Reflections on *Magical Realism*: A Return to Legitimacy, the Legitimacy of Return

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Magical Realism breaks into the ranks of Comparative Literature with a volume of 24 essays by specialists in various national traditions: *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Where else can the recent and most notable fiction of North and South America, Eastern and Western Europe, India, Morocco, Japan and Oceania meet under the same roof (or, indeed, between the covers of a single book), if not at the table of that unusual concept, Magical Realism, where they have come, not to negotiate *per se*, but to feast and be dissected? This collection, beside being informative, will be highly provocative to comparatists, Latin Americanists, literary theorists and historians of non-realist narrative, and to all those interested in contemporary fiction and postmodern discourse across national boundaries.

I can begin by citing a few of the authors attending: Borges, Carpentier, García Márquez, Fuentes, Allende, Grass, Kundera, Rushdie, Khatibi, Walcott, Morrison, Thomas, Kroetsch, Richler, Cheever, Barthelme, Carey, Kenzaburo. This (incomplete) list, which includes several recent Nobel laureates (and many who deserved to be), attests to Magical Realism's return to legitimacy as a critical concept. By the same token, the volume's *tour de force* is to take us back at every turn through the foundational tradition of Latin American Magical-Realists to some illustrious precursors: Cervantes, Faulkner, Gogol, Hoffmann, James, Kafka, Schéherezade, Stendhal, and Sterne.

Yet, the collection is surprisingly cogent and its essays meaningfully organized: *Foundations, Theory, History, Community*. After an introduction which places Magical Realism, eccentrically, within an international and postmodern context, the editors offer apt translations of its foundational documents. Available for the first time in English are Franz Roh's original piece on German Post-Expressionist painting (for which he coined the term *Magischer Realismus* in 1925), as well as two seminal essays by Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier on his concept of "the marvellous-real" (1948) which led to a new brand of Magical Realism in Latin America. After Angel Flores's 1955 article (the first by a literary critic), there follows Luis Leal's famous rebuttal (1967), the first to recognize Roh's paternity of the term (while completely altering it to suit Latin American fiction). This pair gave rise to one of the most heated debates in Latin American criticism, a debate which has never truly ended: what is Magical Realism and which authors exemplify it?

In my opinion, Roh's is the best article available to date on the early history of the term. An impressive piece of scholarship in the art-historical tradition, Irene Guenther's essay, "Magical Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimer Republic," documents the sources and trajectory of Roh's concept in European art and literature, the roles played by Hartlaub, Bontempelli, Daisne, and Jünger in the genesis and dissemination of this controversial term, and its probable migration routes into Latin America before and after Nazi persecution of "degenerate art." Supplementing Carpentier, Flores, and Leal, Amyrill Chanady gives a fuller account of the more recent issues surrounding Magical Realism on the Latin American side. Despite the historical interest which may justify their inclusion, Flores and Leal have notorious flaws which have mislead critics. Chanady (like others in the collection) refers to recent scholarship, reconstructing a balanced picture of the Latin American debate. A well selected bibliography confirms the first epithet: informative.

Analysis and interpretation also abound. Scott Simpkins makes a suitable transition from historical foundations to theoretical considerations, as he focuses on language. Under *Theory*, Wendy Faris attempts a working definition of Magical Realism as an inclusive international phenomenon. Theo D'haen, Rawdon Wilson, and Jon Thiem expand that approach to include postmodern metafiction, reader response, and fictional space, until it flexes expansively in a piece by Jeanne Delbriec-Garant which calls for "variations" on Magical Realism — the psychic, the mythic, and the grotesque.

This opens to a section on *History* — no longer the history of the term but, rather, a movement from theory to one of Magic Realism's unifying themes: the re-writing of "official" history through interpretative fiction. John Burt Foster Jr. analyzes this process in D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*; P. Gabrielle Foreman discusses Toni Morrison and Isabel Allende; Richard Todd looks at Graham Swift's England, Peter Carey's Australia, and Mordecai Richler's Canada; Patricia Mervale compares *Midnight's Children* and *The Tin Drum*; Steven Walker writes of magical archetypes in *The Satanic Verses*; and David Mikes re-encounters Caribbean history in Derek Walcott and Alejo Carpentier — a return to legitimacy.

