

Contentious Contributions: Magic Realism goes British

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I. *Introduction*

Sometimes the ways of literary criticism are nearly as strange and wonderful as the literature it analyzes. Fairy tales in their wisdom have long known that it is never the first, nor the second, but the third sibling, son, or suitor who will persevere (unless it is the seventh, but unfortunately that does not make for a good analogy here). Having gone from a brief flourishing into relative obscurity twice, the term “magic realism” was granted a third, rather remarkable – if not actually miraculous – lease on life which, through the simplifying glass of retrospective vision, is frequently dated to the publication of Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967. And this time, attached to a new and exciting kind of literature, “magic realism” seemed destined for the stars: some three and a half decades later, the term enjoys greater currency than ever, and indeed may confidently be said to be *en vogue* not only with critics – a fact to which the amazing number of recent publications on the topic attest –, but with publishers and the reading public as well, though each time certainly for quite different reasons.

That the ever-increasing popularity of the mode is felt to be not entirely unproblematic is illustrated by recent critical complaints about regrettable imitations and undue attempts at appropriation – though one might here wonder to what extent it is the critics who get to tell the

writers how, or what, to write. Certainly, as with every form of literature, establishment inevitably entails a certain loss of originality and subversive impact. In this case, however, there is more to the matter than that, for the debate about magic realism has from the very beginning been about more than just another literary concept; it has always also been influenced by political and ideological agendas. Hailed as Latin America's "authentic expression" (Flores 1955:192), the mode was for a long time treated as an exclusively Latin American phenomenon, engendered directly by the continent's "marvelous" nature, history and culture. This "Americanist" interpretation of magic realism, amply criticized as a "territorialization of the imaginary" (Chanady 1995:131) and a "geographical fallacy" (Wilson 1995:223), was in time expanded to what might be called the "postcolonialist" interpretation, according to which the mode's characteristic fusion of realistic and fantastic elements originates in the material reality not only of Latin America, but of the postcolonial situation *per se*, which is likewise characterized by the co-existence of irreconcilable opposites, i.e. a dominant rational-scientific "Western" and a marginalized mythical "native" world view. As an inherently postcolonial mode, magic realist fiction arguably undertakes to redress the cultural hierarchy imposed by the colonizer by revaluing the alternative, non-Western systems of thought, presenting them as a corrective or supplement to the dominant world view.

But to read magic realism as resulting from postcolonial reality and pursuing an essentially postcolonial project again has certain cultural and political implications. As is the case with postcolonial discourse in general, the hotly debated question is, "Who can speak as 'Other'?" – or, in this instance, write as a magic realist. Any use of the mode by writers who can be regarded as belonging to the "cultural center" (though marginality seems in times of political correctness to have become so fashionable that one is sometimes hard put to locate any such "center" at all) is felt potentially to diminish the mode's subversive capacity. At best, there is something slightly condescending about Western attempts to jump on the postcolonial bandwagon; Theo D'haen points to "privileged" writers running "the risk of being judged 'patronizing' by those on whose behalf such writers seek to speak" (D'haen 1995:195). At worst, magic realist techniques are seen to be (ab)used merely to produce literary fireworks

that pander to the readers' taste for the exotic – serious postcolonial critique becomes pure postmodern playfulness, ex-centricity a pose. In short, when imported into the so-called “center,” magic realism deteriorates into a cliché.

Or does it? The number of recent approaches which perceive magic realism as a global mode suggest that the apparent incongruity between a postcolonial project on the one hand and a Western context of production on the other requires a closer look. Certainly there are examples where the mode has already become generic, where the devices seem flat and mechanical and mere tributes to a literary convention, however recently established. The line, however, which divides a “vital” magic realism from one which has been done to death does not necessarily run between postcolonial and first-world literatures, and there are a number of magic realist texts from the so-called “privileged centers of literature” that can substantially contribute to a reading of magic realism as a (postcolonial) critique of the dominant rational-scientific world view. Focusing on examples of magic realism from contemporary Britain, this essay proposes that magic realist fiction argues for a reevaluation of alternative modes of thought not only from within a specifically postcolonial perspective, but already on a more general level. The mode can be seen to function almost as a fictional counterpart to anthropological or sociological studies: tracing the various strategies by which individuals and communities try – and always have tried – to make sense of the world, magic realist fiction shows how rationalism and science alone cannot adequately account for the human experience of the world. Unlike magic realist texts from postcolonial literatures, where the non-scientific perspective often coincides with a “native” point of view, the texts from British fiction emphasize the extent to which alternative, frequently marginalized modes of thought are not restricted to (post)colonial cultures, but exist also in Western settings (even if they are rarely acknowledged). The texts thereby suggest that cultures cannot be neatly divided into rational vs. irrational, scientific vs. magical, but that certain patterns of meaning-making are anthropological constants which will persist even if they are incompatible with the dominant (i.e. scientific) world view. Narrative, magical and metaphorical modes of thought are shown to influence people's perceptions and decisions just as much as do objective

