MAGIC REALISM, BETWEEN GLOBALIZATION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract: *The paper focuses on the way Magic Realism had its roots in Europe, changed and became a Latin-American phenomenon, which "caught" and spread again towards Europe, being appreciated world-wide while turning to issues related to national identity, periods and features.*

Keywords: Magic Realism, origins, globalization, national, success

Globalization

Before looking at Magic Realism as a globalized phenomenon, we must first see what globalization, a widely used word nowadays, really is. We start with Ronald Niezen's definition, according to which the term globalization has come to mean almost any process in which distinct people, who possess unique languages and ways of life, are being assimilated into a wider humanity [...] the creation of a tradition- and nation-transcending, cosmopolitan way of life. (Niezen, 2004:36-37) Cultural globalization is about how people make sense of the world and themselves in the light of a variety of competing world views and assumptions (MacGregor, 2008:35)

Various studies point out the fact that globalization is not a recent (or modern) phenomenon, if we understand by it the way literary influences and ideas have „travelled" from one author to another, finding new meanings and shapes.

Magical realism has become globalized to the point that it now represents the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world, thinks Homi K. Bhabha (see Hart, 2005:6), and it has travelled a long way since its beginnings.

Magic Realism: origins and evolution

In 1925, when speaking about the post-Impressionist painting in his work *Nach Expressionismus. Magischer realismus*, the German art critic Franz Roh could never have guessed the destiny of the term he launched in the international artistic world. Showing that the mystery was not outside the represented world, but hiding behind it, he was drawing attention to the juxtaposition of reality and appearance, to the unperceived connections between objects. Translated into Spanish, his work was published in Revista de Occidente two years later, and reached the Latin American intellectual circles. But there were other influences as well.

Tommaso Scarano tells us the story of three young men meeting on the terrace of a Parisian café: Miguel Ángel Asturias from Guatemala, Alejo Carpentier from Cuba, and Arturo Uslar Pietri from Venezuela. They came into contact with the Surrealists and were influenced by them, but felt the desire to express the American world, to return home and learn about their continent. Asturias was obsessed by the Maya culture, Carpentier was fascinated by the negro elements of Cuban culture, Uslar Pietri became convinced by the fact that the special role of the Latin American writer was "to reveal, to discover, to

express the almost unknown, almost hallucinatory reality which was Latin America, in order to penetrate the great creative mystery of the cultural crossbreed." (in Linguanti, 1999: 15) Consequently, Asturias adopted Mayan influences and traditional indigenous story telling structure in his *Men of Maize (1949)*, Carpentier later spoke of the history of America as a chronicle of the marvellous real.

The return of these writers to Latin America coincided with a large migration of Europeans, particularly from Spain, and with a time of maturation for many Latin American countries which sought to create and express a consciousness distinct from that of Europe (Bowers, 2004:16). Magic realism (or magical realism as some critics name it) was going to become a means of expressing authentic American mentality and developping an autonomous literature, in spite of its 'old continent' initial influences, making use of oral and literary narrative traditions and a mixture of real and magical. Jorge Luis Borges, considered the precursor to magic realism, acknowledged influences from both European and Latin American cultural movements, and this mixture of cultural influences has remained a key aspect of magical realist writing, considers Bowers (2004:18).

Angel Flores' essay *Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction* (1955) emphasized the connections between magic realism and European modernist aesthetics, while Luis Leal, in *El realismo mágico en la literatura hispanoamericana* (1967) claimed that magic realism was an exclusively New World literary movement.

Magic Realism and the Boom

Flores' essay attracted renewed interest in Latin America and led, in a way, to the so-called 'Boom' of the '60s, a movement in which experimental Latin American literature, based on both European and Latin American influences, was published in large numbers. Thus, for the first time, Latin American novelists were able to exert an influence on their counterparts from Europe and the United States. Initially comprising only male writers, the Boom conicided with an international awakening interest for women's voices.

Magic realist works belonged to this Boom which was also made possible by a change on the literary market. Before that, writes De Castro, (2008:100), "In each country, no one knew what was being written in other Latin American countries; especially because it was so difficult to publish a first novel or a first collection of short stories or get them recognized. All of the publishing houses were more or less poor and, in the larger countries, prejudiced in favour of foreign literature".

Things changed when editors accepted that "Spanish literature is any literature written in the varied forms of Spanish... (our) contemporary literature is one literature and one only, even though the actual linguistic experience may be sited in places as distant as Santiago de Compostela (Spain), Santiago in Cuba, Santiago in Chile and Santiago del Estero (Argentina)" (see De Castro, 2008:172) Thus, the development of a pan-Latin American literary market and space is one of the main reasons behind the development of the boom. The works of the writers who have become known worldwide were exported not only due to their quality, but also because of their intelligent appeal to an international mass readership, argues De Castro (2008:101).

For Regina Janes, the Boom was the literary equivalent of decolonization, a decade of sudden, unexpected and international acclaim of several generations of Latin American writers whose works crossed national and linguistic boundaries within Latin America and then kept travelling, via translations, to other continents. It conquered Europe and North America, but it also made Latin American readers read Latin American writers with the avidity they had once reserved for the French, the North Americans, and Kafka (Janes, 1991:6), a phenomenon which proves, once again, more and more difficult nowadays, as in De Castro's words, "Perhaps one of the great paradoxes of globalization is that, for many of our writers, the true challenge is no longer that of being read abroad, but, rather, in capturing again the local reader" (2008:103).

