
Magical Realism: The “Problem of Definition”

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Abstract: Whilst the theoretical study of magical realist literature is broad and wide-ranging, there is a remarkable lack of consensus among critics on how the mode should be defined, how its techniques should be described, and how it corresponds with both the contexts of its production and its contemporary neighboring genres. This essay maps some of the dominant avenues that have been explored in the field, illuminating where the disagreements lie and highlighting the sheer profusion of critical approaches that have been competing for attention since magical realism first began to receive academic attention with the publication of Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967, which have inevitably contributed to the confusion about how works of magical realism should be identified and interpreted. Ultimately, it is my contention that the study of magical realism is limited by the critical convention that considers the mode to have begun in Latin America in the 1950s, and often treats García Márquez as its originator: texts emerging from outside of this context are excluded from critical discussion, even where they comply with all formal definitions of the mode. My essay interrogates this convention, which I view as producing an untenable internal contradiction that I identify as a key contributing factor in the so-called “problem of definition” with which the field has long been plagued, and proposes that historical or geographical particulars cannot feature in a working definition of magical realism.

Keywords: magical realism, definition, Europe, history, postmodernism, Todorov, ontology, antinomy

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It is conventional to begin a discussion on magical realism by addressing the “problem of definition” which plagues the field. I would argue that magical realism is instantly recognizable to anyone who encounters it, even (perhaps especially) if they are not equipped with the terminology to identify it as such, and yet the praxis proves curiously resistant to academic capture. Bland descriptions like “combines the magical with the real” just as readily conjure science fiction,

fantasy, and fantastic fiction; the difference lies in the handling of the two ontologies, not in their presence, and so the problem of disentangling magical realism from its neighboring literatures has consumed much critical effort. To compound this difficulty, there is even academic disagreement on what constitutes the opposing ontologies of "magic" and "real." Attempts to resolve the root problem have tended to only sprout further ones, as critics respond to the "problem" of magical realism either by producing increasingly byzantine critical models which invariably contribute to rather than clarify the confusion, or by attempting to absorb magical realism into other critical canons, such as postcolonialism and postmodernism. Such is the confusion that Roberto González Echevarría has declared that "magical realism lies in a theoretical vacuum" (108). In this article I will visit some influential examples of this critical debate in order not only to state my own position on its various features, but to argue for dispensing with some of the proposed particulars required for a working definition of magical realism.

This is not to say that there is no consensus at all: there is, up to a point, consensus both on what magical realism does and how it does it. Jenni Adams's stated working definition of magical realism goes only to the point of unanimity:

The following definition suggests two main properties of magical realism: first, their encompassing of two contradictory ontological codes, broadly recognisable as "realist" and "magical/supernatural"; and secondly their attitude of acceptance towards magical or supernatural events. In advancing this ostensibly minimal definition, I aim to avoid overly schematic formulations which might both exclude a number of canonical magical-realist texts and limit the concept's productive application to novels not conventionally or obviously categorisable as such. (4–5)

Adams's definition is telling in its sparsity: reluctance to engage with the "problem of definition" beyond the point of consensus is understandable given the scope of the debate, and also the fact that, as she correctly identifies, by engaging in "overly schematic formulations" one runs the risk of being hampered by labyrinthine justifications for introducing texts into the magical-realist canon, a risk that she is wise to avoid given that her study focuses on European holocaust literature. This definition more or less encompasses the sum total of critical agreement: the one thing upon which everyone agrees is that magical-realist texts create a "blend" or co-mingling of realist and non-realist events, juxtaposing the two in a way which invariably takes the form of a realist narrative reporting on supernatural or magical events as though they presented no challenge to the assumptions of realism, without active expository integration into the perspective adopted by the text (as happens in science fiction or much of fantasy fiction). More pithily put, "the reporters are sober while reality is drunk" (Wood 10–11).

Even the agreed-upon technique of reframing the magical as real runs into problems when critics introduce doubt as to the demarcation between "magical" and "real." The singular effect of magical-realist fiction is achieved by the use of the techniques of "banalization" (alternatively termed by Tamás Bényei "naturalisation"), the mode's calling-card technique of relating magical events in a banal tone, heavily associated with García Márquez's work; and what both Hegerfeldt