“facts”; they, too, decisively shape psychological and social reality. In this sense, the magic realist “argument,” fictions and metaphors, beliefs and dreams are just as “real” as the material world, and must be taken into account in trying to understand human thought and behavior. At the same time, magic realist texts emphasize the way in which *all* modes of thought and perception, be they rational-scientific or other, can only ever provide constructions of the world—which means that world views are never absolute and universal, but necessarily provisional and open to revision. Far from advertising an unconditional faith in mythical world views or mystic philosophies as a cure-all for an overdose of rationalism and science, magic realist fiction quite neutrally observes the helpful as well as the harmful uses to which the various human strategies of meaning-making may be put.

As this essay will show, the dual function of redeeming different world views while simultaneously deconstructing all claims to universal validity is the common purpose behind the different literary techniques typically employed by magic realist texts. On the one hand, magic realist fiction emphasizes the importance of non-scientific modes of thought by allowing all sorts of fictions to become “real” on the level of the text, thereby giving rise to many of the features that have been identified as so characteristic of the mode. On the other hand, the texts make use of metafictional strategies and the transgression of literary conventions in order to cast doubt on their own reliability and produce a certain hesitation in the implied reader. In the following, I will examine how these different literary techniques contribute to magic realism’s critical inquiry into the workings of the human mind. For illustration, I will draw mainly on a group of British magic realist texts, namely on works by Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Jeanette Winterson, Emma Tennant, and Robert Nye. Some, but not all, of these texts have previously been discussed by critics as examples of magic realist fiction; those that have not I offer as my own “discoveries,” hoping the analysis will reveal them to be enlightening for any discussion of magic realism.

II. *Magic realist techniques and their functions*

The adaptation of the realist mode to fantastic elements

Magic realism is, first and foremost, an “amalgamation of realism and fantasy” (Flores 1995:189). Or at least that’s what a survey of the critical debate suggests, for some variant of Flores’s formulation graces almost every attempt to define the mode. The briefness of this “definition” is surpassed only by its inadequacy, for obviously there are a considerable number of genres and modes that equally answer to this description, quite apart from the problem that terms like “marvelous,” “fantastic” or “supernatural” are culturally contingent and that what is considered physically impossible in some cultures may be deemed perfectly normal in others. The “fantastic” elements of magic realist fiction are thus not inherently so, but become visible as such only against the conventions of literary realism, which are installed only to be immediately subverted. Using prominent techniques of realism on the one hand, such as the doubling of the extratextual world, the imitation of non-fictional modes like history or journalism, or the abundant use of (frequently superfluous) detail, which according to Roland Barthes is fundamental to creating *l’effet du réel* (cf. Barthes 1968:87), the magic realist mode on the other hand introduces items that violate the realist standards it purportedly adheres to. Characteristically, these non-realistic items cannot be “recontextualized,” explained away as dreams, hallucinations, metaphors, or lies; presented in a strikingly nonchalant and matter-of-fact manner (often even demonstratively so), there seems to be no option but to accept them as part of the fictional world. Saleem’s miraculous gifts of telepathy and smell in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Villanelle’s webbed feet in Winterson’s *The Passion*, and even Fevvers’ wings in Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*; all these and many other implausibilities/ impossibilities in the end have to be taken – not only, but also – at face value. In thus “normalizing” or “naturalizing” the non-realistic elements, magic realism fundamentally differs from fantastic fiction, which by contrast uses a rhetoric of vagueness to shroud them in a sense of mystery and ambiguity (on this point, cf. Todorov 1975:38 and Chanady 1985:132ff.). At the same time, magic realism also refuses to be reabsorbed into the realm of fan-

tasy or marvelous fiction, though these forms have likewise been seen to use realist techniques to present non-realistic elements (cf. Brooke-Rose 1981:254ff). But whereas in these modes the non-realistic elements go completely unremarked by the narrator or the (implied) reader, magic realist fiction, in remarking on their very unremarkableness, paradoxically manages to flaunt these elements as transgressions of realist conventions, thereby causing the reader to hesitate – not over the ontological status of the fantastic items, as would be the case in fantastic fiction, but over which set of conventions are to guide the reading of this narrative.

