his own works—alludes to that process of the mythification of nature which can be seen in the magic world picture of the indigenous peoples of our America.<sup>13</sup> Angel Valbuena Briones states that “marvelous realism,” “magical realism,” and fantastic Argentinean literature are similar.<sup>14</sup> Germán Darío Carrillo compares the previous definitions and concludes that all writers who explore reality in a new way arriving at the extreme limit of fantasy without falling into the absurd or prodigious are “magical realists.”<sup>15</sup>

My intention is not to question the terminology of my colleagues. After all, these terms are only words which change with history.<sup>16</sup> Only a fanatic would think of defining a word according to a past meaning when that word is still very much alive in the present. I have already said that in 1958, when Roh himself again referred to the artistic style which in 1925 he had baptized with the name *Magischer Realismus* (“magical realism”), he preferred to replace that name with another *Neue Sachlichkeit* (“new objectivity”). It is fitting that everyone should make his ideas clear; and it has been my intention to clarify my own. I have distinguished, then, between supernatural and strange narrations. In the first, the narrator allows a portent to break suddenly into the action which he is narrating. He rejoices in denouncing the principles of logic and in simulating miracles which turn the laws of nature upside down. Thanks to the freedom of his imagination, that which is impossible in the physical order becomes possible in the order of fantasy. There is no other explanation than that of his whims. The narrator affects, as an explanation of the inexplicable, the intervention of mysterious agents. Sometimes the supernatural appears, not personified by means of agents, but in a cosmic upheaval which, without anyone knowing how, obliges men to assume grotesque postures. In these supernatural stories, the world is left standing on its head. On the contrary, in strange stories, the narrator, instead of presenting magic as if it were real, presents reality as if it were magic. Characters, things, and events are all recognizable and reasonable, but as the narrator proposes to provoke feelings of strangeness he disregards what he sees and abstains from rational explanations. Before, we saw him palming or altering objects. Reality was dissipated in the meanderings of fantasy. Magic was like a violent flight towards Nothingness. Now we see the narrator at the opposing extreme. “Magical realism” takes root in Being but, it does so whilst

describing it as problematic. Things do exist, and what a pleasure we get from seeing them emerge from fantasy's flow; but now we enter into them, and in their depths we again touch upon the enigma. Between the dissolution of reality (magic) and the copying of reality (realism), "magical realism" surprises itself, as though it were present at the spectacle of a new Creation. Seen with fresh eyes in a new morning's light, the world is, if not marvelous, at least disturbing. In this class of narration, the events, being real, produce the illusion of unreality. The writer's strategy consists of suggesting a supernatural atmosphere without departing from nature, and his tactic is to deform reality from within the imagination of neurotic characters.

Having defined "magical realism" in this fashion, I am going to apply it to Spanish-American literature—not to Spanish-American reality, which does not enjoy artistic privileges, but rather to writers who have looked at their lands and their peoples through lenses polished in the workshops of the world's great literature. If I may, I shall offer a personal testimony to demonstrate how and when "magical realism" came into being.

My perspective was that of a reader who lived in Buenos Aires, that is to say, in the most europeanized city of the whole of Spanish America. The Argentineans did not read Argentinean writers and much less Spanish-American ones. As a child, like many of my schoolmates, I devoured French and English novels. The first Argentinean novel which moved me to admiration was *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926). With a metaphoric art learned from the French symbolists, Ricardo Güiraldes idealized a gaucho Argentina which did not exist and he blended very natural scenes into a preternatural atmosphere of fantasies, mysteries, and time changes. In comparison with the country novels which then predominated (those of Benito Lynch, for example), it could have been said of chapter XV (and of its conclusion in chapter XVIII) that it was pure "magical realism." Since that reading of *Don Segundo Sombra* I have paid more attention to Spanish-American letters.

"Can there not be," I would ask myself, "can there not be in the rest of Spanish America, narrators who go even further than Güiraldes in their break with realistic conventions?" The young people of today, accustomed to the international "Boom" of Rulfo, Cortázar, García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Fuentes, Cabrera Infante, are unable, perhaps, to imagine that in the years to which I am referring Spanish-American literature was not accessible. One had to make a great effort in order to obtain any of it in Buenos Aires. I was luckier than other critics. My search was made easy firstly by my close friendship with Pedro Henríquez Ureña, who was well-informed about whatever was being done in our America; and secondly, by the fact that, due to my position as editor of the literary section of *La Vanguardia* (from 1931), I received from all parts books which the ordinary reader would not have been able to buy, not even in the best bookstores. It was then that I discovered, hidden away in remote cities, a minority of antirealist narrators.

