Lies that Tell the Truth

Magic Realism Seen through Contemporary Fiction from Britain

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Anne Hegerfeldt
Hamburg, November 2004

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INTRODUCTION

"Is Magical Realism Dead?" asks a headline in a 2002 issue of *Newsweek*. The American author William Kennedy, himself a practitioner of the mode, promptly shoots back in an article of his own: "Remedios the Beauty Is Alive and Well."[1]

The two articles are symptomatic of the critical debate that has been raging over the literary phenomenon of magic realism[2] ever since it first came to public attention during the 1960s Boom in Latin American literature. For almost four decades now, magic realism has been an amazingly steadfast favourite both with critics and publishers, and, if publishers' predilections for using the term on back-cover blurbs are anything to go by, with the reading public as well. One might argue that it has found favour also among writers, many of them trying their hand at it. But this is a contentious point, as it often is the critics and the publishers who apply the label "magic realism", not the writers themselves. With public and critical interest showing no signs of flagging, one might indeed agree with William Kennedy that magic realism is alive and well.

However, throughout its nearly four decades of literary stardom, magic realism has also consistently faced severe points of critique. It has been condemned as escapist literature, as exoticist and commercialized kitsch. It has been pigeon-holed as a typically Latin American

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[1] Mac Margolis, "Is Magical Realism Dead?" and William Kennedy, "Remedios the Beauty Is Alive and Well", both in *Newsweek*, 6 May 2002, 50-53 and 56, respectively.

[2] In contemporary literary criticism, both "magic realism" and "magical realism" are used. I prefer the former, as it can be read as a double noun phrase and thus better reflects the relationship of equality between magic and realism that is a fundamental aspect of the mode.

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phenomenon. More fundamentally, the concept of magic realism has been found too vague to be legitimately treated as a separate literary mode at all. Keeping a detailed discussion of this debate for later, I will here only briefly outline some of the more immediate problems which this study on magic realism faces and which in fact to a certain extent motivated it.

Initially considered a purely Latin American phenomenon, 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 Western world-view. More recently, there have been attempts to establish magic realism even as a global mode. It has been suggested that magic realism's increasing appearance in Western literatures might be understood as a kind of colonization in reverse: in an exemplification of Salman Rushdie's much-cited phrase "the Empire writes back",[3] the mode comes from the political, economic and cultural margins to revitalize metropolitan literatures.

However, endeavours to move magic realism away from the margins are anything but uncontroversial, especially as they touch not only on questions of literary theory and criticism, but also on the politics of literature. Critics have claimed that Western appropriations of magic realism necessarily detract from the mode's postcolonial potential – even more so than its popularity and commercial success presumably do already. In a review of the Black Dutch writer Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles*, Hilary Mantel scathingly notes a predilection for magic realist fiction that has deplorable consequences even in a postcolonial context:

> Perhaps this clumsy borrowing of fantastic technique is not surprising; it is hard not to imagine that *Abyssinian Chronicles* is written to reflect a European publisher's idea of what an African story should be like. Perhaps publishers and readers, like charity donors, require prodigies of horror and strangeness before they will open their purses.[4]

As with every form of literature, establishment entails a certain loss of originality and subversive impact.[5] But in the hands of First World writers, magic realist techniques are said to turn into a mere literary fireworks that pander to a Western taste for the exotic. Here, serious

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[3] "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance", *The Times*, 3 July 1982, 8.
[4] "Staring at the Medusa's Head", *The New York Review*, 30 November 2000, 31.
[5] See Laura Moss, "'Forget those damnfool realists!' Salman Rushdie's Self-Parody as the Magic Realist's 'Last Sigh'", *ARIEL*, XXIX/4 (1998), 121.

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postcolonial critique becomes pure postmodern playfulness, ex-centricity a pose – in short, magic realism deteriorates into a cliché. Moreover, it smacks of political incorrectness to divorce magic realism from a postcolonial context of production and, in a renewed act of quasi-colonial appropriation, simply pronounce it available to Western writers. However, attempts at postcolonial exclusivity are complicated by the fact that postcoloniality itself comes in various hues, and that its borderlines are much contested. Indeed, magic realist writers like Gabriel García Márquez or Salman Rushdie have been seen less as authentic colonized Others than as members of a class of privileged Third World intellectuals.[6] This is not to elide the difference between writers from Third World countries and writers more directly entrenched at what has been labelled the cultural centre. I merely want to point out that assigning positionalities is not a clear-cut affair.

As my subtitle indicates, I will argue that magic realism is not restricted to postcolonial literatures, but may profitably be used in Western contexts as well. Let me stress from the beginning that in reading magic realism as a global mode I do not dispute that the mode is postcolonial. On the contrary, I will show that, regardless of the author's place of birth, magic realist fiction indeed is decidedly postcolonial in that it re-thinks the dominant Western world-view in a number of ways. Using an ensemble of literary techniques, magic realist fiction insists that the concept of reality cannot be confined to the empirically perceivable. Rather, people's multiple ways of perceiving and constructing their world must be acknowledged as real, for insofar as these fundamentally influence actions and decisions, they have significant repercussions on the level of social and material reality. In rendering metaphors, stories, dreams or magical beliefs real on the level of the text, magic realist fiction re-evaluates modes of knowledge production generally rejected within the dominant Western paradigm. Western writers may well participate in such a postcolonial project. As Salman Rushdie has said: "Literature is not in the business of copyrighting certain themes for certain groups."[7] Projecting a marginalized or postcolonial perspective is not a question of the author's identity, but of whether the text works.

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[6] See the discussion in Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye*, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures 1, London and New York, 1998, 29ff.

[7] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-91* (1991), London, 1992, 15. See also Margery Fee, "Who Can Write as Other?", in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, London and New York, 1995, 242-45.

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It may be objected that in extending magic realism towards the cultural centre, my study carries the mark of its own origin, which is undeniably and implicatingly central. However, my aim is not to extol magic realism as a British mode. Rather, this new perspective is intended to provide a clearer focus on magic realist techniques and their effects and functions.

While the idea of magic realism as a global mode has been applied enthusiastically to American and Canadian fiction, this has been the case less with works from Britain. Notable exceptions are the novels of Salman Rushdie (provided one wants to consider these British, a point to be returned to in a moment) and texts by Angela Carter, who generally has been regarded as the British practitioner of magic realism *par excellence*. The curious absence of British fiction from the critical debate has been attributed to the mode's ostensible lack of appeal to writers from Britain. Marguerite Alexander has maintained that British literature simply is too firmly entrenched in a realist tradition for magic realism to have much impact,[8] while John Fowles has suggested that British authors find the mode too playful or flippant, though unfoundedly so: "what the British will not accept is that magic realists can have their cake and eat it – both 'bend' reality *and* be really serious."[9]

With all due respect, I beg to differ from these assessments. The situation is not as bleak as all that. If magic realism has not been found in fiction from Britain, it is not because it is not there, but because critics have not looked for it. This study will show that there are in fact quite a number of works from Britain which make use of the same techniques as works that have been considered magic realist. I suggest that their analysis within a magic realist framework will prove rewarding both for its own sake and for the critical debate of the mode at large.

The argument applies also to magic realist works by others writing from the "centre", such as William Kennedy, Günter Grass or Patrick Süßkind. I have restricted my text corpus to works from Britain for practical reasons. There are only so many texts a study can reasonably take into account, and going by country of origin provides at least a preliminary criterion of selection. I do not claim to give an exhaustive

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[8] Marguerite Alexander, *Flights from Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British and American Fiction*, London and New York, 1990, 143.

[9] Unpublished letter to Jeanne Delbaere, 10 March 1980; quoted in Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, "Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English", in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, Durham: NC, 1995, 252; emphasis in the original.

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overview over magic realist fiction from Britain – this would be beyond the scope of this study. Certainly there are other texts I might have considered, such as D. M. Thomas' *The White Hotel*, the novels of the Anglo-American Russell Hoban, or those works by Louis de Bernières that so self-consciously place themselves within the Latin American tradition of magic realism.[10] However, my selection has been made with a view as to which texts would prove most interesting and enriching also in relation to the broader critical debate on magic realism. My analysis focuses on selected novels by Angela Carter, Robert Nye, Salman Rushdie and Jeanette Winterson, as well as Alice Thomas Ellis' *The 27th Kingdom* (1982), Emma Tennant's *Wild Nights* (1979) and Marina Warner's *Indigo* (1992).

At this point, a brief word seems in order about the inclusion of Salman Rushdie's works in the category of "fiction from Britain", or, indeed, the use of any such category at all. Opinions differ sharply as to whether Rushdie is to be considered a British author or not. While he is quite undeniably part of Britain's literary establishment,[11] his Indian origin has been used to identify him as a postcolonial author. Rushdie has referred to himself both as an Indian writer in England and as a British writer (see *Imaginary Homelands*, 15 and 5). However, in the final instance, the question of nationality is not of primary interest here. As Rushdie himself has exasperatedly observed, it is folly to try and contain writers within passports (see *ibid.*, 67). In the age of the global village, literary forms cannot be confined within geographical and political boundaries (if this ever was the case); Lori Chamberlain argues that "it is difficult now to speak of writers in terms merely of a national literary tradition".[12] At a time when "cross-pollination is everywhere" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 20), it is more than ever the works themselves that matter. No doubt Rushdie's novels may very profitably be discussed within a postcolonial paradigm. At the same time, they resemble other British

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[10] See *Señor Vivo and the Coca Lord,* London, 1998, 234 and 53 for unmistakable allusions to Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Cien años de soledad* [1967], trans. Gregory Rabassa, New York, 1998), as well as his magic realist story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" (included in *Magical Realist Fiction: An Anthology*, eds David Young and Keith Hollamann, New York and London, 1984, 457-62).

[11] Stephen Prickett argues that "Rushdie has acquired in the eyes of the world the identity of a 'British' author" ("Centring the Margins: Postmodernism and Fantasy", in *Twentieth-Century Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society and Belief in Twentieth-Century Mythopoeic Literature*, ed. Kath Filmer, New York, 1992, 185).

[12] "Magicking the Real: Paradoxes of Postmodern Writing", in *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-bibliographical Guide*, ed. Larry McCaffery, Movements in the Arts 2, New York, Westport: CT, and London, 1986, 9.

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works of magic realism in that they clearly show how magic realism as a global mode challenges and complements the rational-scientific world-view. It therefore makes sense to include Rushdie's work in a study dealing primarily with magic realist fiction from Britain.

This study consists of three main parts. Part One begins with an overview over the critical debate on magic realism, outlining the history of the term and discussing in more detail the contentious literary and political issues broached above. I will then develop a working definition of magic realism as a literary mode. Going beyond the usual, clearly insufficient shorthand definition of magic realism as an "amalgamation of realism and fantasy",[13] I will delineate additional characteristics critics have used to distinguish magic realism from neighbouring modes such as the fantastic and the marvellous. In order to keep the definition from becoming too restrictive and incapable of taking the constant evolution of literary modes into account, I will draw on notions of prototype theory and Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance. This means that the attributes used to define the mode are seen as typical without being compulsory. Magic realist fiction is understood as a family, with each member exhibiting important resemblances to prototypical works of magic realism while at the same time displaying other, individual features.

However, a prototypical definition of magic realism by itself is incapable of capturing the specifics of the mode. It becomes necessary to consider not only the mode's characteristic features or attributes, but also their function. Drawing on magic realist fiction from Britain, I will in Part Two identify and analyse the literary techniques that give rise to magic realism's typical features, thereby elucidating their effects and functions. Five techniques will be examined: (1) magic realism's adaptation of other genres and modes; (2) its use of ex-centric focalizers; (3) its critique of paradigms of knowledge production; (4) its inversion of the Western categories "real" and "fantastic"; and (5) strategies of literalization. It will be seen that these techniques, while on the surface quite dissimilar, actually are complementary, each contributing to the postcolonial project that is central to magic realist fiction.

Analysis is succeeded by synthesis. Part Three will combine the findings of Part Two into a coherent reading of the mode as an inquiry into the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of human knowledge.

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[13] Angel Flores, "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction", *Hispania*, XXXVIII/2 (1955), 189.

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This study argues that, despite its blatant departures from literary realism, magic realist fiction is very much a literature of the real insofar as it scrutinizes and recreates the experience of living in a complex and frequently confusing world. Functioning almost as a fictional counterpart to anthropological or sociological studies, works of magic realism investigate the various strategies by which individuals and communities try, and always have tried, to make sense of reality. Rationalism and science alone, thus the magic realist argument, cannot adequately account for human experiences of the world. And this is the case not just in postcolonial settings, but in Western cultures as well. Alternative modes of knowledge production, so frequently rejected as mere fictions, must be acknowledged as useful complements to Western paradigms. However, in making human acts of meaning-making transparent, magic realist fiction at the same time emphasizes the extent to which all knowledge is based on acts of construction. As will be shown, the texts characteristically suggest that, more often than not, reality exceeds the categories used to describe it, revealing absolute knowledge to be an illusion.

Magic realism's dual aim of exploring the possibilities of knowledge while simultaneously showing up its limitations, thereby preventing an uncritical suspension of disbelief, is captured in the title of this study. Adapted from a remark of Jack Hodgins' about myth,[14] it exemplifies magic realism's argument that fiction may provide insight, but only as long as it is recognized as such. Ceaselessly drawing attention to its own constructedness without thereby invalidating itself, magic realist fiction self-consciously presents itself as "lies that tell the truth".

[14] See Geoff Hancock, "An Interview with Jack Hodgins", *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, XXXII/XXXIII (1979), 62.

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PART ONE:

THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

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CHAPTER 1

THE CRITICAL DEBATE: AN OVERVIEW

By now, the oxymoron "magic realism" looks back on a critical usage of more than three quarters of a century. In this interval, however, the term has not congealed into a clearly outlined concept; in fact, quite the opposite is the case. Instead of growing more rigorously defined and restricted in application, the term has evaded critical demarcation and today enjoys a usage more diverse than ever. This is true especially for the field of literary criticism, where, after initially having been applied almost exclusively to Latin American fiction, the term in recent years has appeared also in connection with other literatures, predominantly postcolonial ones. As for the visual arts, after more than half a century of near absence, the term seems to be enjoying a revival in painting, as well as being transferred to the medium of film.[1]

The term "magic realism" today being what might almost be described as rampant, it is perhaps little surprising that contemporary critics lament its over-enthusiastic and indiscriminate use, fearful that it will degenerate into a fashionable but essentially meaningless *passe-partout.* Deploring the term's "thoughtless application", Roberto González Echevarría has even declared that "magical realism lies in a theoretical vacuum".[2] And yet, the term has stubbornly asserted its place in critical discourse. As Frederic Jameson observes: "In spite of these

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[1] See Seymour Menton, *Magic Realism Rediscovered, 1918-1981*, East Brunswick: NJ, 1983, and Frederick Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film", *Critical Inquiry*, XII/2 (1986), 301-25.

[2] *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home*, Ithaca: NY, and London, 1977, 127 and 108.

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terminological complexities – which might be grounds for abandoning the concept altogether – it retains a strange seductiveness" (Jameson, 302). Its surprising tenacity suggests that, despite the lack of critical consensus as far as its precise meaning goes, magic realism nevertheless is felt to be a stimulating and viable theoretical concept.

Magic realism's purported "theoretical vacuum" is a shortcoming many critical studies try to overcome by delineating a brief history of the term rather than outlining the mode's characteristics. This seems an understandable tactic, for the term has been applied to so widely divergent works both in painting and in literature that any attempt to distil from these magic realism's essential features leads to such generalization as to make a clear definition impossible. However, the historical approach does more to confuse than to illuminate the issue. Therefore, my consideration of the term's origins in the first part of this chapter is in fact a refutation of attempts to arrive at a definition *via* the term's history.

Same term, different concepts: magic realism's convoluted history

Much of the confusion concerning magic realism as a literary concept arises from the strikingly heterogeneous usage the term has enjoyed throughout its career. The problem begins with the fact that the term is generally considered to have been imported from another domain altogether, namely from art criticism, and that critics too often try to construct a continuity between the term's different meanings. However, as critics investigating the term's complex history have pointed out, the usual difficulties involved in transferring a term from one artistic medium to another in this case are compounded by the vagueness of the original formulation.[3]

The term was first used by the German art critic Franz Roh in a short essay in 1923 and subsequently in his *Nach-Expressionismus – Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (Leipzig, 1925).[4] It was

[3] See Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, "The Origins and Development of Magic Realism in Latin American Fiction", in *Magic Realism and Canadian Literature: Essays and Stories*, Proceedings of the Conference on Magic Realist Writing in Canada, eds Peter Hinchcliffe and Ed Jewinski, Waterloo, 1986, 49; and Irene Guenther, "Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic", in Zamora and Faris, 34 and 62.

[4] Roh's essay "Zur Interpretation Karl Haiders: Eine Bemerkung auch zum Nachexpressionismus" (*Der Cicerone*, XXV [1923], 598-602) is mentioned by Michael Scheffel (*Magischer Realismus: Die Geschichte eines Begriffes und ein Versuch seiner Bestimmung*,

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the latter publication that presumably helped to spread the term in Europe and then in Latin America. In the wake of expressionism, Roh identifies a new "magic realist" style of painting, visible for example in the works of Otto Dix, Georg Schrimpf, or Alexander Kanoldt. In the attempt to distinguish it from expressionism, Roh lists twenty-two characteristics of magic realism, most of which are irrelevant, if not outright contradictory, to the term's current usage in literary criticism (see Roh, 119f.). Furthermore, many of Roh's features are directly concerned with technical aspects of painting. The list therefore does not help to elucidate today's literary concept. Of no more use are the aims and functions attributed to the new style on a more general level. Irene Guenther, after a detailed look at the term's past and present use, comes to the conclusion that "Franz Roh's actual influence on the contemporary literary genre, magical realism, is debatable, so transmuted have his pictorial formulations become".[5]

Putting it somewhat more bluntly, one could say that the overlap with today's literary concept is marginal to non-existent. One crucial difference, for example, lies in the meaning of the term "magic". Roh intends it to refer to the sense of newness with which quotidian reality is endowed through painterly emphasis on clarity and clinical detail, whereas in current literary usage, "magic" designates first and foremost the opposite of "realistic". Unlike magic realist writers, Roh's post-expressionists do not portray fantastic, that is to say non-realistic, objects; after expressionism's rejection of the observable world, a renewed focus on reality can be made out.[6] However, this does not entail a return to nineteenth-century realism. Rather, the new style seeks to recreate the ordinary object in such as manner that it would be seen in a new, unfamiliar way, thereby imparting a sense of the mystery inhering in the world, of the "magic of being" (see Roh, preface and 30). Roh's writings here call to mind the Russian formalists' concept of *ostranenie* or defamiliarization,[7] which enters into magic realist writing as well (see

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Stauffenburg Colloqium 16, Tübingen, 1990, 7). Most critics mention the 1925 treatise as the origin of the term.

[5] Guenther, 61; see also Gonzáles Echevarría, 115.

[6] See Roh, 23ff. The same idea is reflected in Gustav Hartlaub's rival coinage *Neue Sachlichkeit* or "New Objectivity", which soon eclipsed Roh's *Magischer Realismus* (see Seymour Menton, "Magic Realism: An Annotated International Chronology of the Term", in *Essays in Honor of Frank Dauster*, eds Kirsten F. Nigro and Sandra M. Cypess, Homenajes 9, Newark, 1995, 129).

[7] As outlined by Victor Šklovskij in "Art as technique" (Russian version 1917, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge,

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Chapter 6). Nevertheless, the fundamental difference remains that fantastic elements, incorporated into a realistic framework, are constitutive of magic realist fiction. The change in meaning is so substantial that William Spindler has even claimed that "magic realism" has come to mean "the exact opposite, in fact, of what the original term signified".[8]

Consequently, critical efforts to establish magic realism as a coherent concept by going back to the roots miscarry. In many cases, the inconsistencies are simply ignored, which does not exactly help in developing a clear definition.[9] In other cases, attempts to reincorporate aspects of Roh's painterly concept into current literary usage have resulted in a rather startling application to texts that evince none of the features currently regarded as typically magic realist. In Canadian scholarship, the term has been applied to works of fiction that according to Geoff Hancock should more appropriately be called "hyper-realist".[10] Such misapplication, thus Hancock, results from identifying qualities characteristic of magic realist painting such as extreme clarity, precision, ultrasharp focus[11] in a work of fiction and, by analogy, endowing the latter with the same label.

With some scholarly texts one could suspect yet another motive behind the historical approach. Reinstating Franz Roh as the founding father of magic realism might be an (unconscious?) attempt on the critics' part to reclaim for First World literature a mode that influential writers and critics have frequently presented as unique to Latin America. There seems to be an undercurrent of this in Theo D'haen's essay on "Magic Realism and Postmodernism",[12] as well as in Seymour Menton's chronology of the term, in which Menton defends what he calls the "internationalist interpretation of Magic Realism" against an

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London and New York, 1988, 16-30). See also Gonzáles Echevarría, 114 and Chanady 1986, 53-54.

[8] "Magic Realism: A Typology", *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, XXXIX/1 (1993), 77. I will relativize this claim in Chapter 6.

[9] For an example, see María-Elena Angulo, *Magic Realism: Social Context and Discourse*, Latin American Studies 5, New York and London, 1995. The confusion is exacerbated by the fact that despite its title, the book uses the term "marvelous realism" throughout.

[10] "Magic or Realism: The Marvellous in Canadian Fiction", in Hinchcliffe and Jewinski, 46 (cited as Hancock 1986).

[11] Due to these prominent characteristics, art historians have classified Roh's magic realist painting as a "direct antecedent of the so-called Super or Hyper Realism" of the 1960s and 1970s (Menton, 1995, 145; see also the last chapter of Menton 1983).

[12] "Magic Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers", in Zamora and Faris, 191-208 (cited as D'haen 1995a).

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"Americanist" one (Menton 1995, 127). Writing about magic realism in British fiction, I obviously agree that the mode is available to all writers. However, to base this argument on Roh is not only detrimental, because confusing, but quite unnecessary.

Faced with such diffuse usage, it is hardly surprising that some critics should have rejected the term as useless. However, in view of the invigorating effect the concept of magic realism, ill-defined as it may be, has had on literary studies, it seems overly hasty to discard it because of such confusions. Over time, the term has come to denote two different concepts, one pertaining to painting and the other to literature, which have developed independently. To turn back to Roh's writings unnecessarily complicates matters – there is no need to find a common denominator between magic realism in painting and magic realism in literature. Though a comparison might be interesting, a conflation of the two meanings only results in unproductively broadening the literary category. This is not a call for a strict separation between painting and literature; the point is that the term is used differently in the two realms, and one needs to specify whether one is referring to the painterly or the literary concept.[13] Consequently, I will not draw on Roh's theories in my characterization of magic realism as a literary mode.

Unfortunately, concentrating on magic realism in literature does not miraculously leave one with a homogenous and clearly defined concept, for since 1925, a number of literary critics have proceeded to use the term quite independently. In Europe, the Italian critic Massimo Bontempelli first applied the term *realismo magico* to both literature and painting in his journal *900. Novecento*, which appeared irregularly between 1926 and 1929. Whether or not Bontempelli took over the term from Roh has not been ascertained. While certain parallels can be made out between Roh's and Bontempelli's writings (see Menton 1995, 131), Irene Guenther cautions: "Differences [...] are as numerous as similarities" (Guenther, 60). One important difference is that Bontempelli's *realismo magico* includes the application of realistic techniques to fantastic elements, something Roh had expressly excluded (see Menton 1995, 131).

After its brief flourishing in the 1920s, the term seems to have languished in comparative disuse. Even though some critics make much

[13] See Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomies*, New York, 1985, 18.

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of the fact that Roh's work was translated into Spanish in 1927,[14] thereby purportedly bringing the expression *realismo mágico* to Latin America, the term did not really re-enter the arena of critical discourse until what Gonzáles Echevarría describes as magic realism's second "moment":

> The concept appears again in Latin America in the forties, when it had already been forgotten in Europe. This new outbreak occurs around 1948, when Uslar Pietri and Carpentier, almost at the same time, dust off the old tag from the avant-garde years. (109)

It is highly debatable whether this "new outbreak" is really so much a reappearance of the same concept as the recycling of an eye-catching label, as Gonzáles Echevarría's distinction between separate "moments" already suggests.

The Venezuelan author Arturo Uslar Pietri is usually credited with being the first to apply the term "magic realism" to Latin American fiction. It is not clear where he might have become familiar with the term, and critical opinion differs considerably as to whether he draws on Roh or not; he may also have taken it over from Bontempelli or New York art circles in the early 1940s.[15] Uslar Pietri proposes that magic realist texts, thus entitled "for lack of a better name", consider "man as a mystery in the midst of realistic data" and achieve a "poetic divination" of reality.[16] This formulation generally has been criticized as vague and ambiguous, a criticism that, seeing that the formulation can be both linked to and divorced from Roh's,[17] seems more than justified. On the whole, Uslar Pietri's "definition" is of as little help as Roh's in defining today's literary concept.

Of more direct influence on the discussion of magic realism in literary criticism has been a concept that, ironically enough, was conceived in explicit opposition to Franz Roh: Alejo Carpentier's *lo real*

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[14] First as "Realismo mágico: Problemas de la pintura europea más reciente" (*Revista de Occidente* 16 [1927]), then in book form as *Realismo mágico, post expresionismo: Problemas de la pintura europea más reciente* in the same year (see Zamora and Faris, 30-31, n. 1). On the impact of the translation, see Angulo, 3; Chanady 1986, 54; Menton 1995, 132ff.; and Guenther, 61.

[15] See Chanady 1986, 54 and Menton 1995, 140 for the first and Gonzáles Echevarría, 109 for the second explanation.

[16] *Letras y Hombres de Venezuela* (1948), Madrid, 1978, 287 ; translated in Gonzáles Echevarría, 110, n. 24.

[17] Parallels are made out by Chanady 1986, 54 and Angulo, 4. Gonzáles Echevarría by contrast flatly states: "In Uslar Pietri, aside from the use of the term itself, there is hardly a visible trace of Roh" (115).

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maravilloso.[18] Unfortunately, this opposition largely has been ignored by contemporary critics, who frequently treat Roh's painterly concept, Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso* and today's literary magic realism as one and the same.[19] Only now and then have critics condemned this conflation as one source of the conceptual confusion concerning magic realism, demanding that magic realism and Carpentier's *real maravilloso* be treated as separate literary concepts (see Menton 1995, 141ff. and Gonzáles Echevarría, 113). While I will also distinguish between the two, I argue that the difference lies in the fact that magic realism is a literary mode, whereas *lo real maravilloso* refers to Latin American reality. Consequently, the two terms cannot be used interchangeably. Nevertheless, Carpentier's notion of a marvellous real presupposes a certain attitude to, or perception of, reality that is useful in analysing magic realist texts. Carpentier's main ideas will therefore briefly be outlined.

Alejo Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso*

The Cuban writer and critic Alejo Carpentier first used the term "*lo real maravilloso*" in an essay of the same title, which originally appeared in the Caracas newspaper *El Nacional* on 8 April 1948[20] and was reprinted as prologue to his novel *El Reino de Este Mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*) in 1949.[21] In his essay,[22] Carpentier unfavourably contrasts European artists' and writers' "tiresome pretensions of creating the marvelous" with the "experienced marvelous reality" of Latin America (Carpentier 1995a, 84). He argues that in European surrealist painting and literature, the marvellous is evoked inadequately through the artificial juxtaposition of unlikely objects and the mere use of cliché:

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[18] "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real" ("Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso", lecture given 1975, published 1981), trans. Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora, in Zamora and Faris, 102-103 (cited as Carpentier 1995b).

[19] See for example Jeanne Delbaere, "Magic Realism: the Energy of the Margins", in *Postmodern Fiction in Canada*, Postmodern Studies 6, eds Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens, Amsterdam, 1992, 76; and Theo D'haen, "Postmodernisms: From Fantastic to Magic Realist", in *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, eds Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1997, 284.

[20] See Gonzáles Echevarría, 108, n. 20.

[21] *The Kingdom of This World*, trans. Harriet de Onís, Harmondsworth, 1975.

[22] I will quote from the English translation "On the Marvelous Real in America" (from *Tientos y diferencias*, 1967), trans. Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora, in Zamora and Faris, 75-88 (cited as Carpentier 1995a).

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> By invoking traditional formulas, certain paintings are made into a monotonous junkyard of sugar-coated watches, seamstresses' mannequins, or vague phallic monuments: the marvelous is stuck in umbrellas or lobsters or sewing machines or whatever on a dissecting table, in a sad room, on a rocky desert. Poverty of the imagination, Unamuno said, is learning codes by heart. Today there are codes for the fantastic based on the principle of the donkey devoured by the fig, proposed as the supreme inversion of reality in *Les Chants de Maldoror*, codes to which we owe "children threatened by nightingales," or André Masson's "horses devouring birds." But observe that when André Masson tried to draw the jungle of Martinique, with its incredible intertwining of plants and its obscene promiscuity of certain fruit, the marvelous truth of the matter devoured the painter, leaving him just short of impotent when faced with blank paper. It had to be an American painter – the Cuban, Wilfredo Lam – who taught us the magic of tropical vegetation, the unbridled creativity of our natural forms with all their metamorphoses and symbioses on monumental canvases in an expressive mode that is unique in contemporary art. (*Ibid.*, 85)

While European artists in vain try to conjure the marvellous, their Latin American counterparts are privileged: in their sphere, reality itself is marvellous, they need only reveal or amplify it.

In dividing the European and the Latin American marvellous into fake versus authentic, Carpentier uses metaphors taken from the domain of magic, which can similarly be separated into conjuring or sleight of hand – that is, artful deception – and true sorcery. For Carpentier, the European marvellous is "manufactured by tricks of prestidigitation", using "that old deceitful story of the fortuitous encounter" between incongruous objects. Its artists and writers "disguise themselves cheaply as magicians", the only difference being that they "substitute for the tricks of the magician the commonplaces of the intellectual or the eschatological delights of certain existentialists".[23] Their failure to evoke the marvellous is, according to Carpentier, due to a lack of faith in what they present: "it seems that the marvelous invoked in disbelief – the case of the Surrealists for so many years – was never anything more than a literary ruse, just as boring in the end as the literature that is oneiric 'by

[23] I give the last phrase as translated by Gonzáles Echevarría, 110, n. 25. The Spanish reads: "que no hacen sino sustituir los trucos del prestidigitator por los lugares comunes del literato 'enrolado' o el escatalógico regodeo de ciertos existencialistas" (Alejo Carpentier, "Prologo", *El reino de Este Mundo* [1949], Havana, 1979, 5). The translation by Zamora and Faris mistakenly reverses the direction of substitution: "All they do is to substitute the tricks of the magician for the worn-out phrases of academics or the eschatological glee of certain existentialists" (Carpentier 1995a, 86).