and Bényei call “supernaturalization”—but which I would term “defamiliarization”—in which the text relates events that do not fall outside the boundaries of empirical realism, but presents them as if they do. These techniques work in concert in what Brian McHale calls a “rhetoric of contrastive banality” (76), and yet even on this absolutely rudimentary point about magical realism, consensus is endangered by critics who object that, as Jean-Pierre Durix writes, “in civilisations where the religious domain can include elements belonging to various forms of traditional faiths, the dividing line between reality and the supernatural is far from clear” (86). This argument relates to Alejo Carpentier’s idea of *lo real maravilloso*, of the concept of “reality” (and therefore of its negative), differing from one cultural context to another; however, magical realism operates via a dialogue between ontological codes, and for this dialogue to proceed depends upon a point of referential stability, a fixed perspective existing outside of the text, and I am in agreement with Anne Hegerfeldt that “magical-realist fiction itself suggests [traditional Western realism] as a convenient basis of comparison” (52). Although cultural relativity is a legitimate concern in theory, in reality it turns out to be a straw man, as magical-realist fiction in all of its origins adopts the same broad codes as Western realism, in the sense that it anticipates the readers’ reaction to its “magical” events and deliberately models the reverse; the “rhetoric of contrastive banality” depends on subversion, which requires that there be an expectation to subvert. Following the argument for culturally-contingent ontological codes to its logical conclusion leads to a position that magical-realist technique is engaged by complete serendipity, by writers for whom the ontological codes being manipulated experience no antinomy. To put it bluntly, by the 20th century when magical realism was burgeoning in the Third World, if any writers remained who truly subscribed to the religious or mythological beliefs which supposedly imperil our ability to interpret texts based on ontological assumptions, then they were not writing magical-realist fiction, because its apparatus was beyond their operational capabilities.

Beyond this point of consensus, such as it is, there have been many attempts to condense magical realism’s specific characteristics. The best-known attempt so far at such a distillation has been Wendy B. Faris’s model composed on five criteria, the achievement of which she considers designate a text as a work of magical realism:

First, the text contains an “irreducible element” of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space, and identity. (*Ordinary* 7)

These five elements are closely related, and in practice share considerable overlap, but provide a useful itemization of stylistic elements. The first two items on Faris’s list are fundamental, because they refer to the established simultaneous presence of the two ontological codes: the magic element must be “irreducible” because even the slightest possibility of interpreting a text’s “magical” elements as a fantasy, vision, or hallucination on the part of the protagonist automatically excludes it as magical-realist, and similarly, if the magical code of the text is not

contradicted by a realist one then we are reading a work of marvelous or fantasy fiction. The fourth quality relates to the text's handling of the two codes it establishes, also essential because texts which enact resistance to their "merging" generally belong to the mode of the fantastic; the fifth could be said to be a summary effect of the first, second, and fourth criteria, but is certainly a valid common denominator.

Identifying these sorts of denominators can be useful, and there is no doubt that discussion of them forms a worthwhile and instructive contribution to magical-realist criticism. However, part of the "problem of definition" arises when critics attempt to assimilate them into an actual working definition of magical realism itself, which frequently leads to so-called "models" so unwieldy that they cannot possibly be usefully applied. Anne Hegerfeldt's five-point model, for instance, encompasses the point of consensus ("the fusion of realistic and fantastic elements"; "matter of factness"; and "fantastic reality," by which she refers to the technique of defamiliarisation or "supernaturalisation") but also carries the "literalisation of metaphor" and "the production of knowledge," textual accomplishments which occur deep in the undercarriage of the magical-realist text, where they occur at all, and are, I would argue, dispensable to a descriptive model (50–65).¹ For Marisa Bortolussi the essential criteria are "Magical Plot Events: Coherence vs. Discontinuity," "Narrators: Authoritative vs. Ingenuous," and "Implied Authors: Serious vs. Ironic."² Maggie Ann Bowers persists in classifying "magic" realism as different from "magical realism" which is different again from "marvellous realism" on the basis that "in magic realism, 'magic' refers to the mystery of life: in marvellous and magical realism 'magic' refers to anything spiritual or unaccountable in rational science" (20).³ William Spindler devises a typology dividing magical realism into "Metaphysical Magic Realism" (which privileges the technique of defamiliarization), "Ontological Magical Realism" (which privileges banalization—Spindler does not acknowledge that the two techniques are almost invariably used in combination to a greater or lesser degree), and "Anthropological Magic Realism," in which the narrator usually has "two voices" reflecting the two ontological codes, and "the antinomy is resolved by the author adopting or referring to the myths and cultural background [...] of a social or ethnic group" (which does not correspond with any other definition of magical realism that I recognize) (80). Jeanne Delbaere-Garant is similarly impelled to divide magical realism into three sub-categories of "psychic realism," "mythic realism," and "grotesque realism," to be determined by the text's magic originating in the psyche as "a reification of the hero's inner conflicts," or "borrowed from the psychical environment itself," or reflecting "the anarchic eccentricity of popular tellers who tend to amplify and distort reality to make it more credible" (251–256). The problem with all of these models is that they suffer from an attempt to situate nuance as an axis of operational difference, and what is clear is that even where these nuances are relevant, they do not yield successful classificatory models. Even allowing for the relative merits of each model (although one very seldom sees them employed by ensuing magical-realist critics), those merits are negated by the sheer multitude of conflicting terminology and emphases, which cannot but exacerbate the "problem of definition," and it is not at all clear what compulsion is driving this profusion of neologisms. In critical canons generally, the idiosyncratic behavior of individual texts towards their subject matter is not considered to be a sign that that behavior inheres within the genre or mode under discussion, and

must therefore be fed into our definition of it, and there has been no tangible advantage to adopting such an approach in magical realism.

