

EDITORIAL

A Necessary Confusion: Magical Realism

Controversy has dogged magical realism since it first drew the attention of the world literary community through Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and other works of the Latin American "Boom" in the 1960s. Recognized by some as a significant international movement in fictional style, by others rejected as an irresponsible evasion of reality and even as a conversion of third-world suffering to entertainment, magical realism has constituted a special scandal to conventional literary history, which, no matter how demystified and post-Hegelian it may claim to be, generally assumes what Hegel assumed: that "art, for us, is a thing of the past," that the progress of spirit (for what else is postmodernism with its ironic superiority to semiotic codes) has relegated art to a more primitive era of human expression and that only modes of the philosophical and political remain to be explored.

Erich Auerbach saw all of literary history from Homer to Proust as progressively defining a realistic mode of narrative; in this he extended Matthew Arnold's claim that the effort of modern thought was to "see the object as in itself it really is." In contrast, Lois Parkinson Zamora's survey of twentieth-century art in this issue finds one of its greatest concerns to be the finding or awakening of creative power in the real. Since the groundbreaking study *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* edited by Zamora and Wendy Faris, magical realism's influences may be traced throughout the twentieth century and especially in German and Spanish modernism. In deeper currents, it draws on the return of the banished supernatural, the uncanny and fabulous in Hoffmann and Kleist (the title of whose short tale "Improbable Verities" serves as an eponym for all his tales), the unexpected pertinence of the archetypal unconscious (in Poe) or the theocratic cosmos (in Hawthorne), and most especially the absurd in city and country alike as seen in Gogol,

the subject of James D. Hardy, Jr. and Leonard Stanton in this issue.

Magical realism is most readily recognized in the work of the major Latin American fiction writers Borges, García Márquez, and Cortázar and in the dialogue with their style taken up by Elena Garro, Isabel Allende, Laura Esquivel, and Ana Castillo. Some think it most likely to crop up throughout the Americas—Derek Walcott, Toni Morrison, Robert Kroetsch—where a world system and a mental world collided with a reality in place already some five hundred years ago. As an international (or interregional) style magical realism has characterized the work of novelists writing about nations in transition to modernization, such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Abdelkebir Khatibi, Ben Okri; Salman Rushdie, the most prominent of these, has called them “‘half-made’ societies, in which the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new.” Most broadly, it responds to the sense of displacement and discursive impoverishment extended everywhere by the world system, perhaps nowhere more than in the centers rather than the peripheries; and thus, as Anne Hegerfeldt shows in this issue, more than a few British authors carry on this mode.

Wendy Faris in this issue examines the cultural politics of the “battle between two oppositional systems,” with all-too-real historical and economic scars, that is often the matrix of magical realism. The “struggle” identified by Rushdie is inevitably a battle for subjective as well as physical and economic survival. It therefore leads to encounters with ancestral cultural systems that have now become what Toni Morrison, in referring to African and African American lore as source for Black American fiction, has called “discredited knowledge.” The fight for recognition involves a collective recognition that a people cannot be defined completely, and thus fragmented, by the economic system. Yet this encounter with the dreamed past is not controlled or mediated: the “return of the repressed” may be a collective as well as a private phenomenon. Trinidadian poet Kamau Brathwaite has given an inimitable definition in a recent issue of *Annals of Scholarship*:

Magical realism (MR) is simply a legba or lembo or limbo xperience: the sudden or apparently sudden discovery of threshold or watergate into what seems “new” because it is very ancient . . . where the “real,” since it has entered continuum, hold ing within its great wheel all the

“tenses”—past present & future—no longer in so-call chronological tension, but, like the computer, w/”random” access memory form all or any of the time-compass, becomes “magical” because, w/this access of what I repeat is a kind of blindness, we find ourselves in a capacity of trans-limitness, erasure of expectant boundaries into mineral or plant or zemi or lwa or angel orOther.

The legba, the angel, and so on, are part of cultural memory which Brathwaite so aptly calls “‘random’ access.” Michael Wood in this issue renders the concept of cultural memory more concrete in calling it “already narrated reality” and sees magical realism as faithful “to the stories people tell,” while from this point of view “the older realism, in this interpretation, is already enacting a form of censorship.”

Ironically, the older, “responsible” realism may be outflanked by the most advanced scientific knowledge as well as by the “discredited.” Magical realism responds to disclosures of reality now current in physics and the natural sciences and to the changing condition of our understanding of “reality.” Several of the contributors to this issue point out that magical realism often operates in both directions, presenting fantastic events as ordinary and continuous with the everyday world and singling out certain aspects of the everyday as fantastic and unbelievable, either outrageous or a source of wonder or both. In both cases what emerges is a sense that the commonsense view of the world is a constructed view. Based on a faith in mechanistic science, this view has by now been effectively dismantled by science itself and brought before the everyday eye by electronic engineering. Quantum reality, still so little understood even by scientists themselves, is nonetheless fully formulated and is the indispensable basis of both the worldwide web of electronic information transfer and analysis and the cracking of the genomic code. As scientists often observe, quantum mechanics provides the most accurate equations the human race has ever devised, even though it is poorly understood by even the most insightful minds in physics.

Imaginative descriptions of the quantum world by science writers resemble the “instantaneous” world suggested by much magical realist writing. This paradox serves as witness that the modern world is in transition to the possibility of a new mode of understanding reality. It is

however a possibility that can be realized only through the aid of imagination, which opens the framework within which understanding operates. In a sense, then, technology (which is often seen as the product or, alternatively, as the enabler of imagination) is the opposite of imagination, for whereas the latter annuls space and time for the envisioning mind, the former overcomes space and time for the practical reason, which can operate perfectly well without the imagination, carrying out the dictates of the social will. Technology looms as a simulacrum of imagination.

What looms for the technologized reality of the globalized citizen as a consequence is thus an unprecedented numbness in which everyday discourse remains stubbornly in a ruling mode of mechanistic insistence, reinforced by the persistence of economic bottom-line thinking, while the transformations of reality in which it traffics so familiarly become steadily more fantastic. In such a situation the truly alienated psyches are those of the most privileged users of this technology, and the only hope for maintaining some contact with reality is through geopolitical and economic alienation from modernity—or, alternatively, through a dialogue between the hypermodern and the traditional that refuses to submit to the prestige of the electronically privileged world and instead submits it to the critique of pre-modern tradition, imagination, history and irony such as magical realism carries out.

The authors in this issue all engage in this dialogue. They are particularly aware of the danger of a “counterfeited” magical realism offered in the name of exoticism, for in the economy of literary style bad currency tends to drive out good. Yet they offer spirited defenses of a movement that they see as alive and growing; they relate its poetics to earlier movements in art and to classic authors; and they aver its insights to be on the whole more revealing than evasive of the real world, a world in which commonsense realism has always been only a narrow part and whose cosmic dimensions, the presence of the past, dare to be envisioned once again.

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