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arrangement' or those praises of folly that are now back in style" (*ibid.*, 86). By contrast, in Latin America, people's faith in supernatural powers actually produces miracles:[24]

> I found the marvelous real at every turn. Furthermore, I thought, the presence and vitality of this marvelous real was not the unique privilege of Haiti but the heritage of all America, where we have not yet begun to establish an inventory of our cosmogonies. (Carpentier 1995a, 87)

Through this essay as well as his later writings, Carpentier became something of a father figure for younger Latin American writers, encouraging them to look to their own continent for inspiration and identity rather than emulating European traditions (see Gonzáles Echevarría, 222). It is quite obvious that, apart from being an essay on art, Carpentier's text also is a programmatic attempt to invert the cultural hierarchy between Europe and South America, or, in postcolonial terminology, to reverse the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, the centre and the margin.[25] Carpentier's endeavour to claim the marvelous for his continent may well have contributed to later tendencies to discuss magic realism as a mode unique to Latin America. However, similar agendas can also be made out in texts that do not explicitly refer to Carpentier's writings. Latin American claims to magic realism might thus be seen as part of the general struggle for cultural identity and recognition that arguably has characterized Latin American fiction since political independence in the early nineteenth century.[26]

As mentioned above, critics tend to use the terms "magic realism" and "*lo real maravilloso*" interchangeably. Gonzáles Echevarría, aware of a discrepancy, has argued for "two versions of magical realism", defining Roh's version as phenomenological and Carpentier's as ontological (113). However, it is counterproductive to conflate Carpentier's *real maravilloso* with literary magic realism, or to see them as two versions of the same. The terms should be kept distinct because they refer to altogether

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[24] Carpentier is here referring to beliefs in the Haitian slave leader François Makandal's supernatural abilities. Arrested and tried for attempting to poison Haiti's white slave owners, Makandal is said to have transformed into a mosquito when he was about to be burned to death at the stake (Carpentier 1995a, 86-87). For a historical account of the Makandal conspiracy of 1757, see Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below*, Knoxville, 1990, Chapter 2.

[25] See also Jean-Pierre Durix, *Mimesis, Genres and Postcolonial Discourse: Deconstructing Magic Realism*, Houndmills and New York, 1998, 104-12.

[26] See Doris Sommer and George Yudice, "Latin American Literature from the 'Boom' On", in McCaffery, 192-93.

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different domains. While the former ostensibly exists in Latin America through the continent's history, nature, ways of life and beliefs,[27] the latter is a literary mode or, as Chanady puts it, "an *-ism*".[28] This suggests that the two terms should divide neatly along the lines of the epistemological versus the ontological. However, as Chanady goes on, "Carpentier's concept, of course, has less ontological validity than is apparent, since reality itself cannot be marvelous, but is simply considered as such by an outsider" (Chanady 1986, 53). Understood as an attitude towards reality, Carpentier's concept – although not itself a mode of representation – is nevertheless useful for an analysis of magic realism in that magic realist novels depict a marvellous reality like the one Carpentier describes, replete with faith, wonders and miracles.

Carpentier's revisionist and postcolonial agenda is even more evident in a lecture he gave in 1975 on "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real" (Carpentier 1995b). In this text, Carpentier relates the concept of *lo barroco* to his older concept of *lo real maravilloso*. Since he attributes a baroque mode of writing to the novelists of the Boom,[29] many of whom have also been characterized as magic realist, I will briefly delineate the argument of this second essay. Even if Carpentier's *lo barroco* is not the same as magic realism because the concept works on a much more general level, some of the links Carpentier establishes are useful for my later analysis of magic realist fiction.

I disagree with Gonzáles Echevarría when he claims that in Carpentier's later writings, the baroque "has come to replace the 'real marvelous'" (223). Rather, Carpentier's essay presents *lo barroco* as a mode of expression used to portray Latin American reality, while *lo real maravilloso* refers to that reality itself, a difference analogous to the magic realism/*lo real maravilloso* distinction explained above. Instead of replacing the earlier concept, Carpentier's baroque intersects with his marvellous real.

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[27] See Julio Rodríguez-Luis, *The Contemporary Praxis of the Fantastic: Borges and Cortázar*, Latin American Studies 1, New York and London, 1991, 105.

[28] Chanady 1986, 53.

[29] "A typical, and to a great degree justified, impression [of the Boom] would read as follows: Latin American literature, especially narrative, hit the international literary scene like a tornado, leaving behind a path strewn with prestigious literary prizes and starry-eyed, awed, and even envious writers from the European and North American centers of 'World' culture" (Sommer and Yudice, 189-90). Along with writers from the 1960s such as Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel García Márquez, an earlier generation (Jorge Luis Borges, Juan Rulfo, Alejo Carpentier) became internationally recognized.

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In order to free the term "baroque" from its limited European, seventeenth-century meaning, Carpentier characterizes the baroque as a historically recurrent creative impulse, "*a spirit* and not a *historical style*".[30] The baroque spirit is essentially dynamic, innovative and subversive: "It is art in motion, a pulsating art, an art that moves outward and away from the center, that somehow breaks through its own borders" (*ibid.*, 93). In this, it resembles the marvellous, which can be described as "everything strange, everything amazing, everything which eludes established norms".[31] To the dynamic mode of the baroque Carpentier opposes classicism, which imitates certain archetypes according to academic rules and therefore is essentially static: "Classicism is academic, and all that is academic is conservative, vigilant, obedient, and therefore the declared enemy of innovation, of anything that breaks rules and norms" (Carpentier 1995b, 92). Intrinsically related to transformation, upheaval and change, the baroque has been the dominant mode of expression in Latin America throughout history and belongs to it now more than ever. In a celebration of the postcolonial concept of hybridity, Carpentier lays claim to the baroque:

> And why is Latin America the chosen territory of the baroque? Because all symbiosis, all *mestizaje*, engenders the baroque. The American baroque develops along with *criollo* culture, with the meaning of *criollo*, with the self-awareness of the American man, be he the son of a white European, the son of a black African or an Indian born on the continent – something admirably noted by Simón Rodríguez: the awareness of being Other, of being new, of being symbiotic, of being a *criollo*; and the *criollo* spirit is itself a baroque spirit. (*Ibid.*, 100)

Native to the continent, the baroque is the mode best suited to depict Latin America's essentially marvellous reality. Therefore, as Carpentier triumphantly proclaims, contemporary Latin American novelists, in availing themselves of the baroque, will succeed where European writers

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[30] Carpentier 1995b, 95; emphases in the original. Carpentier is here following the Catalan art critic Eugenio d'Ors (*ibid.*, 108, n. 3).

[31] *Ibid.*, 101. Carpentier's baroque notably resembles the carnivalesque as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin (see Chapter 4 below). Carpentier's baroque is also reminiscent of Lyotard's conception of the postmodern as emerging in the open space between the transgression of old rules and the establishment of these transgressions as new aesthetic criteria (see Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" [French version, 1982], trans. Régis Durand, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [*La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir*, 1979], trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, 1984, 79ff.; cited as Lyotard 1984b).

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have failed, thereby becoming the founding fathers of a baroque tradition:

> But faced with strange events that await us in that world of the marvelous real, we must not give up and say, as Hernán Cortés said to his monarch: "As I do not know what to call these things, I cannot express them."[32] Today, we know the names of these things [....] We have forged a language appropriate to the expression of our realities, and the events that await us will find that we, the novelists of Latin America, are the witnesses, historians, and interpreters of our great Latin American reality. We have prepared ourselves for this, we have studied our classics, our authors, and our history. In order to express our moment in America, we have sought and found our maturity. We will be the classics of an enormous baroque world that still holds the most extraordinary surprises for us and for the world. (*Ibid.*, 107-108)

In the final sentence, Carpentier performs a strange twist that essentially undermines his own argument. He wants Latin American novelists to become "the classics of an enormous baroque world", that is: they are to establish the norms – one could almost say, a canon – of the baroque. This contradicts the basic idea of the baroque as Carpentier himself defines it, namely as a mode inherently subversive of established norms. Even while pronouncing European culture doomed because it is based on an infertile classicism, Carpentier betrays his own adherence to the very frame of mind he rejects when he presents the Latin American novel as a new archetype, spawning new "classics". His approach therefore in no way resolves the hierarchy it is protesting against, but merely inverts the positions of colonizer and colonized. However, as postcolonial critics have pointed out, a different and better system will not be brought about by a simple reversal of the hierarchical order. Instead, it is necessary to question the underlying philosophical assumptions of that order.[33] Specifically with respect to literature it has been suggested that, instead of desiring to become "major" or canonical, "minor" literatures need to "retain the memory of their subjugation and

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[32] Carpentier is here referring to an earlier passage in his lecture which relates how Hernán Cortés had to admit defeat in his attempts to describe Mexico, finding that the Spanish language lacked adequate expressions for the unknown things he encountered (*ibid.*, 104-105).

[33] See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), London and New York, 1994, 33.

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deterritorialization",[34] thereby preventing a mere inversion of centre and margin.

Ultimately, Carpentier's concept of *lo real maravilloso* is Eurocentric. If Latin American reality strikes Carpentier as marvellous, it can do so only if European reality implicitly is taken as the norm. Carpentier says of Latin America: "Here the strange is commonplace, and always was commonplace" (Carpentier 1995b, 104). But in order to first perceive the supposedly commonplace as strange, he has to proceed from a different basis, in this case European notions of what is commonplace. Carpentier's perspective here does not essentially differ from that of the colonizers Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo, whom Carpentier so infelicitously quotes in support of his concept,[35] apparently failing to realize that he thereby invalidates his argument. For rather than establishing Latin America as inherently marvellous, the conquistadors' writings only reveal how the continent's marvellousness depends on a European perspective. Gonzáles Echevarría makes the same point when he explains why Carpentier's proclamation of magic as indigenous to Latin America cannot be accomplished from an inside perspective:

> writers such as Carpentier and Asturias have felt the need to proclaim magic to be here, attempting to evade the alienation of the European for whom magic is always there [that is, in the realm of the "Other"]. But in this attempt there is a double or meta-alienation; it may very well be that magic is on this side, but we have to see it from the other side to see it as magic. (128)[36]

Ironically, while seeking to redeem Latin American culture from a marginal and inferior position, Carpentier ends up adopting the colonizers' vision. And yet, their perspective is not his; educated in Europe but at heart very much a Cuban, he speaks from what has been described as a "double exile".[37] Writing from one position to argue for

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[34] Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, New York, 1998, 53. Gandhi is referring to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who write: "How many styles or genres or literary movements, even very small ones, have one single dream: to assume a major function in language, to offer themselves as a sort of state language, an official language [...]. Create the opposite dream: know how to create a becoming-minor" (*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* [French version, 1975], Theory and History of Literature 30, trans. Dana Polan, Minneapolis, 1986, 27).

[35] *Ibid.*, 104, 105 and 107.

[36] See also Durix, 105ff.

[37] Durix, 111. Durix takes the term from Gareth Griffiths' *A Double Exile: African and West Indian Writing between Two Cultures*, London, 1978. Griffiths uses it to describe

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the other, Carpentier finds himself in a conflict typical of many postcolonial writers. Linda Hutcheon has said of postcolonial literature that "its revolt continues to operate within the power field of [the] dominant culture, no matter how radical its revalorization of its indigenous culture".[38] This also fits the present case. Yet, in spite of being postcolonially "implicated in that which it challenges" (*ibid.*, 170), Carpentier's writing nevertheless provided an important impetus for the development of a Latin American identity that has no need to look to Europe for a model.

Appropriations and re-appropriations, or: who can write as magic realist?

Similar objectives as Carpentier's pervade a paper presented at the 1954 Modern Language Association Conference by Angel Flores, professor of Latin American literature at Queens College, New York. Simply entitled "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction", the essay returned the term to the literary scene; this time, as it turned out, to stay.[39]

It is rather ironic, and quite revealing with respect to literary academia, that this paper has acquired a status of seminal importance and is a bibliographical must for every study of magic realism, while at the same time there exists a wide critical consensus that Flores' formulations are far too vague and ideologically informed to provide a sound conceptual basis. Seymour Menton attacks Flores for his "overly broad use of the term", claiming that he "lumped together under Magic Realism all manifestations of experimental, cosmopolitan literature as opposed to the social protest, proletarian and telluric prose fiction which had dominated the 1920s and 1930s, and most of the 1940s" (Menton 1995, 145). Gonzáles Echevarría, somewhat polemically characterizing Flores' paper as "an article that more than anything celebrates – belatedly – the coming of the avant-garde to Latin American literature", writes: "As a critical concept, the magical realism outlined by Flores has neither the specificity nor the theoretical foundation needed to be convincing or

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postcolonial authors who, writing in English, are "exiled culturally from the sources and traditions of [English] and linguistically from the landscapes and peoples they write about" (9).

[38] "Circling the Downspout of Empire: Post-colonialism and Postmodernism", *ARIEL*, XX/4 (1989), 162 (cited as Hutcheon 1989b).

[39] "The third moment of magical realism's appearance [...] begins with the 1955 article by Flores" (Gonzáles Echevarría, 111). Seymour Menton regards Flores' paper as "the starting point for all the ensuing polemical discussions" (Menton 1995, 144ff.).

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useful" (111). And the Hungarian critic Tamás Bényei wonders at "later critics' strange reluctance simply to disregard this by no means profound document".[40] But as Gonzáles Echevarría has sarcastically suggested (111), perhaps one cannot expect a meticulous theoretical formulation from a paper that elsewhere has been characterized as "concerned with validating and even advertising the literary output of a formerly colonized society".[41]

Flores' text is in fact quite unabashedly programmatic. While Flores admits that critical evaluations of Latin American fiction as second-rate are not completely without foundation, he argues that past shortcomings have to be put down to psychological as well as social and economic circumstances (rather than lack of talent, I suppose, although Flores does not say so). By 1954, however, such an estimate is no longer justified: there now exist what Flores calls "brilliant" novelists and short story writers in Latin America, whom Flores groups together into a new trend he calls "magical realism". Under the influence of the "pathfinder and moving spirit" Jorge Luis Borges, Latin American writers of the forties "produced prose fiction comparable to the best in contemporary Italy, France, or England" (Flores, 188-90). A rather lengthy catalogue of works follows. The paper concludes in a spirit of celebration:

> Never before have so many sensitive and talented writers lived at the same time in Latin America – never have they worked so unanimously to overhaul and polish the craft of fiction. In fact their slim but weighty output may well mark the inception of a genuinely Latin American fiction. We may claim, without apologies, that Latin America is no longer in search of its expression [...] – we may claim that Latin America now possesses an authentic expression, one that is uniquely civilized, exciting and, let us hope, perennial. (*Ibid.*, 192)

Like Alejo Carpentier, Flores here seeks to correct a myopic concentration on Europe and the USA by ascribing to Latin American fiction a unique mode of expression equal or even superior to that of the colonizer. Amaryll Chanady has critically called this appropriation of magic realism by Latin America "a territorialization of the imaginary" (Chanady 1995, 131).

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[40] "Rereading 'Magic Realism'", *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, III/1 (1997), 152.

[41] Amaryll Chanady, "The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms", in Zamora and Faris, 127 (cited as Chanady 1995).

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Flores' "territorialization" of magic realism is rendered problematic by the first part of his essay, where he discusses the mode as a universal reaction against photographic realism[42] and, paradoxically enough, provides the new Latin American trend with an illustrious European heritage. Flores identifies certain writers and painters of the First World War who had "re-discover[ed] symbolism and magical realism", among them Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka and Giorgio di Chirico (188). These had revived elements from the works of previous writers such as Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Hoffmann or Poe. Flores construes a direct line of influence from Kafka to Borges, who had translated some of Kafka's shorter fiction into Spanish. Of the three main strategies Chanady discerns in the postcolonial struggle for cultural identity and metropolitan recognition – claiming equality based on similitude between colonizer and colonized; claiming the right to be different but equal; and asserting difference and claiming superiority[43] – Flores here employs a somewhat paradoxical mixture. He is pleading equality based on similitude when he aligns Latin American fiction with a European tradition, while at the same time he is claiming equality or even superiority based on difference when he maintains that magic realism is unique to Latin America.

Having delineated magic realism's European roots, Flores takes Kafka's "peculiar fusion of dream and reality" as a case in point and derives from this his definition of magic realism – often quoted, but equally often found wanting – as "the amalgamation of realism and fantasy" (189). Flores gives no indication of where he originally picked up the term "magic realism". Despite attributing a European origin to the mode, he does not refer to Roh's study. Neither does he indicate awareness of any previous usage of the term with respect to Latin American literature. Gonzáles Echevarría accordingly locates a discontinuity between earlier usages of magic realism and the academic discussion that was launched by Flores' paper and is still raging today (108).

Having come this far, I would suggest a brief pause to consider why the glaring discontinuities in the usage of the term "magic realism" so often either have been simply ignored or more or less artfully glossed over. The various tactics of establishing continuity, among them both the

[42] So Flores starts from a completely different premise than Roh, who applauded photography's aesthetic potential (see the chapter called "Eigenausdruck der Natur [Kunst und Fotografie]", Roh, 42-52).
[43] Chanady 1995, 131, 133 and 134.

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endeavour to endow magic realism with European roots as well as the attempt to present it as an inherently Latin American mode by equating it with Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso*, all are, at least to a certain extent, concerned with the same issue: the question of who can write as magic realist. This question in turn is bound up with issues that go beyond the scope of literary criticism proper, which means that frequently a distinctly political sub-text can be made out. Considering that definitions of magic realism may have been conceived with a view as to whom they will privilege to speak, it seems wise to examine the issue of magic realism's various appropriations and re-appropriations in more detail.

Following Flores' reintroduction of the term, magic realism for a long time was largely treated as an exclusively Latin American phenomenon, even if the understanding of the concept quickly evolved beyond Flores' formulation. As Chanady has pointed out, Flores' paper itself does not adequately justify why magic realism should be regarded as inherently Latin American (Chanady 1995, 131). But remedy was at hand: resourceful critics enlisted Carpentier's concept of *lo real maravilloso* to explain why it should be a Latin American privilege to produce magic realist works. According to this "Americanist" interpretation of magic realism, the writing springs directly from the continent's supposedly marvellous nature, history and culture, and is characterized by specific elements and motifs that derive mainly from autochthonous myth and legend. Critics frequently point to Carpentier's or Miguel Ángel Asturias' fiction as examples, the latter's *Hombres de Maíz* frequently being seen as a retelling of the Popol Vuh. However, it may be asked in how far these writers are really part of the tradition they are presenting, for much of their interest in and knowledge of Latin American myths derives from European studies in anthropology (see Durix, 107ff. and Chanady 1986, 57-58). Nevertheless, the Americanist argument has been made a number of times, and not only from a Latin American point of view. David K. Danow only recently wrote:

> Magical realist texts derive from a host of Latin American realities. Among the more apparent sources are an imposing geography, composed of daunting natural barriers – impenetrable forests, dangerous waters, and portentous heights – and a frequently unbearable humid Caribbean atmosphere that inevitably dampens the spirits. The geographical proximity of the jungle to the city elicits a related omnipresent sense of the closeness of the prehistoric past to modern life, of myth, or primordial thinking, to scientific thought. Yet that closeness, filtered through a creative human imagination nurtured on a mix of the traditions and beliefs of the native Indians, as well as those of the transplanted Africans and Europeans

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> absorbed into that world of prolific cultural hybridization, allows for a seemingly inevitable portrayal of the fantastic as factual and realistic.[44]

I have quoted Danow at some length to point out some of the problems of seeing magic realism as an inherently Latin American phenomenon. First of all, the excerpt presents Latin American fiction and reality from a decidedly Western, not to say suspiciously Romantic perspective – as noted above, one needs to look from the outside in order to describe a place in terms of the strange or marvellous. Latin America here is endowed with a strangeness, albeit an alluring one, that is diametrically opposed to the implied normalcy of the Western critic's reality, thereby affirming the basic colonial division into "them" and "us"; and this division is not cancelled out by the re-evaluation of the other side as positive. With respect to Latin American fiction, the First World thus provides the foil against which the world depicted in a magic realist text can first be perceived as magic. From this it would follow that to a Latin American reader, who presumably is accustomed to such an exotic reality, the same text should appear more or less realistic.

This conclusion strikes me as extremely problematic. Disregarding for the moment the finer points of the question of realism and representation, I hasten to acknowledge that the assessment of a text as realistic to a certain extent depends on a reader's cultural background. The distance between a Latin American magic realist text and a familiar external reality may well be greater for a non-Latin American reader.[45] However, just as realist texts no more mirror the world than other texts do, but depend just as much on the reader's acceptance of certain conventions, it is naïve to assume a correspondence between magic realist texts and Latin American reality. In fact, as I will shortly show, magic realist texts themselves subvert a naïve notion of realism as a natural and objective mode of representation by exposing the narrative conventions on which realism is based.

Even more problematic than the correspondence view is that, in the end, the Americanist argument boils down to a thematic approach. If magic realism indeed were an exclusively Latin American mode, it must be based on certain elements unique to Latin America, such as particular historical events or indigenous myths. But why should the incorporation of Latin American myth into a realistic setting make a text magic realist, whereas the incorporation of, say, African or Asian myth does not? The

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[44] *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*, Lexington, 1995, 71.

[45] On the question of recognizing mimesis in postcolonial literature, see also Durix, 45-46 and 56ff.

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restriction of the mode to a single continent simply does not make sense, for as soon as Latin American reality is regarded with a view not to its contents, but to its structure, it becomes clear that similar conditions of mythological beliefs juxtaposed with scientific thought prevail in many other societies as well, most obviously perhaps in those of formerly colonized countries. Assuming that artistic form is in some way connected to historical, political, social and cultural context,[46] literatures from former colonies might – though always under the postcolonial studies *caveat*![47] – be expected to exhibit certain structural similarities. Magic realism would then have to be seen as a mode available to postcolonial writing in general. And indeed, contemporary criticism has frequently characterized magic realism as an inherently postcolonial mode.[48]

An expansion of the Americanist argument can be found in Geoff Hancock's appropriation of magic realism to Canadian fiction. Rejecting Carpentier's claim that the marvellous can be found exclusively in Latin America, Hancock relocates the concept of *lo real maravilloso* in Canada:

> As a western Canadian, whose home town was New Westminster, B.C., I experienced the improbable on a daily basis. You might expect logging, fishing, mining, but you would be amazed by the magic, myth and metaphor in the midst of such everyday occurrence. (Hancock 1986, 30)

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[46] This is not to say that art is determined by its context, but merely that it is influenced by it. While one may anticipate that social change will trigger a change in literary form, that form cannot be predicted. Postcolonial criticism, however, has argued for the determining influence of the context of production, suggesting that certain circumstances are favourable to the emergence of specific forms, which prevail in literary works from former colonies (see Durix, 3).

[47] The bracketing of literatures from former colonies under the label "postcolonial" obscures differences in historical experience and present conditions of postcoloniality, as well as the diversity of fictional output. Nevertheless, shared concerns such as language usage, cultural hybridity and critique of Eurocentrism, as well as similar forms of representation arguably make it useful to group these admittedly diverse literatures together (see John Thieme, "Introduction", *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, ed. John Thieme, London, New York and Sydney, 1996, 1-9; see also Salman Rushdie's 1983 essay "Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 61-70).

[48] See Durix or Cooper. Fredric Jameson has maintained that "magic realism depends on a content which betrays the overlaps of the coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features" (311).

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In Canada, too, life is full of "extraordinary events" and "the incredible"; here, too, one is "surrounded by fantastic reality". Canadian reality is as marvellous as its Latin American counterpart:

> I did not have to read Miguel Angel [*sic*] Asturias to find the marvellous. I had been living in Guatemala all along. There was no difference between the Colombia of Gabriel García Márquez and the British Columbia of my experience. (*Ibid.*, 32)

Latin America's claim to magic realism as the authentic expression of its marvellous reality is paralleled by Hancock's British Columbia on every count: the "startling" landscape "lends itself to the flamboyant rhetorical devices of magic realism"; its population of "fishermen, lumber barons, larger-than-life politicians" are "folkloric characters" which "provide rich and wonderful models"; and Latin America's ancient Maya, Aztec and Toltec cultures find their equivalents in the Native American cultures of British Columbia. Canada is thus equally characterized by a collision of European rational thought with native mythic thinking, a juxtaposition which, as the essay suggests, is reflected in magic realism's mixture of the realistic and the fantastic (*ibid.*, 32-33).

Hancock's argument is problematic, not because of his claim that there are Canadian writers writing in a magic realist mode, for there undoubtedly are, but because it constitutes a completely unnecessary attempt to legitimize Canadian uses of magic realism through a Canadian version of *lo real maravilloso*. Hancock relies on the same naïve notion of correspondence as the Americanists do when he suggests that magic realist fiction springs directly from conditions prevailing in Canada. This, however, is to disregard the necessarily constructed nature of fiction.[49]

In an attempt to acquit Hancock's essay of this charge, one might benevolently assume that the author is propagating not so much an ontologically as an epistemologically based marvellous. Canada's marvellous reality appears indistinguishable from, or perhaps extant solely in, its fiction when Hancock writes: "as I look at my shelf filled with Canadian examples, I see that miracles are not found only in Latin America" (Hancock 1986, 36). Here, it seems that the marvellous Canadian reality lies not so much in what Canada is, but in how its people experience and represent it. Unfortunately, internal contradictions make a consistent reading of Hancock's essay difficult, for a few pages later he locates the Canadian marvellous in an ontological reality after all when he remarks:

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[49] On this point, see also Durix, 145.

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"Writers have to work hard to invent this kind of reality where the marvelous exists in the actual" (*ibid.*, 45). Ultimately, Hancock's essay is openly programmatic in that it assigns to Canadian writers a fundamental role in shaping a national consciousness: "The duty of our writers is to name things, to write themselves into existence." Writers are called on to "shake off previous assumptions that Canada [is] a dull place" and create instead a vision of a marvellous Canada through magic realist fiction (*ibid.*, 32; see also 36 and 47). As Jean-Pierre Durix has pointed out, these "nationalistic undertones" make Hancock's attempted definition of magic realism somewhat problematic to work with (Durix, 145).

Whereas Hancock merely re-models the Americanist argument to fit Canada, thereby unwittingly invalidating it, it is possible to pursue the logical implications of the Americanist argument even further. Assuming that magic realism can indeed be seen to arise in response to the co-existence of heterogeneous world-views, it cannot be restricted to postcolonial literatures, for such circumstances most decidedly obtain also Western societies.

Although in post-Enlightenment times the European world-view has been equated with rationalism, empiricism and scientific thought, these are merely the dominant paradigms, not the only ones. Far from being homogenous in outlook, Western as well as postcolonial societies are characterized by different and often contradictory ways of thinking that exist side by side. This readily becomes visible in the way that even individuals who proclaim a rational-scientific outlook may adhere to various forms of superstitious belief. Non-scientific modes of thought exist also outside such shared beliefs, for example in individualized systems of magical causation like the ones frequently (though not exclusively) constructed by children.

Many interpretations of the world that are incompatible with modern science belong to the category of magical thought. Magical thought can broadly be defined as the belief in, or the construction of, causal connections between particular events or items that are due to mystical forces beyond the human sphere. These connections are then used to explain events or to work toward a desired outcome. In the Western world, magical beliefs are frequently thought of as illogical and irrational. However, it has been argued that, within their cultural context, apparently irrational beliefs can seem quite rational.[50] Furthermore,

[50] See Steven Lukes, "Some Problems about Rationality" (1967), in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan R. Wilson, Oxford, 1970, 203ff. and 212-13. I.C. Jarvie and Joseph Agassi have differentiated between rational action (an action being rational if directed towards a goal)

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modern science and magic have been seen to proceed from the same basic desire to understand and control nature; to paraphrase Sir James Frazer, science is magic that works.[51]

Although magic presumably has been ousted from the Western pantheon of knowledge by science, a development traced by Keith Thomas in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*,[52] the contemporary revival of the occult and various forms of mysticism more than amply illustrate the persistence of magical thought even in societies with a predominantly scientific outlook. Anthropological, sociological and psychological studies suggest that magical thought needs to be regarded as a civilizational *conditio sine qua non*.[53] For a long time, technological societies refused to acknowledge a continuum between so-called primitive and modern cultures. Nevertheless, as a fundamental strategy of explaining the world, magic plays an important role also in Western societies, if on a less obvious level (see Chapter 8). Regardless of whether they are valid or not, these magical beliefs are relevant to everyday life; as social scientists have pointed out, magic can be said to "work" insofar as it has very real effects indeed on a psychological and social level. It has therefore been proposed that, in trying to understand human thought and behaviour, magic must be taken seriously – not in the sense of believing in it, but as a cultural phenomenon that needs to be investigated from a rational-scientific perspective. By refusing to consider magic as a form of knowledge, one forgoes the opportunity to gain insight into a fundamental aspect of human nature (see Haarmann 1992, 30).

Magic realist fiction undertakes just such a rational investigation into the role that non-rational modes of thought play in human existence (see Chapter 8). Reading the mode in this way, I strongly disagree with Carpentier's claim that representing the marvellous requires faith on the part of the author. It is perfectly possible to present a magical world-

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and rational belief (a belief being rational if it satisfies some criterion of rationality). These are understood as weak and strong rationality, respectively. Magical actions would then qualify as rational in the weak sense ("The Problem of the Rationality of Magic" [1967], in Wilson 1970, 173 and 179).

[51] "The true or golden rules constitute the body of applied science which we call the arts; the false are magic" (Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* [1890], New York, 1951, Part I, Vol. I, 222). On continuities between science and magic, see also Robin Horton, "African Traditional Thought and Western Science", in Wilson 1970, 131-71.

[52] *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (1971), Harmondsworth, 1991.

[53] See Harald Haarmann, *Die Gegenwart der Magie: Kulturgeschichtliche und zeitkritische Betrachtungen*, Frankfurt am Main and New York, 1992, 34.

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view from a believer's perspective without the author necessarily sharing this world-view. In fact, magic realist fiction characteristically opens up two perspectives simultaneously, a realistic and a magical one, as will be shown below (see Chapter 4).

Seeing that heterogeneous modes of thought prevail in all societies, it does not make much sense to impose geographical restrictions upon magic realism. While postcolonial writers may write in a magic realist mode more frequently or more consistently than Western writers because the opposing world-views clash more sharply within their cultures, this does not exclude other writers from using similar techniques. As Amaryll Chanady has pointed out: "If magical realism is the amalgamation of a rational and an irrational world view, then we can include in this category works such as Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, in which the devil makes his appearance in twentieth century Moscow" (Chanady 1985, 21). She goes on to compare this to Latin American magic realist works such as Asturias' *Hombres de Maíz*:

> In both these cases, we have a coherent code of the supernatural, or a set of norms which guide the characters' interpretation of their surroundings according to a world view that differs from that of logic and reason [....] The difference is that the irrational world view in one represents the primitive American mentality, while in the other, it corresponds to European superstitions.[54]

Wendy B. Faris similarly finds that Western magic realist writers draw on "urban, 'first world', mass cultural analogues of the primitive belief systems that underlie earlier examples of Latin American magical realism".[55] As example, she names the kind of writing found in tabloid newspapers and magazines. The claim that magic realism is an exclusively Latin American phenomenon can therefore be invalidated on grounds of structural similarities between all societies, making the mode a global one. Faris persuasively argues that, while magic realist texts of course are rooted in the cultural and historical context of their

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[54] Chanady designates all modes of thought that are incompatible with scientific discourse as supernatural. The term is problematic in that it is historically and culturally contingent.

[55] "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction", in Zamora and Faris, 183.