In incongruously adapting the realist mode to non-realistic elements and then allowing this incongruity to undermine the narrative, magic realism calls to mind yet another form entirely, namely the tall tale. Here, too, realist techniques are used to give fantastically absurd events a façade of factuality, while any bid for realism is progressively undermined by exactly these elements: always keeping a deadpan expression, the narrator piles on increasingly extravagant and fantastic items, straining credibility to the point where the narrative finally collapses under its sheer absurdity. The tall tale thus consists of two opposing impulses: to conceal yet to simultaneously denounce its fictional status, which to a certain extent is reminiscent of the two opposing aims I have attributed to magic realist fiction. Magic realism of course never reaches that point of total self-denunciation or collapse; as I have said, the non-realistic elements cannot be reconciled to a realistic framework. A number of magic realist texts, however, not only resemble the tall tale in terms of technique, they also give a strong feeling of the tall tale insofar as the narrator deliberately – and often, it seems, quite gleefully – keeps the implied reader precariously teetering on the edge of disbelief. A good example is Fevvers' and Lizzie's intradiegetic narrative in *Nights at the Circus*, where the two women, despite their deadpan miens, appear positively to gloat over the confusion their outrageously absurd tale induces in their victim, the reporter Jack Walser (cf. *NC* 7, 26, 27, and Part I, *passim*). The self-conscious narrators in Robert Nye's novels *Falstaff* and *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* similarly generate the feeling that they are putting the reader on – mainly because they protest too much that that is *not* what they are doing, by no means, not at all. The same can be said of Saleem in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Moraes Zogoiby in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and even the anony-

mous narrator in *Shame*, all of whom acknowledge that their tales sound perhaps a mite improbable, but that's the way it was, so take it or leave it. Interestingly, the doubt cast on the narrators' reliability by their excessive and consequently self-subversive truth-claims is countermanded by admissions on the part of the narrators themselves that they are, in fact, only telling stories; once again, the effect is the opposite of what might have been expected, for paradoxically, these "anti-truth-claims" serve to rehabilitate the narrators, suggesting that perhaps there is more than one way of telling the truth, without any single way having a prerogative. In Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*, the truth claim and its opposite are conveniently rolled into one: "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (P5, 13, 69 and 160). This apparently so contradictory piece of advice might actually serve as magic realist fiction's motto in general when it presents the non-realistic elements as 'real' while at the same time using them to disrupt the reader's suspension of disbelief. The mode here indicates how fictions need to be recognized, in both senses of the word: fictions must be acknowledged as important parts of the human experience, even while they need to be identified as the constructions that they are.

Literalization

Magic realism further emphasizes the "reality" of fictions through a set of techniques which are based on linguistic and conceptual violations, rather than transgressions of genre. Although at a first glance the techniques may appear dissimilar, I have subsumed them under one label because they can all be seen to follow a movement from the abstract to the concrete, from the figurative to the literal, from the word to the thing. To emphasize these similarities in structure reveals the common factor behind many of the elements which heretofore have merely been vaguely classed as non-realistic or "fantastic." Many of the metamorphoses, for example, which have been identified as so typical of magic realist fiction (cf. Faris 1995:178), make more sense if they are regarded as not just another "magic" ingredient added to enhance the overall flavor, but only if they are read in the context of other instances of literalization. In *The Satanic Verses*, the mutation of Saladin Chamcha and the other immigrants into beasts can be seen to result directly from their English

environment's racist prejudices: considered a "fucking Packy billy" (SV I63), Saladin really does turn into a demi-goat, causing no surprise at all in the policemen and immigration officials present, who after all only find their assessment confirmed. By rendering the metaphor "real," the text emphasizes the power such constructions have over human thought and human action, and the very real suffering they can inflict. A similar function can be attributed to other cases of literalized metaphors, such as Villanelle's lost heart in *The Passion* (cf. P I15f.), India's businessmen "turning white" as they follow in the former colonizer's footsteps in *Midnight's Children* (cf. MC 179), or the fact that in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Aurora Zogoiby's life in the fast lane actually causes her son Moraes to age at twice the normal speed (cf. MLS I61). Endowing figures of speech with the referentiality of literal language, magic realist fiction strikingly insists that metaphors are not merely the rhetorical ornaments or even the lies great thinkers of modernity have made them out to be, but that they have a decidedly real influence on human perceptions of the world, a position which, incidentally, aligns magic realist fiction with much contemporary theory on metaphor (cf. e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

Closely related to the literalization of metaphor (and perhaps not always clearly distinguishable) is the way in which magic realist texts allow abstract nouns to acquire a distinctly material presence. Unlike other non-realistic elements, which are based on the violation of cultural norms and may thus be perceived as fantastic to varying degrees, these elements arise from the transgression of the semantic constraints governing linguistic usage and are therefore no longer culturally contingent, but will disconcert every competent speaker of a language equally. Just as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* a web of tenderness must be materially pushed aside before the beloved can leave, and memories are looked for in literal corners (cf. *Solitude* 117 and 191), in Rushdie's novels emotions give off smells like material things (cf. MC 317f., S 27 and MLS 286), *Wild Nights* has boredom tapping on the window like a branch (cf. WN 17), and in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the Zogoiby cook, in an act of "culinary magic," adds "a generous sprinkling of hope" to the past and the present to "cook up the happy future" (MLS 273). A recurrent motif is also the reification of language itself: in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, sharp words inflict physical wounds (cf. MC 198 and S 237), and in *The Moor's*