Of the additional characteristics proffered by critics as distinguishing features of magical realism, one does strike me as worthwhile, which is Bortolussi's observation about plot discontinuity: she observes that "it is difficult to understand why the level of plot has not been considered in the formulation of a poetics of magic realism, for it is precisely at this level that one observes the most obvious differences between magic realism on the one hand, and fantasy and the fantastic on the other" (358). Narrative treatment of plot, character interpretation of plot, symbolic relevance of plot devices, all of these feature in magical-realist critical discussion, but Bortolussi makes the deceptively simple point that in terms of productively differentiating magical-realist literature from other types, the discontinuity of its events is a useful common denominator. (This refers, of course, to the abrupt and startling magical events which are neither explained nor contextualized by the narrative.) Obviously, this feature cannot be taken in isolation, as it does not independently distinguish magical realism from, for instance, Surrealism, but it is an undeniably consistent ingredient in all magical-realist texts.

One critical model which stands out in its enduring success is Amaryll Chanady's 1985 work, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy*, which defines magical realism via explicit contrast with fantastic literature. This applies to part of the wider problem-area for magical realism, which is frequently confused with the neighboring literatures of marvelous, science fiction, fantasy, and fantastic fiction, and so it is worth briefly delimiting these terms for the sake of clarity. First, to briefly dispense with the low-hanging fruit, is the question of distinguishing magical realism from texts belonging to the superficially-comparable categories of the marvelous, science fiction, and fantasy. What these three types of literature share is a single reality, each with differing distance from the recognized single reality of the implied reader. (Again, here we are following Hegerfeldt's example in assuming Western realism as the point of departure.) An example of marvelous fiction would be a fairy tale: this reality is broadly recognizable to the reader in the sense that its setting is roughly analogous to planet earth in its natural laws, landscapes, flora, and fauna, but the reader easily understands that they are in a "fairy tale reality" when they encounter witches, mermaids, talking mirrors, etc., and do not seek any further explanation for such apparitions. At the other end of the spectrum is science fiction, which explicitly occupies the implied reader's reality, but one in which scientifically-plausible advances or discoveries have taken or are taking place, and thus is often located in an imagined future. Any phenomena—aliens, triffids, sentient machines—which are not recognized occupants of the reader's reality are given a pseudo-scientific explanation, and so are incorporated entirely into the logical dictates by which that reality is organized.

Between the two is fantasy, whose range of texts is the broadest in terms of distance from "our" reality.⁴ None of the literary-classificatory distinctions here cause especial confusion within magical-realist academia, but misappropriation of the magical-realist label is frequent in its general usage, particularly in respect of certain types of fantasy literature; to use an example cited by Stephen Hart, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) was advertized on the Bloomsbury Publishing website as a work of magical realism (Hart and Ouyang 305). The

confusion here presumably arose because—apart from the fact that the epithet “magical” would have held obvious attraction to promoters—for the first several chapters the text is located firmly in suburban England before moving into a magical space, but the *Harry Potter* series is easily classified as fantasy fiction because the texts’ magical elements are presented as a secret, but existing facet of a single reality—our reality—deliberately and systematically concealed from the view of the world’s “muggle” (implied reader) population. Another example of contemporary fantasy which has caused confusion is *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Philip Pullman, who was described in *Newsweek* as “our most beguiling magical realist for all ages” (Jones). This trilogy, especially in its first two installments, actually thematizes the existence of multiple realities with its pseudo-scientific use of the “many worlds” theory; however, these texts also belong firmly to the genre of fantasy, as the “worlds” through which its characters travel are consolidated into a single reality, albeit composed of infinite co-existent universes.