I was dazzled by the prose of Alfonso Reyes, with whom I dealt personally during his visits to Buenos Aires: his narrations invented a fascinating realm of fiction. One has only to recall the stories in *El plano oblicuo* (1920); for example: "La cena" and "La reina perdida," in which reality turns into magic. Thanks also to Alfonso Reyes, who recommended them to me, I read the strange *Ensayos y fantasías* (1918) of his compatriot Julio Torri.

Reyes and Torri belonged to the postmodernist generation. In the following generation, the one which appeared after the First World War, narrative art

changed more ostentatiously. Many of the characteristics which are attributed to the novel of today were sketched out then. The subject matter was transferred from the country to the city; psychological analysis moved from simple souls to the examination of rare neuroses; the realist philosophy was substituted by idealist and existentialist philosophies; style became poetic; language began to experiment by analyzing itself; the novel multiplied itself and, as if in a hall of mirrors, we saw one novel within another. If not always in the totality of a book, at least in some passages of high artistic endeavor, the narrators of the generation known as *de Vanguardia* described situations which were enveloped in those storm clouds of mystery which foretell discharges of "magical realism." I am thinking of Alejo Carpentier, Vicente Huidobro, Jaime Torres Bodet, Miguel Angel Asturias, Enrique Labrador Ruiz, Gilberto Owen, Lino Novás Calvo, Vizconde de Lascano Tegui, Agustín Yáñez, María Luisa Bombal, the César Vallejo of *Fabla salvaje*, and several others.

I myself became part of that renovating adventure: in *Vigilia* (1934), with methods learned from Proust and Joyce, I poured out the novel from within the mental processes of an adolescent. And, in *El mentir de las estrellas* (1940) there were at least three stories which were sealed with the aesthetic of "magical realism."

Up till now I have not mentioned Jorge Luis Borges because his work as a short story writer began late; but scarcely had it begun when his stories exercised (and they continue to exercise) a great influence on the narrators of "magical realism." I remember the surprise with which in 1940 we read his story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." It opened a new period in the history of the Spanish-American narrative. In the first place, there, in that story, were the seeds of the forest of tales that was to grow from Borges during that decade. And, from the storytelling art of Borges, in its turn, there was let loose a multitude of admirers, apprentices, disciples, inspired people, and plagiarists. His stories broke the genre down into curious formal complications: the short story-cum-essay and the essay-cum-short story, the short story within a short story, the short story which seems a mere chronicle and which is suddenly transformed into a fantasy by a footnote or a postscript, the short story which reduces a theory to the absurd and which is followed by another short story which reduces the opposite theory to the absurd. One example, among many, of this construction with thesis and antithesis is "La obra de Herbert Quain," where he speaks of regressive novels with an infinitely branching past and "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," where he speaks of a labyrinthine novel where the future branches into infinite possibilities. And observe that although Borges decided not to write novels, he did write short stories about the art of writing novels; with the result that some of his reflections on the novel form part of the program of today's experimental novelists. Be that as it may, what is certain is that the important thing about Borges' contribution was that he subverted one's vision of the world. And Borges' vision of the world has influenced Arreola, Cortázar, Mejía Valera, García Márquez, and other narrators of today.

Part of Borges' storytelling can be classified as fantastic literature; in other words, the natural order is inexplicably altered by the irruption of a supernatural fact, as in "Las ruinas circulares," for example. But, the majority of his stories fit, rather, into "magical realism": "Funes el memorioso," "El muerto," and "El Zahir," to mention just three of those written in the forties.

I have deliberately referred to stories by Borges which take place in the River Plate region, and in which Creole characters are involved in situations which are typical of American life. I have done so because I believe that when

young critics speak of "magical realism," it is precisely to a literature rich in American content that they point. Furthermore, I believe that the novelty of the writers of the "Boom," between 1950 and 1970, consisted in making the antirealistic schemes of the magicians of 1930-1950 function within the reality which extends from Mexico to Argentina and from Chile to Puerto Rico.