Last Sigh, a curse remains floating in the air until it can finally descend on its mark (cf. *MLS* 72, also 31). The distinction abstract/concrete furthermore becomes curiously blurred in lengthy inventories which indiscriminately mix the material with the abstract. Because no difference is made between the two kinds of “objects” physical existence loses its significance as a criterion of value: the conceptual world appears on a par with material reality. Even more so than the other examples of literalization above, these abstractions-rendered-concrete appear to be suspended between the literal and the figurative, their blatant infringement of the rules of language producing a certain amount of hesitation about how they are to be read. At the same time, in allowing abstract concepts and even language to merge with reality to the point of becoming solid substance, the technique once again underlines the extent to which the non-material, too, is an essential aspect of human reality.

A third type of literalization, which again partly overlaps with the previous two, can be seen to derive from the realm of the psychological. Many of magic realism’s numerous ghosts for example are quite transparently presented as materialized memories; not infrequently, they seem to be the all too real offspring of a guilty conscience. As Rosa Diamond so pithily puts it in *The Satanic Verses*: “What’s a ghost? Unfinished business is what” (*SV* 129), and this indeed seems to be the case with many of the ghosts in *Midnight’s Children* and *The Satanic Verses*. In *Wild Nights*, ghosts also quite matter-of-factly move among the living, continuously enacting the family history; here, the ghosts might be seen to serve not only as reminders, but also to provide a certain reassurance. In making the past ontologically present, ghosts serve to emphasize how the past continues to exert its influence over people’s perception and behavior in the now.

Ex-centric focalizer

A feature critics have frequently discussed as typical of magic realist fiction is its tendency to adopt a marginalized, peripheral or “ex-centric” point of view. This obviously ties in well with readings of the mode as engaged in an essentially postcolonial project: in order to level the social and cultural hierarchy that is colonialism’s (patriarchy’s/ racism’s/

chauvinism's/. . .) legacy, magic realist fiction takes on the perspective of the hitherto oppressed, thereby endorsing their world view as a valid alternative to the dominant outlook. As neatly as literature here seems to correspond to theory, however, I should like to point out that there is a considerable amount of abstraction involved in this argument. Surely, no one would want to imply that the "magical" world presented in magic realist texts actually mirrors the world views adhered to by formerly colonized peoples, women, ethnic minorities, or homosexuals (to name just a few of the groups which have been considered marginalized). This would be to suggest that a rational-scientific world view – whatever its drawbacks – is the prerogative of a dwindling dominant "center," while the margins are characterized as incapable of rational thought in the first place – a reaffirmation of precisely those constructions of the "Other" that postcolonial as well as feminist and other theories of the ex-centric most urgently seek to overcome. Quite obviously, the use of a marginalized perspective to project a "magical" world view is a literary technique, not a mimetic reproduction of an extratextual reality. The magic realist world view symbolically stands in for a variety of marginalized or "Other" perspectives (not necessarily non-scientific ones), which are vicariously characterized as supplements to the dominant outlook.

After these words of caution about taking magic realism's conflation of the marginal with the magical too literally, I should like to turn around and propose that there is after all quite a direct connection between magic realism's ex-centric focalizers and the mode's projection of a basically realistic world that nevertheless manages effortlessly to accommodate the extravagant, the marvelous, and the fantastic. For in choosing focal characters who clearly stand outside the dominant rational-scientific order, the texts do exploit post-Enlightenment constructions of the "Other" as non-rational and non-scientific, i.e. as also ideologically "Other," constructions which allow the rational-scientific "center" to exclude the "alien" from the realm of legitimate discourse. Among the notions of "Otherness" which magic realist texts draw on there are the categories familiar from postcolonial theory, such as racial/ethnic identity, gender, or sexual orientation. Frequently, however, these are combined with, and arguably upstaged by, other and more immediately visible markers of ex-centricity, such as physical abnormality (e.g. Villanelle in *The Passion*, Moraes

Zogoiby in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Fevvers' and Madame Schreck's cabinet of female freaks in *Nights at the Circus*, an affiliation to the world of entertainment and the carnivalesque (especially in *Nights at the Circus* and *The Late Mr. Shakespeare*), madness, or childhood (*Wild Nights*, *Midnight's Children*). The mode's use of the child's – or at times a child-like – perspective is particularly interesting insofar as the magic realist world with its nonchalant acceptance of the fantastic, its use of magical and animistic modes of thought and its literalization of the metaphorical and the abstract corresponds remarkably closely to influential psychological constructions of the child's world view, as presented for example by Jean Piaget (cf. Piaget 1997).