Discrimination becomes more complicated in cases where unexpected textual events are not neatly consolidated into a single narrative, which is why fantastic literature has presented something of a problem to scholars of magical realism. Fantastic literature, like fantasy and science fiction, is intuitively different from magical realism, but codifying the precise nature of the difference has proven challenging to critics. Tzvetan Todorov’s model of the fantastic is the most commonly evoked, and does in many ways resemble the models of magical realism quoted above:

The fantastic requires the fulfilment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader’s role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work—in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as “poetic” interpretations. (33)

What fantastic literature shares with magical realism is the presence of two narrative codes in conflict: the “real” of the reader, and the unreal—usually supernatural—which seeks to impose upon it, and the academic disagreement arises in regard to the way in which the “reality status” of events is handled by the text. The disagreement assembles over the question of how the experience of “doubt” manifests in each mode: in Faris’s model, the third criteria is that “the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events”; however, for Bowers, it is precisely these “doubts” which are definitively absent from a magical-realist text, and instead are the hallmark of a work of the fantastic: she argues that the scholar of the fantastic tends to interpret magical realism’s “magic” events as “extraordinary events within a realist tale”; by contrast, “a magical-realist interpretation considers these two elements to be presented by the narrator to the reader as ordinary events in a realist story,” and the element of doubt is the point of distinction: “this element of doubt [...] stops the text from being magical-realist, but it is exactly this hesitation between the two explanations [...] that affirms its

fantastical nature” (Bowers 25–26).

The problem here may be the focus on the word “doubt,” or “hesitation,” which, as McHale points out, frames the conflict as an epistemological one rather than an ontological one. This is appropriate for discussion of fantastic fiction (as Todorov uses it), because the fantastic text invites the reader to try and decode which ontological code is the correct interpretative cipher; in magical realism, though, the uncompromising presence of both codes deters any such interpretative inclination on the part of the reader. This is what makes the reading experience so fundamentally different. A better word than “doubt” is “antinomy,” as Chanady prefers. It is Chanady’s contention that the difference lies in the state of antinomy between the opposing ontological codes that each mode encapsulates, which in magical-realist fiction is resolved, and in fantastic fiction is unresolved. In other words, the presence of a conflicting narrative code (the unreal or supernatural) presents a cause for fear and distress in the fantastic text, whereas in the magical-realist one it is naturalized (or “resolved”) in its treatment by the narrative, or more specifically the implied author: “authorial reticence plays an essential role in each of these two modes, but it fulfils a different function in both cases. While it creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and disorientation in the fantastic, it facilitates acceptance in magical realism” (30). Chanady develops a three-part taxonomy of magical realism based on this key distinction: that the text demonstrates “coherently developed codes of the natural and the supernatural” (30); that the antinomy between the two codes is resolved; and that a reticence on the part of the authorial voice both legitimizes the supernatural events (since “the mere act of explaining the supernatural would eliminate its position of equivalence with respect to our conventional view of reality” [30]) and encourages the “acceptance” which characterizes “resolved antinomy.”

Chanady’s is one of the most widely-cited models of magical realism ever penned, to the point that Bortolussi suggests that its enduring influence has stymied further enquiry:

Curiously, sixteen years after its publication, her formal theory still has not received the critical attention it deserves, and even the most current scholarship continues to quote her arguments uncritically, indeed, often naively. Subsequent scholars stopped asking the question of what constitutes magical realism on the false assumption that it had already been adequately answered. It was not. (283)

There are two problems with the concept of “resolved antinomy.” The first is that the state of apparent antinomy differs from text to text. For example, compare the representation of a magical event in García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) in which Father Nicanor demonstrates “the miracle of levitation” to one in British magical realist Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984):

“Just a moment,” he said. “Now we shall witness an undeniable proof of the infinite power of God.”

The boy who had helped him with the Mass brought him a cup of thick and steaming chocolate, which he drank without pausing to breathe. Then he wiped his lips with a

handkerchief that he drew from his sleeve, extended his arms, and closed his eyes. Thereupon Father Nicanor rose six inches above the level of the ground. It was a convincing measure. He went among the houses for several days repeating the demonstration of levitation by means of chocolate. (García Márquez 85)

García Márquez naturalizes the magical event so thoroughly that it appears, as Bower argued, as an "ordinary event in a realist story." Compare this to a passage from *Nights at the Circus* in which the protagonist Fevvers, in the house of the Grand Duke in Petersburg, discovers his plan to imprison her in a Fabergé Egg, so uses a miniature toy train set to escape from his clutches and physically relocate herself into the dominant narrative strain, where the other characters are on the platform of the Moskovsky railway station boarding a train to Siberia:

She dropped the toy train on the Isfahan runner—mercifully, it landed on its wheels—as, with a grunt and whistle of expelled breath, the Grand Duke ejaculated.

In those few seconds of his lapse of consciousness, Fevvers ran helter-skelter down the platform, opened the door of the first-class compartment, and clambered abroad.

"Look what a mess he's made of your dress, the pig," said Lizzie.