The focus on the relationship between history and fiction across national contexts leads fittingly to a final section on *Community*, in which questions of ideology and collective identity are explored, but also, one in which Magical Realism is extended to both farther and closer cultural spaces in order to find (or

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ideology and collective identity are explored, but also, one in which Magical Realism is extended to both farther and closer cultural spaces in order to find (or else to found) a Community in the larger sense: that of shared human experience in a postcolonial world. Stephen Siemon’s essay, "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse," sets the tone in a Canadian context. John Erickson takes it to North African narrative, and Susan Napier to modern Japanese fiction. Suddenly, the generating tensions behind Magical Realism are laid bare: the "clash" of cultural imaginaries between Western and non-Western, modern and traditional, rational and mythical. As in Latin America, this clash can be external (from foreign influence) or internal to the community. Such is the "westernization" of Japan or the intimate struggle between its own modern industrial and ancient traditional cultures. The literature that reflects it — Napier argues — has a fundamental link to other regional expressions of Magical Realism. Referring to another cultural space, Melissa Stewart brings the mode back from its traditional — indigenous, rural, even pastoral — setting to the modern city in a reading of Kennedy, Cheever, and Barthelemy. Meanwhile, in the essay that (only for the time being) closes this community of texts, Lois Parkinson Zamora recuperates the presence of "Magical Romance" in U.S. and Latin American fiction — the legitimacy of return.

This wonderful collection moves in expanding circles, concentric and eccentric, which mimic the developing semantic field of Magical Realism itself. Its essays, like the fiction they explore, exhibit an elusive but perceptible unity within their diversity. This returns me to the other epithet — provocative — as I revisit some of them.

As a Latin Americanist, I will not pretend to be entirely objective, given the collection’s aim of recognizing Magical Realism as an international phenomenon. The mere notion will strike a xenophobic chord in some: if sharing it with the Canadians were not enough, our cherished Magical Realism, benchmark of our alterity, is now all over the world of modern fiction. True, the term was not ours to begin with and must be legitimately returned, but, still, xenophobia is no reasonable matter. On the other hand, this book brings new life to the debate at a time when many turn away from it in Latin America after decades of unresolved polemics. Carlos Rincón has observed recently that while the "assimilation" of Magical Realism into the canon of metropolitan postmodernism can be read as a "hegemonic reduction of the different to the same, the force of (its) alterity is constitutive of the 'postmodern condition' itself, which is precisely the center’s loss of its status as such" (224). A similar optic is found throughout this volume as a basis for eccentric unity. As Theo D’haen points out, the traits associated with postmodern fiction are often the same as those recently ascribed to the Magical-Realist mode. Yet, postmodernism is not always an accepted foreign import in Latin America. Argentine novelist Ricardo Piglia puts it eloquently: "Postmodernism means the poor are wrong." Many would agree with Fredric Jameson, that Magical Realism is actually an "alternative to the narrative logic of the contemporary postmodern" (302). But still, is it a uniquely Latin American alternative? Chanady’s essay treats the "territorialization" of Magical Realism in a most pertinent fashion: as a form of cultural self-affirmation, identity construction, and resistance to metropolitan paradigms — a model that goes back to Carpentier.

For the record, I must point out that my compatriot, Alejo Carpentier, has been commonly misunderstood — a perspective consonant with Chanady’s argument. Carpentier never claimed that "marvellous reality" was an exclusively Latin American patrimony. His famous Prologue (included in this collection) was actually a response to another famous preface-manifesto: that of Rubén Darío’s Prosas proflanas (1896). The Nicaraguan modernista, inspired by French Parismans Théophile Gautier and Leconte de Lisle, claimed that despite his Amerindian blood he had the hands of a marquis, and that thereby his poetry sang precious things from distant lands, Japanese princesses, and visions of Versailles, because he "detested" the time and place in which he was born. Carpentier’s reaction to neo-Romantic exoticism was to call upon his peers to abandon all allegiance to European schools and realize that they need not look beyond their own authentic reality to find the marvellous which, lost to Western rationalism, was being artificially invoked, in disbelief, by the cheap "magicians" of surrealism and the avant-garde. By expressing our own marvels — he claimed — we will have "something new to offer universal literature." Carpentier would have been gratified to read this new volume and find out that artists around the world would heed his advice with respect to their own autochthonous traditions, thereby decentering the codes of fiction and of Magical Realism itself.

As Stephen Siemon and others point out, Magical Realism finds ideological underpinnings as postcolonial discourse, as does most of its Latin American vein. Curiously, Santiago Colás, in a recent PMLA article, finds quite the opposite. Borrowing from Žižek, he puts Latin American Magical-Realists on the couch, to uncover their secret desire for perpetuating the gulf of "cultural inequality," whereby an intellectual elite acting as international intermediaries "peddled a [cultural] commodity with an ostensibly stronger claim to authenticity: the native" (391). Clearly, the old Latin American habit of delegitimizing our own traditions (in favor of postmodern NAFTA-esque neoliberalism in this instance) is still as alive and well today as it was in Darío’s time — and so is the ingrained colonized mentality it betrays. But it is after watching it be celebrated in America’s foremost organ of literary hegemony, that I can hardly hide my enthusiasm for a new book which recognizes Latin American authors as worthy ushers of today’s most compelling world fiction — a return to legitimacy.