As it does with literary realism, the magic realist mode installs such cultural constructs of the "Other" as irrational, and therefore deluded and inferior, only to subsequently subvert them. For in magic realist fiction, it is the "alien" perspective which becomes the norm and those who reject the marvelous as (scientifically) impossible who are presented as outsiders. In *Nights at the Circus*, the unconventional world view of the social misfits and the physical freaks from the London underworld and the realm of the circus is endorsed, while Walser's skepticism and insistence on empirical proof are mocked. Similarly, in *The Passion*, the skeptical Henri must find out that Villanelle's lost heart is not, as he had assumed, merely a figure of speech, but "real" (cf. *P* 115). And in *Midnight's Children*, Saleem warns his readers against prematurely rejecting the socially marginal perspective as unreliable:

Don't make the mistake of dismissing what I've unveiled as mere delirium; or even the insanely exaggerated fantasies of a lonely, ugly child. I have stated before that I am not speaking metaphorically; what I have just written (and read aloud to stunned Padma) is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother's-head truth. (*MC* 200)

Magic realism's use of the ex-centric categories of carnival, madness and childhood is another interesting case in point, for here, post-Enlightenment's marginalizing constructions are subverted when magic realist fiction confronts them with other traditions that envision these

categories as states of privileged perception or even revelation. In *Falstaff* for example, Sir John Fastolf invokes the medieval and Renaissance traditions of carnival and the wise fool to underline his narrative's epistemological potential (cf. *F* 217, 256, 347 and 391). García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* harks back to the old idea of the divinely inspired mad(wo)man in the figures of José Arcadio Buendía and Remedios (cf. *Solitude* 86-92 and 213f.); madness is also connected to a certain kind of insight in *The Passion* (which can be seen to stand in a Romantic rather than a Renaissance tradition), *Nights at the Circus*, and *Midnight's Children*. Finally, Romantic constructions of the child as an innocent who is perceptive to phenomena beyond the adult's ken can be seen to play a role in *Wild Nights*, where the child narrator sees a marvelous world that remains hidden to her scientifically-minded parents (cf. *WN*, e.g. p. 15). In this way, magic realist fiction redeems perspectives which the rational-scientific world view as well as literary realism have traditionally branded as unreliable, suggesting that they, too, can provide insight into the world. By extension, other marginalized world views are similarly revalued as important contributions which should be taken into account by dominant discourses.

Knowledge and knowledge production

A reading of magic realism as a quasi anthropological or sociological inquiry into the workings of the human mind is much supported by the mode's focus on issues of knowledge and knowledge production. In tracing how human beings individually and collectively perceive their world, magic realist fiction critically reviews different strategies of knowing – or, as the texts suggest, constructing – reality. Received (i.e. rational-scientific) paradigms of knowledge such as historiography and science are sounded as to their epistemological potential and are contrasted with alternative, “Other” modes of knowledge production, chief among which are various forms of narrative.

Magic realist fiction's challenges to positivist models of history have been widely noted, and a not inconsiderable overlap can be made out between magic realism and Linda Hutcheon's category of historiographic metafiction (cf. Hutcheon 1996). Rushdie's novels certainly are good ex-

amples of the latter in their self-conscious foregrounding of the pitfalls of trying to know and represent the past (cf. Hutcheon 1996, e.g. p. ix et passim). Metahistoriographic discourse plays a prominent role also in Nye's *Falstaff* and *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in Winterson's *The Passion*. Presenting themselves as histories and/or (auto)biographies, the texts undermine positivist history's claims to objectivity and factuality by revealing how the historical account relies essentially on the same meaning-making strategies as does narrative fiction in order to cover the gaps and inconsistencies in what is known of the past, and is thus necessarily a subjective construction. Moreover, historical discourse is shown to be an instrument of power which works to uphold existing hierarchies; Saleem for example shamelessly admits to "[c]utting up history to suit [his] own nefarious purposes" (*MC* 259). Compared to other, non-magic-realist works of historiographic metafiction, magic realism's critique of positivist history might be seen to begin already on a more fundamental level insofar as the magic realist mode quasi by definition undertakes a subversion of history's discourse of choice, namely realism. However, magic realist fiction not only subverts, but goes on to offer constructive criticism as well, outlining a revised historiography that will include also overtly fictional forms. The texts characteristically suggest that, even if a purely factual and objective account of history were possible, it would nevertheless be completely dissatisfactory – as the narrator of *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* puts it so bluntly, "a man's life does not just consist of facts" (*LS* 24). Other types of (historical) narratives such as local tales and legends, anecdotes, gossip and rumor are shown to shape equally people's perception of the past, and should therefore be taken into consideration in writing history. Significantly, this is no invitation to misrepresent these forms as historical "fact"; their status as unconfirmed information must be made clear, just as the historical account as a whole needs to reveal its own constructedness. Science as the Western paradigm of knowledge *par excellence* is a further focus of attention in works of magic realist fiction. Interestingly, it appears to be more prominent in texts from a Western context than for example in Latin American works; however, so far this is only an impression and would need to be examined in more detail. Scientific thought and discourse are introduced into magic realist fiction in basically two