The weeping girl threw herself into the woman's arms. (Carter 226)

What is presented here is not a straightforward technical impossibility (levitation) but an event that is impossible on literally every conceptual level, and whilst neither the narrative nor the inter-textual characters acknowledge the antinomy, it is preserved in that it assaults the reader's imaginative powers far more vigorously than the García Márquez passage.

This leads me to the second problem: "doubt" is the wrong word because it suggests that magical-realist texts leave the reader in a state of uncertainty about how to interpret the magical events they encounter, which they do not. Magical realism is uncompromising in its magical events: they *cannot* have happened, and yet they did happen, described and corroborated by textual witnesses, and so it is the concept of "reality" itself that becomes hopelessly slippery. Although the text does not itself acknowledge the antinomy, this in no way prevents the reader from experiencing it. As Béneyi writes, "a conflict seems to be eliminated from the text only to be reproduced in the process of reading; the element of ontological doubt might appear to be absent from some magic realist texts [...] but in those cases it is inevitably reborn in the reader" (152). Indeed, the reverse is the case: as McHale argues, "the characters' failure to be amazed by paranormal happenings serves to heighten our amazement," and the technique of banalization "actually sharpens and intensifies the confrontation between the normal and the paranormal" (76). Where magical-realist texts differ from fantastic ones is in the *appearance* of resolved antinomy, which in fact produces the result that the reader experiences it more potently.

In this regard the solution to differentiating the magical real from the fantastic is a simple one, and is in fact exactly the same as that outlined above with regards to other adjacent literatures, which hinges on the question of unidimensionality. Fantastic texts resemble magical-realist ones in that they adopt the same contradictory codes, and they exploit the antagonism between them

for narrative effect, but in fantastic literature, the emphasis is on the eventual resolution of the two codes into one: in most fantastic texts, the tension which arises from the friction between two codes eventually resolves into either what Todorov calls the “fantastic-marvellous,” in which the supernatural is eventually accepted to be an existent (if intolerable) element of reality (such as in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* [1897]), or the “fantastic-uncanny,” in which a natural explanation is found for the apparently magical occurrences (such as in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* [1794]) (Todorov 44). The rare exception is the “pure fantastic” (of which James’s *The Turn of the Screw* [1898] is the prime example) in which the text withholds resolution, and so the tension extends beyond the end of the text and the reader is asked to decide for themselves. This is the important point: in all cases of the fantastic, either the text or the reader must decide between the two ontological codes: they are held always to be incompatible, and narrative momentum is sustained by the endeavor to collapse them into one, whether by “reality” triumphing, or its capitulating to accommodate supernatural elements. Meanwhile, magical-realist texts purport not to notice the antagonism between their two ontological codes, and the two are not considered to be incompatible: both just do exist, and the narrative tension arises from the systematic failure, or refusal, to acknowledge any incompatibility, or to resolve the two ontological codes into one.

If formalist approaches to defining magical realism cannot entirely succeed in overcoming the “problem of definition,” then the poststructuralist approaches which have been popular in magical-realist criticism, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, merely add to the confusion. I have already addressed the problems of unwarranted geographical exclusions associated with aggressively postcolonial approaches to magical-realist fiction; Durix in his *Mimesis, Genesis and Post-Colonial Discourse* (1998) demonstrates that these exclusions can lead to further tightening of the entry requirements when he adds the proviso that magical-realist texts must include a socio-political angle, since “magic realists usually have a definite idea of their social role and pose political problems, which beset the (post-colonial) country described” (146, parentheses in the original). This edict begets a criteria for magical-realist classification which is narrowed almost to non-existence:

One may wonder whether it is not preferable to abandon the term “magical realism” altogether. An alternative is to restrict it severely [...] to reserve the label to those texts that share strong similarities with García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* [...] which have a strong realistic basis, depict large communities in the process of making their own history in the face of strong imperialistic resistance. The main characters are larger than life and veer towards the allegory. But this “serious” concern is evoked in problematic terms which invoke mock heroism as well as heroism. “Magic realists” are clearly sophisticated in the use they make of metafiction, intertextual references, an interweaving of the “realistic” and “fantastic” modes but also of implicit questioning of the polarity on which such terms are based. (146)

This is specificity the point of annihilation. Postcolonialism can, and has from the earliest magical-realist criticism been an illuminating lens through which to view magical-realist texts, when

applied to those texts which have emerged from relevant contexts (Dash; Cooper; Schultheis; Holgate, "Unsettling Narratives," to name a few), but proves to be a problematic starting point in forming a definition. Texts can of course be both magical-realist and postcolonial—indeed, many critics would argue that *most* magical-realist texts are both of these things—but if magical-realist texts can be shown to emerge from non-postcolonial contexts (and they can) then no context can be allowed to inform a practical definition of the mode.