Some of the novelists were at various times in regular communication with one another and, with them, Spanish American fiction found a new confidence, a sense of its place in the world, and of what its sources of power were: strong local or family traditions of oral narrative; a set of political realities which were often already, without having to be arranged or refocused, operatic or farcical; a long tradition of dead-pan irony, and a remorseless commitment to jokes. (see Sturrock, 1996:393)

In the 1990s, a new wave of writers using elements of magic realism appeared, and new theories of magical realism emerged, inspired by cultural studies and poscolonial theory, and magic realism no longer referred to Latin America only, finding representatives in North America, Europe and Africa as well. For Maggie Ann Bowers, magical realism in literature in the English language appeared first in the early 1970s, and notable locations of magical realism are Canada, the Caribbean, West Africa, South Africa, India, the United States and England, with acknowledged magical realism writing also being produced in Australia and New Zealand, but there are other voices also placing it in Eastern European countries like Romania, for instance (including Hertha Muller in it).

A list of representative novels for magic realism would include Miguel Ángel Asturias's *Men of Maize*, Alejo Carpentier's *Kingdom of this World* (both published in 1949), Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum* (1959), Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: A Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980), Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1982), Patrick Süskind's Perfume (1985), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989), Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and so on. While each displays characteristic features, critics have generally tried to find common elements to include them in the mode.

Focusing on contemporary British fiction, Anne Hegerfeld notes that magic realism has come to be regarded as a mode available to postcolonial writers in general, providing them with a means to challenge the dominant Wester world-view. It has been considered a global mode (idea applied enthusiastically to American and Canadian fiction), and magic realism's increasing appearance in Western literatures might be understood as a kind of colonization in reverse, a mode coming from the political, economic and cultural margins to revitalize metropolitan literatures. (Hegerfeld, 2005:2)

Similarly, Wendy Faris considers it "a revitalizing force that comes often from the 'peripheral' regions of Western culture – Latin America and the Caribbean, India, Eastern

Europe, but in literary terms a periphery that has quickly become central and yet still retained the intriguing distance of that periphery. Like the frontier, like primitivism, the lure of peripheralism (more recently called by other names like the subaltern, the liminal, the marginal) dies hard, because the idea is so appealing and so central to the center's self-definition" (Faris, 1995:165)

She then goes on, quoting Isabel Allende (a successfull post-Boom magic realist writer) on the matter: "I don't believe that the literary form often attributed to the works of... Latin American writers, that of magic realism, is a uniquely Latin American phenomenon. Magic realism is a literary device or a way of seeing in which there is space for the invisible forces that move the world: dreams, legends, myths, emotion, passion, history. All these forces find a place in the absurd, unexplainable aspects of magic realism... Magic realism is all over the world. It is the capacity to see and write about all the dimensions of reality" (Faris, 1995:187)

Magical Realism became accepted as the canon by the North American and European literary establishments, and Charles Werner Scheel's explanation of the phenomenon is very suggestive, reminding us of Angela Carter's words "new wine in old bottles": "Good sparkling white wine deserves to be labelled champagne, even if it's not French wine. It is the method rather than the mere ingredients, or their origin, which defines that product [...] so let there be French champagne, Russian champagne, or other champagnes", he says (see Schroeder, 2004:5), and then applies his idea to magical realism, noting that: "Since the cultural conditions affecting a literature are likely to be more specific [...] than the factors contributing to the production of grapes and wine [...] narratives written in the same magico-realist (or marvellous realist) mode, but in different countries or even continents, are apt to display strongly distinctive flavours".

De Castro point out to the enormous commercial success in the U.S., Europe, Spain and Latin America of novels written by Magical Realists, quoting Gustavo Guerrero, according to whom in the last fifteen years the true Latin American bestsellers have almost all been written by notorious epigones of García Márquez, or Juan Poblete who writes about an international market saturated by magical realisms produced in different parts of the global south or by its diasporas in the metropolitan countries (see De Castro, 2008:108-109).

Wondering why magical realism has been so successful in migrating to various cultural shores, Stephen Hart (quoting Elleke Boehmer) finds the answer in its ability to express a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement, to combine the supernatural with local legend and imagery, expressing cultures which have been repeatedly unsettled by invasion, occupation, and political corruption. (see Hart, 2005:6)

There are a number of important prizes and awards which reflect the appreciation Magic realist writers have enjoyed in time. Miguel Angel Asturias received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1967, for his work deeply rooted in the national traits and traditions of Indian peoples of Latin America, Gabriel Garcia Marquez received it in 1982 for his novels and short stories which reflect an entire continent, Tony Morrison, who uses elements of African-American folklore was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1993 for giving life to an essential aspect of American reality, and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1987.

But the success of Magic Realism fiction has become a burden for the newer generation of writers who want to find their own voice, their own way. Thus, in their introduction to their anthology entitled *McOndo* (1996), Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gomez make a comparison between the way Christophor Columbus "won" the American territory, giving the natives shards of colored glass, to their delight and surprise, and how almost five centuries later, the descendants of those remote Americans have decided to reward the Admiral's goodness sharing with readers around the world other pieces of colored glass for their amusement and pleasure: magical realism. Fuguet and Gomez claim that the appeal of the mode makes editors and readers willing to accept them only if they conform to the same "recipe" of themes and techniques (they don't get published as they lack traces of magic realism), complaining that they wanted to conquer the world only to be reduced to their own tradition: "We left to conquer McOndo but all we found was Macondo". According to Rory O'Bryen, the authors show how the popularity of a genre hailed as the hallmark of the postcolonial prevents them from expressing the transformations of their postcolonial status under the conditions of late capitalism and globalisation. (2011:2)

Yet, in spite of the claims that magic realism is (or should be) a thing of the past, it seems that it continues to appeal to contemporary readers, looking for national features in imaginary lands and a globalized world.

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