ways: once in the form of characters who rely on a rational-scientific world view, and then in the form of what might be called “mock-scientific discourse,” where the narrator so exaggeratedly and absurdly conforms to scientific criteria that science’s claim to superiority is completely undermined. Representatives of science are for example the narrator’s parents in *Wild Nights*, who are presented as fundamentally ignorant, and the skeptic Jack Walser in *Nights at the Circus*, who must learn that there is more to the world than “checkable fact” (NC 47). The importance of scientific discourse is relativized also in *The Late Mr. Shakespeare*, where the narrator digresses to supplement his narrative with some scientific facts; these facts, however, though perhaps interesting, appear less to the point than the anecdotes and stories the narrator has been telling (cf. LS95, 101, or the footnote on 108). This does not mean that the novel characterizes science as completely negligible; significantly, Shakespeare finds his gift in “the cauldron of inspiration *and* science” (LS 102; my emphasis). Winterson’s *Gut Symmetries* offers an interesting variant on the topic, rejecting the linear and positivist world view of classical mechanics in favor of the fluid, interconnected world of the “new physics” (GS 207), which in turn is likened to arcane systems of knowledge like alchemy, the Kabbalah, or the Renaissance world view. The second tactic, the use of mock-scientific discourse, occurs for example in *Shame*, where the narrator unconvincingly invokes “medical evidence” (S 17) and uses absurdly precise numbers to parody the Western obsession with proof and precision (cf. S, e.g. pp. 66, 91 and 135; on this point, cf. also Durix 1998:134). In *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers and Lizzie similarly mock the scientific paradigm when they refer Walser to ultimately completely useless medical publications or eye-witnesses (cf. NC 46, 60 and 78). In *Falstaff*, the narrator adapts this strategy to the “science” of history, trying to render his narrative more credible by quoting from accredited sources or historical documents (cf. F 154 and 250). Such parodies of scientific strategies reveal the extent to which, in a Western context, they are demanded and uncritically accepted as seals of authorization.

Thus, without rejecting the accepted Western paradigms of science and history wholesale, magic realist fiction does suggest that, in their focus on facts, logical thought and empirical proof, these indices are by themselves insufficient to capture the human experience and therefore

need to be supplemented by other modes of knowledge production. Narratives of all sorts are shown to function equally as sources of knowledge in the endeavor to make sense of the world and one's place in it, a fact which is exemplified by many magic realist texts' emphasis on stories and storytelling, as well as less ritualized forms of communal talk such as gossip and rumor; formulations like "people said," "according to some," "it was rumored," and so on, strikingly abound in magic realist fiction, both in texts from 'postcolonial' and other backgrounds. Once again, this focus is not to be mistaken for an unconditional redemption of marginalized modes of thought. Acting the neutral observer, magic realist fiction shows how *all* paradigms of knowledge production, rational-scientific or otherwise, can be helpful as well as harmful. The important point seems to be that the provisionality and constructedness of all knowledge is kept in mind, for as soon as knowledge turns into absolute and unassailable belief, it becomes a limiting factor. Significantly, Walser's stubborn subscription to the rational-scientific paradigm results in a narrow-minded "blindness" which is not much different from the "magic" conviction of the English officials in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* that immigrants are animal mutants; similarly, it is not science, but religion which confines Saleem's grandmother within "an invisible fortress of her own making, an ironclad citadel of traditions and certainties" (MC 40).