More recently, critics have come to consider magical realism within the context of world literature (Bell; Siskind; Holgate, *Climate*) which, as Mariano Siskind writes, "produces new genres, or rather new generic formations, constellations of texts whose identity is defined in accordance with new needs and new critical and aesthetic desires translated into new organizing principles" (347). In other words, the school of world literature has grown out of a need for new categories in which to situate literary modes which cannot be accommodated by existing structures; in this Siskind includes travel writing, ghost narratives and *bildungsromans* among others, but focuses specifically on magical realism as a prime example. What is striking about Siskind's study, though, is that even whilst promoting magical realism as a global literature, he continues to wed it decisively to postcolonialism: "only recently has magical realism been construed as a world literary genre, when it was identified as an aesthetic strategy of postcolonial literary fields" (350). Even as he argues against the "perception of magical realism as a conspicuously Latin American problem," pointing out that "the worldly history, geography, and cultural politics of magical realism did not begin (as is usually assumed) in Latin America, but in Paris" (selecting Bontempelli's promotion of magical realism in his journal *900* as an origin point), he gives only a throwaway mention to its consideration "more generally, as a global literary currency" (349–350), citing Carter and Peter Carey as "global" examples. Magical realism cannot at once be "trans-cultural, trans-historical, trans-generic" (346–347) and be specifically postcolonial, but its consideration within the field of world literature does suggest a critical recognition of the mode's international capacities.

The other paradigm to which magical realism has frequently been married is postmodernism. Postmodernism is not beholden to the contextual specificity of postcolonialism and so does not (necessarily) carry the same threat of diminution. As with postcolonialism, comparative studies with postmodernism have been fruitful, but similar problems arise when critics go further than interrogating the points of contact between the two and view magical realism as "a particular strain" of postmodernism (D'haen 194). Wendy Faris's project of "building magical-realist rooms in the postmodern house of fiction" in order to "situate it within postmodernism" ("Scheherazade's" 175) involves first establishing her formal criteria for magical realism (an extended version of that quoted above) and then going on to list "several secondary or accessory specifications" which are supposed to demonstrate that "magical realism can be profitably extended to characterize a significant body of contemporary narrative in the West, to constitute [...] a strong current in the stream of postmodernism" (165). Some of these characteristics are legitimate—"Metafictional dimensions are common"; "many of these texts take a position that is antibureaucratic" (175; 179)—but it is unclear how others contribute to the extension of magical realism into postmodernism: for instance, that "the narrative appears to the late-twentieth-century adult readers to which it is addressed as

fresh, childlike, even primitive [...] wonders are recounted largely without comment, in a matter-of-fact way, accepted – presumably as a child would accept them” (177) is a quality that many readers would use to differentiate magical realism from other literatures, rather than one frequently cited as a feature of postmodernist works. Similarly, that “metamorphoses are a relatively common event” (178) is not a characteristic commonly attributed to postmodernism, and Faris’s only examples of metamorphoses come from works of established magical realism (Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, D. M. Thomas’s *The White Hotel*, and Carlos Fuentes’s *Distant Relations*). Indeed, Faris’s study is altogether impoverished by a lack of any references to works not already firmly established as works of magical realism with which to bolster her argument from the other side, and so although her secondary characteristics serve to fine-tune her broader description of magical realism, that they signify an ancestral relationship with postmodernism is not evidenced. Whilst engagement with existing literary structures is invaluable in magical-realist criticism, attempts to assimilate magical realism into its parallel paradigms only serve to further obfuscate its “problem of definition,” because magical realism has its own ideological aesthetic profile, and cannot be pinioned to a specific geographical or social context.

Magical realism cannot be pinioned to a specific context. The question of whether we consider it a “genre” or a “mode” is intimately informed by this fact. Whilst many critics have defaulted to “genre” (Connell; Durix; Faris, “Scheherazade’s”; de la Campa; Moses; Aldea; Siskind), many others have preferred “mode” (Roberts; Wood; Aldama; Takolander), in Chanady’s case specifically because “genre” is “historically and geographically restricted” (2). Bowers agrees that “the flexibility of the mode resides in the fact that it is not a genre belonging to one particular era, and therefore not related to a particular critical approach” (63), and Eugene L. Arva is insistent on “magical realism, as a mode of writing and *not* as a canonical genre restricted to a certain geography, culture or literary trend” (3, emphasis in the original). For Bényei “‘Mode’ seems to be appropriate precisely because of its vagueness: the term is narrow enough not to define the phenomenon as a genre, and broad enough to go beyond the identification of narrowly interpreted ‘stylistic’ features” (150). Although the justifications (where they occur) for magical realism as a mode vary in emphasis, the consensus is clear that “genre” imposes restrictions based on context, and it is on this basis that I also discuss magical realism as a literary mode.