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production, there exist significant similarities that make it useful to group all magic realist texts together for purposes of literary analysis.[56]

However, this is not the most important argument against what Rawdon Wilson has called "the geographical fallacy".[57] As noted above, the problem lies in the underlying assumption of the Americanist argument that magic realism is intrinsically connected to an existing marvellous reality. It is a gross oversimplification to understand magic realism (or, for that matter, any other artistic mode) as a natural form of expression deriving directly from an external reality. While the emergence of the magic realist mode is certainly connected to the social and historical circumstances of its production, the relationship is much more complex than the all too linear one implied by the Americanist argument. Obviously, the co-existence of heterogeneous discourses is relevant to magic realism insofar as these discourses provide much of the material writers draw on,[58] but the combination of traditionally incompatible modes is very much a literary technique – a reflection not of, but on an external reality. Like all fiction, magic realist texts take up a variety of elements from what Wolfgang Iser has called "the real" and actively transform these to create a new, decidedly fictional world that engages with an extratextual reality through difference.[59] As a way of representing (or rather: re-presenting) the world through fiction, magic realism cannot be restricted to certain geographic locations. Isabel Allende, frequently considered a second generation Latin American magic realist, has explained:

> What I don't believe is 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

[56] Faris, 187, n. 7. While, of course, I agree, I would hesitate to conclude from this that magic realism can without further ado be subsumed under postmodernism, as Faris and Theo D'haen suggest (see D'haen 1995a).

[57] "The Metamorphoses of Fictional Space: Magical Realism", in Zamora and Faris, 223 (revised version of "The Metamorphoses of Space: Magic Realism", in Hinchcliffe and Jewinski, 61-74).

[58] However, writers are not restricted to existing legends, myths, or superstitions. Magic elements can also be individual creations (see Chanady 1986, 56 and 1985, 22).

[59] In Iser's scheme, the real that enters into the fictionalizing act is not limited to objective reality, but includes theoretical discourses, fictional works, organizational structures, etc. (Wolfgang Iser, "Akte des Fingierens, oder, Was ist das Fiktive im fiktionalen Text?", in *Funktionen des Fiktiven*, eds Dieter Henrich and Wolfgang Iser, Poetik und Hermeneutik 10, Munich, 1983, 123, n. 2).

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> place in the absurd, unexplainable aspects of magic realism [....] Magic realism is all over the world. It is the capacity to see and to write about all the dimensions of reality.[60]

My reading of the mode also comes to the conclusion that magic realism is very much concerned with the reality it springs from. This idea will be examined extensively in Part Three.

I have deliberately taken a few pages to discuss approaches that limit magic realist fiction to Latin American or postcolonial literature, for to ignore this debate risks blending out the special circumstances of literary production that exist in postcolonial societies. One might in fact suspect that the post-Boom popularity of magic realism has tempted other critics to appropriate it to their own literatures by pushing an "internationalist" interpretation of the mode. Looking at such highly debatable strategies of legitimation as the "it-was-originally-European-anyway" approach or the "our-reality-is-just-as-marvellous-as-yours" tactic, one feels such accusations might be justified. I do not want to deny that the post-colonial situation may have influenced the development of certain representational modes more commonly found in formerly colonized countries, making postcolonial literature in many ways quite distinct from other literatures. Nevertheless, I will show that magic realist techniques may profitably be employed by Western writers as well. It has been suggested that magic realism is one of many new literary forms that, in a quasi-reversal of Western colonization, come from the cultural margins to revitalize the centre. As Jean-Pierre Durix has it, "the writers from the 'margins of empire' are beginning to revolutionize literature in ways which are anything but peripheral" (Durix, 11). Ernst Reckwitz has similarly pointed to the renewal that postcolonial literatures have effected in British fiction.[61] It will therefore prove illuminating, both with a view to British literature and the debate on magic realism, to see how the mode has been adapted by authors writing from Britain.

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[60] Isabel Allende, "The Shaman and the Infidel" (Interview), *New Perspectives Quarterly*, VIII/1 (1991), 54; quoted in Faris, 187, n. 10.

[61] See "Der Roman als Metaroman: Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*; Kazuo Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills*; John Fowles, *Mantissa*", *Poetica*, XVIII (1986), 140-64.

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CHAPTER 2

A WORKING DEFINITION

The problem of defining literary kinds

My discussion so far has followed Gonzáles Echevarría's suggestion that the history of the term "magic realism" can be divided into three distinct phases, the last having been sparked off by Angel Flores' essay. However, the fact that the term has been in continuous use since then is not matched by a continuity in meaning. Although shorthand definitions of magic realism for the most part still boil down to some variant of Flores' catchy definition of magic realism as an "amalgamation of realism and fantasy", the current critical discussion focuses on texts of a rather different order than the ones Flores had in mind. Whereas Flores regarded the writings of Jorge Luis Borges as paradigmatic of what he called magical realism, the term is now applied to fiction by writers like García Márquez or Salman Rushdie, and many critics find the inclusion of Borges' writings in this category problematic, if not outright confusing.[1] Moreover, Flores' formulation is much too general to allow a distinction between magic realism and other genres or modes that combine heterogeneous elements, such as surrealism, science fiction or fantastic literature. Therefore, amendment seems called for.

[1] See Durix, 116; Bényei, 155; and Wilson 1995. Wilson argues that Borges' fictional worlds are logically derived from constructive axioms assumed by the writer and are internally coherent and uniform; therefore, they belong to fantasy. Magic realism by contrast intertwines incompatible codes to create a hybrid space characterized by "plural worldhood" (Wilson 1995, 226). The persistent mislabelling of Borges as magic realist perhaps goes back not only to Flores, but also to Borges' essay "El arte narrativo y la magia", which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 8.

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Although there is no shortage of more recent attempts to define magic realism, the results are unsatisfactory. Despite a certain critical consensus as to which works are to be considered magic realist, theoretical definitions fall short for two basic reasons: either they are too broad, making discrimination between texts impossible, or, in an attempt to avoid the former defect, they are unduly rigid and exclude all but a very small number of texts from consideration, thereby prematurely cutting off critical discussion.

Of course, the dilemma of definition is not peculiar to magic realism. Similar problems arise in virtually every attempt to define literary kinds, no matter whether the object of discussion is relatively specific, like the aphorism, or vast, like the novel.[2] In his well-known introduction to genre theory, Alastair Fowler observes that "genres at all levels are positively resistant to definition".[3] This resistance may in part be attributed to the fact that literary kinds are essentially metamorphic in nature. Indeed, it has become a commonplace of genre theory that any definition of a particular genre becomes obsolete with each new work considered within that framework. Far from being convenient pigeon-holes for sorting texts, genres are always in flux. As Tzvetan Todorov notes, "*every* work modifies the sum of possible works, each new example alters the species".[4] Fowler similarly writes:

> Every literary work changes the genres it relates to [....] Consequently, all genres are continuously undergoing metamorphosis. [5]

However, received genres are unsettled not only by new texts, but also by new interpretations of existing texts. As Deborah Madsen has said, "every experience of genre (each new text and each new reading) changes the generic definition".[6] This not only entails resistance to definition, but over longer periods of time often also leads to

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[2] See J.J. Oversteggen, "Genre: A Modest Proposal", in *Convention and Innovation in Literature*, eds Theo D'haen, Rainer Grübel and Helmuth Lethen, Utrecht Publications in General and Comparative Literature 24, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1989, 17-35; and Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature*, London and New York, 1990, 96.

[3] Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (1982), Oxford, 1997, 40.

[4] *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (*Introduction à la Littérature Fantastique*, 1970), trans. Richard Howard, Ithaca: NY, 1975, 6; emphasis in the original.

[5] Fowler, 23. Perhaps one should rather say "the genres it is related to", that is, by the critic. Leaving out the critic falsely suggests that literary categories exist in and of themselves, and that literary works inherently belong to them.

[6] *Rereading Allegory: A Narrative Approach to Genre*, Basingstoke, 1995, 22.

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considerable changes in the meaning of generic labels, though these changes may be obscured by the fact that a label seems to have been in continuous use (see Fowler, 134). The history of the label "magic realism" discussed above is an instance in point: crucial changes in meaning have taken place. And one may confidently expect further development, for each critical discussion of magic realism, by highlighting certain aspects and downplaying others, by introducing new texts or relating the mode to different literary forms and traditions, will cause a shift in the understanding of the term. Genre theory shows that magic realism's resistance to definition is not only natural, but, in the interest of both writers' and critics' creativity, quite desirable.

Rejecting an essentialist view of literary kinds as stable, pre-existing categories does not mean that the concepts of genre and mode are no longer workable. Genres and modes can be understood as useful fictions, constructs motivated by pragmatic critical interest. This in no way renders them less significant, for without such tools it would be difficult – if not impossible – to discuss literature above the level of the individual work. Retrospectively constructed from a critical vantage point, literary categories allow texts to be grouped for purposes of comparative analysis. Todorov stresses the need for such categories in literary criticism:

> failing to recognize the existence of genres is equivalent to claiming that a literary work does not bear any relationship to already existing works. Genres are precisely those relay-points by which the work assumes a relation with the universe of literature. (Todorov 1975, 8)

Gérard Genette has similarly argued in defence of literary kinds that, over and beyond the individual text, critical analysis may and indeed should be interested in a text's hidden or manifest connections to other texts, its "transtextuality".[7] Transtextual relations include intertextuality in the strict sense[8] as well as "paratextuality", which is produced by imitation and transformation, as for example in pastiche or parody. Transtextuality furthermore refers to "that relationship of inclusion that links each text to the various types of discourse it belongs to" (*ibid.*, 82); among these are the genres and their characteristic features such as topic, mode, and form. Genette calls this set of external references the

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[7] *The Architext: An Introduction* (*Introduction à l'Architexte*, 1979), trans. Jane E. Lewin, Berkeley and Los Angeles, Oxford, 1992, 81.

[8] This is "the literal presence (more or less literal, whether integral or not) of one text within another" (*ibid.*, 81-82).

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"*architext*", and a text's relationship to its architext he calls "*architextuality*, or simply *architexture*". The architext is an integral part of the way in which a text functions: "The architext is [...] everywhere – above, beneath, around the text, which spins its web only by hooking it here and there onto that network of architexture" (*ibid.*, 83). Not to take that web of connections into account would leave the literary analysis incomplete, at least in the discipline of poetics, "whose object, let us firmly state, *is not the text, but the architext*" (*ibid.*, 84; emphasis in the original).

Giving up essentialist notions of literary categories allows one to jettison the equally restrictive and unproductive idea that these categories are mutually exclusive. While new texts are certainly produced and read with reference to existing analytical categories, it is not a matter of slipping a text into the appropriate slot, but of entering into a dialogue with established forms: not conformity to, but deviation from existing models is what matters. The inevitable gap between an abstract generic model and its concrete realizations means that a text may profitably be considered within the framework of several different genres or modes. Furthermore, since genres and modes are in no way natural, but result from critical interest, a re-grouping into completely new sets is also thinkable and will illuminate other characteristics of the chosen texts. In recognition of the "multigeneric text", genre theory has spoken of "generic dominants" and "accompanying functions" that allow multiple membership,[9] as well as of "hybrids" and "generic modulation", which combine two or more generic repertoires.[10] Over time, the process of mixing genres may lead to generic transformation and the formation of new literary kinds, though this formation always takes place in and through critical discourse, not independently. Once again, magic realism is a case in point: the very term indicates that it mixes existing genres and modes, and many magic realist texts have been examined under a variety of other headings, including historiographic metafiction, "fantastic histories", fantastic literature, "postmodern gothic" and "postmodern realism".[11]

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[9] Madsen, 14-16. The terms are taken from the reader reception theory of Robert Jauss, who in turn adapted them from Roman Jakobson. Jakobson argued that language fulfils several functions, which, depending on the context, may act either as dominant or determining functions, or as subsidiary or accessory constituents ("Linguistics and Poetics" [1960], in Lodge 1988b, 37).

[10] See Fowler, 183ff. and 191ff.

[11] See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), London and New York, 1996, Chapter 7; Jana French, "Fantastic Histories: A Dialogic Approach to a Narrative Hybrid", *Dissertation Abstracts International*, Ann Arbor: MI, 1996 (Digital

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In the end, then, magic realism offers critics not much greater conceptual difficulty than do other literary categories. In fact, both its shifts in meaning over time and its frequent and somewhat diverse usage in current criticism are welcome signs that the mode is still vital and productive. Nevertheless, for the purpose at hand it is obviously necessary to specify what I mean when I talk about magic realism, especially as the concept will be applied to works of fiction not previously viewed in this context.

Methodically, I would like to base my working definition of magic realism on suggestions made by two different critics in quite different contexts. One of these is Tamás Bényei's proposal that instead of starting with theoretical formulations and assumptions, "one could look at the group of texts considered 'magic realist' by the little critical consensus there is on the matter" and proceed from there.[12] Given the vast number of rather vague definitions to choose from, it seems to make sense to base one's definition on the texts that have given rise to the current critical usage of the term.

Critics largely seem to agree that the term came to be used in its current meaning during the 1960s, when scholars of Latin American fiction apparently felt that here was a new way of writing distinct enough to be analysed in its own right. The reference point to which the majority of critics hark back is Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967), which was translated in 1970 as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Frequently listed as a typical example of magic realist writing, it has even been called the "*fons et origo* of magic realism for the present generation".[13] This is not to say, as Jeanne Delbaere does, that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* "initiated" the magic realist novel (Delbaere 1992, 77). Although many magic realists arguably are indebted to García

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Dissertations, DAI-A57/11); Neil Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism*, London, 1990, 184-208; Theo D'haen, "Postmodern Gothic", in *Exhibited by Candlelight: Sources and Developments in the Gothic Tradition*, eds Valeria Tinkler-Villani and Peter Davidson, Studies in Literature 16, Amsterdam and Atlanta: GA, 1995, 283-94; Beate Neumeier, "Postmodern Gothic: Desire and Reality in Angela Carter's Writing", in *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, eds Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith, Manchester and New York, 1996, 141-51; and José David Saldívar, "Postmodern Realism", in *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, gen. ed. Emory Elliott, New York, 1991, 521-41.

[12] Bényei, 150; see also Durix, 146.

[13] Patricia Merivale, "Saleem Fathered by Oskar: *Midnight's Children*, Magic Realism, and *The Tin Drum*", in Zamora and Faris, 329 (revised version of "Saleem Fathered by Oskar: Intertextual Strategies in *Midnight's Children* and *The Tin Drum*", *ARIEL*, XXI/3 [July 1990], 5-21). See also Bényei, 150; Faris, 167; Danow, 8 and *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* (ed. Ian Ousby, London, 1989), s.v. "magic realism".

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Márquez's work,[14] there are also earlier texts that contain magic realist elements comparable to those found in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for example Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* or Günter Grass' *Die Blechtrommel* (1959; translated as *The Tin Drum*). And one need not stop a mere fifty years ago. Kafka's "Die Verwandlung" (1915), translated as "Metamorphosis", has been cited time and again as a precursor, if not an outright example, of magic realism.[15] My aim in pointing out García Márquez's prominence is not to identify the first magic realist text – I would readily agree that the idea of tracing the origins of a genre back to an individual writer is a post-Romantic myth.[16] Still, García Márquez might be regarded as what Fowler calls an "originator", an individual who, while not actually the creator of a new genre or mode, nevertheless is instrumental to its establishment, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* can be seen as one of those great texts that take on "an almost paradigmatic function", popularizing and institutionalizing a new kind of writing that may develop into a separate genre (Fowler, 155 and 154).

Since the 1960s, a great many texts have been considered within the framework of magic realism, and a number of writers have more or less explicitly alluded to it in their works.[17] All of this has served to broaden and redefine the concept and will obviously continue to do so. Nevertheless, most critics writing today do seem to have a certain group of core texts in mind when they speak of magic realism, and it is from these that I derive my understanding of the term. Apart from Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, paradigmatic texts include not only Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* and Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum*, but also the novels of Salman Rushdie, especially *Midnight's Children* (1981), Isabel Allende's *La Casa de los Espíritus* (1982), which was translated in 1985 as *The House of the Spirits*, and Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World* (1977). Other recent texts that repeatedly have been listed as examples of magic realism are Patrick Süßkind's *Das Parfum* (1985; translated as *Perfume*), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991). These texts can be considered

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[14] Its influence has been made out in Rushdie's novels (see Merivale, 329, and Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*, London, 1989, 65ff.), and Jack Hodgins has even acknowledged it personally (see Hancock 1979, 62).

[15] See Chanady 1985, 20-21 and 1986, 50; Faris, 167; Wilson 1995, 220, 223, 224; and Durix, 51. Of course, the classification of texts as magic realist that predate the current usage of the term is a back-projection; for example, in the case of Grass' *The Tin Drum* it may well have been its similarity to *Midnight's Children* that first led to its being considered a magic realist text (see Merivale 1995).

[16] See Fowler, 154 and Madsen, 9.

[17] Julian Barnes for example satirizes the mode in *Flaubert's Parrot* (New York, 1990, 99).

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representative of magic realism in so far as they are central to the current critical understanding of the term.[18]

The second suggestion I would like to take up is Alastair Fowler's suggestion that instead of thinking of genres as classes, a conception that has dominated genre theory in the past, one might rather think of them as types (see Fowler, 37). Seeing genre as a means of classification led Romantic and modern genre theorists to set up hierarchical systems analogous to those used in botany or zoology, in which inclusions are univocal and hierarchical (see Genette 1992, 73). The limits of the analogy are obvious. In biological taxonomy, classes[19] are clearly definable and mutually exclusive, reflecting not only similarities between the members of one class but also a common evolutionary background; class membership is based on a set of traits compulsory to all constituent elements. But with literary categories not only is it extremely difficult to delineate them to the point of mutual exclusivity, it is also counter-productive. Neither is the idea of a common ancestor congenial to the processes of influence and cross-fertilization that characterize the production and reception of literature.

Regarding literary kinds as types instead of as classes implies a completely different notion of genre. Rather than a means of classification, genre becomes a means of communication, that is, a way of conveying information about a text. Since a reader always perceives a text in relation to other texts – or, as Genette would say, in terms of its architext – genre is instrumental in interpreting the text. As Fowler explains: "If we see *The Jew of Malta* as a savage farce, our response will not be the same as if we saw it as a tragedy" (38). Following Fowler's revised approach to genre, a reader may think of a text as a manifestation of a certain genre, which differs from thinking of a text as a member of a class in that there is no checklist of defining criteria to be fulfilled. There exist significant similarities between the text and other embodiments of the type, but there is no smallest common denominator to which all manifestations can be reduced. A theory that sees genre in terms of type instead of class furthermore is able to account for changes in a genre over time, for the genre is not petrified by essential characteristics, but is open to modification through each new text which comes to be seen as an example of that genre.

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[18] Bényei speaks of "the currently accepted magic realist 'canon'" (Bényei, 151). I have avoided the term for its connotations of hierarchy and literary worth, but it is essentially the same idea.

[19] I am retaining the term because Fowler uses it for all *taxa* or taxonomic groups, of which classes actually constitute only one.

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In relying on similarities between texts rather than a set of essential traits, Fowler's approach to literary kinds is much indebted to prototype theory and Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance. Prototype theory originally grew out of psychological studies on mental categorization and was developed further in cognitive linguistics and semantics.[20] Unlike other theories of semantic meaning, such as feature semantics, which treats cognitive categories as homogenous and clearly definable based on the presence or absence of certain essential features, prototype semantics views categories as ranging from typical representatives or "prototypes" to less typical, peripheral examples.[21] A prototype can be visualized either as an existing category member or as an idealized abstraction; researchers still differ as to whether the organization of mental categories is based on exemplars, that is, on memories of actual specimens, or on a fictitious combination of the most typical attributes.[22] Transferred to the realm of genre, this means that genre membership could be attributed either on the basis of similarity to an actual work of fiction acting as prototype, or on the basis of a set of typical attributes abstracted from central examples of the genre. I would suggest that both conceptions of prototype are pertinent to literature: while the overall understanding of a genre might be based on a compilation of central elements, critical analysis often resorts to existing works as prototypes.

Prototype theory well suits literary kinds in that it treats category boundaries not as clear-cut, but as "fuzzy". The attributes of good examples of a category overlap to a large extent with those of the prototype; the overlap grows less for more peripheral examples, until the category fades out. Linguistics studies have shown that peripheral examples of a category will elicit different responses from informants: some will still count the item as an example of the given category, while others will assign it to another category.[23] Therefore, a prototype-based

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[20] For a brief overview over prototype semantics, see John J. Saeed, *Semantics*, Introducing Linguistics 2, Oxford, 1997, 37ff. For a more detailed introduction, see Friedrich Ungerer and Hans-Jörg Schmid, *An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics* (1996), London and New York, 1999, Chapter 1, esp. section 1.1.

[21] For a comparison of prototype semantics and feature semantics, see Leonhard Lipka, "Prototype Semantics or Feature Semantics: An Alternative?", in *Perspectives on Language in Performance: Studies in Linguistics, Literary Criticism and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, eds W. Lörscher and R. Schulze, Tübingen, 1987, 282-98.

[22] See Saeed, 37, and Ungerer and Schmid, 39, who adhere to the latter view.

[23] Experiments on the "fuzziness" of category boundaries were conducted by William Labov (see "The Boundaries of Words and Their Meaning," in *New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English*, eds Charles-James N. Bailey and Roger W. Shuy, Washington: D.C., 1973, 340-73, cited in Ungerer and Schmid, 16).

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definition is able to account for the disagreements so frequent in critical practice about which genre or mode a literary work falls into. The most important point about prototype theory, however, is that instead of a rigid definition based on mandatory elements, it provides a more flexible one based on a set of typical, but not obligatory attributes. Using this approach allows me to extend my working definition to include, over and beyond those few features that are category-wide but insufficient to characterize the mode, other prototypical attributes which will provide a clearer picture.

Another aspect which transfers well to the discussion of genre and mode is prototype theory's argument that not only prototypical attributes, but even quite peripheral traits may contribute to the internal cohesion of a category. Prototype theory here intersects with Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance, which is based on the idea that members of the same category "have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, – but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways".[24] Wittgenstein's well-known example is the category "game". Board games, card games, ball games and the Olympic Games all are somehow connected, but in comparing each group of games to the next, "[we] can see how similarities crop up and disappear".[25] The result is "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail".[26] These similarities Wittgenstein calls "family resemblances", for, as he explains, "the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way".[27]

It is because of its ability to open categories up and make them flexible that genre theorists have turned to the notion of family resemblances. Enlarging upon his earlier suggestion to see genres as types, Alastair Fowler draws on Wittgenstein's concept:

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[24] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen: Philosophical Investigations*, eds G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (1953, 1958), Oxford, 1967, 31; emphasis in the original. The German runs: "es ist diesen Entscheidungen garnicht [*sic*] Eines gemeinsam, weswegen wir für alle das gleiche Wort verwenden,– sondern sie sind mit einander in vielen verschiedenen Weisen *verwandt*" (*ibid.*, 31; emphasis in the original).

[25] "Ähnlichkeiten auftauchen und verschwinden sehen" (*ibid.*, 32).

[26] The German reads: "ein kompliziertes Netz von Ähnlichkeiten, die einander übergreifen und kreuzen. Ähnlichkeiten im Großen und Kleinen" (*ibid.*, 32).

[27] The corresponding German passage runs in full: "Ich kann diese Ähnlichkeiten nicht besser charakterisieren als durch das Wort 'Familienähnlichkeiten'; denn so übergreifen und kreuzen sich die verschiedenen Ähnlichkeiten, die zwischen den Gliedern einer Familie bestehen: Wuchs, Gesichtszüge, Augenfarbe, Temperament, etc. etc." (*ibid.*, 32).

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> Literary genre seems just the sort of concept with blurred edges that is suited to such an approach. Representatives of a genre may then be regarded as making up a family whose septs and individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having a single feature shared in common by all [....] Genres appear to be much more like families than classes. (Fowler, 41)

I will accordingly base my working definition of magic realism on prototypical attributes of magic realist fiction, thereby hoping to characterize the mode closely without being dogmatically exclusive.

Magic realism: genre or mode?

In recent critical studies, magic realism has been designated variously as a critical concept, a category, a literary current, a tendency, movement or trend, a discourse and a phenomenon. These terms for the most part are used far too loosely to have methodical repercussions. Within the more specific vocabulary of literary criticism, magic realism has been referred to as a genre as well as a mode. Some studies arouse a sneaking suspicion that their authors have not given much thought to a possible difference in meaning between the two terms, but quite simply use them interchangeably.[28] However, genre and mode do focus on different aspects of literature, and thus a conception of magic realism as a mode necessitates a different critical approach than if one viewed it as a genre.

Although magic realism far more frequently is referred to as a mode than as a genre, not many critics have actually commented on their choice of the term. As one of the few critics to do so, Amaryll Chanady rejects the notion of genre as too specific for magic realism (see Chanady 1985, vii and 16ff.). For her, genre is "a well-defined and historically identifiable form", whereas mode is a "particular quality of a fictitious world that can characterize works belonging to several genres, periods or national literatures", which better describes magic realism (*ibid.*, 1-2). Tamás Bényei similarly proposes that magic realism should be considered not a genre, but a mode:

> "Mode" seems to be appropriate precisely because of its vagueness: the term is narrow enough not to define the phenomenon as a genre, and

[28] See Durix, 114 or 148 and 115 or 116, respectively; Faris, esp. 164; and Zamora and Faris, 1-11.

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> broad enough to go beyond the identification of narrowly interpreted "stylistic" features. (Bényei, 150)

Although I will also discuss magic realism as a literary mode, I would argue that the distinction between genre and mode is not, as Bényei and Chanady seem to imply, merely one of degree. A mode does not differ from genre simply in that it is less fleshed out or specific; mode and genre are not located on the same continuum, but are altogether different concepts. Unfortunately, the question of genre versus mode is a hotly contested issue in literary criticism.[29] As a detailed review of the critical debate goes beyond the range of this study, I will outline only the most basic aspects.

Putting it simply, one could say that genre primarily relates to form and, at least on the level of sub-genre, content, while mode refers to manner of narration. In trying to distinguish between genre and mode, Alastair Fowler argues that genres usually are referred to in noun form (a piece is a novel, a comedy, etc.), while modes are expressed by adjectives: a piece is comic, Romantic, etc. (106). However, while he grants that mode is distinct from genre in that it does not convey any information about a text's external form, he nevertheless conceives of modes as derived from genres by selecting certain features from the corresponding genre's repertoire, leaving out the features pertaining to form (*ibid.*, 107).

I find Fowler's approach problematic, for he assumes that a mode was preceded by a corresponding "parent" genre (*ibid.*, 251). But what are the "parent" genres of modes like realism, surrealism or the absurd? As a manner of narration or, more broadly, of representation, a mode is not restricted to a single form or even a single medium. Labels like realist, surrealist, or absurd can be applied not only to novels, short stories, plays or poems, but also to films, photographs or paintings. The same is true of magic realism: it is a manner of representing a fictional world that cuts across genre boundaries and may be found in diverse forms of literature, as well as in other arts. Although the vast majority of literary criticism deals with magic realism in prose fiction, there have

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[29] Or should I say that this is fortunately so? As one of David Lodge's characters in *Small World* points out, "what matters in the field of critical practice is not truth but difference. If everybody were convinced by your arguments, they would have to do the same as you and then there would be no satisfaction in doing it. To win is to lose the game" (*Small World: An Academic Romance* [1984], Harmondsworth, 1985, 319).

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been attempts to apply the concept to drama as well.[30] There also are a number of magic realist films, often adaptations of novels, such as the Mexican *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992), based on Laura Esquivel's novel of the same title,[31] or the more recent *Big Fish* (2003), based on the novel by Daniel Wallace.[32] A similar mode might also be found in visual art; however, as explained in Chapter 1, one needs to be careful not simply to equate different concepts. Moreover, it seems to me (although this needs further investigation) that magic realism requires a form capable of presenting events in terms of cause and effect, so that the mode might not be found in non-narrative art – which is not to say that visual art cannot be narrative; but it often is not.

Unlike Fowler, Gérard Genette emphasizes the discontinuity between genre and mode. Even though for Genette the concept of mode also intersects with that of genre in so far as genres consist of modal, as well as thematic and formal, elements, modes are not regarded as derived from genres. Going back to pre-Romantic theories, Genette sharply differentiates between genres, which as aesthetic categories are culturally and historically contingent, and modes, which as "modes of verbal enunciation" are linguistic or pragmatic categories (Genette 1992, 64). As such, they may be regarded as natural or universal in so far as all users of language, regardless of any literary intention, must employ them in speaking or writing. Mode thus becomes accessible to a purely linguistic analysis excluding both thematic and formal considerations, whereas definitions of genre invariably contain thematic elements. While these intersect with elements of mode, there is no correlation between them: "mode neither includes nor implies theme; theme neither includes nor implies mode" (*ibid.*, 73). Genette suggests that genre could be visualized in terms of a coordinate system in which modes and themes are distributed along the ordinate and the abscissa, while the resulting genres are located at the points of intersection.[33] This two-dimensional model of genre may be expanded to include "a third axis of parameters"

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[30] See Marc Maufort, "Exploring the 'Other Side of the Dark': Judith Thompson's Magic Realism", in *"Union in Partition": Essays in Honour of Jeanne Delbaere*, eds Gilbert Debusscher and Marc Maufort, Liege, 1997, 191-200.

[31] *Like Water for Chocolate (Como agua para chocolate*, 1989, first translated into English as *Like Water for Hot Chocolate*, 1992), trans. Carol and Thomas Christensen, London, 1998.

[32] *Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions* (1998), London, 2003.

[33] With mathematical precision, he speaks of "a grid [...] in which the overlap between *n* thematic classes and *p* modal and submodal classes would determine a considerable number – that is, *np*, neither more nor fewer – of existing or possible genres" (Genette 1992, 77).

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containing the formal aspects (*ibid.*, 77). In "a sort of translucent cube", mode, theme and form would then determine the make-up of a genre.[34]

An important point about Genette's approach is that he bases mode solely on the "enunciating situation" (*ibid.*, 74). Texts fall into the three categories of pure narration, mixed narration or dramatic imitation,[35] which in turn can be further subdivided, for example into first-person (homodiegetic) versus authorial (heterodiegetic) narration. Unlike other literary critics and theoreticians of genre, Genette does not recognize categories like the heroic, the tragic, the comic, the fantastic or the romantic as modes, because they are historically contingent and at least to a certain extent depend on a specific thematic content (see *ibid.*, 67-68).

Although in my analysis I will not adhere to quite as strict a definition of mode as that proposed by Genette, I am nevertheless indebted to him in that I also take mode to refer not to form or content, but to manner of narration. Without wanting to detract from Genette's argument, I would propose that the heroic, tragic, comic, etc. can, in fact, be viewed as modes, to the extent that their effects depend on narrative strategies rather than on themes or motifs. While certain thematic elements undoubtedly prevail in particular modes and may therefore at first glance appear to inhere in them, mode nevertheless is not so much a question of "what", but of "how": it is the manner of narration, rather than the events narrated, that makes out the mode, for the same action could be told in any number of different registers.[36] This means that listing frequent themes and motifs is not sufficient to characterize a mode. In the case of magic realism, while I would readily agree with Lois Parkinson Zamora's observation that "[g]hosts in their many guises abound in magical realist fiction", I would not so readily agree with her subsequent claim that "they are crucial to any definition of magical realism as a literary mode".[37] Obviously (as the rest of her lucidly argued essay fortunately makes clear), it is not the presence of ghosts as such,

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[34] Genette 1992, 78. While I find Genette's "translucent cube" appealing for its neatness, perhaps that is its very fault: it simply is too neat to work in practice. As Genette himself points out, genres may belong to more than one modal, thematic or formal category at the same time (see *ibid.*, 73).

