

In Reality

Michael Wood
Princeton University

For the last twenty years or so magical realism—the term and the practice—has been the victim of its own success. Already in 1984 Julian Barnes mockingly called for a reduction in its output: “A quota system is to be introduced on fiction set in South America. The intention is to curb the spread of package-tour baroque and heavy irony. Ah, the propinquity of cheap life and expensive principles . . . ah, the fredonna tree whose roots grow at the tips of its branches and whose fibres assist the hunchback to impregnate by telepathy the haughty wife of the hacienda owner; ah, the opera house now overgrown by jungle” (*Flaubert’s Parrot*). We may catch the satirical glance at José Donoso’s *Obscene Bird of Night* and Marco Sousa’s *Emperor of Brazil*, but it won’t matter if we don’t, since the general point is clear. If he had been writing later Barnes could have extended his edict to fiction set in India and West Africa and even Britain. In 2000, in an article in the *New York Times*, Pankaj Mishra was celebrating the demise of magical realism in Indian fiction, a responsible return from the dreams of Salman Rushdie and his followers to the hard details of the insufficiently changed world, but he was probably celebrating too soon.

If only it were all so easy; if sturdy old-fashioned realism were always an option, and magic were nothing but an evasion. Certainly we have seen plenty of package-tour baroque in fiction, but not more than we

have seen of package-tour naturalism or package-tour portraits of collapsing middle-class selves and marriages. And the largest claim of the writers we associate with magical realism—Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez, Salman Rushdie, many others—is that ordinary realism cannot represent certain realities. There are difficulties with this idea—a tendency to mythologize particular histories, particular geographical regions, to align magical realism exclusively with the Third World—but they are not shallow or casual difficulties, and they have nothing to do with evasion. On the contrary, ordinary realism looks like an evasion in these contexts, since it relies on the plausible presentation of a drastically falsified world. The plot, so to speak, would have been written by dictators and submissive history books, and realist writers would be copying a mere mask.

But there are two quite different kinds of magical realism, even if they are often found in the same writer and indeed on the same page, and terminology can help us here. The phrase itself, as is well known, was first used by Franz Roh in 1925 to describe what was happening in European painting after expressionism. Roh was thinking of Balthus and Chagall and generally of work which, in Carpentier's summary, "combines real forms in a way which does not conform to ordinary reality" ("Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso"). The magic was in the style, in other words, and this effect does occur in literary magical realism. The facts are the facts, but they are given to us as if they were fables. "Colonel Aureliano Buendía led thirty-two armed uprisings and lost them all. He had seventeen sons by seventeen different women, and they were killed one after another on a single night before the oldest had reached the age of thirty-five. He escaped from fourteen assassination attempts, seventy-three ambushes, and a firing squad" (*Cien Años de Soledad*).

But what kind of facts are these? Aren't they themselves fabulous? When Angel Flores and others accommodated the idea of magical realism to narrative fiction, Roh's chief idea was turned upside down. The magic was in the material, and the realism was in the style. Franz Kafka became the ideal ancestor, and fantasy after fantasy was represented by the deadeast of deadpans, as if the author were reciting a telephone book or reading out the company accounts. There are instances of this voice in Günter Grass, but its undisputed master remains García Márquez.

We have already hit an interesting snag, though, and one that is central to this weirdly complicated literary debate. Who decides when fantasy is fantasy, and how can realism be just a style? Realism in literature rests on assumptions about the world and on a long tradition of successful novels based on those assumptions. The steady voice of realism reflects the steadiness of the world it recounts, and indeed in many European novels this irremediable steadiness is the ultimate problem, the reason our heroines have to die by arsenic or by throwing themselves on a railroad track. The model is sober reporting of the way things are, but in this first kind of magic realism the reporters are sober while reality is drunk. A familiar example from *Cien Años de Soledad*:

The boy who had helped at Mass took him a cup of thick and steaming chocolate which he drank without pausing. Then he wiped his lips with a handkerchief he took from his sleeve, stretched out his arms and closed his eyes. Then Father Nicanor rose twelve centimeters from the ground. It was a convincing strategy. For several days he went around to different houses, repeating the proof of levitation through stimulation by chocolate . . .

The only hint of open irony comes a little earlier, when the narrator tells us that Father Nicanor had recourse to this minor miracle only because no one would give him any money for the building of his new church otherwise: “se dejó confundir por la desesperación,” he got confused by his desperation. Even here, though, we are not quite in the realm of the fantastic. We are in the realm of legend and hyperbole, the realm not of fact but of reported or embroidered fact, the realm of what the Argentinian novelist and critic Ricardo Piglia calls “already narrated reality.” One of the deepest insights of magical realism is that much of the world comes to us in this way, and that a fidelity to the stories people tell, however far-fetched they may be, is itself a form of realism. The older realism, in this interpretation, is already enacting a form of censorship, preferring the way it claims things are to the way they are experienced or recast in the memory and in narrative.