What this survey of various approaches to magical realism reveals is that our “problem of definition” is a peculiar case of specificity begetting vagueness. Christopher Warnes maintains that vagueness is tactically employed in order to smuggle writers of disparate contexts under the same classificatory umbrella, referring specifically to Stephen Slemon’s 1988 article comparing works by Canadian writers Jack Hodgins and Robert Kroetsch to García Márquez, an exercise which he views as a “liberty provided by magic realism’s lack of theoretical specificity” (409). To describe this as a “liberty” presupposes that the grounds for comparison are technically illegitimate, which is a conclusion that can only be reached if we consider geographical origin as the only legitimate ground for comparison. This is not an exclusion that we impose in other schools of literary academia, and the impetus to do so is surprising given, as Warnes points out, that “on the contrary, the facilitation of comparative analysis is probably magical realism’s most persuasive claim to usefulness” (7). Of the critical works he considers, Warnes praises Erik Camayd-Freixas’ *Realismo*

magico y primitivismo: relecturas de Carpentier, Asturias, Rulfo y García Márquez (1998) as the only one "to take seriously the need to ground synchronic category construction in diachronic literary history" but notes that "the price he pays for this specificity is that his analysis is limited to the Latin American context" and therefore "does not account for how and why magical realism has the global prominence it does" (11). Meanwhile, this question is tackled by Faris, but for Warnes suffers the opposite problem, since she "eschews cultural and historical specificities," and "the 'irreducible elements' of these texts—as of all magical realism—can be understood only through close scrutiny of the cultural, material and historical conditions under which they were written" (10). Warnes therefore concludes that "it remains to be seen whether it is possible to combine Faris's global range with Camayd-Freixas's commitment to historicity" (11).

This is the clearest articulation of any in magical-realist criticism of the contradiction which runs to its core. Warnes at once condemns and demands historical and cultural specificity. It seems clear to me that the solution to this impasse is not to hold out for the discovery of this Tasmanian tiger, a hitherto unsuspected critical angle or paradigm to facilitate the alchemic miracle of the "combination" viewpoint, but to relegate specificities to secondary rank. Warnes's fear seems to be that any such hegemonic concession will be tantamount to a total unmooring of magical realism, that without a "commitment to historicity," with historicity in the passenger seat, critics can only be governed by "naive, sentimental or Romantic assumptions that magical realism is concerned with describing some kind of dreamily ahistorical 'magical reality'" (11). Perhaps the trouble that academics have had in pinning down and articulating the machinations of magical realism contributes to this anxiety, but it seems overly emphatic. After all, whilst contextualizations are frequently invaluable, they need not necessarily occupy the forefront of our every critical discussion, especially where the context itself does not occupy such a position within the text. This point is made by Bényei, in proposing a similar model: "I suggest that a reverse procedure could be installed as an experiment: one could look at the group of texts considered 'magic realist' by the little critical consensus there is on the matter, and bracket the geographical/cultural context—always conceding that the context is there and is continually reasserting itself" (150). Context can occupy the leading evaluative role in any given study, but cannot be considered in a definition of magical realism itself. Since magical-realist texts do share common poetics, characteristics, and narrative techniques—the fact that we can recognize them at all is proof of this—and yet do not share a common context, what sensible approach is there but to consider context on a text-by-text basis, especially since its position of relevance varies between texts of the same category?

With specificities of context relegated to secondary consideration, a schema of magical realism needs to be established which is relevant across all its instances. Informed by the consensus already achieved by magical-realist criticism, I propose to broadly follow Adams's definition, as quoted above, that magical-realist texts are marked out by their "encompassing of two contradictory ontological codes, broadly recognisable as 'realist' and 'magical/supernatural'; and secondly their attitude of acceptance towards magical or supernatural events." I advance two minor amendments to Adams's first point, which I believe serve as fine-tuning, to sharpen the definition between magical realism and other modes or genres: firstly that that magical realism not only adopts, but sustains two contradictory ontological codes. This is what separates it from fantastic

fiction, whose narrative tension arises from not only friction between these two ontological codes, but an impetus to collapse them into one, which even in rare cases of the “pure” fantastic, where neither a fantastic-uncanny nor a fantastic-marvelous destination is reached, sustains beyond the limits of the text. Secondly, I would add that the two ontological codes, once established, do not conform to any fixed hierarchy. (This again differs from the fantastic, in which even if the hierarchy of the codes is problematized, it is implicitly upheld.) I would also add one further characteristic to Adams’s model, after Bortolussi’s contribution, referring to the “discontinuity of events.” This proviso covers a number of unifying characteristics of magical realism: firstly, the absence of a robust explanatory thread to connect events (which, again, would mark a text out instead as fantastic or fantasy); it contributes to the *ostranenie* effect, the “supernaturalization” or defamiliarization of familiar objects, which is often achieved by their appearing out of order, in contrast with “magical” elements; and the element of paradox, of insoluble indeterminacy, which prevents the reader from ever fully relaxing into the text’s proffered coda of reality.