[35] Genette here is following Plato's and Aristotle's classification (see *ibid.*, 70).

[36] As Jean Bellemin-Noël put it, "c'est le discours, non l'événement, qui qualifie l'histoire: en théorie, une 'même' aventure est susceptible d'être contée en registre fantastique, merveilleux, ou même réaliste" ("Notes sur le fantastique [textes de Théophile Gauthier]", *Littérature*, VIII (1972), 3-23; quoted in Chanady 1985, 15).

[37] Lois Parkinson Zamora, "Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction", in Zamora and Faris, 497-98.

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but their function within the magic realist text that is crucial. Other critics who regard magic realism as a literary mode have similarly rejected overmuch emphasis on theme. Amaryll Chanady convincingly argues that the important point about magic realism is not that it makes use of supernatural elements, for in this it does not differ from other literary modes, but the way in which it does so. The difference between magic realist fiction and fantastic literature accordingly lies in the treatment or "modality" (Benyei, 151) of the supernatural.

My intention to discuss magic realism as a mode therefore means that my working definition as well as my analysis will focus on literary techniques, rather than characteristic themes and motifs. Obviously, in the course of the analysis it will be necessary to refer to content. However, themes and motifs will be examined not for their own sake, but with a view to their specific function.

Defining magic realism: prototypical literary techniques

In the remaining portion of this chapter, I will formulate a working definition of magic realism based on prototypical attributes, that is, on narrative and linguistic techniques typically found in magic realist fiction. Features commonly identified as magic realist will be introduced briefly. I will furthermore indicate areas of overlap and intersection, and point ahead to certain issues that have not yet been the focus of critical attention, but which are distinctive and will be examined more closely in Part Two.

The fusion of realistic and fantastic elements

The co-existence of elements from traditionally incompatible codes is probably the most notable and most noted feature of magic realist fiction, and the mode is often defined in these terms. Echoes of Flores' "amalgamation of realism and fantasy" prevail, despite the fact that contemporary critics for the most part are referring to other works than Flores. Characteristically, magic realist fiction approximates literary realism in that it presents a fictional world that is clearly recognizable as a reflection of the extratextual world, in this respect differing sharply from fantasy literature or the fairy tale: "Typically, a magical realist fictional world asserts its connection to an extratextual world [...] and may even, in the manner of canonical realism, seem to create a fenestral

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translucency through which reality flickers."[38] At the same time, however, use is made of fantastic elements that clash with the realistic features. Significantly, the fantastic elements in the magic realist text cannot be explained away, reduced or reconciled to its realism – they cannot be "recontextualized".[39] The fantastic event does not turn out to be a hallucination, a dream, an elaborate intrigue, a practical joke, or an outright lie on the part of the narrator, but is part of the fictional world. As Faris observes: "In terms of the text, magical things 'really' do happen" (167).

Rather than of fantastic elements, it might be more precise to speak of non-realistic elements, for magic realism's "magic" is by no means restricted to the fantastic in Todorov's sense of the term. Todorov defines the literary fantastic in terms of apparently supernatural occurrences whose reality status remains in doubt on the level of the text: readers and characters cannot be sure whether they merely tricks, illusions or hallucinations, or whether they are real. Enacted by a character, hesitation becomes an important theme of the fantastic text.[40] Although the magic of the magic realist text is sometimes reduced to what critics call the supernatural, it actually occupies a broader spectrum, ranging from the fantastically implausible to the outright impossible. Part of magic realism's fantastic character is in fact based on a predilection for exaggeration and excess, a "baroque" or "generally extravagant, carnivalesque style".[41] So it would be more precise to say that magic realism blends elements of the marvellous, the supernatural, hyperbole and fabulation, improbable coincidences and the extraordinary with elements of literary realism.[42]

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[38] Wilson 1995, 220. Michel Dupuis and Albert Mingelgrün similarly stress magic realist fiction's "solide ancrage dans la vie quotidienne" ("Pour une poétique du réalisme magique", in *Le Réalisme Magique: Roman. Peinture et Cinéma*, ed. Jean Weisgerber, Brussels, 1987, 221).

[39] The term is Patricia Waugh's (*Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London and New York, 1984, 101). Marguerite Alexander uses the term "naturalized" to express the same idea (see Alexander, 3). However, Chanady and Bényei use "naturalization" in the opposite sense, which is the one I will also adopt, namely to express that fantastic events are presented as though they were perfectly normal (see Chanady 1985, 104 and Bényei, 152).

[40] See Todorov 1975, Chapter 2. When the hesitation is resolved, the fantastic text moves either into the genre of the uncanny ("the supernatural explained") or the marvellous ("the supernatural accepted"; *ibid.*, Chapter 3).

[41] Faris, 185; see also Bényei, 172; Delbaere-Garant 1995, 256; and Danow, *passim*.

[42] See Bényei, 154; Danow, 67; and Chanady 1985, 55 and 53-54.

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Obviously, terms like "realistic", "non-realistic", "supernatural", "impossible", etc. cannot be avoided in any discussion of magic realism. They are problematic, for their meanings vary for different readerships; readers from different times as well as different cultures will not necessarily agree on where to draw the line between the natural and the supernatural, the potentially real and the experientially impossible. Used without further qualification, the terms implicitly refer to Western rational-empirical notions of the real. This difficulty arises with many approaches to non-realistic literature: a broad definition of fantasy as *"any departure from consensus reality"*[43] becomes unworkable especially in a postcolonial context, where "ready-made definitions of terms such as the 'supernatural' or the 'fantastic' become less precise because consensus on what reality is and what belongs to the supernatural becomes more difficult to reach" (Durix, 86). Such naïve ethnocentricity has been severely criticized by postcolonial practitioners, who quite rightly ask with what justification the Western world-view should be the norm against which everything else is measured.

When using culturally contingent terms, it becomes necessary to reveal which system serves as a point of reference. The norm of comparison is arbitrary in so far as no single perspective is intrinsically justified. However, like metafiction and many postcolonial texts, magic realist fiction self-consciously enters into a dialogue with traditional Western realism, appropriating its conventions only to immediately subvert them, thereby undermining the notion of literary realism as a transparent window on the world.[44] It therefore makes sense to use realist conventions as a backdrop or foil against which to perceive magic realism. This is not to claim hegemony for a realist mode of writing. But magic realist fiction itself suggests this as a convenient basis of comparison. In the following, I will accordingly use "non-realistic" or "fantastic" to refer to elements that, in traditional literary realism, would be rejected as incredible, fabulous, supernatural or impossible.

It must be noted that the distinction into fantastic and realistic elements at this point is based on something outside the text, namely on the conventions of a mode other than magic realism. Looking at the distinction as it is constructed inside the text will reveal a most curious reversal of the two categories (see Chapter 6). Taking the perspective into account is crucial, for attempts to define the real and the

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[43] Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*, New York and London, 1984, 21; emphasis in the original.

[44] See also Zamora and Faris, 3.

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supernatural solely from within the text go awry. Going back to Wolfgang Iser's concept of the implied reader,[45] Chanady argues that it is the text itself which tells the reader what is to be considered the norm, what deviation (see Chanady 1985, 6 and 32). On this basis, however, the fantastic would not become visible, for the magic realist text characteristically presents the fantastic as real and vice versa. Chanady herself seems to realize that merely to follow the text's definitions is insufficient: if the fantastic were in fact completely naturalized, magic realism would be indistinguishable from the marvellous. In order to explain why the fantastic elements strike the reader as such even though they are presented as real, Chanady resorts to the concept of the implied author: "the perspective presented by the text in an explicit manner is not accepted according to the implicit world view of the educated implied author" (*ibid.*, 22). However, the implied author's world-view ultimately is based on the realist conventions invoked by the magic realist text, so that after all it is something outside the text that provides the foil for the magic realist narrative.

Matter-of-factness

The coexistence of realistic and fantastic elements in itself is insufficient to distinguish magic realism from other modes or genres which also contain heterogeneous elements, such as surrealism, science fiction, or fantastic literature. The important criterion therefore is not the mere presence of such disparate elements, but the manner in which they are presented. Critics have generally commented on the imperturbable attitude magic realist texts adopt towards the incongruity of their elements. Within the text, the non-realistic or fantastic event is not perceived as improbable or impossible, but, as David Danow puts it, "is simply a *fact* of the place and is therefore told in matter-of-fact way" (87; emphasis in the original).

Most influential in drawing attention to matter-of-factness as a distinguishing criterion has been Amaryll Chanady's study *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*, in which she compares how the codes of the real and the supernatural interact in the two literary modes. At first glance, magic realism and the fantastic appear structurally similar in that both contain elements from what are felt to be two irreconcilable levels of reality. In this, they are easily distinguished from the "unidimensional" mode of the marvellous, found for example in the fairy tale or in fantasy literature,

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[45] *Der implizite Leser: Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett* (1972), Munich, 1994.

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where the supernatural does not conflict with the laws of the fictional world (Chanady 1985, 7; see also 22). In science fiction, the elements that constitute departures from realism likewise are fully integrated into the world of the text, again rendering it unidimensional. However, science fiction significantly differs from the marvellous in that its impossible events are based on rational-scientific norms of logic, making the world of science fiction "an extrapolation of our own" (*ibid.*, 4).

By contrast, magic realism and the fantastic are both bidimensional: the distinction between the real and the supernatural is preserved. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two worlds differs fundamentally in the two modes. Unlike fantastic literature, magic realist fiction does not present the supernatural "as if it were antinomious with respect to our conventional view of reality" (*ibid.*, 23). Instead of being rejected as something that cannot be, supernatural events are perceived as normal or at least possible by magic realist focalizers. According to Chanady, this "eliminates the antinomy between the real and the supernatural on the level of the text" (*ibid.*, 36). Yet, the two codes remain distinct: Chanady argues that, although resolved on the level of textual representation, the conflict remains perceivable to the reader on the semantic level.[46] Basically, this seems to tie in with her suggestion that the text's bidimensionality is upheld by a discrepancy between the world-views of the focalizer and the implied author.

I propose that magic realism's bidimensionality arises from its evocation and subsequent transgression of the narrative conventions of literary realism. The matter-of-fact manner of narration, combined with a realistic setting, calls to mind the realist mode, only to immediately come into conflict with the non-realistic events narrated. While the narrator's attitude indicates that a certain event is to be accepted as an empirically real and often not even particularly astonishing occurrence, the conventions of the realist mode point in the opposite direction, designating the event as impossible. These conflicting clues lend a certain tension to the text.[47] Consequently, I disagree with Chanady when she

[46] See Chanady 1985, 25. Unfortunately, she does not elaborate, so that the exact role of semantics remains unclear to me. Her argument is rendered no more intelligible by the fact that a few pages later she claims the exact opposite, namely that the conflict is in fact resolved on the semantic level as well: "An antinomy which exists on the semantic level is resolved in the act of reading if the focalizer does not perceive it and if the narrator invalidates the contradiction between the real and the impossible by describing both kinds of phenomena in the same way" (*ibid.*, 36).

[47] While Faris also notes that the co-presence of realistic description and fantastic elements points the reader in opposite directions (see Faris, 169), she does not link the realist feeling of the narrative to the narrator's matter-of-fact attitude.

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writes: "In contrast to fantastic literature, the supernatural in magic realism does not disconcert the reader, and this is the fundamental difference between the two modes" (Chanady 1985, 24). Admittedly, supernatural elements in magic realism are not experienced as a disturbing or threatening invasion from another realm, as in fantastic literature; on the level of the text, there is none of the character hesitation Todorov finds so typical of the fantastic, and this is in fact a fundamental difference between the two modes. Nevertheless, magic realist texts do in fact engender a moment of hesitation – it merely has been relocated to the level of the reader (see Bényei, 152). Furthermore, magic realist texts also contain something like Todorov's hesitation in that characters display uncertainty about the reality status of particular objects or events, the difference being that these are not at all unusual by realist standards (see Bényei, 175, n. 2). Magic realism's generation of reader hesitation ties in with Brian McHale's observation that, far from neutralizing the fantastic effect, an unfazed presentation of non-realistic events – or, as he calls it, "the rhetoric of contrastive banality" – actually serves to heighten the reader's amazement.[48] The discrepancy between tone and content leads to hesitation on the reader's part about how to reconcile the apparently incompatible elements, for the usual means of recontextualization, such as writing the event off as a hallucination, attributing it to an unreliable narrator, etc., are not supported by the text. The uncertainty over which set of conventions to apply in reading draws attention to these conventions as cultural constructs.

I want to suggest that magic realism's matter-of-fact narration of fantastic events is closely linked to three other aspects of magic realist narrative. As far as neighbouring genres and modes go, the text's imperturbable manner *vis-à-vis* the implausible is strongly reminiscent of the tall tale: here, too, the narrator offers an absolutely deadpan delivery of fantastically absurd events. This point will be taken up in Chapter 3. As far as narrative perspective is concerned, the narrator's unfazed attitude towards the marvellous, fabulous or fantastic exhibits interesting parallels with the magical and animistic world-view psychologists have attributed to children. Magic realist texts are in fact frequently told from a child's or at least a childlike point of view. Of course, the child's perspective as it is used in magic realist fiction is very much a literary device and does not necessarily mirror actual children's perception. Nevertheless, an analysis of the childlike focalizer affords some insight into magic realist techniques and will consequently be undertaken in Chapter 4. Finally,

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[48] *Postmodernist Fiction*, London and New York, 1987, 76.

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magic realism's strikingly unsensational rendering of incredible events is counterbalanced by a most curious tendency to present realistic events or phenomena as marvellous or fantastic, a strategy of inversion to be outlined in more detail in Chapter 6.

Literalization of metaphor and related strategies

Magic realist fiction addresses the traditional Western distinction between the literal and the figurative by rendering figures of speech oddly real on the level of the text: in magic realist fiction, metaphors become literally true.[49] For example, while the 1001 children of India's hour of Independence in *Midnight's Children* may be seen, as the narrator grants, to signify the myriad opportunities open to the new nation, they are nevertheless to be regarded – and here the narrator insists – as flesh-and-blood characters.[50] Idioms and sayings also must be taken at face value: for example, characters literally burn with love. Frequently rejected as lies or mere rhetoric by the great thinkers of modernity, in magic realist fiction figurative language acquires the referentiality, and by extension also the status, of literal language. Through techniques of literalization, magic realist fiction suggests that metaphors can be as important and true as empirical descriptions of reality.[51]

But literalization is not restricted to figurative language: thoughts and concepts are endowed with physical existence as well. I suggest that literalization is behind much of magic realism's magic, for many of the apparently fantastic events are based on a making-real of figures of speech, mental concepts, or psychological mechanisms. A number of the metamorphoses critics find so typical[52] of magic realist fiction can be understood as literalizations of animal metaphors, a reading to which attention characteristically is drawn by the text itself. The many ghosts that appear in magic realist texts likewise can often be understood as the embodiment of memories or as personifications of a nagging conscience. Furthermore, subjective impressions, such as people who do not age or

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[49] See Faris, 176 and Chamberlain, 10. Bényei argues that what happens is not so much a literalization of figurative language as a figurization of referential language, making the technique "a critique of fixed conceptual language (including referential and metaphysical illusions about language)" (166).

[50] See Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981), London, 1995, 200.

[51] Conversely, one might argue with Bényei that equating figurative and literal language reveals the notion of reference to be specious, meaning that denotative terms can describe the world no better than metaphors can.

[52] Faris (178) lists metamorphoses as a secondary characteristic of magic realism in its own right. However, it is not particularly useful simply to note the recurrence of a motif without analysing its function.

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houses that change shape, are rendered as objective fact, again becoming literally true on the level of the text.

Going beyond literalization in the strict sense of the term, I include in this category other closely related techniques. Again, they involve a transgression of linguistic and conceptual boundaries, thereby deconstructing traditional dichotomies such as abstract/concrete, word/thing, past/present. In violation of the semantic constraints governing linguistic usage, magic realist texts endow abstract entities with physical properties: emotions can be touched and smelled, memories are looked for in literal corners or become cooking ingredients.

The received distinction between the abstract and the concrete again becomes curiously blurred in lengthy inventories that indiscriminately list material objects, emotions, utterances, political principles, and theoretical concepts. Because no difference is made between the material and the ideal, ontological existence loses its significance as a criterion of value – the world of ideas is put on a par with material reality. A similar re-evaluation takes place when the past is made present, for instance through the appearance of ghosts. Although these are related to the category of literalized psychological ideas referred to above, ghosts also emphasize the importance and ongoing influence of the past by making it physically present. Such a reading of the ghosts haunting many magic realist texts ties in with magic realism's preoccupation with history (see Chapter 5). Like the recuperation of the figurative, the revaluation of the non-empirical achieved through these techniques is an important aspect of magic realism's engagement with the rational-empirical tradition. Although in the day and age of subatomic particles the real no longer simply is equated with the visible, there still is a tendency to dismiss the non-material and the non-verifiable as unreal, and therefore irrelevant. Magic realist fiction re-opens the question of what is real by tracing the profound influence that fictions (in the broadest possible sense) exert upon people's lives.

A special instance of rendering the conceptual concrete is magic realist fiction's treatment of words as things. In some texts, words take on the quality of material objects; in others, they can be seen to have physical effects, actually bringing about the events they speak of. Even more literally so than in the instances discussed above, language here merges with reality to the point of becoming solid substance. While this readily calls to mind a host of postmodern theories which hold that reality is created primarily in and through language, reverence for the quasi-ontological word – or, in some cases, Word – also concurs with important aspects of magical as well as religious belief systems. Magic's

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reliance on language to effect changes in or gain control over an external reality has widely been noted; the spell has even been regarded as the most important element in magic.[53] The flip-side of verbal magic is the linguistic taboo, which likewise bears witness to "the power of words".[54] Furthermore, in some cultures words actually are regarded as independent physical objects: according to certain Arabic beliefs, one may escape a curse by lying down on the ground and letting the words pass overhead, while in parts of Ireland, a curse, once uttered, is believed to remain in the air, where it may hover for up to seven years before finally alighting upon the victim (see Ogden and Richards, 68).

The notion of the reification of language also appears in child psychology. Studies by Jean Piaget and others suggest that, up to the age of ten, children do not distinguish between the sign and signified; to them, word and thing are identical. Piaget maintains that in the child's mind there exists a direct bond between language and the referential world, which means that it believes words capable of exerting a direct influence upon physical reality.[55] Piaget's methods and theories have been extremely influential, but also much criticized in developmental psychology. Leaving the scientific aspects to the experts, I will draw on his analysis of the child's world-view for the light it throws on the childlike perspective used in some magic realist texts that will be discussed in Chapter 4.

At the same time as rendering figures of speech real, magic realist texts retain a distinctly metaphorical or allegorical quality. Not infrequently, the suspicion creeps in whether a magic element is not to be read figuratively after all. As Bényei has observed, "events tend to become tropes and vice versa",[56] so that the reader constantly is moved back and forth between literalization and "figurization". But just as metaphors are never fully literalized because the text self-consciously allows the metaphorical level to shine through, the movement of figurization likewise is not brought to completion: the literal level is never quite left behind. *Midnight's Children* and *The Tin Drum* for example

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[53] See Bronislaw Malinowski, "Magic, Science and Religion" (1925), in *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (1948), Prospect Heights: IL, 1992, 73.

[54] Thus the title of the second chapter of C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning* (London, 1923), which deals with various beliefs that treat words as more than mere symbols.

[55] *The Child's Conception of the World* (*La Représentation du Monde chez l'Enfant*, 1926): Jean Piaget, *Selected Works*, trans. Joan and Andrew Tomlinson, London and New York, 1997, I, 60ff.

[56] Bényei, 165. Bényei here acknowledges Patricia Tobin's analysis of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (in *Time and the Novel: The Genealogical Imperative*, Princeton, 1978, 164-91).

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strongly demand allegorical readings, which, however, cannot be entirely sustained. Brian McHale has used the term "opaque" to describe allegories that "again and again [...] collapse into 'literal' texts", as can also be observed in Kafka, Beckett and Joyce (McHale, 141ff.). Consequently, much magic realist fiction appears suspended between two levels of signification, inviting a literal and a figurative reading at once. In this way, the text once more induces hesitation about how it is to be understood, simultaneously offering and retracting metaphor or allegory as a tantalizing possibility of recontextualizing the fantastic elements.[57] Many magic realist texts play quite openly on their ambivalence, insistently foregrounding the figurative aspect without in any way resolving the tension in favour of one interpretation. This flirtation with metaphorical or allegorical readings seems to me a crucial difference between magic realism and fantastic literature, which also has been credited with literalizing metaphor.[58] While magic realist fiction resembles the fantastic in that it, too, "insists upon the actuality" (Jackson, 85) of an event that might otherwise be understood as a metaphor or an allegory, in magic realism the figurative dimension always remains visible, hovering, so to say, on the surface of the text, whereas in the fantastic it can be recuperated only through the process of interpretation.

Fantastic reality

I have already mentioned another curious trait which magic realist texts exhibit to a greater or lesser degree and which might best be understood as the reverse side of magic realism's matter-of-factness: the presentation of the realistic as fantastic. While narrating with the utmost nonchalance something that in traditional realism would be rejected as outrageously incredible, "in a strange reversal of the usual conception of normality" the text treats the quotidian as though it were astounding, marvellous, fantastic (Chanady 1986, 56). In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, flying carpets or Father Nicanor's levitation by chocolate are accepted without anyone so much as batting an eye, while magnets or ice are deemed hardly credible.[59] Támas Bényei speaks of a "rhetoric of inversion" that

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[57] On the temptation of reading magic realism as allegory, see also Faris, 172; and Steven F. Walker, "Magical Archetypes: Midlife Miracles in *The Satanic Verses*", in Zamora and Faris, 350.

[58] See Todorov 1975, 76ff. and 113ff.; see also Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London, 1981, 50.

[59] See *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 34, 90, 1-2 and 18-19, respectively.

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effects the naturalization of fantastic events and, conversely, the "supernaturalization"[60] of ordinary occurrences (152).

William Spindler has maintained that naturalization and supernaturalization are actually at the root of two different definitions of magic realism. The latter recalls Roh's *Magischer Realismus* in that everyday objects are endowed with a sense of mystery and unreality, while today's magic realism springs from the naturalization of fantastic occurrences (see Spindler, 78-79). Spindler hereby attempts to reconcile the painterly and the literary concepts. However, he has overlooked an important aspect of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* if he reduces its magic realism to its matter-of-factness, for the novel characteristically combines the two techniques.

Bényei has intriguingly argued that by inverting the categories of the real and the fantastic as defined in literary realism, magic realism reveals the extent to which both the real and the fantastic are rhetorically constituted: "the degree of reality for a particular object or event is seen as an effect produced by the narrative" (153). Other critics have attributed another function to the technique of inversion, seeing it as a way of expressing the experience of living in a world that frequently has been characterized as stranger than fiction. Lori Chamberlain has linked the use of magic realism in recent North American fiction to "the increasingly fantastical quality of life in late capitalism – where people walk on the moon, go to drive-in churches, and have pet rocks" (9).

Living in such a world may be experienced as an asset. Angela Carter speaks of the "exuberance and variety of the imaginary life" that characterizes the fantastic secondary reality generated by the media,[61] and a number of critics have found that magic realism bestows a freshness upon the world by presenting it in a marvellous manner.[62] However, there is a darker, more distressing side to the experience as well, for magic realist fiction also presents the world as a chaotic, merciless, and inhumanely cruel place. The sense of living in a fantastic reality has been related to the Second World War and, more specifically, to the Holocaust. "The fact of the 'unbelievable' happening" (Alexander, 13)

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[60] Bényei takes the term from Alexis Márquez-Rodríguez, "Deslinde entre el realismo mágico y lo real maravilloso a propósito de la novelística de García Márquez", in *El punto de mira: Gabriel García Márquez*, ed. Ana María Hernández de López, Madrid, 1985, 339 (quoted in Bényei, 152).

[61] "Louise Erdrich: *The Beet Queen*" (1987), in *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings*, London, 1992, 152 (the essay is cited as Carter 1992a, the collection as Carter 1992b).

[62] See Faris, 177, and Danow, 70. Incidentally, both link the perception of the world as a wondrous place to the childlike perspective mentioned above.

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has, thus the argument, rendered the world incomprehensible and unpredictable. Now, it seems, anything that can be imagined may potentially come true, because what is true already has surpassed the thinkable. Reality itself has become incredible, inconceivable, fantastic.

The Holocaust in scale and premeditation certainly exceeds anything hitherto known in the history of humankind, and might well have given rise to a perception of the world as surpassing credibility. Nevertheless, it is possible to connect magic realism's inversion of the categories "realistic" and "fantastic" to human violence on a more general level. As Chapters 6 and 9 will show, the technique is frequently used to describe atrocities of war, governmental oppression, police brutality or racism. Natural catastrophes which inflict large-scale human suffering, for example a plague or famine, form another sub-group of events presented as fantastic, although they sharply differ from the previous instances in that they are not caused by humans. To present these situations as though they were beyond belief does not entail a refusal to acknowledge their reality. Even though some critics have accused magic realist fiction of escapism, arguing that, like fantasy literature, it provides an alternative, utopian world, this claim cannot be upheld for the majority of magic realist works, many of which are actually very political indeed. In supernaturalizing cruel events, the texts express a stunned incredulity about the state of the world, implying that the idea of such things actually happening exceeds – or should exceed – the human imagination. Within the text, a "fantastic rhetoric" is used to characterize the events as hardly credible, almost as impossible; yet, at the same time, these passages either refer to real historical events or have clearly recognizable historical parallels. Therefore, far from denying the reality of such events, the fantastic tone conveys a heightened sense of despair over the fact that, tragically, they are only all too possible.

In portraying extratextual reality as fantastic, magic realism exhibits an interesting overlap with the non-fiction novel and the New Journalism, forms of writing that use the techniques of realist fiction to narrate factual events, often making these appear unbelievable or absurd in the process. Critics have linked the emergence of the genre to the social and political climate that pervaded the United States during the 1960s.[63] Tom Wolfe, himself a well-known practitioner of the New Journalism, has stressed that, as journalists, these writers are geared towards a detailed and true depiction of a mind-boggling contemporary

[63] See John Hollowell, *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Non-Fiction Novel*, Chapel Hill, 1977, 3ff.

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reality – an aim Wolfe claims has been abandoned by contemporary novelists, all of whom have defected to the "Neo-Fabulism" of myth, parable and legend.[64] The list of novelists accused contains, among others, the name of Gabriel García Márquez, which would place magic realism at the very opposite end of the spectrum from New Journalism. It is therefore highly interesting that Lori Chamberlain should be able to argue for significant stylistic similarities between magic realist texts and a non-fiction war-novel by Michael Herr, a writer who has been counted among the New Journalists.[65] It is furthermore remarkable that both *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* should have been explicitly compared to New Journalism and the non-fiction novel.[66] But most striking is perhaps the fact that a number of magic realist writers themselves have protested vehemently against being seen as escapist fabulists. Instead, they lay claim to a high degree of verisimilitude, higher even than that of traditional realism. For all that it seems so fabulous and fantastic, thus the argument, fiction written in a magic realist mode actually is truer to life, than realist fiction. In this, magic realist writers are not after all so far removed from the practitioners of New Journalism.

The production of knowledge

I will bring my working definition to a close by outlining one final attribute of magic realist fiction, and that is its concern with the production of knowledge. At a first glance, this item may appear vague and hardly useful in characterizing a literary mode – after all, a very large part of literature is somehow concerned with aspects of knowledge. However, it is characteristic of texts in the magic realist mode that they examine critically the status of dominant as well as "Other" knowledge by tracing and revealing the manifold ways in which knowledge is produced. The strategies employed to this end are based on various features critics have identified as typical of magic realism, though as long as they are seen separately they do not really seem to contribute to the specific character of the mode. Identifying a common function allows me to group these strategies under one heading, thereby elucidating their significance for the magic realist mode.

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[64] Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism* (1975), with an anthology, eds Tom Wolfe and E.W. Johnson, London, 1977, 11; see also 43ff. and 54ff.

[65] See Chamberlain, 14. Tom Wolfe includes a text by Michael Herr in his anthology ("Khesanh" [September 1969], in Wolfe, 101-34).

[66] See Ashutosh Banerjee, "Narrative Technique in *Midnight's Children*", and Suresh Chandra, "The Metaphor of *Shame*: Rushdie's Fact-Fiction", both in *The Novels of Salman Rushdie*, eds G.R. Taneja and R.K. Dhawa, New Delhi, 1992, 28 and 81, respectively.

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Critics have repeatedly diagnosed in magic realism an obsession with history and its concomitant Western mode of production, historiography.[67] As has been pointed out above (see 40), a considerable number of magic realist works may also be categorized as "historiographic metafiction" or "fantastic histories". These works undertake rewritings of official versions of history, playfully offering alternative accounts. By telling the story from a different, usually oppressed perspective, they reveal the extent to which history never consists of purely factual and impartial accounts, but serves the interests of those who write it. Historiography's claim to objectivity again is critically examined in texts that probe the possibilities of accurately knowing the past in the first place, drawing attention to gaps in historical knowledge and the way these are filled through interpretation and reconstruction. In this, magic realist works can be said to engage in a project similar to the one tackled by philosophers of history like Hayden White, who has emphasized the historian's compromising reliance on the meaning-making power of narrative, showing an unbiased and faithful representation of the past to be impossible.[68] Roland Barthes has moved history even closer to fiction when he inquired "whether it is fully legitimate to make a constant opposition between [...] the fictional narrative and the historical narrative".[69] Its critique of Western historiography and official history once again links magic realism also to postcolonial theory and fiction.[70] It also ties in with magic realism's subversion of literary realism, which has been seen as the mode of representation *par excellence* of post-Enlightenment historiography.[71]

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[67] See Zamora and Faris, 9, as well as Faris, 169-70. On the role of history and historiography within individual works, see Gabrielle Foreman, "Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende on Call", in Zamora and Faris, 285-303; John Burt Foster, "Magic Realism in *The White Hotel*: Compensatory Vision and the Transformation of Classic Realism", *Southern Humanities Review*, XX/3 (1986), 205-19; Richard Todd, "Narrative Trickery and Performative Historiography: Fictional Representation of National Identity in Graham Swift, Peter Carey, and Mordecai Richler", in Zamora and Faris, 305-28; and Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse", in Zamora and Faris, 414 (slightly revised from *Canadian Literature*, CXVI [Spring 1988], 9-24).

[68] See "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" (1980), in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore and London, 1987, 1-25.

[69] "The discourse of history" ("Le discours de l'histoire", *Social Science Information*, 1967), trans. Stephen Bann, in *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, ed. E.S. Schaffer, Cambridge, 1981, III, 7.

[70] On postcolonialist fiction's interest in history and historiography, see Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1994, 34ff.