In the essay I quoted from earlier, Carpentier equates the marvelous with the extraordinary and makes clear that these are always relative terms,

implying an abandoned or violated norm. What the norm is will depend on who we are, and of course we have to say the same about the fantastic and all related words. What magical realists describe in such sober language doesn't have to be legend or hyperbole; it could be history itself if it seems strange enough. And when writers like Carpentier and García Márquez evoke the marvels of Latin America they make no distinction between an improbable history and an outlandish nature. García Márquez, in *La Soledad de America Latina*, his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, lists the wonders naïve early travellers saw (spoon-billed birds, an animal that looked like a cross between a mule and a camel) alongside wars and dictators and the nearly 120,000 people who have disappeared in acts of governmental repression. These things all form part of an uncommon reality, a "realidad descomunal" which belongs to Latin America alone, "that immense country of hallucinating men and historic women." This is not a "paper reality," he says, but one "which lives with us and determines each instant of our uncountable daily death." There is much mythmaking here, of course, but García Márquez is clearly conscious of where he is. He is taking Stockholm as the capital of the old world, and explaining to his audience how little they know about the other side of the ocean, and how little magical realists had to invent.

With this we arrive at the other kind of magical realism, usually associated with Carpentier's term "lo real maravilloso," the marvelous real. Here the claim is that reality itself, whether historical or natural, is fantastic, a form of daily miracle. Or more precisely, it would be fantastic if we just read about it or if we came across it somewhere else. Here it just is the real. Calling it marvelous expresses our surprise at its undeniable actual existence. There is no escaping the Eurocentrism of these views, and both García Márquez and Carpentier write from the point of view of someone arriving in a strange place. This seems a little odd, since they were born, respectively, in Colombia and Cuba, but it becomes less odd when we remember the language they write in. Their very words are those of people who once arrived in America; they have only the language of empire, just as Stephen Dedalus, in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, has only the language of the invaders of Ireland.

And there is more than Eurocentrism here. In an earlier essay than the one I've quoted from, "De lo real maravilloso americano," Carpentier

cites Bolivar's battles as well as Mayan ruins, and carefully delineates the different strangenesses, to him, of China, Iran, the Soviet Union, and Prague. He had his first notion of the marvelous real, he says, when he visited what was left of Sans-Souci and the fort of La Ferrière, remnants of the reign of Henri-Christophe in Haiti, the chef who became a king. Carpentier's wonderful novel, *El Reino de este mundo*, is based on this man's rise and fall. The marvelous here is not a version of the exotic, which leaves our old sense of reality intact, indeed confirms it. The marvelous, Carpentier says, depends on faith, and the great error of the Surrealists was to try to create the marvelous without really believing in it. Text after text by André Breton, once you examine them in detail, confirms how right Carpentier was about this, how deeply rational Breton was in his attempts to escape reason. And in Haiti Carpentier had his faith confirmed. Reality was expanded, not abandoned. European architecture mingled with voodoo. "At every step I found the marvelous real. But I also thought that this presence and currency (*vigencia*) of the marvelous real was not the sole privilege of Haiti but the patrimony of all of America"—of all America, we note, not just Latin America. For Carpentier the literary problem is how to represent this profuse and extraordinary reality, and his own solution was a revival of the baroque in language. He underestimated the problem, I think. "As for the marvelous real, we have only to stretch out our hands to reach it." To reach it maybe; but writing it is something else.

Can we put the two kinds of magical realism together? Well, they are already together, as I have suggested, in a great deal of remarkable fiction, but can their claims be reconciled? On the face of it the claim that reality (and therefore realism) is a fraud doesn't sit well with the claim that reality is marvelous and requires for its presentation only a new and appropriate variety of realism. I don't think there is an easy way out of this logical difficulty, but I don't think there should be, since the difficulty is what we need to understand. We could do worse than taking the shifting notion of reality itself as our guide. The word "real," like marvelous, extraordinary, fantastic, and so on, is a relational term, as the philosopher J. L. Austin showed long ago. It doesn't make any sense unless we know which particular form of the unreal is being contrasted to it. But then it has the peculiar property of denying its own relational status. The real

thing or the real story is offered to us as something beyond discussion or interpretation; beyond all relativisms, the real itself. This is a kind of preemptive usage. The word covers its own contingency. That is its job, and remains its job unless we manage to retrain it, or reveal its machinery. This is what I see magical realism as doing, in both its forms.

García Márquez, for instance, consistently uses the phrase “en realidad” to correct an erroneous appearance or narrative, to tell us what’s what. But he frequently does it in situations that are otherwise fantastic, say a world of ghosts. The phrase can only be relational, a claim of greater contextual truth, not a truth beyond context. Or consider this sentence which occurs very early in *Cien Años de Soledad*: “Fascinated by an immense reality which then became more fantastic for him than the vast universe of his imagination, he lost all interest in his alchemy laboratory.” The character in question is the first José Arcadio Buendía, and he has discovered Carpentier’s marvelous real in a text largely governed by the other kind of magical realism. Reality is fascinating to him because it trumps his imagination, not because it rebukes it. He is not a realist, even when he turns to reality. And what this splendid ripple of terms (fascinated, immense, reality, fantastic, vast, imagination, alchemy, laboratory) suggests to me is that the false appearances and true miracles together constitute an invitation to see how unsettled the world is, and how many worlds there are.

In the months since the New York and Washington attacks of September 11, many of us have been tempted by two opposing and, I think, deluded stances. One is that reality is harsh and horrible but it hasn’t changed; terrorism isn’t new. The other is that reality has changed utterly, and that recent events had no history, could occasion only surprise. Each stance misses what the other one catches, and it’s hard to imagine a middle ground. Reality changes and remains the same, that is why we need both forms of magic realism. It’s true that the term has become battered and the practice a little tired, but at its best this mode of fiction exemplifies a restlessness and a curiosity we now need more than ever. Henry James said the real is that which we cannot not know. That’s why we think we know it better than we do.