On an aesthetic front, this collection is no less provocative. You will not find here a "unified theory" of Magical Realism, not only because these essays disagree on many points, but because the editors have chosen to open up the
concept to its broadest associations and connotations. This is evident from their initial side-by-side inclusion of Roh and Carpenter, who have led generations of Latin Americanists along opposing paths. The editors know that "Roh’s emphasis is on aesthetic expression, Carpenter’s on cultural and geographical identity” — there is absolutely no relation, except that they "share the conviction that magical realism defines a revisionary position with respect to the generic practices of their time and media; each engages the concept to discuss what he considers an antidote to existing and exhausted forms of expression" (7). Such a general (and generous) reconciliation can only be termed Solomonic. The same is true about juxtaposing Flores and Leal, who epitomize the formal versus the thematic approach, another secular schism in magical-realist scholarship.

I will not claim impartiality here either. Most Latin Americanists have long abandoned Roh as well as Flores and Leal, although the schism between formal and thematic approaches has somehow remained. Since the isolation of "the fantastic" by Todorov, Vax, Callois, Schneider, et al., the Latin American trend has been to reduce the scope of magical realism to a handful of authors and texts. While far from a consensus, most critics now lean toward an ethnological version of magical realism, with Alejo Carpenter, Miguel Angel Asturias, Juan Rufio, and Gabriel Garcia Márquez being the authors most often cited. Here, magical realism issues from an alternate world view one might call "primitive" — whether it is of voodoo practitioners, Guatemalan Indians, or villagers from the Mexican and Columbian hinterlands. The emphasis is anthropological and regional, but what lies behind this is the suggestion of a continental Latin American identity. Carpenter’s "themes” of the "marvellous-real” seems to have gained the upper hand — or has it?

My own thinking suggests that magical realism is as much formal as thematic. Carpenter, however, took pains to avoid any suggestion of an "ism,” of a formal or aesthetic practice (what he so harshly criticized surrealism for). He proposed instead the rather awkward term "Latin American marvellous-real” — where the operant word is "real" (no "ism"). The reason for this avoidance? Carpenter knew his proposition — that the "marvellous” resided in Latin American reality and not in the art of storytelling — was at bottom a foundational literary myth, designed to legitimize a Latin American aesthetics, lending authority to the practice later known as "magical realism.” The founder himself could not indulge in aesthetic stylization, or his "marvellous-real” would seem less "real.” Yet, later authors, beginning with Asturias, became ever more prone to literary artifice, as belief in the myth eroded. At the end, what prevails is the self-conscious formalism of parody in Cien años de soledad (1967), a novel which recalls Don Quixote’s undoing of another myth, the chivalric. Thus, a second opportunity for magical realism in Latin American fiction has seemed at least precarious since 1967: excepting Siete lunas y siete serpientes (1970) by the Ecuadorian Demetrio Aguilera-Malta, most are watered-down versions, like Isabel Allende’s La casa de los espíritus (1982), Vargas Llosa’s El hablador (1987), and esquivel’s Como agua para chocolate (1990). Whether an international movement can revitalize the Latin American tradition remains to be seen.

At bottom, the real-marvellous, turned magical realism, was a type of narrative primitivism. After all, the founding fathers themselves, Carpenter and Asturias, underwent their sentimental education in 1920s Paris, then the artistic center of an international cult of the primitive. Their link to the term "magical realism” does not lead at all to the obscure German art critic Franz Roh, but to the then notorious Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli, who conceived his own Realismo Magico in 1926, as a literary term. Bontempelli’s journal, Novecento, was published in French as well as Italian and distributed in Paris. His close friend, Venezuelan writer and diplomat Arturo Uslar-Pietri (the first to apply the term Magical Realism to Latin American narrative in 1948), befriended both Carpenter and Asturias in Paris, where they launched their own short-lived literary journals. When Carpenter moved to Venezuela in 1943, he regained contact with Uslar. Bontempelli’s dictum — "Adamo non ha un passato, non possiamo tonare Adami. Siamo dei primitivi con un passato” (188) — was not only a reaction to Italian futurism, but to the "false” primitivism-without-a-past proposed by Dada and the surrealists. Carpenter’s later reaction to surrealism was stated in strikingly similar terms.