[71] See Roland Barthes, "L'Effet de Réel", *Communications*, XI (1968), 87.

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However, magic realist fiction not only shows up the interestedness and constructedness of historical accounts, but also asks about the respective social and psychological importance of proven historical fact versus fictitious embellishments of history. Typically, an empiricist or materialist historiographic practice based on presumably known facts will be complemented or even replaced by legend, local tales, gossip and rumour, showing how such knowledge shapes people's perception of the past just as much as, if not more than, real historical events. Magic realist fiction strongly suggests that such fictions need to be taken into consideration if one wants to understand a community's past, as well as its present.

Magic realism's propensity to make use of myth, legend and folklore has frequently been noted, as have its affinities with oral traditions.[72] While there is a danger of overemphasizing the reliance on pre-existing material, especially with respect to Latin American and postcolonial literature, such alternative forms of knowledge are an important part of what magic realism sets over against the dominant Western paradigm. The strategy calls to mind the age-old distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, which at the most basic level can be understood as two different methods of organizing knowledge about the world: *mythos* narrates the world, whereas *logos* rationally explains it. However, unlike Romanticism, which arguably regarded myth as a privileged mode of thinking and perception, magic realism is not concerned with inverting the hierarchy, but with the way different forms of knowledge production engender mental constructions of the world, thereby influencing human behaviour. In some instances, alternative forms of knowledge may prove more useful than science in understanding the world. Storytelling in particular is presented as an anthropological disposition that serves many important social and psychological functions. Magic realist fiction often uses the topos of narrating the self, at times literalizing the topos to the extent that the act of narration becomes equated with life. Frequently, the idea of constituting identity through narration is found not only on the individual level, but is broadened to include community and even national identity. Magic realist fiction thereby exemplifies how narrative knowledge, which according to Jean-François Lyotard became devalued in the West with the rise of science (see Lyotard 1984a, 27), functions as an important complement to scientific knowledge.

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[72] See Zamora and Faris, 3-4 and Faris, 165-66 and 182-83; Brennan, Chapter 4; and Durix, 153.

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A further prominent strategy can be made out in magic realist fiction that has to do with knowledge and its production, but has not yet been commented on. Notably, the texts display an abundance of authorization strategies[73] ranging from the pre-scientific to the mock-scientific, thereby revealing how all knowledge is in need of legitimation, with the form of authorization depending on the rules of the "game" for which the knowledge has been produced.[74] Some magic realist texts parody the science game and its insistence on reproducible and falsifiable empirical data by first pretending to uphold and then subverting the rules. Older strategies are also employed: frequently, the truthfulness or non-fictionality of an account is vouched for through eyewitness claims, hearsay, or the (sometimes more than doubtful) authority of the narrator. These truth claims clash with the outrageous or fantastic stories they pretend to validate, creating a tension that undermines the narrator's claims and points to the uncertainty of all knowledge.

[73] See Aleida Assmann, "Fiktion als Differenz", *Poetica*, XXI (1989), 239-60.
[74] See Lyotard 1984a, 9ff., 18 and 23ff.

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Part Two:

Literary Techniques

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CHAPTER 3

MAGIC "MONGREL" REALISM: THE ADAPTATION OF OTHER GENRES AND MODES

Having outlined the critical debate and a working definition of magic realism in the preceding chapters, I will now analyse magic realist techniques with the help of selected works from contemporary British fiction. My findings will bring the prototypical attributes outlined in the working definition more sharply into focus, thereby contributing to the ongoing debate about magic realism not only with respect to British literature, but on a more comprehensive level as well. The analysis will focus on five basic techniques. The results of the analysis will then be considered in Part Three, which discusses in how far magic realism can be said to perform a mimetic function.

The first technique to be dealt with is magic realism's adaptation of other genres and modes, which forms the topic of this chapter.

Preliminaries: aspects of hybridity

Because of its characteristic fusion of traditionally incompatible elements, magic realism frequently has been called a mixed or hybrid mode. This is a deceptively simple statement, for magic realism can be regarded as hybrid in a number of ways. Rawdon Wilson for example points to the hybrid nature of the fictional world set forth in magic realist texts: "The copresence of oddities, the interaction of the bizarre with the entirely ordinary, the doubleness of conceptual codes, the irreducibly hybrid nature of the experience strikes the mind's eye." Later, he specifies: "Two distinct kinds of fictional world have been enfolded

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together" (Wilson 1995, 210 and 222). Other approaches, oftentimes rooted in postcolonial theory, have emphasized magic realism's reliance on two different cultural traditions and two world-views, not infrequently suggesting that the mode reflects the situation of a writer living in an essentially "hybrid" postcolonial culture.[1]

However, magic realist fiction may be considered hybrid not only in its combination of different systems of thought, but also in that it often quite explicitly mixes established genres and modes of narrative representation. Although the magic elements may be completely idiosyncratic, magic realist fiction nevertheless stands within – or rather, vigorously inserts itself into – a system of written and oral culture. It has been argued that the generic hybridity of magic realist texts "confounds the capacities of the major genre systems to come to terms with them".[2] Magic realism's refusal to fit into an existing canon of genres and modes has been read as an act of postcolonial resistance against the cultural centre and its attempt to impose a received systems of generic classification onto the margins.[3] I will argue that magic realist fiction's tendency to incorporate and play on written and oral genres moreover functions to inquire into the social role of different narrative conventions (see Chapters 5 and 8).

Critical accounts of magic realism in postcolonial literatures tend to reduce the sources the mode draws on to two: a so-called native tradition on the one hand and a Western tradition on the other. Pierre Durix has examined how the cultures of colonizer and colonized join to yield the "hybrid aesthetics" of magic realism (Durix, Chapter 4; see esp. 152ff.). However, even prior to Western colonization non-Western cultures had been subject to cross-cultural contact that led to hybridization, so that the notion of a pure or authentic native tradition is essentially an "ideological representation" (*ibid.*, 10). A character of Salman Rushdie's has called this "the confining myth of authenticity, that folkloristic straitjacket" which should be replaced "by an ethic of historically validated eclecticism, for was not the entire national [in this case Indian] culture based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seems to

[1] See Slemon, 411. The postcolonial culture in question is Canada. On Canada's claim to postcoloniality, see Hutcheon 1989b, 154ff.

[2] Slemon, 408; see also Hutcheon 1989b, 151. However, as I have pointed out in the Introduction, one needs to ask what happens to magic realism's much-acclaimed subversive potential when the mode becomes established.

[3] On postcolonial literature's subversion of literary conventions and the genre canon, see Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1994, 181ff.

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fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest?".[4] It is similarly reductive to speak of "the" English or Western tradition, for the English literary canon in itself is diverse enough to have engendered a multitude of generic hybrids (see Fowler, Chapter 10). The hybrid nature of magic realist fiction therefore does not necessarily derive from the contrast between native tradition and Western thought, both wrongly homogenized, although it tends to do so with magic realist writers from a postcolonial background who "self-consciously recuperate non-Western cultural modes and non-literary forms into their Western forms (the novel, the short story, the epic poem)".[5] However, it may equally result from the juxtaposition of different Western traditions. As Zamora and Faris note: "Contemporary magical realist writers self-consciously depart from the conventions of narrative realism to enter and amplify other (diverted) currents of Western literature that flow from the marvelous Greek pastoral and epic traditions to medieval dream visions to the romance and Gothic fictions of the past century" (2).

Not surprisingly, in magic realist fiction from Britain and other Western English-speaking countries, the reliance on non-Western traditions is not as pronounced as in many postcolonial literatures. In the following, I will therefore focus on Western traditions. Most prominent among these are literary realism and the literary fantastic, which especially in Britain has a long history and which some magic realist works invoke even while setting themselves apart from it. In looking at the relationship between magic realism and the fantastic, I will suggest modifications to the approaches outlined in Chapter 2. A further point of interest is the use of fairy tale, myth and legend. Apart from the allusion to a literary heritage, it is the borrowing of a particular rhetoric that makes these genres relevant to a study of magic realism. The final section of this chapter relates magic realism to the tall tale, revealing the two kinds of writing to evince surprising similarities concerning technique. Significantly, the techniques are diametrically opposed to those found in fantastic literature, again showing how far magic realism differs from the fantastic.

Identifying the traces of other genres and modes serves several purposes. For one thing, it allows me simultaneously to relate magic

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[4] *The Satanic Verses* (1988), London, 1998, 52.

[5] Zamora and Faris, 4. Unfortunately and unaccountably, their phrasing privileges Western forms as the basis of magic realism. But for how much longer are the novel, the short story, or the epic poem to be considered foreign to Latin America, the Caribbean or India? After all, Latin American writers have been producing novels for over a hundred years.

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realism to and demarcate it from neighbouring kinds, bringing the mode more sharply into focus. For another, magic realism's adaptation of literary traditions provides a basis for the later discussion, revealing how individual techniques achieve their effects.

Installment and subversion: exploiting literary realism

Literary realism frequently has been taken as the backdrop or narrative norm against which magic realism's distinctive features first stand out.[6] This argument bears a certain risk of ethnocentrism; however, magic realist fiction itself endorses such a reading. Because deviation from a norm draws attention to the conventions on which that norm is based, magic realism functions to question realism's claim to a transparent representation of reality, thereby undermining its position as the privileged discursive mode of Western rationalism. Instead of rejecting the realist mode outright, as more radically experimental literature does, magic realism follows a two-step pattern of appropriation and transgression or, to speak with Linda Hutcheon, of installing and subverting.[7] Magic realism accordingly can be characterized as "an internalized challenge to realism".[8]

To conceive of magic realism's relationship to literary realism as essentially duplicitous means that the analysis needs to focus on two issues. My first step will be to ask which techniques magic realist fiction employs to simulate or install realism, which automatically raises questions about specific markers that usually signal the presence of the realist mode. The second step then is to inquire into magic realist transgressions of the realist mode.

David Lodge has suggested that, with respect to art, realism can roughly be defined as "truth to life/experience/observation in representation".[9] However, as a written text can never imitate reality directly, but only ways of thinking and speaking about reality, this definition needs to be modified to meet the specific needs of literature:

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[6] See Chanady 1995, 128 and Wilson 1995, 215.

[7] See *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London and New York, 1989 (cited as Hutcheon 1989a), 63 *et passim*, as well as Hutcheon 1996, *passim*.

[8] Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, Toronto, 1988, 208; quoted in Theo D'haen, "Irish Regionalism, Magic Realism and Postmodernism", in *British Postmodern Fiction*, Postmodern Studies 7, eds Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens, Amsterdam and Atlanta: GA, 1993, 40 (cited as D'haen 1993).

[9] *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature*, London, New York and Sydney, 1977, 23.

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> A working definition of realism in literature might be: *the representation of experience in a manner which approximates closely to descriptions of similar experience in nonliterary texts of the same culture.* (*Ibid.*, 25; emphasis in the original)

According to Lodge, such texts can be found in the fields of history and journalism, which set out from the same central assumption as does the tradition of literary realism, namely "that there is a common phenomenal world that may be reliably described by the methods of empirical history" (*ibid.*, 40). Realist fiction has been linked to historiography also by Roland Barthes, who argues that both kinds of writing use the same techniques. According to Barthes, realist fiction takes its cue from empirical historiography, whose accounts are characterized by superfluous or useless details that serve no function other than to create a sense of the "concrete real", of "that which is" and resists all structure, including that of narrative. Therefore, realism reached its peak during what Barthes calls "the reign of 'objective' history".[10]

Obviously, there is a fundamental difference between history and journalism on the one hand and realist fiction on the other in that the former two may be falsified by comparing them to the extratextual world, something which by definition is not the case with a fictional account. Of course, postmodernism in its renewed scepticism towards representation has vigorously disputed all disciplines' ability to provide an accurate description of reality, moving not only history but also science into the realm of fiction. However, regardless of whether or not non-fiction succeeds in representing reality, its professed referent is the extratextual world, which sharply distinguishes it from those pieces of writing that declare themselves fictions. However, fiction written in a realist mode is based on the same kind of world as that described in historical and journalistic accounts, adhering to the same norms of what is to be considered possible and probable. As Ursula Le Guin writes: "Reporting and history [...] deal with what happened; realistic fiction, with what could have happened."[11] This does not mean that the fictitious

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[10] "L'histoire (le discours historique: *historia rerum gestarum*) est en fait le modèle de ces récits qui admettent de remplir les interstices de leurs fonctions par des notations structuralement superflues, et il est logique que le réalisme littéraire ait été, à quelques décennies près, contemporain du règne de l'histoire 'objective'" (Barthes 1968, 87).

[11] "Introduction", in *The Norton Book of Science Fiction: North American Science Fiction, 1960-1990*, eds Ursula K. Le Guin and Brian Attebery, New York and London, 1993, 27. Already Aristotle said of the historian and the poet that "one tells what happened and the other what might have happened" (*The Poetics*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe [1927; revised 1932], London and Cambridge: MA, 1965, 35). Fantastic fiction can accordingly be

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world set forth in the realist text must correspond to a historically real place or time. Even a narrative with an invented setting can be realist, provided it does not violate non-fiction's basic assumptions about the world.

However, the greater part of realist literature does make use of historical places, persons and events, as well as other real-world social and cultural phenomena. According to Christine Brooke-Rose, "the realistic narrative is hitched to a megastory (history, geography), itself valorised, which doubles and illuminates it, creating expectations on the line of least resistance through a text already known, usually as close as possible to the reader's experience".[12] Once distinctive items or "landmarks" (*ibid.*, 86) have activate the reader's knowledge about the extratextual world, this is then projected onto the world of the narrative, so that the fictional world ultimately is constructed as a duplicate of the reader's world. By contrast, the marvellous and the fairy tale do not make use of a megatext in the same way: the setting characteristically remains vague and the time unspecified. Because readers are basically familiar with the world of realist fiction, not much general background information needs to be given, although the demand increases the further the events of the narrative are removed from the intended audience in space or time. By contrast, fantasy often must explain at length the fundamental rules of its particular fictional world, in some cases presenting the reader with a complete cosmology, which functions as an alternative megatext. In science fiction, the reader also frequently needs to be brought "up to date" not only on the scientific and technological, but also the social and political developments that distinguish the fictional world from the reader's (see Le Guin, 35 and Brooke-Rose, 256).

Magic realist fiction characteristically hitches itself to a megastory to give itself a realistic veneer. In Latin American magic realist fiction, this strategy is very noticeable both in Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*, which retells the history of Haiti's slave revolution, and in Isabel Allende's *House of the Spirits*, a family chronicle that unfolds against the economic and political upheaval of twentieth-century Chile. García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* also invokes realism, for although

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defined as dealing "with what could not have happened" and science fiction "with what has not happened" (R.S. Delany, "About 5750 Words", in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, New York and Berkely, 1977; cited in Le Guin, 27; no page given).

[12] *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic*, Cambridge, 1981, 243; see also 86.

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Macondo itself is an invented town, it might well exist in a Latin American country, and its fate of colonisation and civil war exhibits only too many parallels with history.

English language magic realist texts likewise anchor their narratives to the extratextual world. Angela Carter's *Wise Children* opens with a number of landmarks that seem to signal a realist setting in contemporary London. Having introduced herself as hailing from "the wrong side of the tracks",[13] the first person narrator Dora Chance goes on to explain:

> If you're from the States, think of Manhattan. Then think of Brooklyn. See what I mean? Or, for a Parisian, it might be a question of *rive gauche*, *rive droite*. With London, it's the North and South divide. Me and Nora, that's my sister, we've always lived on the left-hand side, the side the tourist rarely sees, the *bastard* side of Old Father Thames. (*Ibid.*; emphasis in the original)

The references to New York, Paris and London trigger knowledge about the socio-economic structure of these cities' real-world counterparts, thereby suggesting that the fictional world is modelled on the reader's extratextual world.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* likewise implies at the very outset that its world is a reflection of the reader's world when the narrator gives his place and date of birth as Bombay, 15 August 1947, the day India gained political independence (9). Throughout the novel, the narrative closely maps the history of the Indian nation from Independence through the Emergency and features guest appearances by historical personages like Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. Real-world settings are very much fleshed out in Rushdie's other magic realist novels as well: *The Moor's Last Sigh* is set mostly in post-1945 India, the non-dream part of *The Satanic Verses* is set in contemporary England and in India, while *Shame* takes Pakistan's recent history both as setting and as theme. Similarly, Jeanette Winterson's magic realist short stories are all recognizably set in twentieth-century England, though the location is not always specified;[14] her novel *Gut Symmetries* is set both in New York City and in England. Alice Thomas Ellis' *The 27th Kingdom* is set in London in 1954,[15] while Emma Tennant's *Wild Nights* recreates family life in a big

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[13] *Wise Children* (1991), London, 1992, 1.

[14] See "O'Brien's First Christmas", "The World and Other Places", "Newton", and "Adventure of a Lifetime", all in *The World and Other Places*, London, 1998.

[15] See Alice Thomas Ellis, *The 27th Kingdom*, Harmondsworth, 1982, 1.

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country house in the Scottish Borders[16] sometime around the Second World War.[17]

Although contemporary settings are perhaps more easily recognized as reflections of a familiar world, references to earlier historical periods equally work to establish realism. Carter's *Nights at the Circus* takes London and Russia on the eve of the twentieth century as its scene, while Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* uses Napoleon's military campaigns as megastory. Robert Nye's *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, purporting to be an account of the Bard's life and times, recreates Elizabethan and Jacobean England; *Falstaff* goes back even further, unfolding in the time of Henry Bolingbroke and his successors. In Marina Warner's *Indigo*, the Caribbean island that undergoes colonization in the seventeenth century is, strictly speaking, imaginary; nevertheless, like García Márquez's novel, the narrative installs realism insofar as the events described recognizably double historically documented acts of colonization. Furthermore, as is the case with many realist texts using invented locations, the island is only an imaginary enclave in what otherwise is a duplicate of the reader's extratextual world. So, in sum, magic realist fiction installs realism by suggesting that its world is a reflection of reality as represented in non-fictional types of discourse. In fact, some of the magic realist works analysed here overtly imitate non-fictional genres such as history or biography, thereby invoking the realist tradition even more strongly.

However, the assumption to be dealing with a realist text is radically called into question when the fictional world violates the conventions of realism. Some magic realist texts use an omniscient third-person narrator to simply present the magic elements as undeniable fact, as for example in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Other texts employ a first-person narrator, which might seem to leave room to doubt the narrator's reliability. However, it is typical of magic realism that the narrative is not discredited: on the level of the text, the fantastic aspects cannot simply be dismissed and thereby reconciled to realism, but, in absence of conclusive evidence to the contrary, must be accepted in good faith.

A good illustration of magic realism's technique of installing and subverting realism can be found at the very beginning of Angela Carter's

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[16] The narrator mentions "the silent lochs" (*Wild Nights*, London, 1979, 49). Tennant spent her childhood in the Scottish Borders (see John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, London and New York, 1985, 282).

[17] Electricity was introduced into the household when the narrator's father was a small boy, so the war that takes place in the narrator's childhood years should be the Second World War (see *Wild Nights*, 56, 62ff. and 77).

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Nights at the Circus, which starts off in the realist mode only to transgress it immediately:

> "Lor' love you, sir!" Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. "As to my place of birth, why, I first saw the light of day right here in smoky old London, didn't I! Not billed the 'Cockney Venus', for nothing, sir, though they could just as well 'ave called me 'Helen of the High Wire', due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore – for I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*."[18]

The approximation of a Cockney accent and the references to London and Greek mythology are typical realist markers doubling the extratextual world, thereby suggesting that the text will adhere to the conventions of realist fiction. However, the speaker goes on to make the by realist standards outrageous claim that she was hatched, intending it to support the equally fantastic assertion that the wings she displays on stage are real. Throughout the novel, both claims are neither refuted nor verified by the text; whether or not the wings are to be taken as real ultimately remains an open question.[19] But even so, Fevvers' potentially real hatched and winged status constitutes a clear breach of realism.

The opening paragraphs of Winterson's *The Passion* likewise install and immediately subvert realism. References to Napoleon and Joséphine and much realistic detail are counteracted by pictures of fantastic excess: Napoleon is purportedly so fond of chicken that a fresh meal has to be available at all times, resulting in a kitchen filled with chickens in all stages of preparation, while the narrator is promoted from the absurd post of neck wringer to that of platter carrier.[20]

Such infractions – things realism would reject as impossible or as too implausible – abound throughout the texts. *The Passion* offers its reader a protagonist with webbed feet who can walk on water, which in

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[18] *Nights at the Circus* (1984), London, 1994, 7.

[19] See David Punter, "Essential Imaginings: the Novels of Angela Carter and Russell Hoban", in *The British and Irish Novel Since 1960*, ed. James Acheson, New York, 1991, 148. The novel itself provides ambiguous clues: Fevvers laughs at Jack Walser for believing her to be "the 'only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world'" (*Nights at the Circus*, 294), but it remains unclear whether she lied about her wings or her virginity. Carter herself, asked point-blank about Fevvers' wings, without hesitation affirmed that, obviously, Fevvers does have wings (see Haffenden, 90). However, Carter's answer may well have been ironic.

[20] *The Passion*, (1987), London, 1996, 3. This is not to say that the grotesque scenario may not perhaps be historically more accurate than one would care to believe.

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Winterson's Venice, where all boatsmen's sons are thus endowed, is unusual only as in this case the webbed feet belong to a woman (49ff.). The novel furthermore features a priest whose left eye surpasses a powerful telescope; after falling in disgrace with the Church for peeking into women's windows, he joins Napoleon's army at Boulogne and is posted on a pillar to keep a lookout over the English Channel (*ibid.*, 21ff.). The India of *Midnight's Children* contains an even bigger host of human marvels: between them, the midnight's children display genuine telepathy, literally blinding beauty, and the abilities to transform into animals and change size or gender at will, as well as powers of prophecy and sorcery (196ff.). In *The Satanic Verses*, two men are hurtled from an exploding airplane over the English Channel at a height of 29,002 feet and wash up on the English shore, none the worse for wear (3-10).

In *Wild Nights*, the family mansion constantly changes its shape and size and regularly fills with the ghosts of dead family members and servants.[21] The motif of changing buildings also appears in *Shame*, where one sister Shakil complains to her son that the house is shrinking: "We keep on losing rooms [...], today we mislaid your grandfather's study", and another adds: "It's so sad, son, how life treats old people, you get used to a certain bedroom and then one day, poof, it goes away, the staircase vanishes, what to do."[22] *The Passion* repeats the motif on a larger scale: here, it is the whole city of Venice that is said to be constantly changing its size and outlay (see 49, 97, 112). *Indigo*'s island of Liamuiga is haunted by the presence of the wise woman Sycorax, whose voice mingles with the noises of the island.[23] In *The 27th Kingdom*, a Chelsea neighbourhood discovers that Valentine, a young black postulant sent down from her convent in Wales, is capable of levitation, clairvoyance

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[21] See *Wild Nights*, 9ff., 16-17, 107, and 10, 18, 29.

[22] Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (1983), London, 1995, 274-75.

[23] Marina Warner, *Indigo: or, Mapping the Waters* (1992), London, 1993, 77-78, 212-13, 370. On *Indigo* as a rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, see Warner's own statements in Chantal Zabus, "Spinning a Yarn with Marina Warner", *Kunapipi*, XVI/1 (1994), 524-25. See also Richard Todd, "The Retrieval of Unheard Voices in British Postmodern Fiction: A.S. Byatt and Marina Warner", in *Liminal Postmodernisms: The Postmodern, the (Post-)Colonial and the (Post-)Feminist*, Postmodern Studies 8, eds Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens, Amsterdam and Atlanta: GA, 1994, 109ff.; Eveline Kilian, "Visitations from the Past: The Fiction of Marina Warner", in *(Sub)Versions of Realism: Recent Women's Fiction in Britain*, anglistik und englischunterricht 60, eds Irmgard Maassen and Anna Maria Stuby, Heidelberg, 1997, 65-66; and Barbara Korte, "Kulturwissenschaft in der Literaturwissenschaft: Am Beispiel von Marina Warners Roman *Indigo*", *Anglia*, CXIV/3 (1996), 431ff.

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and other kinds of magic (see 60 and 153). In *Wise Children*, the narrator finds that her uncle Peregrine has remained untouched by age, still exhibiting a full head of fiery red hair on his hundredth birthday (207; see also 114, 170). Sir John Fastolf, the narrator of *Falstaff*, tells of a friend whose nose has acquired such a fiery glow from excessive fondness for drink that it will bring water to the boil when accidentally dipped into it.[24] And the biographer of *The Late Mr Shakespeare* relates how, after a labour of seven days and seven nights, at the moment of the Bard's birth the town clock stopped and the house burst into flames, miraculously remaining unconsumed.[25]

However, the fantastic elements are not restricted to what by rational-empirical standards is considered physically impossible; highly improbable events can have a similar effect. In Jeanette Winterson's short story "The World and Other Places", the protagonist lands his airplane in his parents' village and parks it in their driveway – not impossible, but absurd enough to make the reader hesitate. The effect is heightened by the matter-of-fact manner of narration:

> I went home to visit my mother and father. I flew over their village, taxied down their road and left the nose of my plane pushed up against the front door. The tail was just on the pavement and I was worried that some traffic warden might issue a ticket for obstruction, so I hung a sign on the back that said "FLYING DOCTOR".[26]

One could include among the infractions of realism also elements that are in fact possible according to natural law, but might nevertheless strike the general reader as fantastic. In *Indigo* as well as in Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, a woman who has not born a child produces milk to suckle another woman's baby.[27] In both novels there are characters who regard this phenomenon as miraculous, as well as others who do not find it at all surprising. One might similarly be inclined to dismiss as fantastic Dora Chance's claim that her father and his non-identical twin brother have different fathers (see *Wise Children*, 21f), although this is in fact biologically possible, if extremely unlikely. Magic realism's deliberate blurring of the boundary between the possible and the impossible will be returned to in Chapters 6 and 9.

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[24] Robert Nye, *Falstaff*, Boston and Toronto, 1976, 279.
[25] Robert Nye, *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, London, 1998, 29-30.
[26] *The World and Other Places*, 99.
[27] *Indigo*, 87; and *Like Water for Chocolate*, 70.

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Magic realism's "normalized miracles": flirting with the marvellous?

Like Aurora Zogoiby in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, magic realist narrators tend to react to anything extraordinary "with an unfazed casualness that instantly normalised the miracle".[28] Instead of rejecting the apparently non-realistic as an infraction of natural law, as the literary fantastic would, magic realist fiction simply takes it in narrative stride. In this, magic realism arguably shares a characteristic feature of marvellous literature, which likewise evinces no surprise at the existence of all sorts of fabulous creatures, magical powers, or supernatural occurrences, for here, the marvellous is the norm.

Although there are many varieties of marvellous literature, the marvellous is perhaps best exemplified by the fairy tale[29] and its realm of talking animals, fairy godmothers, magic implements, and miraculous transformations, with the *Tales of the Arabian Nights*[30] adding genies, flying carpets and other gimmicks to a repertoire many a magic realist text has unabashedly recycled. Despite these affinities, however, magic realism differs fundamentally from the marvellous in that the magic realist world purports to be a reflection of the reader's world, whereas marvellous literature makes clear from the beginning that the fictional world functions according to completely different laws.[31] Of course, what seems a clear-cut matter in theory is not always so simple in practice, and there undoubtedly are texts that could be understood both as modern fairy tales and as instances of magic realism.[32] On the whole, however, this is a

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[28] *The Moor's Last Sigh*, London, 1994, 140.

[29] "Fairy tale" here includes both folk and fairy tales. Jack Zipes uses "folk tale" (*Volksmärchen*) for the oral narratives told by and for the common people, and "fairy tale" (*Kunstmärchen*) exclusively for the literary genre that emerged when the folk tale was artistically appropriated by the upper classes during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* [1979], London, 1992, esp. 23).

[30] Todorov distinguishes between the fairy tale and the "marvellous tales" of the *Arabian Nights* on stylistic grounds (see Todorov 1975, 54).

[31] See Chanady 1995, 130. It might be objected that the fairy tale appears non-mimetic only from a rationalist perspective, and that marvellous characters like elves, fairies, giants, dwarfs or ghosts may well have been real to the people who told the tales. Furthermore, for all their supernatural events, fairy tales have been shown to be very concerned indeed with the social reality they spring from. However, like all utopian (or dystopian) literature, this concern is expressed by projecting alternative worlds, not by reproducing this one (see Zipes, 6 and 20ff.).

[32] Examples are Marina Warner's short story "In the Scheme of Things" (in *The Mermaids in the Basement: Stories*, London, 1993, 163-79), or the stories in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), London, 1995.

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useful preliminary criterion to distinguish between magic realist fiction and marvellous literature. As the following analysis will show, there are further crucial differences between magic realism and the marvellous, both in the techniques used to "normalize" the miracles and in the effect the normalized miracles have upon the implied reader. In fact, magic realism's normalized miracles are not brought about by techniques of the marvellous at all. Instead, magic realist fiction employs conventions of the marvellous to the very opposite effect, namely to make everyday reality appear fantastic, a strategy that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. But let me start by focusing on the basic ways in which magic realist fiction often quite self-consciously aligns itself with the literary tradition of the marvellous.

Not infrequently, magic realist texts deliberately adapt narrative conventions and typical motifs of the marvellous in order to subvert their realist trappings, raising doubts whether the work had not perhaps better be read as an instance of marvellous literature after all. However, these generic signals are in turn blocked by the text's self-conscious adherence to the conventions of realism. As a result, the text seems to oscillate between the two contradictory modes. In their adaptation of the marvellous, the texts under discussion here frequently allude to the fairy tale as a literary kind as well as to individual tales, mainly from the European tradition. *The Arabian Nights* also play a role as intertext, although magic realist fiction more frequently exploits the frame story of Scheherazade for a "theory" of narrative than the tales themselves for motifs.[33] Myths and legends, again mostly with European roots, are likewise adapted.

The use of Biblical allusions and motifs also needs to be mentioned here, even though the classification of the Bible as marvellous literature might meet with some protest – not because this relegates the Bible to the status of fiction, which I believe no longer is a particularly controversial point, but because the Bible itself does not acknowledge its fictionality. As a fictional history liberally sprinkled with marvellous events, it might even be proposed that the Bible be seen as an instance of magic realism. However, the Bible cannot actually be said to install realism, and it exhibits a complete lack of self-consciousness or metafiction, an aspect too prominent in magic realist fiction simply to disregard. Nevertheless, the Bible as well as Jewish and Christian

[33] A notable exception is *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with its "magic lamps and flying mats" (200). Wendy Faris highlights the connection when she calls magic realist narrators "Scheherazade's Children" (see the title of Faris 1995).

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mythology in general furnish magic realist fiction with fantastic elements in the same manner as do Greek myths, Celtic legends, or the Brother Grimm's fairy tales[34] – all of which, incidentally, qualify just as much as autochthonous material as the Latin American myths and legends that early critics of magic realism regarded as so essential to the mode. Apart from serving to undermine the realism installed by the text, transferring elements from such traditional narrative genres to a contemporary setting is one of the strategies by which magic realist fiction inquires into the different kinds of knowledge circulated by societies (see Chapter 5).