So to summarize: 1) magical-realist texts encompass and sustain two contradictory ontological codes, broadly recognizable as “realist” and “magical,” which do not conform to a fixed hierarchy; 2) the narrative adopts an attitude of acceptance towards magical or supernatural events; and 3) plot events exhibit an element of discontinuity. This model outlined above is deliberate in its austerity, and may therefore not be considered radical, but it is crucial to adopt a model which can adapt to magical realism in all its local variants. Embracing these variants is important because when we release magical realism from its received history, as a necessarily postcolonial, originally Latin American literature, we are left without a chronicle of its development. This project proposes to remedy this loss by contributing to our understanding of magical realism before it was popularized and revolutionized by García Márquez. Magical realism from then until the present has been thoroughly and convincingly documented and evaluated, but a more robust and satisfying chronicle of magical realism will be one which considers its thus-far neglected prehistory, not in order to reassign the mode a new figurehead, but to situate magical realism in dialogue with its contemporaries.

Notes

1. To repeat, this is not to say that they are not valid insights into magical realism: it is hard to disagree that “in magic realist fiction figurative language acquires the referentiality, and by extension also the status of literal language” (Hegerfeldt 56), but that the equity of literal and figurative differs meaningfully from the equity of the real and the fantastic is not convincingly argued. In emphasizing the literalization of “idioms and sayings” (56) and “figures of speech” (58), Hegerfeldt is doing no more than pointing to a different source of “myth” than that of the practitioners of postcolonial magical realism, who identified the literalization of shamanism, telepathy, etc. as magical realism’s source of magic: these are frequent features of magical-realist texts, but not essential ones, and that “in magic realism the figurative dimension always remains visible” (59) is a feature sufficiently represented in her first criterion. Similarly, magical realism’s destabilizing influence on our concept of “knowledge,” to which Hegerfeldt’s “production of knowledge” refers, is not convincingly differentiated from the technique of defamiliarization. That magical-realist texts “examine critically the status of dominant as well as ‘Other’ knowledge” (62) strikes me more as a motivation for than a characteristic of these texts, and the re-inscription of “official” histories is too closely related to her “fantastic reality” to warrant being listed as an item in its own right.

2. Bortolussi's "narrators" and "implied authors" refer broadly to the "attitude of acceptance" to magical events observed by other critics, but her rendering of it needlessly confuses the issue. Bortolussi maintains that "real readers are often surprised that the narrator is not surprised by anything s/he narrates. Thus, the very status of the narrator is rendered suspect" and that "obviously, this investment is the doing of the implied author. Therefore, in magic realism, the distance between narrator and implied author is ironic" (361). I would argue that the figure of the narrator varies too much from text to text for it to be considered a static quality: for instance, whilst Bortolussi's observation may be true of Grass's *The Tin Drum*, which is narrated by its own protagonist, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is too lacking in a discrete "narrator" figure to be able to talk meaningfully about "distance" between narrator and implied author, and Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is largely narrated through the skeptical eyes of the Walser character, which dislodges the "ingenuity" that Bortolussi assigns to all magical-realist texts.
3. The observation is, again, an interesting one, and the historical research on which it is based is sound (Bowers relates "magic" to the earlier visual-art-informed use of the term by Roh and Bontempelli and "magical" to the narrative form), but the multiplication of terms splits hairs and cannot be practically applied. Designating two different terms denies that magical realism carries a philosophical agenda relating precisely to "the mystery of life," and in fact denies the technique of defamiliarization by which this is achieved.
4. Chanady's 1985 work classifies fantasy as simply "belonging to the marvellous" (430) although she later muses that "a discussion of popular fantasy would have led me to formulate other distinctions, which may have led to a better understanding of the specificity of texts considered as magic realist" (430). I am inclined to agree with Chanady's earlier assessment in the cases of fiction known as "high fantasy," set entirely in realities radically different from ours (Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* would be an example) because the reading experience is much like the experience of reading fairy tales. Whether or not we classify fantasy as a sub-genre of marvelous fiction, I think that some distinction between "the marvellous" and "fantasy" is valid for separating fairy-tale-type fiction from "low fantasy" texts, which are set primarily in the "real" world but with the inclusion of fantasy elements (an example would be Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*) on the basis that these texts are not entirely immersed in a "marvellous" reality.

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