The notion of evoking "primitives with a past” was extremely pertinent to Latin Americans. While post-World War I Europe was anxious to erase its past and begin anew, Latin America, disenchanted with the perceived "decline” of Western civilization and spurred by the Mexican Revolution, wanted to reclaim its own indigenous past (long repressed as "barbarism”) and assert its identity as difference, as non-Western. When Carpenter and Asturias returned home in the 1930s as prodigal sons, Latin America had undergone a profound cultural transformation marked by the decline of positivism and evolutionism and the rise of humanistic anthropology. Theirs was a return to legitimacy, away from the suspect urban primitivism of Paris, and a legitimacy of return, into the authentic Afro-Indian primitive of home. While Carpenter proposed the (re)discovery of the Latin American marvellous-real, Asturias proclaimed himself "El Gran Lengua” (The Great Speaker) of his Mayan forefathers. Their claim was initially accepted without challenge by critics and readers appointed in the faith on the inexhaustible mythical register of Latin America. It was after Juan Rufio’s frank artistry in Pedro Páramo (1955), the direct antecedent of García Márquez’ primitivist metafictions, that all representation of primitive otherness began to be revealed as pastiche. Thus, while magical-realist themes remain rooted in the "primitive,” its form is simply "primitivist.” Its original contribution to "universal literature” — the derivation of a coherent set of narrative techniques and semiotic
bimbinism which has little objective validity, outside the sheer performance of the Magical-Realist text.

To some extent, international critics are condemned to repeat the Latin American polemics and encounter the same theoretical quagmires, but so much is new in the way of critical language and approaches, as well as in areas to which to apply them, that this new debate already proves as fruitful and productive as the earlier ones. This is evident in the theoretical essays by Faris and Wilson. Wendy Faris proposes a list of primary and secondary traits for international Magical Realism. Certainly, anyone would be tempted to exchange, add, and drop traits. Moreover, there have been lists before. What we lack is the principles unifying formal and thematic traits into a system, but that presupposes exclusion: limiting Magical Realism's field of application. Still, Faris' catalogue is the most perceptive and discriminating to date, and her distinction between primary and secondary traits offers a distinct conceptual gain. Most importantly, transnational descriptions of Magical Realism help affirm and delineate the Latin American variety, whose elusive definition remains crucial, in turn, for the international debate.

Rawdon Wilson takes a different approach, tackling another secular schism in Magical-Realist thinking, that between the main Latin American models: Borges or García Márquez. It is interesting to note that Borges was influenced in his youth by the Blau Reiter, and that critics who still insist on Franz Roh's version (e.g., Seymour Menton) consider Borges a Magical-Realist. On the other hand, García Márquez, although influenced by Borges's revival of Cervantes and Scheherazade (see Borges, "Magias parciales del Quijote"), is profoundly different from the Argentinean. His Nobel speech of 1982 confirms his devotion to Carpenter. Rawdon Wilson's theoretical parable, involving two brothers with distinct methods for reinventing the world, resolves the matter in favour of the Colombian. Wilson distinguishes between mimetic space in realist texts and axiomatic space in Borges' fictions, establishing García Márquez's Magical Realism as a distinct hybrid. This distinction is necessary, but perhaps not sufficient. Yet, this is what is remarkable about Magical Realism, that even in failing to define it fully, Wilson gives us a brilliant analysis of the alchemy of perceptual and conceptual space within the experience of reading.

In order to assert Magical Realism as a broad international movement, the volume's strategy is to define it through expansive associations at the fringe, to explore its limits, at the expense of a core. While binary oppositions are always emphasized, their number and diversity increases. Perhaps this reflects the vacuous center of postmodern discourse; or perhaps Magical Realism is like Ibsen's onion, all layers and no pit. The editors say these essays "circulate eccentrically." Even the works they designate as Magical-Realist belong to the orbit of Wittgenstein's "family resemblances." Some have similar eyes; a few noses look alike; in others, it is a certain gait, and so forth. If you look deeply,
all humanity is related. So rather than tear the concept to pieces, it seems reasonable (or Sorolomic) that we should all share it.

As always, there will be those who will not believe in Magical Realism as a plausible critical concept nor as a coherent aesthetic phenomenon. While that remains a legitimate option, they may still be reminded of Cervantes’s centuries-old lesson in El coloquio de los perros: amid a dispute on whether dogs can speak, the author tells us a story rich in human themes; the character who reads another’s implausible text admits his enjoyment and his doubts: "... sin ponerme en disputas con vuestra merced si hablaron los perros o no ... Yo alcanzo el artificio del coloquio y la invencion, y basta." The caveat for skeptics: Magical Realism is not a quest for a literary label, but a plunge into the innermost workings of contemporary fiction.

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Works Cited