One of the most straightforward roles, then, that the tradition of the marvellous fulfils for magic realist fiction is that of props master. Although the magic in magic realist texts derives from various techniques or sources, a considerable number of non-realistic elements have obviously been recycled from an existing inventory of the marvellous. In *Nights at the Circus*, Madame Schreck's cabinet of female freaks includes a Sleeping Beauty and a female version of Tom Thumb (63-68). In *Wild Nights*, the child narrator and her Aunt Zita ride the north wind to the obligatory fairy tale ball, and fallen leaves turn into liveried rats, recalling Charles Perrault's version of "Cinderella".[35] In *Indigo*, a Sycorax-Circe remembers how she "used to change men into beasts" by taking them as lovers,[36] and Xanthe Everard's christening is transparently modelled on the beginning of "Sleeping Beauty", the slighted guest cursing the baby and the fairy godmother trying to ease the curse as best she can, though her blessing of common sense in turn can be seen as a curse (see *Indigo*, 58-61 and 373).

Shame quite self-consciously makes use of the European tale "The Beauty and the Beast" (see *Shame*, 139 and Chapter 8). *Midnight's Children* frequently turns to Indian mythology, for example when it endows the son of Parvati-the-witch and Major Shiva with the huge ears of the elephant-headed god Ganesh (420). *Wise Children* picks up the widespread mythical motif of eternal youth in Peregrine's unchanging appearance. There are different sources for the motif, such as the

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[34] Of course, these different sources overlap considerably, with fairy tales and Celtic myths in turn being based on Biblical motifs.

[35] See *Wild Nights*, 21-22 and 25. The tale does not exactly contain liveried rats, but the fairy godmother turns a rat into a coachman, who presumably is wearing some kind of uniform (see Charles Perrault, *Märchen aus alter Zeit* [*Contes en Vers*, 1694, and *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé: Avec des Moralitez*, 1697], illustrated by Gustave Doré [from the 1862 edition], transposed by Dorothee Walterhöfer, Plochingen and Stuttgart, 1966, 70).

[36] *Indigo*, 110-11. It might be objected that this is not a magic elements in the strict sense, for unlike Ulysses' crew, the men do not physically become beasts. For further discussion of this example, see Chapter 7 below.

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fountain of youth or the Greek gods' consumption of nectar and ambrosia, but *Wise Children* suggests that Peregrine's youth is based on a Faustian type of pact, an "infernal deal the Hazard brothers made with time" (114). *The Late Mr Shakespeare* adapts a host of tales too numerous to be named; Arthurian legend can be made out behind the idea that Shakespeare has not died, but lies in an Iceland iceberg where he will remain for a thousand years, and Mary Shakespeare's seven-days' labour clearly recalls the Book of Genesis (367 and 30). *The Passion* also reworks a Biblical motif in having Villanelle walk on water (69 and 129), though of course Villanelle's webbed feet might explain that miracle, as is pointed out by one character in the novel who "risked excommunication by suggesting that perhaps Christ had been able to walk on the water thanks to the same accident of birth" (104). In *The 27th Kingdom*, parallels are drawn between Valentine's levitation and the miracles performed by saints (61).

And then there are the countless magic elements that pervade both magic realist fiction and marvellous literature without being traceable to a single source: witches, ghosts, transformations and metamorphoses, which play a prominent role not only in Greek mythology, but have also been identified as the defining feature of the fairy tale.[37] There are the extraordinary births and the astonishing physical and psychic attributes and abilities of the characters – extraordinary size, strength, or age, clairvoyance, telepathy, or flight, to name but a few. Striking is also the use of magic numbers such as three, seven, or the notorious one-thousand-and-one: *Shame*'s Omar Khayyam has three mothers, Nye's Fastolf and Shakespeare both are presented as thrice-christened, once in church, once in a ditch, and once in the bath,[38] and *Wise Children* includes a fairy-tale-like triple wedding: "Three rings slipped onto three fingers. Three women pushed back three veils" (159). In *Falstaff*, a whole chapter is dedicated to "the holy number 7", providing a good overview over various tales and legends featuring that number (286). The midnight's children originally count 1001 (195), Moraes Zogoiby's affair with his female tutor lasts 1001 days,[39] and Pickleherring promises to tell 1001 – that is, innumerably many – tales about Shakespeare (*The Late Mr Shakespeare*, 8). Obviously, this list, though lengthy, is far from complete;

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[37] See Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, London, 1994, xixff.

[38] *Falstaff*, 18 and *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, 32. The motif appears in the *Till Eulenspiegel* tales (see *Till Eulenspiegel: Ein Volksbuch* [following the text of the 1515 edition, reprinted 1884 by the Max Niemeyer Verlag, Halle], ed. Hans Marquardt, Berlin, 1978, 7-8).

[39] *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 190; for further instances of the number, see 102 and 279.

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but it should suffice to illustrate one function of the marvellous in magic realist fiction.

A perhaps more interesting device of intertextual allusion frequently to be found in the texts under discussion here is the use of the standardized opening or closing formula of the fairy tale. Because of their invariance, these phrases are strong generic signals: the traditional opening "Once upon a time" serves to cue the reader or listener in to the nature of the narrative to follow, while the final "And they lived happily ever after" again marks the boundary between the fairy-tale and the real world to which the reader or listener must return. Between them, these formulas open up a realm of the marvellous. In magic realist fiction, however, these signposts, in addition to fulfilling their usual function of framing fairy tales inserted into the narrative proper,[40] are frequently put to a somewhat different use. Instead of exporting the reader to a remote fairy-tale realm, they import the marvellous into a world apparently analogous to the one the reader knows. In a realist world, however, the marvellous is a transgression, and in spite of being presented in a completely nonchalant manner, the use of a fairy-tale opening already marks what is to follow as a departure from realism, contributing to the hesitation engendered by magic realist fiction.

In order to import the marvellous into an apparently realist text, some magic realist texts employ the traditional fairy-tale opening as a ruse, in a manner inversely analogous to the installing/subverting of literary realism discussed above. Once again, the narrative invites the reader to make assumptions about the nature of the text, only immediately to overturn them. In *The Passion*, after having related the "legend" of how the Venetian boatmen's male offspring acquire their webbed feet, Villanelle launches into what sounds exactly like a fairy tale: "There was once a weak and foolish man whose wife cleaned the boat and sold the fish and brought up their children and went to the terrible island as she should when her yearly time was due" (50). However, the couple in the story turn out to be Villanelle's parents, so that the tale is relocated to the first diegetic level, and the ostensibly realist world of the novel finds itself enriched by the marvellous phenomenon of webbed feet. A later fairy tale again is used to introduce the marvellous into the world of the text, for it likewise turns out to be literally true (*ibid.*, 97-98; see also Chapter 7 below). Significantly, the marvellous element – hearts are possessions carried about in little boxes and may consequently be

[40] For examples, see *Falstaff*, 88-89, 115-16, 286-87, 296-97. The inset tales in Winterson's *Gut Symmetries* and *The Passion* are special cases, to which I will return in Chapter 5.

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given away, stolen, or lost – is accepted quite routinely by the implied reader as long as it appears to be contained within the fairy tale. It is only when Villanelle indicates that the story is to be taken literally that the element causes hesitation.

False expectations similarly are raised by *The 27th Kingdom*, *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, which actually begin their narration in the manner of the fairy tale, only immediately to de-install the genre by indicating that their fictional world is supposed to be a reflection of contemporary reality after all. Compared to magic realist works that first set out in a realist vein and then introduce fantastic elements, as in *Nights at the Circus*, these texts could be thought of as beginning on the off-beat, or as observing a phase shift. Although the cycles do not coincide, the two types of magic realist texts essentially perform the same movement or pattern: both oscillate between realism and a non-realist mode, merely taking different starting points.

As a look at both of Rushdie's novels, and even more so *The 27th Kingdom*, shows, that which follows the fairy-tale opening need not necessarily belong to the extraordinary or the marvellous. *The 27th Kingdom* manages to set up and de-install the fairy tale in the same breath, beginning with the contradictory phrase "Once upon a time, in the year of our Lord 1954" (7). The subsequent paragraphs confirm that the setting is in fact a reflection of London in the fifties, even if embellished by a few magic elements. *Midnight's Children* likewise immediately reverts from the fairy tale to the real world:

> I was born in the city of Bombay ... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. (9)

Shame begins: "In the remote border town of Q., [...] there once lived three lovely, and loving, sisters" (11). However, the very next sentence breaks with the vagueness and anonymity of the fairy tale by accounting in the most concrete and detailed realist manner for the three sisters' household china, which comes "from the Gardner potteries in Tsarist Russia". Although the fairy tale tone is briefly reverted to in the sentence "And one day their father died", it again gives way to a basically realist mode. No longer able to recontextualize the implausibilities of the text by categorizing it as marvellous literature, the reader next is proffered the almost equally convenient explanation of temporal remoteness: "All this happened in the fourteenth century" (*ibid.*, 13). But this offer is immediately revoked, and the narrator ironically chastizes the reader for

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seeking to relegate the marvellous to another time, if not another realm: "I'm using the Hegiran calendar, naturally; don't imagine that stories of this type always take place longlong [*sic*] ago."

In all three novels, the fairy-tale opening is undermined when the text reverts to the realist mode. However, following so hard upon the heels of an aborted attempt at the marvellous, this belated realism paradoxically has already been subverted before it could even be established, and an after-taste of the fairy tale lingers on. Exploiting what Marina Warner has called the fairy tale's "once-upon-a-time distancing manner",[41] narrators are able to endow mundane details with a curiously unreal quality. The technique is used in *Wise Children*, when Dora Chance reminisces about her childhood and youth: "Once upon a time, there was an old woman in splitting black satin pounding away at an upright piano in a room over a haberdasher's shop in Clapham High Street and her daughter in a pink tutu and wrinkled tights slapped at your ankles with a cane if you didn't pick up your feet high enough" (53). The fairy-tale opening relegates the past to a realm so far away that it no longer belongs to the same world; viewed from the narrative present, those times hardly seem credible. The strategic invocation of the fairy tale to express incredulity becomes even more obvious in Dora's question: "Would you believe a live theatre in Kennington, once upon a time?"[42]

The fairy tale closing formula works in an analogous fashion to characterize an event as fantastically implausible, as is illustrated by Dora's ironic and self-conscious comment upon the fairy-tale ending with which she retires two comparatively minor characters in mid-narrative: "Meanwhile, Genghis Khan and the imitation Dora lived happily ever after [...], and if you believe that, you'll believe anything" (*Wise Children*, 161). In Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World*, the closing formula similarly is used at the end of the novel to characterize it as a rather incredible tale: "*And if*, as Becker will tell you with borrowed words, pulling you closer, rolling his eyes in the direction of the House, *if they're not dead nor gone they're alive there still.*"[43] Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), which has also been labelled magic realist[44] but which is rather a meta-magic realist text (see 315ff. below), similarly invokes the fairy tale in order to present reality as too strange to be believed. Not only history,

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[41] "The Uses of Enchantment" (Lecture at the National Film Theatre, 7 February 1992), in *Cinema and the Realms of Enchantment: Lecture, Seminars and Essays by Marina Warner and Others*, ed. Duncan Petrie, London, 1993, 31; cited as Warner 1993a.

[42] *Wise Children*, 75; for further examples, see 8, 57, and 215.

[43] *The Invention of the World* (1977), Toronto, 1994, 455; emphasis in the original.

[44] See Todd 1995 and Benyei, 150.

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but biographies, too, are fantastic, causing people to tell "those most unbelievable yet haunting of fairy-tales, their own lives".[45]

The strategy's potential to render reality fantastic is perhaps exploited to the utmost by Oskar Matzerath in Günther Grass' *The Tin Drum*. Here, fairy-tale conventions are used to narrate instances of inhuman cruelty, among them the events of the "*Reichskristallnacht*" and the Holocaust. Oskar's tale of unbelievable cruelty culminates in the last sentence of a chapter cynically entitled "Glaube, Liebe, Hoffnung" ("Faith, Hope, Charity"), which relates how, of all people, it is the SA man who survived the Third Reich unscathed: "Es war einmal ein Musiker, der hieß Meyn, und wenn er nicht gestorben ist, lebt er heute noch und bläst wieder wunderschön Trompete."[46] By telling historically real events as a fairy tale, the narrator marks these events as too fantastic to be true – and yet, they undeniably happened. In this way, the text manages to convey a sense of horror and outrage more profound than could have been expressed in words.

Contrary to what might have been expected, the matter-of-factness magic realism shares with the marvellous is not based on an adaptation of the literary marvellous at all, for allusions to the marvellous merely conflict with the realism in the text and contribute to the tension perceived by the reader. This leaves the question of how magic realism's distinct matter-of-fact attitude toward the fabulous, the extraordinary or the fantastic is achieved.

Paradoxically, the effect is brought about by realist techniques. The impression that the strange, the implausible and even the impossible are perfectly natural – even if not always as entirely unspectacular as the expression "matter-of-fact" suggests – is attained by applying realist techniques to non-realistic elements.[47] Originating in historiography, the

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[45] Graham Swift, *Waterland* (1983), London, 1992 (revised edn), 7.

[46] *Die Blechtrommel* (1959), Frankfurt am Main, 1960, 167. "There once was a musician, his name was Meyn, and if he isn't dead he is still alive, once again playing the trumpet too beautifully for words" (Günther Grass, *The Tin Drum*, trans. Ralph Manheim [1965], Harmondsworth, 1986, 200).

[47] Fantasy literature such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* likewise naturalizes the fantastic by using realist techniques (see Brooke-Rose, 231-88), but unlike in magic realism, the fictional world here is a not reflection of the existing world. Interesting borderline cases are works in which a reflection of the reader's world and a fantasy world exist side by side, as for example in C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. But these still cannot usefully be discussed as magic realism, since the marvellous elements are restricted to the alternative world. There are, however, a number of children's books in which a realist world

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realist mode is strategically employed to lend plausibility to a narrative: the abundance of realistic detail establishes a sense of familiarity and inspires confidence in the events narrated. As Dora Chance, trying to recall the brand name of her former lover's favourite drink, observes in *Wise Children*: "If you get little details like that right, people will believe anything" (196). The magic realist text normalizes or naturalizes the fantastic by rendering it in the same vein of historical reporting which usually signals that, in this narrative at least, one is safe from untoward encounters with the supernatural and other unrealistic excesses. The fantastic elements are granted the same status as the realist elements, at least on the level of the text.

Fantastic fiction by contrast "singularizes" fantastic events by veiling them in mystery and ambiguity (see Chanady 1985, 122). This is achieved through techniques diametrically opposed to those of realism. Instead of abundant detail and a matter-of-fact manner of narration, the text exhibits "reticence in presenting an apparently supernatural event or situation", for the atmosphere of familiarity that attends literary realism would destroy the uncertainty so essential to the fantastic (*ibid.*, 132, 141). Descriptions are kept vague; usually, the supernatural is not shown directly, and ample use is made of what has been called modalization or indications of uncertainty, such as "it seemed that", "I believed", "perhaps" etc.[48] Characteristically, the text strongly hints at the existence of the supernatural, implying that it is the only explanation for a particular event, while at the same time it refuses to believe in it, leaving the reader to hesitate between conflicting interpretations.

According to Chanady, such hesitation is precluded in magic realism by its matter-of-fact presentation of the fantastic, which "naturalizes the supernatural to a point where we hardly see it as such", thereby fostering unquestioning acceptance (Chanady 1985, 151; also 123). I disagree with Chanady on this point. If the reader indeed unquestioningly accepted the magical elements, magic realist fiction would be indistinguishable from marvellous literature, which neither enacts nor induces hesitation. As Chanady herself admits, this clearly is not the case. So reader hesitation must be considered a built-in feature of magic realist fiction, a feature which, while not shared by the focalizers, nevertheless is encoded in the text. According to Gérard Genette, focalized narrative may contain an "excess of implicit information over explicit information", allowing the

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is "contaminated" by the marvellous; it might prove interesting to relate these to magic realism, especially as the mode also uses childlike characters as focalizers.

[48] See Todorov 1975, 38 and Chanady 1985, 137; see also Brooke-Rose, 251.

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narrative to convey more than what is actually stated in the text.[49] The narrative thereby invites a certain interpretation – in the case of magic realist fiction, hesitation and attempts at recontextualization not sustained by the text on the explicit level.

This is effected both through the transgressive application of realist techniques to non-realistic elements and through the transgression of conventions of the marvellous. Both kinds of violation cause the reader to hesitate over how the text is to be understood. The hesitation in turn gives rise to attempts at recontextualization: perhaps the text offers a way out of this dilemma after all – maybe the fantastic element can be attributed to an unreliable narrator or mistaken perception, or reduced to metaphorical or allegorical readings? Intriguingly, magic realist texts acknowledge and address this very issue. Aware of the hesitation they engender, they openly play on it in various ways, as though daring the reader: "Believe it or not!" The texts thereby quite self-consciously engage in a subversive dialogue with existing literary conventions.

To claim that magic realist texts actually comment on and thereby reinforce the hesitation they generate might of course be seen to sabotage the whole notion of matter-of-factness, which has been regarded as so essential in distinguishing magic realism from the fantastic. To differentiate sharply between the two modes arguably becomes even more difficult in texts that self-consciously take their literary heritage into account and deliberately invoke the fantastic, either through parody, as *Nights at the Circus* does, in inset tales, as is the case with *The Late Mr Shakespeare*,[50] or through intertextual allusion, as when *Shame*'s Sufiya Zinobia on her wedding day formally undergoes "transformation from Miss Hyder into Mrs Shakil" (172). However, the treatment of hesitation is quite dissimilar in magic realism and the fantastic, so that it actually serves as a criterion of distinction.

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[49] *Narrative Discourse* ("Discours du Récit", in *Figures III*, 1972), trans. Jane E. Lewin (1980), Oxford, 1986, 198.

[50] In the inset tale of Lord Fox (153-58), the novel heavily draws on the Gothic tradition, veiling the narrative in an air of uneasy mystery and liberally sprinkling it with stock motifs such as the enigmatic stranger, the tomb-like mansion, the locked chamber or the severed hand. The change in tone is quite striking, suggesting that perhaps it is tone rather than structural features that evokes a first intuitive response about whether a text is magic realist or fantastic.

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Playing on the fantastic: magic realist fiction and reader hesitation

Todorov considers the generation of reader hesitation about the ontological status of the events narrated a trademark of the literary fantastic (see 51 above). The hesitation usually is enacted on the level of the text by a character whose uncertainty supposedly mirrors the reader's. But even if such a role model is missing, the narration indicates doubt to be the appropriate reaction. It is essential to Todorov's definition that the ambiguity be maintained throughout the narrative.

By contrast, magic realist fiction treats reader hesitation in a distinctly more self-conscious manner. While not shared by the narrator, the hesitation is nevertheless induced by the narrative; indeed, one could almost say that, often, it is as though the reader were taunted for hesitating to take at face value something the narrator suggests is perfectly normal. Unlike the fantastic narrative, which adheres to a rational-empirical world-view and regards anything not sanctioned by this world-view as a menacing intrusion from a separate and unnatural realm, the magic realist world is not based on rational-empirical premises (although its use of realist conventions implies differently), so that presumably fantastic elements are not automatically unlawful. If the text concedes that they might be thought of as unlikely or impossible, it is at that moment taking into consideration the realist world-view, which actually is foreign to the text. So whereas fantastic literature employs hesitation to express anxiety about the validity of its rational-empirical world-view, magic realist fiction uses hesitation in order to actively question that world-view from a meta-level, suggesting that reality cannot be reduced to the empirically observable or rationally explicable, but that so-called fictions need to be taken into account as well.

Hesitation is played on by magic realist fiction in a variety of ways. One strategy is to stress the matter-of-factness of events, thereby of course undermining it; for how normal can something be if its normality has to be expressly pointed out?[51] The affirmation of the fantastic elements' matter-of-factness often takes on the function of anticipating or refuting hesitation, which can be either metafictionally imputed to the reader or enacted by a character, whose attitude, unlike that of his or her counterpart in fantastic fiction, does not reflect the narrative's. Whereas the fantastic text sides with the sceptics, the magic realist narrative endorses the opposite side – which is not the same as advocating

[51] I here disagree with Chanady, who argues that denials of the strangeness of fantastic events merely serve to naturalize the fantastic (see Chanady 1985, 150).

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uncritical belief, as Chapters 7 and 8 will show. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, only "the outsiders" (255) doubt the story of Remedios' ascension, suspecting that her disappearance has to do with an illegitimate and shameful pregnancy instead. By contrast, the people of Macondo have no trouble accepting the miracle, and it is this version that is presented as the more plausible by the text. A second strategy of playing on hesitation is to proffer possibilities of recontextualization, only to revoke them immediately. In practice, these strategies are not as clearly distinct as my enumeration suggests, but often appear in combination, as the textual examples below will illustrate.

Magic realist fiction's comments on the hesitation it engenders vary both in abundance and explicitness. From my knowledge of magic realist fiction, I would venture that reader hesitation plays a greater role in magic realist texts which stand more immediately in a Western tradition, perhaps because the scepticism fostered by Western empiricism here easily becomes a topic. But even in Latin American classics of magic realism, reader hesitation is encoded within the text. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is generally considered a paradigm of matter-of-factness in that neither the omniscient narrator nor the characters for the most part miss a beat, no matter how outrageous the event. The text refrains from metafictional comments on its own implausibility, and enactments of reader hesitation do not go beyond a few meagre voices of doubt which are quickly and authoritatively silenced, the fantastic firmly being asserted as real. Nevertheless, the question of the reader hesitating over the narrative is present in the text, if in very subtle ways. In a scene early in the novel, one of the main characters is looking for his friend Melquíades. For information, he turns to a gypsy who has just quaffed an invisibility potion. The passage is revealing:

> The gypsy wrapped him in the frightful climate of his look before he turned into a puddle of pestilential and smoking pitch over which the echo of his reply still floated: 'Melquíades is dead.' Upset by the news, José Arcadio Buendía stood motionless, trying to rise above his affliction, until the group dispersed, called away by other artifices, and the puddle of the taciturn Armenian evaporated completely. (18)

Ironically, José Arcadio Buendía is not in the least distressed about the dissolving gypsy, as one might reasonably expect, but only about Melquiades' demise, which, though regrettable, might be deemed a more natural occurrence. However, the gypsy's unhappy end is just one of many "other artifices", so there is no need to be unduly alarmed.

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On the surface, the passage looks like an example of perfectly straightforward matter-of-factness. However, the word "artifices" ever so subtly draws attention to the reader's dilemma of what to believe, and thus constitutes an acknowledgement of hesitation. The situation is fairly similar in other Latin American narratives like Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* or Isabel Allende's *House of the Spirits*, in which Clara's family calmly accept their daughter's preternatural abilities of telekinesis and foresight: "Clara's strangeness was simply an attribute of their youngest daughter, like Luis' limp or Rosa's beauty."[52] Nevertheless, they are aware of the fact that people outside the family might not find Clara completely normal. Quite reticent on the issue of reader hesitation are furthermore William Kennedy's *Ironweed*, which most serenely accommodates a number of ghosts,[53] and Tennant's *Wild Nights*, in which the only characters who refuse to acknowledge the various marvellous occurrences are, significantly, the narrator's parents – whenever they do notice anything untoward, they look for scientific explanations, which according to the narrator are entirely beside the point.

Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* more overtly addresses the issue of reader hesitation, using both metafictional techniques and narrative enactment. Even while presenting fantastic occurrences as unquestionable fact, the text draws attention to their implausibility. Throughout the novel, the reader is kept on the alert by the metafictional reiteration of a formula by which the two first-person narrators, Henri and Villanelle, paradoxically demand the suspension of disbelief while simultaneously emphasizing the text's fictionality:

> I'm telling you stories. Trust me.[54]

This injunction, which like many other aspects of the text seems to point to the idea of fiction as poetic truth, is counteracted by a certain distrust of storytelling, mainly voiced by Henri, kitchen boy in Napoleon's army. For all that Henri himself tells the reader some rather preposterous stories right from the start, for example about Patrick, the eagle-eyed priest (see 78 above), his own credulity has well-defined limits. At first he accepts Patrick's account of all the details he can discern on the English

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[52] *House of the Spirits* (*La Casa de los Espíritus*, 1982), trans. Magda Bogin, New York, 1993, 7.

[53] See *Ironweed* (1983), Harmondsworth, 1986. The matter-of-factness depends on the choice of focalizer; not all characters in the text accept ghosts.

[54] See *The Passion*, 5, 13, 69 (following Villanelle's claim to be able to walk on water), and 160 (the final line of the novel).

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ships with the naked eye. But when Patrick declares that he can "see the weevils in the bread", Henri instructs the reader: "Don't believe that one" (*The Passion*, 23). This shows just how subjective, perhaps even arbitrary, the line between narrative plausibility and implausibility is, for from a realist perspective, all of Patrick's claims are equally fantastic.

On the level of the narrative, hesitation becomes a topic in what amounts to a vignette of the reader's situation, with Henri standing in for the reader and having to listen to a variation of his own paradoxical formula. Telling Henri how goblins once shrunk his boots for trying to dig up their treasure, Patrick produces "evidence" in order to convince his sceptical listener:

> He searched his pockets and handed me a tiny pair of boots, perfectly made, the heels worn down and the laces frayed.
>
> "An' I swear they fitted me once."
>
> I didn't know whether to believe him or not and he saw my eyebrows working up and down. He held his hand out for the boots. "I walked all the way home in my bare feet and when I came to take Mass that morning I could hardly hobble up to the altar. I was so tired that I gave the congregation the day off." He smiled his crooked smile and hit me on the shoulder.
>
> "Trust me, I'm telling you stories." (*The Passion*, 39ff.)

Reader hesitation is also enacted by Henri when he enters Villanelle's Venice upon their desertion from Napoleon's army, which Villanelle had attended as *vivandière*. The reader is introduced to a fantastic Venice by Villanelle in a perfectly matter-of-fact way already in the second part of the novel and presumably has accepted its eccentricities, but to Henri, Venice is an "enchanted city" (*ibid.*, 109) that forces him to revise his notions of the possible. These roughly coincide with those of realism, for Henri acts as a stand-in for the reader.

As a realist, Henri initially refuses to take literally Villanelle's claim that her heart is still with her former lover: "Was she mad? We had been talking figuratively" (*ibid.*, 115). However, in retrospect it becomes clear that Villanelle already made this claim earlier when she told Henri: "They didn't give me enough time to collect my heart, only my luggage" (*ibid.*, 99). This remark initially seems clearly figurative, especially as the motif of the lost heart has been introduced a few pages earlier in a sort of fairy tale. Here, the heart is presented as literally lost, but this is unproblematic within a fairy tale or allegorical context. A literal interpretation on the diegetic level first becomes necessary when Villanelle exacts from Henri the promise to help her get her heart back

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(*ibid.*, 109). However, Henri ignores her remark because he takes it to be metaphorical, arguably cueing the reader to do likewise. He is not even fully convinced by the absence of a detectable heartbeat, and his reaction to Villanelle's insistent request that he retrieve her heart mirrors that of the implied reader: "It was fantastic" (*ibid.*, 116). Only when Villanelle calmly proves that the impossible is, after all, possible by showing Henri an icicle that will not melt does he finally consent to break into her lover's house to fetch the heart. Upon his return, she swallows the heart, and Henri, in the face of unmistakable evidence that she had been telling the truth, abandons his role as sceptic, in a metafictional twist foisting it upon the reader:

> There was quiet. She touched my back and when I turned round took my hand again and placed it on her breast.
>
> Her heart was beating.
>
> *Not possible.*
>
> I tell you her heart was beating. (*Ibid.*, 121; emphasis in the original)

The situation is analogous concerning other claims of Villanelle's that Henri regards as fantastic. When on the return trek from Russia Villanelle tells their Polish hosts about her home town of Venice, Henri is dismissive of her account:

> Villanelle, who loved to tell stories, wove for their wildest dreams. She even said that the boatmen had webbed feet, and while Patrick and I could hardly swallow our laughter, the Poles grew wide-eyed. (*Ibid.*, 104)

However, Henri again must discover that his easy rejection of her story as a fabrication turns out to be wrong.

Enactment is the preferred strategy for commenting on reader hesitation also in *Nights at the Circus*. Although a woman with wings causes no consternation among London's lower world and in the circus, this is not true for the world outside these somewhat exceptional realms. Not wanting to be excluded from human society as a freak, Fevvers takes great care to keep the exact nature of her wings shrouded in mystery (161). The titillating slogan "Is she fact or is she fiction?" (*ibid.*, 7) works to turn her into a subject of speculation not just for the general public, but especially for the media, represented on the level of plot by the reporter Jack Walser, a professed sceptic.

In refusing to confirm or deny the reality of Fevvers' wings, Carter's novel deliberately recalls the fantastic mode. However, exaggeration, self-consciousness and irony turn it into a parody. Moreover, the text is

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decidedly magic realist in that it does not endorse Walser's doubt, as a fantastic text would, but quite dispassionately places Walser's hesitation on the dissecting table. In order to highlight the conflict between Fevvers' magic-realist world and the empirical world-view of realism, the narrative is temporarily focalized through Walser, whose thoughts while watching Fevvers' flying act are those of the no-nonsense realist suddenly confronted with the marvellous: "by all the laws of evolution and human reason", Fevvers should be "the impossible squared".[55] And yet, she exists, defying gravity right before his eyes. What is more, she bases her claim to authenticity on Walser's own motto "seeing is believing" (*ibid.*, 17; also 15), which can be read as shorthand for the scientific Western world-view.[56] The rationalist Walser reacts by rejecting empirical observation in favour of reason, which tells him that what his eyes are seeing is not logically possible. In this, the novel again stands in the tradition of the literary fantastic, where problems of vision, often encoded in motifs like mirrors, glasses, eyes, etc., have been identified as characteristic themes.[57] Nevertheless, Fevvers' act is persuasive because, apart from her wings, it remains close to the humanly possible, actually making Walser "briefly contemplate the unimaginable – that is, the absolute suspension of disbelief" (*Nights at the Circus*, 17).

Walser even more obviously takes on the role of the hesitating reader in those passages in which Fevvers tells him the story of her rather turbulent life. This is a hilarious mixture of literary genres, parodying, among others, the picaresque, the Gothic, and the fairy tale. After being found hatched on the doorstep of Ma Nelson's *établissement*, Fevvers is raised by the whores, growing wings and learning to fly during puberty. Upon Nelson's untimely demise, she is first hired by the mysterious Madame Schreck for her cabinet of female freaks, only to be commissioned to a certain Mr Rosencreutz, who fancies her his *elixum*

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[55] *Ibid.*, 15. Walser arrives at this surprising quantification of Fevvers' impossibility *via* the eminently logical argument that, even if a woman were to have wings (which is impossible), these wings should have developed not in addition to arms, but in their place, as is the case with birds. Therefore, Fevvers' having both arms *and* wings mathematically squares her impossibility.

[56] The transition from a medieval to a modern scientific world-view was accompanied by an increasing distrust in anything not empirically verifiable by one's own senses, especially sight (see Assmann, 254, n. 30). Of course, Renaissance philosophers and scientists-in-the-making were quite aware of the senses' capacity for being deceived, as is reflected for example in Francis Bacon's idols of the tribe and of the cave (see Francis Bacon, *The New Organon* [1620], eds Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne, Cambridge, 2000, 41ff.; I.41 and I.52, and I.42 and I.53, respectively).