Fantastic reality

There remains one last technique which has frequently been noted as typical of magic realist fiction and which again works to redeem fiction as an important mode of knowledge production while simultaneously deconstructing all knowledge as fiction. It could perhaps best be characterized as an inversion of the first technique described above: entertaining a completely matter-of-fact attitude towards fantastically implausible or impossible incidents on the one hand, magic realism on the other presents perfectly "ordinary" reality in such a way that it appears incredible, marvelous, fantastic (cf. Chanady 1986:53ff and Bényei 1997:152f.). The most notorious example of this technique is probably the description of ice and other natural and technological "miracles" in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (cf. *Solitude* e.g. 18f.). Interestingly, the technique appears

quite often in connection with situations of suffering and/or violence; for example, the Pakistani Civil War in *Midnight's Children*, the Napoleonic Wars in *The Passion*, and the outbreak of the plague in *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* are all presented as completely unthinkable. The tension between manner and matter of presentation results from the fact that the reader knows quite well – or at least suspects – that these apparently so incredible elements or events actually correspond to (historical) events in the extratextual world, or easily could. As in the above case, the incongruity provokes hesitation, unsettling the usual perception of the world as “normal,” unspectacular, and quotidian and heading the (implied) reader towards two diametrically opposed – but paradoxically complementary – interpretations of Hamlet’s “There are more things in heaven and earth . . .”: on the one hand, the technique communicates a sense of wonder at a world marvelous beyond one’s keenest dreams, while on the other, it produces a sense of moral horror over a world whose all too frequently human-made cruelty surpasses even one’s worst nightmares.

In inverting its strategy of making fictions “real” and by contrast treating reality as though it were a fiction, magic realism makes, I think, several points. Most important for the reading of the mode proposed in this essay is perhaps the way in which it underlines once again to what extent the perception of “reality” actually depends on pre-existing categories. As in its critique of positivist history, which emphasizes the way in which historical “facts” have always already been subjected to processes of meaning-making, magic realist fiction here similarly highlights that reality is not simply a “given” over which there will exist a natural and universal consensus, but that what individuals and groups will think of as “reality” depends to a not inconsiderable extent on social and cultural factors, causing expectations and assumptions about the world to differ with time and place. To invert strategically the (Western) categories of reality and fiction is to criticize the unwarranted assurance and ease with which the rational-empirical world view claims to be able to distinguish between the two; one might say that magic realist fiction here argues that to be certain about what is real and what is not is harder than it looks, and, furthermore, that a little uncertainty is perhaps not altogether undesirable.

Another effect of applying a “fantastic rhetoric” to elements from the

extratextual world is to suggest that, in this day and age, life has in fact become “stranger than fiction.” One might here make out an interesting parallel between magic realist fiction and the so-called non-fiction novel or the New Journalism, a form which narrates factual events in such a way that they frequently appear absurd or fantastic, and whose rise during the 1960s and 70s has been regarded as a response to a swiftly changing and increasingly incomprehensible world. The idea that reality is far more incredible than anything the writerly imagination could dream up has also been seen as a reaction to the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust; David Danow for example has pointed to the “fantastic reality” portrayed in so-called Holocaust literature (cf. Danow 1995, esp. chapter 4). In presenting actual events as less believable than the most blatant infractions of natural law, magic realism seems to agree with these kinds of literature that the only way to capture the experience of living in the contemporary world is to turn reality into an out-and-out fiction. Moraes Zagoiby explains these poetics in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*: “[...] *unnaturalism*, the only real ism of these back-to-front and jabberwocky days” (*MLS* 5; emphasis in the original). Fiction is thus once more revalued as an indispensable instrument in trying to understand and represent reality.

III. Conclusion

As the above analysis has shown, magic realism employs a wide variety of strategies which can each be seen to contribute a central project, namely to ask about the possibilities of, as well as the limitations to, the human endeavor to know the world. Paradoxically, the mode reaches the same conclusion on both counts – its answer is: fiction. Magic realism clearly shows fictions to be capable of providing knowledge about the world, potentially allowing insights which other, rational-scientific paradigms cannot offer. At the same time, it emphasizes that all knowledge is constructed and provisional, which means that in the end, human insight remains limited to fiction.

In arguing (albeit in fictional terms) that modes of thought which do not conform to the rational-scientific world view and have consequently been rejected as “fictions” are fundamental human strategies of meaning-

making which cannot be ignored if one wants to understand why human beings think and act as they do, magic realism can be seen to intersect with a number of theoretical disciplines. Narratologists, psychologists and sociologists have amply demonstrated the ubiquity of narrative as a means of creating, storing, and communicating knowledge, both on an individual and a collective level. (Socio-)Linguists and philosophers of language have illustrated how metaphors and concepts serve to structure human perception of the world. Thinkers from all of the aforementioned fields (plus a few others) have examined the way in which cultural constructs and beliefs, not infrequently losing their status as fictions and mutating into accepted “fact,” are firm cornerstones of any world view. And finally, anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists have shown how individuals of all cultures to a certain extent rely on magical patterns of thought to confer meaning upon their world and their existence. Incidentally, it is not at all surprising that narrative and magical thought should appear side by side on this list of meaning-making strategies; as Jorge Luis Borges has pointed out, both share a number of features essential to endowing the world and the individual with a high degree of significance. Both narrative and magical thought presuppose a world ruled by causality – not physics’ intricate web of causes and effects, which obscures rather than reveals the principle of causality, but a “frenzied, clear-cut causality” (Borges 2000:80) that allows a reassuringly definite link to be established between cause and effect. Both in narrative and superstitious belief, events are foreshadowed by signs and symptoms; in narrative as well as in magical thought, teleology reigns supreme, contingency being replaced by destiny. In both modes of thought, the world revolves around the protagonist, controlled by a secret force whose only interest consists in furthering or foiling the individual’s plans. Their ability to assuage the human desire to live in a meaningful world explains why both narrative and magical thought should be so prevalent among human beings that they well might, as both magic realist fiction and theoretical approaches suggest, be regarded as anthropological constants.