In fact, between 1930 and 1950 the literature of the Spanish-American countries was predominantly realistic and rustic. The devotees of fantastic literature challenged this empire of regionalists. A school was thus formed on the margin of official realism with Borges as one of its masters. In it, young disciples secretly learned to manipulate the literary schemes of what I have called "the supernatural" and "the strange." In the last two decades—from 1950 to 1970—those young writers have stepped down from the school built at the top of a marble tower and have walked barefoot in the mud of America as did their grandfathers. Their masters had taught them the techniques for weaving tenuous plots and the tricks for constructing abstract structures. The disciples, once they had mastered those lessons, denied their masters and now they exercise their antirealistic techniques and tricks in a concrete American reality. They do not idealize it to the point of making it unrecognizable; nor do they reduce it to a gross copy. The formal games which before had fascinated a minority now entertain the majority because they rely on familiar objects. It is a phenomenon of a mass society. The style of a minority is adopted by a majority. The only thing is that, in the present popularity of the "isms" of the old elite, the impetus is no longer gratuitous and universal, but rather committed and nationalist. Thirty years ago Borges transformed experiences of Buenos Aires into improbable tales and, in order that their improbability would be tolerable to a small public, he situated them in India or on the planet Tlön. Today, García Márquez, so that the public at large will tolerate his improbable fictions, situates them in Macondo, which is the heart of our America. In both cases the magic, the "marvelous," does not lie in reality, but in the art of make-believe.

*Translated from the Spanish by Roger Moore.*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Franz Roh, *Nach-Expressionismus (Magischer Realismus)* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt und Bierman, 1925); *Geschichte der deutschen Kunst von 1900 bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: F. Bruckmann Verlag, 1958). English translation with additions by Juliene Roh, *German Art in the 20th Century* (New York: Graphic Society Ltd., 1968).

<sup>2</sup>Franz Roh, *El realismo mágico*, trans. Fernando Vela (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1927).

<sup>3</sup>*Lune de cendre* (Buenos Aires: La Vanguardia, 1935), juxtaposed the texts of "Luna de deniza," *La Nación*, 7 October 1934, and its translation by Manoel Gahisto in *La Revue Argentine*, Paris, No. 11 (Sept. 1935). This story, along with another three which included "El leve Pedro," *La Nación*, 28 August, 1938, were edited in *El mentir de las estrellas* (Buenos Aires: El Angel Gulab, 1940).

<sup>4</sup>E. Anderson Imbert and L. Kiddle, eds., *Veinte cuentos hispano-americanos del siglo XX* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1956), p. 148.

<sup>5</sup>Arturo Uslar Pietri, *Letras y hombres de Venezuela* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1948), p. 162.

<sup>6</sup>Angel Flores, "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction," *Hispania*, 38 (May, 1955), 187-192.

<sup>7</sup>Angel Flores, *Historia y antología del cuento y la novela en hispanoamérica* (New York: Las Americas, 1959), pp. 386-388.

<sup>8</sup>Alejo Carpentier, *El reino de este mundo* (Mexico: Ediapsa, 1949), pp. 9-16.

<sup>9</sup>Alejo Carpentier, "De lo real maravillosamente americano," in *Tientos y diferencias* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma, 1964), pp. 115-135.

<sup>10</sup>Erwin Dale Carter, *Magical Realism in Contemporary Argentine Fiction* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1966).

<sup>11</sup>Juan Loveluck, "Crisis y renovación de la novela hispanoamericana," in *La novela hispanoamericana*, 4th ed. (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Universitaria, 1972).

<sup>12</sup>Luis Leal, "El realismo mágico en la literatura hispanoamericana," *Cuadernos americanos*, 153 (1967), 230-235.

<sup>13</sup>Günter W. Lorenz, "An Interview with Nobel Prize Winner Miguel Angel Asturias," *Atlas*, 14 (1967), 17.

<sup>14</sup>Angel Valbuena Briones, "Una cala en el realismo mágico," *Cuadernos americanos*, 166 (1969), 233-241.

<sup>15</sup>German Dario Carillo, "Un relato de Gabriel García Márquez visto a través de la lupa del realismo mágico," *Razon y fábula* (Bogotá), 23 (1971), 6-31.

<sup>16</sup>The XVI Congress of the Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana met at Michigan State University from August 26 to 31, 1973, with the one subject of "La fantasía y el realismo mágico en la literatura iberoamericana." The definitions of the term were as contradictory as those that I have mentioned here.