[57] See Todorov 1975, 120-23 and Jackson, 30-31 and 43ff.

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vitae. After narrowly escaping violation and death, she embarks on a spectacular career as a slow-motion trapeze artist, in which function Walser is interviewing her. Fevvers obviously enjoys keeping the reporter teetering on the brink of disbelief and pulls all the stops to maintain the suspense.

By contrast, the frame narrative, focalized through Walser, invokes the tradition of the fantastic by insinuating that there is something "fishy" about Fevvers and Lizzie (*ibid.*, 8). For example, the text implies that the flow of time during the interview has been suspended by supernatural means.[58] This clashes with Fevvers' claims to be telling "the whole truth and nothing but, sir" (*ibid.*, 21; also 25). Fevvers further panders to Walser's drive to verify information by offering to back up her incredible tales with proof, which, however, always turns out to be worthless. The names of people who can purportedly corroborate her story are useless to Walser:

> Walser tapped his teeth with his pencil tip, faced with the dilemma of the first checkable fact they'd offered him and the impossibility of checking it. Cable Mrs – III and ask her if she'd ever worked in a brothel run by a one-eyed whore named Nelson? Contracts had been taken out for less! (*Ibid.*, 47)

Fevvers also refers Walser to a scientific paper on the operation that provided Madame Schreck's mouthless butler with a mouth, thereby of course revealing that any attempt to verify the butler's mouthlessness is futile (*ibid.*, 60).

These instances of mock-scientific verification recall the examples from *The Passion* quoted above, where empirical proof was offered in support of outrageous claims. Other magic realist texts similarly parody strategies of authorization, thereby quite openly drawing attention to the issue of reader hesitation. The narrator of *Falstaff* typically justifies a quote from a purportedly historical document:

> I throw in this bit of authentic History from a disinterested but well-instructed source, just to prepare you for the high jinks which must follow. Without it, you might not believe me. (250)

[58] *Ibid.*, 42, 53, 87. Later, Fevvers admits this to have been a trick, but hastens to add that the rest of the story is absolutely true (*Nights at the Circus*, 292).

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As these examples already indicate, magic realist fiction's self-conscious treatment of reader hesitation closely ties in with its concern with issues of knowledge and knowledge production, featured in Chapter 5.

As I have argued above, the hesitation engendered by magic realist fiction induces attempts to reconcile the disparate elements through reinterpretation. Magic realist fiction latches onto this behaviour, either by having characters enact such attempts, as has been seen in the cases of Henri and Walser, or by deliberately setting the reader up for recontextualization, only not to support the alternative reading after all, leaving the reader suspended in doubt. Faris observes this strategy in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*:

> The mysterious character of Beloved [...] slithers provokingly between these two options [i.e., hallucination or miracle], playing with our rationalist tendencies to recuperate, to co-opt the marvellous. (Faris, 171)

The inability to decide between two conflicting interpretations again seems to align magic realism with the fantastic. However, there is a crucial difference. In the fantastic, both the supernatural and the rational explanation are presented as equally unlikely, causing the reader to accept neither, while the magic realist text suggests that, while none can be confirmed, both versions are equally valid (see Chanady 1985, 153).

One way of inducing attempts at recontextualization is to mark implausible, absurd, or fantastic information as hearsay or rumour by using phrases such as "it was said", "some people said", "according to legend", "rumour has it" etc., thereby apparently dismissing it as invalid. However, despite its uncertain status, such reported information typically is not devalued as particularly unlikely. Neither openly endorsed nor refuted by the narrator, it is left to speak for itself, to be accepted or not, so that the fantastic element cannot actually be recontextualized. This strategy appears not only in self-conscious texts, but also in third-person narratives like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where the narrator marks information as uncertain without substituting an official version. For example, "the legend of the ubiquitous Colonel Aureliano Buendía", while based on "simultaneous and contradictory information" (142), is not discounted, but merges with the neutral and matter-of-fact narrative. Analogously, a child's version of the Macondo massacre is initially told "to the disbelief of all" (*ibid.*, 327), presumably an indication that this information is to be disregarded. However, the child's version blends with the narrator's, and ultimately it is the disbelievers who adhere to the "false [version] that historians had created and consecrated in

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schoolbooks" (*ibid.*, 375). In a more self-conscious manner, the narrator of *Shame* admits that he "cannot prove nor disprove the foul story" that Omar Khayyam's three mothers signed a treaty with their menstrual blood to share all babies (13). Still, he manages to insinuate that it might well be true.[59]

Even in cases where the narrator expresses doubt about the information's validity and offers a more rational explanation, the text itself is not dismissive. Strangely enough, despite the narrator's scepticism, the implausible or impossible version continues to appear the more amenable. In *Shame*, the rumour that the Shakil sisters poisoned the handyman who worked for them is openly discredited by the narrator: "It is only fair to state [...] that the medical evidence in the case runs strongly against this version of events" – the handyman "almost certainly died of natural causes" (17 and 18). Nevertheless, the first version remains much more alluring, because it serves to increase the mystery surrounding the Shakil sisters.

Recontextualization is similarly used to pinpoint reader hesitation when magic realist texts transparently invite metaphorical or allegorical readings, but fail to sustain them. Magic realist fiction's characteristic refusal simply to dismiss local legend, hearsay, metaphor or allegory as fictional and therefore irrelevant is closely connected with what I hold to be magic realism's main function, that is, to reveal the ways in which fictions can become social reality. This argument will be explored further in Chapter 8.

Some magic realist texts more forcefully draw attention to hesitation by metafictionally commenting on their readers' efforts to reduce the tension. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem rebukes his readers for attempting to recontextualize the thousand-and-one midnight's children:

> Don't make the mistake of dismissing what I've unveiled as mere delirium; or even the insanely exaggerated fantasies of a lonely, ugly child. I have stated before that I am not speaking metaphorically; what I have just

[59] Marina Warner's *Indigo* is an exception in that marking fantastic elements as hearsay or rumour it may discredit them. For instance, the thesis that the child Sycorax claims to have retrieved from a dead and buried woman's womb was in fact spewed out by a sea-monster is presented as mere superstition. At the same time, however, more likely explanations for the child's existence, such as that he is Sycorax's own child, are also rejected by the narrative, endorsing Sycorax's version, according to which the voices of the dead called her to a last-minute rescue (see *Indigo*, 82-87).

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> written (and read aloud to stunned Padma)[60] is nothing less than the literal, by-the-hairs-of-my-mother's-head truth. (20)

Paradoxically, the narrator here achieves the very opposite of his stated intention, for in so explicitly decrying recontextualization, he only directs the reader to these far more appealing possibilities of interpreting the narrative.

Saleem's statement exemplifies a kind of narrative utterance that abounds in magic realist fiction, especially in first-person narratives, and which again works to address and heighten reader hesitation: the truth claim. Like Saleem's reprimand, these have a tendency to backfire: the narrator's vigorous assertions to be telling the truth only emphasize the narrative's glaring improbabilities, thereby enhancing, rather than allaying, reader hesitation.[61] Dora Chance punctuates – and so punctures – some rather steep parts of her story with jocular "I-kid-you-not"s; variants are "I swear" and "I tell no lie".[62] Saleem likewise feels the need constantly to avow the veracity of his narrative by interspersing comments in the vein of "believe don't believe but it's true" (*Midnight's Children*, 460); in *Shame*, this becomes "accept don't accept, but facts are facts" (233). In telling of his telepathic connection to the other surviving children of midnight, Saleem again anticipates his narratees' incredulity:

> To anyone whose personal cast of mind is too inflexible to accept these facts, I have this to say: That's how it was; there can be no retreat from the truth. I shall just have to shoulder the burden of the doubter's disbelief. (*Midnight's Children*, 196-97)

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Moraes Zogoiby similarly precedes his fantastic claim to be ageing at twice the normal rate with so elaborate a truth claim that it should set off alarm bells in any reader's head: "Reader, listen carefully, take in every word, for what I write now is the simple and literal truth" (143).

Metafictional claims to reliability are also made by Robert Nye's narrators, who are self-conscious to the extreme. Purportedly writing biography, a genre which by definition implies faithfulness to life (or at

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[60] Padma is Saleem's "narratee" (Genette 1986, 215). She herself does not appear on the first diegetic level, but her hesitation is is addressed by Saleem in his metafictional commentary.

[61] As Aleida Assmann observes, "bereits die allzu explizite Wahrheitsbeteuerung [kann] zum Signal für Fiktionsverdacht werden" (254).

[62] *Wise Children*, 38, 90, 98, 112, 115, 131, 204; 28; and 205, respectively.

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least a sincere attempt at it), the narrator of *The Late Mr Shakespeare* bombastically promises:

> Tell you all about him. All there is that's fit to know about Shakespeare. Mr William Shakespeare. All there is that's not fit, too, for that matter. (1)

Pickleherring authorizes his account by stressing his close personal acquaintance with Shakespeare, thereby employing a specific type of truth claim, the eye-witness claim. Dora Chance also resorts to this form: "If I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes, I'd never have believed it" (*Wise Children*, 66). And Fastolf intends to authorize his version of history by insisting:

> I know. I was there. (*Falstaff*, 180)

But Fastolf's repertoire of truth claims is even broader. He initially has his scribes set down his full name and titles to establish his authority, only immediately to subvert it by impatiently interrupting himself: "hey diddle diddle and hey diddle dan, fill in the details later, all the titles, Thing of Thing, This of That, all the bloody rest of it, feedum, fiddledum fee —." He then employs a traditional truth formula: "me, Fastolf, now telling you the true story of my life and the history of my valiant deeds" (*ibid.*, 1). The date is added in a lengthy and extravagant fashion, mocking the notion that witness accounts need to be specified in space and time. Fastolf continually stresses the truthfulness of his narrative, asserting "If I were not driven by the demon *Truth*, I should not undertake it", and indignantly informing his narratees, addressed as Madam and Sir: "I'm not going to start telling lies at my time of life."[63]

Much in the same manner, Alice in the second paragraph of Winterson's Gut Symmetries also painstakingly avows the truth of her narrative, thereby indicating that there will, in fact, be reason to doubt its veracity:

> This is a true story. If it seems strange, ask yourself, "What is not strange?" If it seems unlikely, ask yourself: "What is likely?" (9)

Claims to truth and objectivity are once again subverted, and moments of reader hesitation reinforced, by narrators who appear flatly to contradict their own truth claims. The self-same narrators who insist upon the truthfulness of their account simultaneously emphasize the

[63] *Falstaff*, 190 and 255; emphasis in the original (see also 77, 115, 121, 177).

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fictional status of their narrative or deliberately cast doubt upon their own reliability, for example by pointing out inconsistencies and errors. Classifying magic realist narrators as potentially unreliable again calls to mind the literary fantastic, which employs unreliable narrators to engender ambiguity. However, crucial differences can be made out, for in magic realist texts, narrative unreliability is handled in a more self-reflexive way, directing attention away from the fantastic's questions about ontological possibility or impossibility, focusing instead on social meanings of concepts like truth and reality.

Examples of narrators who deliberately undermine their own reliability are manifold. The narrator of *The 27th Kingdom*, whose first-person status becomes visible only in the most ephemeral of frames,[64] claims eye-witness status while at the same time casting doubt on his (or her) own trustworthiness: "As for me, the storyteller, I was in the pub by the river at the time, and drank beer and mead, but it all ran down my chin and none went down my throat" (159).

Both Nye's and Rushdie's narrators repeatedly "[wax] rhetorical" (*Midnight's Children*, 211) on the precarious nature of memory, perception and historical fact, illustrating how incomplete knowledge and the inevitability of speaking from a certain perspective make it impossible to lay claim to a singular and absolute Truth. Saleem for example deliberately alerts his reader to "an error in chronology" (*ibid.*, 166): he has "misremembered" the date of Gandhi's assassination, leaving the reader to wonder how many other lapses of memory distort his account. However, Saleem argues that this is not the issue. He has been telling

> memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own. (*Ibid.*, 211)

Chastized Padma partly gives in: "Of course, every man must tell his story in his own true way; but ..." – and this "but" voices the dilemma of all relativist approaches to historical truth.

Lapses of memory are also metafictionally remarked on by Henri in *The Passion* and Dora Chance in *Wise Children*, who admits: "At my age, memory becomes exquisitely selective" (195) – which, needless to say, throws considerable doubt upon the reliability of her narrative. As these

[64] The frame consists of one opening and one closing sentence (see *The 27th Kingdom*, 7 and 159).

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aspects tie in with magic realism's treatment of knowledge and knowledge production, selected passages will be looked at in more detail in Chapter 5.

A number of first-person narrators furthermore take back, or seem to take back, their truth claims by declaring that they are, in fact, only telling stories. The narrator of *The 27th Kingdom* expressly refers to his or her narrative as a "story", and to him- or herself as a "storyteller"; the narrative even opens with the fairy tale formula "Once upon a time" (7 and 159). Moraes Zogoiby, having told the reader of his father's Moorish descent, immediately confesses: "I present the approved, and polished, family yarn."[65] And Pickleherring endangers his status as biographer when he says:

> I only tell you stories about Shakespeare. I only tell you tales which I have heard. You are not required to believe any particular one of them. (*The Late Mr Shakespeare*, 38)

Fastolf goes even further by confessing on his deathbed that he is guilty of self-aggrandizement, and that much of his account is made up (*Falstaff*, 445ff.). The omniscient narrator of *Nights at the Circus*, although not generally given to metafictional comments, at one point ironically observes that, obviously, the narrative does not belong to "authentic history" (97). Even *One Hundred Years of Solitude* implicitly denounces itself as fiction when at the close of the narrative it merges with Melquíades' parchments containing the family history, written one hundred years in advance.

Like the markers of reported information mentioned above, such metafictional disclaimers seem to invalidate the narrative. However, for all their forthrightness (or perhaps because of it?), these disclaimers are quite ambiguous, for they are in turn followed by new truth claims. Throughout the text, the narrator oscillates between two apparently contradictory positions, supplying the reader with conflicting instructions about how to understand the narrative. Moraes Zogoiby, for example, having discredited the story of his father's descent, nevertheless insists that his own story is true:

> In what follows you will find stranger tales by far than the one I have just attempted to debunk; and let me assure you, let me say to-whom-it-may-concern, that of the truth of these further stories there can be no doubt whatsoever. (*The Moor's Last Sigh*, 85)

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[65] *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 78; for further self-denouncements, see 11, 13, 27, 45.

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As Moraes has just reflected on why people make up stories about themselves, the truth claim appears even more self-subversive than usual. But the very next remark invites reconsideration of the issue of narrative reliability, suggesting that literal truth is not the most important criterion: "And as for the yarn of the Moor: if I were forced to choose between logic and childhood memory, between head and heart, then sure; in spite of all the foregoing, I'd go along with the tale" (*ibid.*, 85-86).

The strategy of vacillation is taken to extremes by Saleem in his version of the assassination of Mian Abdullah, leader of the Free Islam Convocation, who upon being attacked by assassins from the Muslim League reportedly produced a humming sound of such a pitch that the dogs of the town came to his rescue, disfiguring the assassins beyond recognition. Saleem prefaces the account with a disclaimer: "According to legend, then – according to the polished gossip of the ancients at the paan-shop" (*Midnight's Children*, 47). However, through a destabilizing spiral of truth claims and disclaimers, the account is left suspended somewhere between claimed fact and proclaimed fiction. Saleem's presentation of the "facts" of the case is followed by an intradiegetic narrative, scrupulously enclosed in quotation marks, which the tellers rather amusingly attempt to authorize by claiming:

> It is well known that this is true. Everyone in town saw it, except those who were asleep.

This should be overruled by Saleem's assurance that he is merely recounting a legend. But is he? In a final twist, Saleem throws doubt upon his initial disclaimer by suggesting that he is presenting valid history after all. Mimicking the sceptical listener, who hesitates over the betel-chewers' wild tale, he says:

> Dogs? Assassins? ... If you don't believe me, check. Find out about Mian Abdullah and his Convocations. Discover how we've swept his story under the carpet ...[66]

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[66] *Ibid.*, 48. Following Saleem's advice, I could discover neither dogs nor assassins mentioned in connection with a Mian Abdullah. There was a Mian Abdullah Shah involved in Muslim politics in the North-West Frontier Provinces prior to Indian Independence, but this individual wrote a letter to M.A. Jinnah on 6 August 1947, long after the assassination related by Saleem (see Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah *Ethnicity, Islam and Nationalism: Muslim Politics in the North-West Frontier Province 1937-1947*, Oxford, 1999, 277-80).

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At first glance, the magic realist strategy of incongruously juxtaposing truth claims and disclaimers, expressed so succinctly in Winterson's "Trust me, I'm telling you stories", looks like just another metafictional technique to foreground the constructedness of narrative. However, the function is a different one. Although denouncing the narrative as fiction does draw attention to the impossibility of representation, it does not refute the narrators' claims to truth but, strangely enough, supports them. As Fastolf tentatively formulates it in his confessional:

> Lies about my whole life. But try & explain: some *true* lies? (*Falstaff*, 447; emphasis in the original)

Pickleherring echoes this philosophy when he paradoxically presents his narrative as inspired by "a desire to come at the truth by telling lies" (*The Late Mr Shakespeare*, 42). So telling stories is after all compatible with telling the truth, provided that truth is not restricted to literal or referential truth, but includes metaphorical, poetic or social conceptions of truth.

Putting you on? Magic realism and the tall tale

Stella, one of the three narrators in Jeanette Winterson's *Gut Symmetries*, recounts the circumstances of her birth:

> It was a cold and snowy winter New York. Cold was master. Heat was servant. Cold landlorded it in every tenement block, pushing the heat into smaller and smaller corners, throwing the heat out onto the street where it disappeared in freezes of steam. No one could get warm. Furnaces and boilers committed suicide under the strain and were dragged lifeless from the zero basements by frozen men in frozen overalls. The traffic cops, trying to keep order in the chaos cold, felt their semaphoring arm stiffen away from their bodies. It was a common sight, at shift change, to see them shifted like statues off their podiums, and laid horizontal in a wheezing truck. (83)

From the structure right down to the motif "It got so cold that ...",[67] the passage undeniably calls to mind the stretcher, the whopper, the tall tale.

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[67] See Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of Folk Literature*, Bloomington, 1955-1958, Motif X1623.1; cited in Bette Bosma, "Tales of Humor and Exaggeration", in *Sitting at the Feet of the Past: Retelling the North American Folktale for Children*, Contributions to the Study of World Literature 45, eds Gary D. Schmidt and Donald R. Hettinga, Westport: CT and London, 1992, 211.

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Typically using the form of a personal recollection, if not her own, then her parents', the narrator takes a realistic situation and escalates it to the ridiculous, all without batting an eye. In Winterson's novel, frozen traffic wardens pale before more spectacular magic realist elements such as a diamond being swallowed during pregnancy and winding up lodged at the base of the baby's spine, or flashes of sunlight being reflected by brass plaques all the way from Liverpool to New York City (see *Gut Symmetries*, 87, 93, and 52). Nevertheless, the passage's almost imperceptible progression from the plausible to the preposterous well illustrates the overlap between magic realism and the tall tale.

Winterson's novel certainly is not exceptional among magic realist works in having the feel of a tall tale, although few critics have noted this aspect of the mode. Jeanne Delbaere has pointed to the presence of the North American tall tale in Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World* and Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*, which recalls the form in the way it suspends the reader between belief and scepticism (see Delbaere 1995, 256 and 1992, 93). Robert Nye says of his narrator in *The Late Mr Shakespeare* that he tells "tall stories".[68] *Nights at the Circus* has been called one of Carter's "tall stories in lush locales", and Carter herself has been described as "a teller of tall tales".[69] Richard Todd's observation that "narrators of magic realism play confidence tricks on their readers" (Todd 1995, 305) also implicitly relates magic realism to the tradition of the tall tale, for it has been seen as one of the declared aims of "yarnspinning" to "dupe, as long as possible, the listener or reader".[70]

Even more interesting than criticism's far and few observations are the surprisingly numerous references to the tall tale made by magic realist texts themselves. In *Nights at the Circus*, the American reporter Jack Walser proudly counts himself a "connoisseur of the tall tale"; exhibiting a "characteristically American generosity towards the brazen lie", his interview with Fevvers is for a series called "Great Humbugs of the World" (11 and 10). The reader further encounters the American Colonel Kearney, a beautiful parody of an original Kentucky yarnspinner, though Fevvers beats him at tale-telling hands down. Carter's

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[68] See appendix to *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, 7. Nye said about his earlier fiction: "I do not write short stories as much as tall stories, fibs, lies, whoppers" (quoted in *British Novelists Since 1960, Part 2: H-Z, Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. Jay L. Halio, Detroit: MI, 1983, XIV, 566; no source is given for the quote).

[69] Haffenden, 92, and Kate Webb "Seriously Funny: *Wise Children*", in *Angela Carter*, ed. Alison Easton, Basingstoke and New York, 2000, 205.

[70] Creath S. Thorne, "The Crockett Almanacs: What Makes a Tall Tale Tall?", *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, XLIV (1980), 97.

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novel thus alludes both to the North American tall tale and the older European *Lügenmärchen*.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the painter Vasco Miranda classifies the history of the Zogoiby household as "family tall-stories", and throughout Bombay, amputees attempt to make their crippled state more glamorous by circulating "loss-of-limb tall tales" (160, 297). The narrator of *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, while admitting that some of the information he has unearthed about the Bard imposes a slight strain on credibility, manages to come up with a good excuse: "And if some of my told tales are tall, that's because in the minds of the tellers the late Mr William Shakespeare was a giant" (69). And Sir John Fastolf, in attempting to explain the Christian doctrine of sin to his niece Miranda, develops a theory of the tall tale that actually begs application to his own often fantastically implausible versions of history:

> "Oh, it is hard enough to believe any of it," I cried. "God is a tall story. The crucifixion and the resurrection – both tall stories. But don't you see, that might well be because they are *true*?[71] If they were lies or fables they would look more plausible, they would suit us better. As it is, they suit us only in the sense that *we* are a tall story too. The world – the nature of man – our natural, actual, formal, and habitual sins. All tall stories." (*Falstaff*, 189; emphases in the original)

Interestingly, Fastolf's insistence that what looks like outrageous fabulation in fact accurately expresses a certain aspect of reality can also be found in academic studies of the tall tale, which have argued that tall tales may communicate psychological or emotional truths.[72] I will discuss ways in which fantastic forms and hyperbole may be regarded as realistic in Chapter 9.

The hypothesis that magic realist fiction has adapted prominent elements of the tall tale is borne out by a closer look at literary analyses of the form. The co-existence of the realistic and the fantastic (mainly in the form of the exaggerated, the fabulous, the absurd), "a dalliance at that hazy border between the credible and the incredible" (Brown, 38), the presentation of the extravagant as though it were normal, and the deliberate production of reader hesitation are some of the obvious features the two forms share. A further overlap is in the aspect of orality.

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[71] Fastolf is following an argument made by the Christian writer Tertullian (see Chapter 9, n. 18).

[72] See Bosma, 209ff. and Carolyn S. Brown, *The Tall Tale in American Folklore and Literature*, Knoxville, 1987, 2.

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The tall tale has been seen first and foremost as an oral genre, literary adaptations coming into existence later,[73] so that not only textual, but also contextual aspects such as the social situation of the telling and the artist-audience interaction enter into the analysis (see Brown, viiff. and 17). This is relevant also to the analysis of magic realist fiction, for many magic realist texts mimic situations of oral or written storytelling, both through enactment in the text and through metafictional address of a listener/reader. Rushdie's and Nye's narrators use the latter device excessively, as do Dora Chance in *Wise Children*, Henri and Villanelle in *The Passion*, Herbert Badgery in *Illywhacker* and Oskar Matzerath in *The Tin Drum*. Of course, any first-person narrative to a certain extent strikes the reader as told, but the act of telling (Sklovskij's *fabula*, Genette's *discours*) is disproportionately highlighted in magic realist fiction. The aspect can be found also in film. The film version of *Like Water for Hot Chocolate* begins and ends with the narrator speaking directly into the camera, thereby establishing a storytelling frame situation; voice-over is used throughout the film to sustain the illusion of a told story. Voice-over is employed extensively also in *Big Fish*.

Reader address lends an oral quality even to narratives which, doffing their hats to the inimitable *Tristram Shandy*, pretend to be in the course of being written, as is the case with *Midnight's Children* and *The Late Mr Shakespeare*. *Falstaff* as a pretended dictation occupies an intermediate position, but the narrator makes his preferences clear, at one point self-consciously correcting himself:

> my readers. Ideally, my *listeners*. (*Falstaff*, 160; emphasis in the original)

Wise Children has also been seen as a written-oral hybrid (see Webb, 203). However, while Dora Chance does mention "the word processor, the filing cabinet, the card indexes" (*Wise Children*, 3), she nowhere implies that the reader is reading that product. Instead, she has ostensibly accosted her narratee in a pub (see *ibid.*, 227). The frame in *The 27th Kingdom* also establishes a storytelling situation, though unlike his or her more self-conscious colleagues, the narrator does not intrude upon the story proper, which makes the act of telling less conspicuous. Reader

[73] This becomes problematic if one takes into account that literary adaptations of the form existed prior to the tall tale's appearance on the North American continent. Brown herself points to traces of the form in classical and medieval literature (see Brown, 11), and the Münchhausen stories had been published by 1785. Another early literary adaptation of the tall tale of course is François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, to which I will return below.

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address is not used in *Wild Nights*, *Ironweed*, *Indigo*, and only once in *Nights at the Circus* (see 185), but the latter two do feature storytelling in the narrative, Serafine and Fevvers serving as storytellers, respectively.

Much more important than their oral quality, however, is the striking similarity between magic realism and the tall tale concerning narrative technique. The tall tale has briefly and usefully been defined as "a comic fiction disguised as fact, deliberately exaggerated to the limits of credibility or beyond" (Brown, 2). As such, it occupies a middle ground between the fictional narrative, which is "told as fiction and heard as fiction" (*ibid.*, 10), and the lie, which is told as true and heard as true, even though it is not. Unlike the lie, the tall tale is told as fiction and ultimately also meant to be heard as fiction.[74] However, in order to have fun at the uninitiated listener's expense, it needs to ironically mask its fictional nature and is therefore – like the lie – deliberately "cast in the form of a true narrative" (*ibid.*, 17). As opposed to the fictional narrative, which reveals itself as such from the start, it may consequently be heard as true, at least for a while, until the tale consecutively undermines itself and the listener realizes that he or she has been had. The tall tale thus consists of two opposing impulses: to conceal and simultaneously denounce its fictional nature (see Caron, 28). The strategies employed to achieve this paradoxical end strongly recall those used by magic realist narratives to install and subvert realism, though for all similarities in technique, the two forms in the end pursue different aims.

Characteristically, the narrator of the tall tale combines several techniques to give the narrative a façade of factuality, much akin to the way magic realist fiction initially installs realism. The tale is usually presented as a personal reminiscence or an anecdote. As Brown points out: "If the yarnspinner himself is not the hero, he tells the story about his best friend or, perhaps, his grandfather" (17). Concrete realistic detail from everyday life is used to "insinuate plausibility" in the face of the preposterous or fantastic (Caron, 28), a strategy used to similar effect in magic realism. Of course, magic realist fiction does not actually pretend to be non-fiction, as the tall tale does; but one could say that it pretends to be traditional realism while it patently is not. Typical for the tall tale is furthermore the use of a deadpan style. E.J. Bird, a writer/collector of tall tales, advises: "A tall tale, if told orally, should be presented with a straight face; and the simple facts, no matter how ridiculous, should be

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[74] *Ibid.*, 10ff., 19. Other critics do refer to tall tales as "lies": see Bosma, 209; E.J. Bird, "The Western Voice of the Tall Tale", in Schmidt and Hettinga, 203; and the title of James E. Caron, "The Violence and Language of Swapping Lies: Towards a Definition of American Tall Tale", *Studies in American Humor*, V/1 (1986).

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given as if they really happened, or could have happened" (Bird, 207).[75] Bird's phrasing nicely reveals how the tall tale's effect ultimately depends upon the appropriation of realist techniques, just like magic realism does. García Márquez has acknowledged his indebtedness to such an imperturbable manner of storytelling:

> The tone that I eventually used in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was based on the way my grandmother used to tell stories. She told things that sounded supernatural and fantastic, but she told them with complete naturalness. ... What was most important was the expression she had on her face. She did not change her expression at all when telling her stories.[76]

Taken together, the narrative and performative techniques of the tall tale strongly recall those of realist discourse. As in magic realist fiction, they are incongruously applied to non-realistic elements, thereby bringing about "the tall tale's distinctive habit of passing off the outrageous as the quite ordinary" (Caron, 28), which might equally well serve as a description of magic realism. Both in its unorthodox use of realism and its resulting stance of matter-of-factness, magic realism therefore in fact is closer to the tall tale than to the literary fantastic.

Having established the credibility of his or her narrative, the narrator of the tall tale begins progressively to undermine it. The narrative techniques used are once more similar to those identified for magic realist fiction above. Again, the bid for realism is subverted by the fantastic elements in the narrative, although the tall tale's characteristic progression from the realistic to the improbable and onward to an absurd climax is not necessarily typical of magic realist fiction. Setting out from a perfectly plausible scenario, the tall tale becomes increasingly extravagant and fantastic, straining credibility to the point where it collapses under the narrative's sheer absurdity (see Caron, 29 and Brown, 20). The fantastic elements in tall tales form a similar continuum as in magic realist fiction, ranging from the merely mildly improbable *via* the "possible-but-outrageously-false" to the outright impossible (Brown, 25). The cultural contingency of such labels has already been discussed: obviously, it depends on the listeners' experiences and beliefs where they will draw the line between the probable and the improbable, the possible and the impossible.

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[75] See also Caron, 28 and Bosma, 213. Brown notes that the dead-pan may be broken by the narrator at the end to let his audience in on the joke (18).

[76] Cited in the publisher's information appendixed to the novel; no source given (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 456; omission in the original).

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In addition to the improbable and the impossible tale, Brown identifies the illogical tale, whose non-realistic elements are based on category mistakes. These disturb the listener/reader not so much because they are physically impossible (though they are that, too), but rather because they transgress conceptual categories: "the category mistake creates an absurdity by allocating an object or a concept to a logical type or category to which it does not belong" (*ibid.*, 23). As opposed to the tall tale's other extravagances, which may be perceived as fantastic to varying degrees, category mistakes will disconcert all competent speakers of a language equally. Examples would be the treatment of concepts as things, as in the weather whopper that it was so cold that words froze upon leaving the speaker's mouth; or the treatment of the intangible as tangible, as in the story of the water well whose surrounding of sandy gravel was eroded by a strong wind, leaving the hole pointing up into the air and good only to be sawn up into fence post holes; or in the story of the man who, when he tried to jump the Grand Canyon but saw he would not make it, sensibly turned around and went back (see *ibid.*, 23-24).