But even while it acknowledges “fictions” to be essential, magic realism at the same time vigorously insists on their constructed nature, as indeed it insists that all world views are essentially constructions. In combining the traditionally incombable and simultaneously drawing atten-

tion to this fact, magic realism produces a certain amount of hesitation; its self-conscious transgression of literary, linguistic and cultural conventions renders these conventions visible, thereby offering them up for discussion and review. To unsettle received notions about literary genres, the use of language, or the objectivity of science and history, about who can be regarded as reliable and what can assuredly be accepted as “real,” all the while undermining the very narrative this is undertaken by, is to deconstruct the rational-scientific world view without – and this is crucial – setting up any other world view in its place. In pursuing these aims, magic realism is certainly engaged in a postcolonial project. At the same time, its refusal to privilege any one world view and instead emphasize the provisional nature of all knowledge also links magic realism to a vast amount of postmodern theory as well as fiction, which pursue a similar line of argument in trying to open up established hierarchies to allow the production of new knowledge.

Originating in the so-called cultural “center,” postmodernism finds itself confronted with the paradoxical task of undermining its own source; not actually marginalized in the same way as are postcolonial discourses, postmodernism has been accused of wrongfully and artificially adopting an ex-centric position in order to speak against the same “central” notions it was born from (cf. above, fn. 5; cf. also D’haen 1995:195). Yet, handicap that it may be, it has been argued that postmodernism’s position of privilege does not automatically preclude it from offering critique. Conceding that postmodernist art and theory are inextricably implicated in that which they challenge, Linda Hutcheon maintains that it is nevertheless possible to question the dominant paradigm from within (cf. Hutcheon 1996:xiii). To a certain extent, postmodernism’s predicament resembles that faced by works of magic realist fiction produced in the so-called “privileged centers of literature,” whose power to criticize has also been disputed. While it would be tempting to use the overlap between magic realism and postmodernist theory and fiction demonstrated above and simply solve the debate about Western appropriations of the mode by declaring, as some critics have done (cf. esp. Faris 1995 and D’haen 1995), that magic realism is not actually a *postcolonial*, but rather a *postmodern* mode, I am a little wary of too quickly obscuring the fact that magic realism does evince significant affinities to postcolonial litera-

tures, something which certainly cannot be said for all strains of postmodernist fiction (especially the more radically experimental ones). Moreover, switching labels to account for Western instances of magic realism to me suggests that postcolonial discourse is in fact available only to those who find themselves in a condition of postcoloniality, which I find an overly simple answer to the question of who can speak as “Other.” As the analysis has shown, magic realism can and should be regarded as a postcolonial mode insofar as it pursues an essentially postcolonial project. But perhaps the notion of the postmodern paradox can nevertheless be of some use for my discussion, for it reminds one that – as this essay has attempted to show for the case of magic realism in British fiction – interrogations may also be conducted from within.

Postscript: The argument having duly been presented, there is one last point that perhaps needs to be raised: in moving magic realism within reach of the so-called cultural “center,” this essay may of course carry the mark of its own origin – which is undeniably and implicatingly central.

List of abbreviations:

<i>F</i>	Robert Nye, <i>Falstaff</i>
<i>GS</i>	Jeanette Winterson, <i>Gut Symmetries</i>
<i>LS</i>	Robert Nye, <i>The Late Mr. Shakespeare</i>
<i>MC</i>	Salman Rushdie, <i>Midnight’s Children</i>
<i>MLS</i>	Salman Rushdie, <i>The Moor’s Last Sigh</i>
<i>NC</i>	Angela Carter, <i>Nights at the Circus</i>
<i>P</i>	Jeanette Winterson, <i>The Passion</i>
<i>S</i>	Salman Rushdie, <i>Shame</i>
<i>Solitude</i>	Gabriel García Márquez, <i>One Hundred Years of Solitude</i>
<i>WN</i>	Emma Tennant, <i>Wild Nights</i>

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