Category mistakes also constitute part of the non-realistic elements in magic realist fiction, which transgresses semantic and conceptual boundaries when it uses figurative language literally or endows abstract concepts with physical qualities. This is not to say that category mistakes have the same effect in magic realist fiction as they do in the tall tale, where they are essentially comic and often appear at the climax of a tale, collapsing any pretence to factuality for good. By contrast, magic realist narratives usually do not present category mistakes in the tone of the tall tale, even though the same narrative may make use of the tall tale's tongue-in-cheek manner in other parts. In *The Passion*, Villanelle's claim to have literally lost her heart has nothing of the tall tale's jocular tone, whereas the passage in which Patrick tells the story of how he ended up with a pair of miniature boots not only contains a tall tale, but even replicates the interaction between the straight-faced narrator and the increasingly sceptical listener (see 93ff. above). The fact that some magic realist passages feel like tall tales while others do not, even though the basic techniques are similar, suggests that it is another factor that brings the tall tale to mind in the first place. I will return to this point shortly.

Another prominent feature of the tall tale is the excessive use of truth claims, which signal right from the start that caution is advised in suspending one's disbelief. Masking the fiction on one level by claiming factuality, they simultaneously unmask it on another (see Brown, 20). The tall tale's pattern of beginning with a truth claim can be found in

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many magic realist texts, undergoing an amusing twist in Peter Carey's *Illywhacker*, whose very title links it to the tall tale, "illywhacker" being Australian for "trickster" or "confidence man".[77] The novel opens not with a profession to be telling the truth, but the exact opposite. Giving his age as an outrageous one hundred and thirty-nine, the narrator immediately warns his reader:

> I am a terrible liar and I have always been a liar. I say that early to set things straight. (*Illywhacker*, 11)

However, having apparently invalidated his fantastic claim to longevity and thereby pacified the incredulous reader, the narrator continues: "My age is the one fact you can rely on, and not because I say so, but because it has been publicly authenticated."

Typically, it is the yarnspinner himself who raises doubts about the tall tale's so persistently avowed truthfulness by deliberately piling one stretcher upon the other, gleefully watching the listener teeter on the brink of disbelief until it finally dawns on the poor innocent that he or she is being put on. In the narrator's deliberate self-subversion, the tall tale differs notably from other instances of unreliable narration, especially in the literary fantastic, where the narrator unwittingly reveals himself to be unreliable. Despite the self-subversion, however, the yarnspinner frequently upholds the deadpan pose until the end of the narrative, and even beyond (see Caron, 29 and Brown, 20). So a well-told tall tale raises doubts without explicitly confirming them, leaving the listener to wonder where exactly the boundary between fact and fiction lies.

The situations of the implied reader of magic realist fiction and the listener of the tall tale exhibit certain parallels. In both cases, the narratee experiences a considerable amount of hesitation because generic expectations have been raised, only to be confounded by clues to the contrary.[78] However, neither the fundamental similarity in the narratees' situations nor the overlap in narrative technique is sufficient to make every magic realist text actually recall the tall tale. Emma Tennant's *Wild Nights* offers a striking example of a text that employs techniques also used by the tall tale without in the slightest having the feel of one. Sections of some of Rushdie's, but especially of Nye's novels on the

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[77] *Illywhacker* (1985), London, 1986, no page number.

[78] I would like to stress again that I make no claim whatsoever about whether or not hesitation is experienced by actual readers of magic realist texts. Rather, as I have shown above, it is the text itself that suggests in a variety of ways that its readers hesitate.

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other hand have a strong flavour of the tall tale, as do *Wise Children* and Fevvers' life-story in *Nights at the Circus*. What distinguishes these narratives from *Wild Nights* and other magic realist texts not reminiscent of the tall tale is their extravagance, their wildly exuberant humour and their ironic enforcement of reader hesitation. These first-person narrators relish excess, they celebrate hyperbole, topping each other in "Rabelaisian precision" (Danow, 45) – the narrator of *Shame* for example claims that Captain Hyder once went without sleep for 420 hours (66), and in García Márquez's Macondo "it rained for four years, eleven months, and two days" (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 339). These magic realist narrators revel in the absurdity of their tales, and in places they seem positively to gloat over the confusion they induce in the reader, enjoying themselves immensely while keeping a perfectly straight face. In this, magic realist narrators are indisputably kin to the teller of the tall tale, who is essentially playing a game (see Brown, 32), pretending to be truthful but all the while undermining his or her own tale, testing how much the listener will swallow before rebelling, how far credibility can be stretched before it snaps. This is exactly the situation in *Nights at the Circus*, where Fevvers and Lizzie, both old hands at telling tall tales, are having a hell of a time stringing along Jack Walser, who is never quite sure whether he is being put on or not. Fevvers flashes him looks "as if to dare him: 'Believe it or not!'" (7), while Lizzie disconcerts her listener by straight-facedly making the most absurd claims: "This was patently incredible and Walser remained incredulous, although Lizzie's spitting black eyes dared disbelief" (*ibid.*, 27). Using almost the same terms, Caron writes that the tall tale "dares the listener to unmask its fantasy" (Caron, 29). Particularly striking, however, is the way self-conscious magic realist narratives will use reader address to mimic the performance situation of the tall tale, allowing the hesitation or incredulity of a fictive audience to be inferred from the narrator's metafictional remarks, such as reprimands for attempting figurative readings, for narrow-mindedness, or for suspecting the narrator of being untruthful.

However, for all that some magic realist narrators insinuate that the reader might be having his or her leg pulled, there remains a fundamental difference between magic realist fiction and the tall tale. While the traditional tall tale usually reaches a climax or point of collapse at which, "if things go well, the reader or listener is left laughing or with the 'I've been had' look upon his face" (Bird, 207), the balance is tipped the other way in magic realist fiction. Although a number of magic realist narratives may deliberately cast doubt upon their own reliability, they cannot in the end be unmasked as lies; there is no choice but to accept

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the incredible. The aim of magic realist fiction here differs from that of the tall tale, which primarily intends to produce laughter by first deceiving and successively undeceiving the listener. Instead, magic realist fiction examines how both individuals and communities perceive – or rather, construct – and represent their world, thereby advocating a broader conception of truth and reality.

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CHAPTER 4

THROUGH ANOTHER'S EYES: MAGIC REALIST FOCALIZERS

The ex-centric focalizer: a literary technique

Theo D'haen writes: "It is precisely the notion of the ex-centric, in the sense of speaking from the margin, from a place 'other' than 'the' or 'a' center, that seems to me an essential feature of [...] magic realism" (D'haen 1995a, 194). Most contemporary critics probably would readily agree with his assessment of magic realism as a fundamentally ex-centric[1] mode, which perhaps is not all too surprising seeing that magic realist fiction has frequently been discussed in the context of postcolonial resistance and identity-formation.[2] According to the current critical debate, magic realist fiction questions dominant paradigms and structures on at least two different levels. In relation to the system of literature, magic realism has been read as a hybrid mode that not only subverts the sway literary realism has arguably held over Western literature since the Enlightenment, but also dissolves the traditional canon of genres set up by Western criticism. On a more general level, magic realist fiction has been seen to make room for world-views that differ from those of the cultural centre. As Zamora and Faris write, "it creates space for interactions of diversity" (3).

However, to infer from its affinity to the ex-centric that magic realism is available only to writers who are in some sense recognizably marginalized, as the critical focus on magic realism in Third World,

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[1] The term is Linda Hutcheon's (see Hutcheon 1996, 57-73).

[2] See especially Slemon 1995, Durix 1998 and Cooper 1998; see also Chanady 1995. On Canadian magic realism as a mode of the margins, see Delbaere 1992.

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minority and women's writing implies, is an erroneous conclusion. Although the mode's effective presentation of a non-dominant world-view clearly is connected to the question of perspective, it is not the ex-centricity of the author that is instrumental, but the marginalized position of the characters from whose perspective the narrative is told. Magic realism's ability to complement the rational-empirical Western outlook is a function not of the author's identity, but of literary technique.

In pointing this out, I do not want to deny that the mode probably is employed more often by writers who are situated at some remove from the geographical, ethnic, social, cultural, economic or political centre. As Angela Carter has convincingly argued, an author's marginalized identity undeniably influences his or her work:

> You write from your own history. Being female or being black means that once you become conscious, your position [...] isn't the standard one: you have to bear that in mind when you are writing, you have to keep on defining the ground on which you're standing, because you are in fact setting yourself up in opposition to the generality. (Haffenden 1985: 93)

There remains the question of who in fact is writing at a remove. Women are marginalized insofar as they do not have equal access to power in a male-dominated society, yet at the same time, "white women can't get out of [their] historic complicity in colonialism, any more than the white working class can".[3] Disagreement also wages about the marginalized status of postcolonial-but-now-British-based writers like Salman Rushdie, whose right to speak as Other has been questioned.[4]

Be that as it may, authors writing from the cultural centre may equally feel an interest in challenging the dominant world-view, and to this end choose to employ the magic realist mode. As an ensemble of literary techniques, the magic realist mode is available to any writer, also to those who are not from the margins, although their assuming an ex-centric perspective might be interpreted as presumptuous. D'haen argues that magic realism "is a means for writers coming from the privileged centers of literature to dissociate themselves from their own discourses of power, and to speak on behalf of the ex-centric and un-privileged (with

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[3] Angela Carter, "Notes from the Front Line" (1983), in *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writing*, ed. Jenny Uglow, London, 1997, 39.

[4] See Anuradha Dingwaney's attacks on Rushdie in "Author(iz)ing *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*: Salman Rushdie's Constructions of Authority", in *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, Contributions to the Study of World Literature 42, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson, New York, Westport: CT, and London, 1992, 157-68.

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the risk of being judged 'patronizing' by those on whose behalf such writers seek to speak)" (D'haen 1995a, 195). An additional danger seen in magic realism's increasing use by authors from Western backgrounds is that the form may lose its subversive impact. Sylvia Söderlind has maintained that the appropriation of the postcolonial by postmodernism inevitably cancels out the former's political force, especially as, according to her, postmodernism's motive is not political solidarity, but pure self-interest: "To the postmodern writer the assumption of a position in the margin is a matter of choice, a narcissistic ruse to attract the reader's attention, rather than a consequence of political reality."[5] While I do see the problem, surely not all authors from the centre can indiscriminately be considered opportunists.

The question of "Who can speak as Other?" is hotly debated in postcolonial studies. It admittedly is a precarious endeavour to speak from a perspective that does not reflect one's own experience. But how helpful is it to deny, on account of a supposed lack of authenticity, the right to speak to those who do not themselves occupy an ex-centric position? Postcolonial critics themselves have pointed out that, quite apart from the difficulty of deciding who counts as Other, such a policy of exclusion serves only to perpetuate the very notion of absolute Otherness that postcolonial theory and practice are trying to overcome.[6]

Magic realist texts can be seen to speak from the margin, then, not by virtue of their authors' marginalized position, but by exploring and presenting world-views that diverge from the rational-empirical outlook prevalent in the Western world. The artlessness with which magic realist fiction manages to portray a magical world is largely due to its unfazed manner of narration. This in turn can be seen as a function of narrative perspective: the matter-of-fact tone results from the fact that implausible or fantastic events are reflected through characters whose world-view quite naturally affords room for the extraordinary, the fabulous or the marvellous. Frequently, these focalizers[7] are characters who can be considered in some way Other.

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[5] "Margins and Metaphors: the Politics of Post-***", in D'haen and Bertens, 45.

[6] See Fee, *passim* and Gareth Griffiths, "The Myth of Authenticity: Representation, Discourse, and Social Practice", in *De-Scribing Empire: Postcolonialism and Textuality*, eds Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, London and New York, 1994, 70-85.

[7] The term is Genette's, who distinguishes between focalization (narrative perspective or point of view) and what he calls "voice", that is, the narrating instance (see Genette 1986, Chapter 5). Focalizer and narrator are two fundamentally different and quite independent functions in a narrative, and they remain distinct even when taken on by the same character. The only time that the narrating and the focalizing instance become indistinguishable is when the narration is a present-tense interior monologue (*ibid.*, 194).

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However, this does not mean that magic realist fiction attributes a magical world-view to all those who find themselves relegated to the margins of society. The use of culturally marginalized focalizers to project a magical world-view is a literary technique, not a mimetic reproduction of an extratextual reality. The outlook of a marginalized group frequently will differ in some respect from that of the dominant centre, but it can do so in a number of ways: while it may include beliefs rejected by Western science, such as the belief in magic or telepathy, the difference may just as well consist in taking a different position on the rights of women, or on what is to be considered normal in terms of sexual orientation, life style, etc. Rather than duplicate the positions and arguments set forth in theoretical discourses, magic realist fiction uses an ensemble of literary techniques to create a fictional world that, in its own way, challenges the centre's claim to sole validity. The magic realist world-view is representative of a variety of Other world-views, which in this way are redeemed as complements to the dominant outlook. In presenting the marginalized perspective not as a substitute, but as a complement, magic realist fiction does not simply reverse the positions of centre and margin, but counteracts and levels the hierarchy between the two, a goal also pursued by postcolonial theory.

The technique of using culturally marginalized focalizers to render a basically realistic world magical or fantastic has been identified by Brian Attebery as a typical feature of what he calls "'real world' or 'modern urban' fantasy".[8] As examples, Attebery names Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), John Crowley's *Little, Big* (1981), and Nancy Willard's *Things Invisible to See* (1984), meaning that the category considerably overlaps with magic realism.[9] Attebery's analysis of Megan Lindholm's *Wizard of the Pigeons* (1986) is particularly interesting in that it shows how focalization is used to make the reader hesitate between two different understandings of the fictional world, a realist one suggested by the text's initial instalment of literary realism, and a magical one presented through

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In the course of a narrative, focalization may vary between zero focalization, internal focalization, external focalization, etc. (*ibid.*, 189ff.).

[8] "Fantasy and the Narrative Transaction", in *State of the Fantastic: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Fantastic Literature and Film: Selected Essays from the Eleventh International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, 1990*, Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy 50, ed. Nicholas Ruddick, Westport: CT, and London, 1992, 22.

[9] *Mama Day* has been discussed as magic realism (see Elizabeth Hayes, "Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* as Magic Realism", in *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*, Critical Responses in Arts and Letters 29, eds Sharon Felton and Michelle C. Loris, London and Westport: CT, 1997, 177-86). *Little, Big* has much of the tall tale and recalls the magic realist mode in that respect.

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the ex-centric focalizer, in this case a homeless person. As in magic realist texts, modern urban fantasy's fantastic elements cannot be recontextualized, no matter how deviant or unreliable the focalizer's perception might seem:

> The filter characters are unreliable in that they do not take part in the consensus: their reality does not conform to that of the postulated reader, nor even to that of other characters in the text. Yet the narrative forces us to find another standard for reliability, inverting our initial judgments of the characters and the world they inhabit. (Attebery, 22)

Amaryll Chanady comes to a similar conclusion concerning magic realist fiction's use of ex-centric focalizers, arguing that "the manner of focalization enables the reader to identify with the protagonists, in spite of the fact that their beliefs are completely different from his".[10] However, I disagree with Chanady's claim that magic realist texts must consistently focalize events through a single perspective in order to disguise the ambiguity that arises from the text's simultaneous reliance on conflicting world-views (*ibid.*, 41-42). Chanady accordingly rejects Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World* as an unsatisfactory example of magic realism (*ibid.*, 37-41), as it emphasizes rather than resolves ambiguities, for example in the case of Mackandal's execution: did he miraculously transform himself to escape from his ropes, as Haiti's slave population would have it, or is the whites' rational explanation true? As playing on reader hesitation and self-consciously pointing to a multiplicity of possible explanations is an essential feature of magic realist fiction, Carpentier's novel is in fact a good example of magic realism, as Chanady herself later acknowledges (see Chanady 1995, 138-39). Varying focalization is an important strategy in leaving the reader suspended between different readings. But even when a magic realist narrative is focalized through the same character throughout, the tension still is not abolished, for endorsement of the focalizer's perspective does not mean that the realist reading is entirely blocked. Frequently, it remains active in the background, enabling the reader to perceive another story behind the one actually told on the level of the text. As Attebery observes of Lindholm's protagonist: "His is not the story of a bitter and unemployable Vietnam veteran slipping into psychosis, though that other, untold story hovers throughout" (Attebery, 24).

[10] Chanady 1985, 42. See also Cornwell, 203.

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Magic realist fiction's suspendedness between two readings, which actually is a simultaneity of two readings, is illustrated quite well by two passages from *Midnight's Children* and *Wise Children*. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem's fantastic claim to be cracking apart is not confirmed by the doctor: "I see no cracks" (65). However, far from invalidating Saleem's claim, the doctor's diagnosis merely foregrounds the allegorical reading of Saleem as India that flickers throughout the text. On this level, Saleem's cracks make sense, for the novel suggests that India is falling apart rather than growing together, and the doctor is a fool for not acknowledging the fate of his nation. In *Wise Children*, Dora herself throws doubt upon the reality of Peregrine's eternal youth by self-consciously wondering:

> Did I see the soul of the one I loved when I saw Perry, not his body? And was his fleshy envelope, perhaps, in much the same sorry shape as those of his nieces outside the magic circle of my desire? (208)

However, this does not cancel out Peregrine's agelessness: ultimately, Dora's perception is more important than whether or not Peregrine has in fact grown old.

Both examples show how the magic realist text may curiously bifurcate, suggesting the possibility of a realistic reading even while sustaining the fantastic version as true. The realistic reading is made possible by the "ironic distance" maintained between the text and the magical world-view of the characters (Cooper, 34). In fact, alternative interpretations may painstakingly be suggested by the text itself, as I have shown in Chapter 3. At the same time, the fantastic reading is endorsed through ex-centric focalization. Characteristically, one reading does not invalidate the other, showing how it is exactly the philosophy of "either/or" that magic realism calls into question.[11]

In using culturally marginal focalizers to project an alternative world-view, magic realist fiction once again first invokes and then undercuts the assumptions of realism and allied non-fictional discourses. As dominant post-Enlightenment discourses, these have consistently attributed to the ex-centric a non-rational, non-scientific way of thought, thereby

[11] Chanady's early theory has trouble accounting for magic realist fiction's bifurcation or doubleness. On the one hand, it stresses the homogeneity of perspective: "the reader accepts the strange point of view of the narrator because there are no textual indications to distance him from that perspective" (Chanady 1985, 154). On the other hand, it argues that "authorial reticence" provides room for contradictory readings (*ibid.*, 149-60).

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effectively maintaining a power monopoly.[12] As Hutcheon points out, the rational-empirical centre has always been quick to brand those who differed as ideologically Other: "Their ex-centricity and difference have often denied them access to Cartesian rationality and relegated them to the realms of the irrational, the mad, or at the very least, the alien" (Hutcheon 1996, 68). According to realist standards, then, it is only natural that ex-centric characters should perceive the world in a different, in this case magical, way. Magic realist fiction installs these received notions of the irrational Other, only to turn around and undermine them by presenting the Other perspective as equally valid and, in the final instance, not Other at all.

Having come this far, it needs to be pointed out that not all magic realist focalizers are ex-centric in some obvious way. Not infrequently, even characters who might be seen as fairly close to the cultural centre turn out to subscribe to magical beliefs. In *The Satanic Verses*, the eighty-eight year-old Englishwoman Rosa Diamond, who before the Second World War lived the privileged life of a rich Anglo-Argentine landowner's wife, undeniably stands in the tradition of the colonizing class. However, for all her Western background, she holds views that are quite incompatible with the rational-scientific paradigm. She claims to have "the gift, the phantom-sight" (130), and when she relates her life-story to Gibreel, ghosts from her past materialize, none of which, needless to say, alarms her at all (see *ibid.*, 138-55). Much the same holds for another English filter character in *The Satanic Verses*, Alleluia Cone, who exhibits an equally prosaic attitude towards the supernatural, though her account of seeing the ghost of a deceased mountaineer on Mount Everest is met with typical Western scepticism by the English school class she visits (195ff.). The female focalizers in *The 27th Kingdom* likewise have no or only little trouble accepting unusual events, even though they are English to the core. Of course, all of these characters might be regarded as ex-centric in that they are women; whether or not this is a useful suggestion will be discussed shortly.

Most striking, however, is the example of the English policemen and immigration officers who arrest Saladin Chamcha in the *Satanic Verses*. As official representatives of the cultural, political, and economic centre, they ought to adhere to a strictly empirical-rational outlook. Yet, they are

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[12] On this principles of oppression, see Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse" (Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France, given 2 December 1970), trans. Ian McLeod, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young, Boston, London and Henley, 1981, 53ff.).

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not at all surprised to discover that Saladin has horns and cloven hoofs, causing Saladin to reflect:

> "This isn't England," he thought, not for the first or last time. How could it be, after all; where in all that moderate and common-sensical land was there room for such a police van in whose interior such events as these might plausibly transpire? (158)

In attributing a magical world-view also to characters whom one might expect to be firmly rooted in the cultural dominant, magic realist fiction deconstructs the myth of a uniformly rational Western outlook, arguing instead that human beings are perfectly capable of holding a host of contradictory views simultaneously. Whether this is presented as a failing or an asset remains to be discussed in Chapter 8. Perhaps as both: although the policemen's fears and prejudices win out over their reason in a harmful way, magic realist texts show that there are also enriching aspects to a certain lack of rationality. In *The Moor's Last Sigh* for example, Moraes Zogoiby's grandfather self-contradictorily is "a nationalist whose favourite poets were all English, a professed atheist and rationalist who could bring himself to believe in ghosts". But Moraes argues: "To me, the doublenesses in Grandfather Camoens reveal his beauty; his willingness to permit the coexistence within himself of conflicting impulses is the source of his full, gentle humaneness" (32).

Categories of ex-centricity and multiple marginalization

The most prominent paradigm of ex-centricity discussed by contemporary criticism is the condition of postcoloniality. In its strict sense, the term refers to all those who in some way suffer from the after-effects of Western colonialism. However, it has been suggested that the notion may profitably be extended to include other forms of marginalization and oppression as well. Linda Hutcheon has pointed out that postcolonialism and various forms of feminism resemble each other in that both challenge the cultural dominant from an ex-centric position. In this, they differ from postmodernism, which, although basically engaged in the same critique, assumes its subversive role from within the dominant order and can afford to undermine central notions such as subjectivity, whereas marginalized discourses first need to claim a position as subject before they can critique the notion (see Hutcheon 1989b, 150-51).

Following the Tunisian intellectual Albert Memmi, Leela Gandhi has defined postcoloniality as "a historical condition marked by the invisible

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apparatus of freedom and the congealed persistence of unfreedom" (6-7). As a "condition", postcoloniality is marked as an unhealthy, dysfunctional state. The medical metaphor is enforced when Gandhi writes that "the pathology of this postcolonial limbo between arrival and departure, independence and dependence, has its source in the residual traces and memories of subordination" (*ibid.*, 7). For the good of the individual and the whole of society, this state needs to be overcome.

A position of subordination is occupied by a large number of magic realist focalizers. Many filter characters would qualify as postcolonial in the strict sense of the term, coming from cultures that in the past have been or, in some narratives' time schemes, still are subject to Western colonization. The marginalizing impact of colonialism is explored most obviously in magic realist works which depict actual processes of colonial enterprise and domination. This is the case in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where Macondo is invaded and colonized by the gringo-run banana company (see 243ff.), and in Marina Warner's *Indigo*, which describes the brutal British conquest and subsequent colonization of a fictional Caribbean island. Colonialism and its after-effects also play a prominent role in Rushdie's novels, which are mainly focalized through characters who do not belong to the colonizing class, though interestingly enough this does not guarantee a magical world-view. In fact, it is the postcolonials Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha who cling most tightly to a rational-empirical world-view, refusing to believe in ghosts or superstitions (see *The Satanic Verses*, 189-90 and 33). So in Rushdie's work at least, the opposition between a supposedly Western rational-empirical world-view and a supposedly non-Western magical one does not hold. A form of colonization can again be made out in the French occupation of Venice in *The Passion*, turning Venice from a "proud and free" place into "an enchanted city for the mad, the rich, the bored, the perverted" (52).

A condition of postcoloniality can furthermore be ascribed to characters who are marginalized on account of their ethnic identity. Magic realism here plays on the colonizing discourse that constructed the "native" mind as Europe's inferior Other, thereby intending to legitimize, *ex negativo*, the superior position of Western thought and civilization.[13] Far from having disappeared along with the outward trappings of colonialism, this discourse is alive and kicking, although it is not always easily recognizable in its present day form. Having survived pretty much unchanged in the racism still rampant today, in the form of

[13] See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York, 1978.

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exoticism it has undergone a curious twist to re-evaluate non-Western cultures as unconditionally positive, thereby constructing them just as much as Other. By presenting the ex-centric perspective as valid beyond the confines of a foreign culture, magic realist fiction challenges such colonizing discourses and the world-view they are based on.

However, to see magic realist focalizers' ex-centricity merely in terms of postcoloniality falls too short. Though the abundance of postcolonial filter characters allows criticism to establish a convenient parallel with contemporary theory, magic realist texts often encode marginality in more individual and frequently also more immediately visible ways, so that postcoloniality is not the only marginalizing factor. In fact, in many cases it is not even the most prominent one. Obviously, the focalizers' postcolonial status significantly contributes to their marginality only in passages featuring a direct encounter with the colonizer. This is the case for example in *The Satanic Verses*, where Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha occupy marginalized positions largely on account of being Indian immigrants, though even here Saladin's marginalized status is underscored by the fact that he transforms into a goat-like creature. But within a context where all other characters equally qualify as post-colonial, postcoloniality no longer marks focalizers as marginal.

If they nevertheless stand apart from what might be thought of as the centre, which in magic realist fiction they characteristically do, additional and more immediate reasons can often be made out. Focalizers are, so to say, multiply marginalized. In Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, it is not so much Clara's Chilean and thus arguably postcolonial identity, but her psychic abilities that render her Other – and not only from a Western perspective, but within her own society as well. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, colonization does not occur until about halfway through the narrative; yet, Macondo right from the start exists at a remove from the centre, a not so much geographically[14] as culturally distant sphere where ice is a miracle and magnifying glasses, telescopes and dentures are unknown (see 19 and 8). Rural isolation has a similar effect in Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*: while people have no trouble believing that a woman was impregnated by bees or that the sky is waging war against them, reports of technological innovations from the "outside world" are rejected as too fantastic to be true.[15] Though the periphery offers the advantage of relative autonomy from a meddlesome

[14] Civilization is just on "the other side of the swamp, only two days away" (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 40).
[15] *What the Crow Said* (1978), Alberta, 1998, 126.

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government (see *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 61-62), individuals may also feel cut off. As José Arcadio Buendía complains:

> Incredible things are happening in the world [....] Right there across the river there are all kinds of magical instruments while we keep on living like donkeys. (*Ibid.*, 8-9)

Then again, progress and contact with civilization may have a curiously un-civilizing effect, changing José Arcadio Buendía from "a clean and active man [...] into a man lazy in appearance, careless in his dress, with a wild beard" (*ibid.*, 10), and taking Colonel Aureliano Buendía off to war.

In *Indigo*, Sycorax, Ariel and Dulé likewise stand on the margins of society long before the advent of the British colonizers, who, dating from Jacobean times (see 145), have a much more magical world-view than any of the so-called primitives, and project their fears of sorcery, witchcraft and soothsaying full-scale onto Sycorax (*ibid.*, 173ff.).[16] Feared and rejected by her own people for her alleged magical powers, Sycorax lives in semi-exile with Dulé, who, as the wise woman's foster child and the orphaned offspring of African slaves, already is doubly "a child out of time and place" (*ibid.*, 88) even before he becomes "Caliban" to the conquerors (*ibid.*, 201). The foundling Ariel likewise is given into Sycorax's care because society feels her to be a misfit (*ibid.*, 97).

Of course, cultural differences – or rather, Western assumptions about such differences – are exploited in focalization. *Shame* is partly focalized through characters whose magic-realist world-view seems to arise directly from their non-Western cultural background. Again, however, some of the main focalizers are marginal in more immediate ways. Having voluntarily withdrawn from society, Omar Khayyam Shakil's three mothers raise their son in the seclusion of their fortress-like house, leaving him painfully different even within his own society: "uncircumcised, un-whispered-to, unshaven", he feels "a man apart", "a man born and raised in the condition of being out of things" (24). In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Moraes Zogoiby likewise finds himself marginalized in manifold ways, his non-Western identity being the least of his problems – if indeed one can describe Moraes as non-Western solely on account of his passport, which I for one do not find convincing. Moraes is a full-blown biological freak: he is deformed, with a hand like a club, and overdimensioned; he ages at twice the normal speed, making him

[16] Kit Everard for example prays to be "protect[ed] [...] from this benighted creature and her foul magic" (*ibid.*, 136).

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"simply too weird" for the rest of society (189). With parents from different cultural backgrounds, he finds himself in no-man's land:

> I, however, was raised neither as Catholic nor as Jew. I was both, and nothing: a jewholic-anonymous, a cathjew nut, a stewpot, a mongrel cur. I was – what's the word these days? – *atomised*. Yessir: a real Bombay mix.
>
> *Bastard*: I like the sound of the word. *Baas*, a smell, a stinky-poo. *Turd*, no translation required. Ergo, *Bastard*, a smelly shit; like, for example, me. (*Ibid.*, 104; emphasis in the original)

A multiple encoding of marginality can also be observed with focalizers belonging to other groups discussed within the paradigm of post-coloniality. The concept has been adapted by feminists to theorize the position of women, as well as by gay and lesbian studies. Homosexuals do not (yet?) figure prominently among magic realist focalizers. There exist lesbian relationships between Mignon and the Princess in *Nights at the Circus* (see 155 and 168), between Villanelle and her lover in *The Passion*, and between Stella and Alice in *Gut Symmetries*, but only in the second case does the character's bisexuality notably contribute to marginalization.[17] Women are more frequently used to project a culturally marginalized narrative perspective (see also Attebery, 25); but again, on the level of the text gender alone appears an insufficient basis for constructing ex-centricity. Almost invariably, female focalizers bear other social stigmata which relegate them to the margins of society in a more immediate fashion, thereby literally and metaphorically underlining the position of powerlessness and subordination women have been, and often still are, forced to occupy.

The 27th Kingdom uses a number of female focalizers whose world-views include phenomena beyond the rational-scientific perspective and who again are multiply marginalized. The case is clearest perhaps with Valentine, who meets with a considerable amount of discrimination on account of being black (see 115 and 150). Mrs O'Connor, as a member of the lower class, with a gypsy lineage and an affinity to petty crime, also occupies an off-centre position. She sympathizes with other marginalized groups, having no patience with racists (*ibid.*, 60), and her world-view decidedly clashes with post-Enlightenment rationalism. Aunt Irene, originally hailing from Eastern Europe and likewise prone to views that

[17] There in fact exists an anthology entitled *Things Invisible to See: Gay and Lesbian Tales of Magic Realism* (ed. Lawrence Schimel, Cambridge: MA, 1998). However, the stories do not have a lot in common with other magic realist texts, either in tone or in technique, so they do not enter into my discussion.

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are at odds with a scientific outlook, is criticized by her more conventionally-minded upper-middle class friends for consorting with people they find socially awkward (*ibid.*, 30). She furthermore differs from what unfortunately appears to be the norm in that she, for one, is not racist (*ibid.*, 115).

Though these characters from *The 27th Kingdom* are all women, I want to suggest that their non-conformist world-views can be attributed not to their gender, but rather to their familiarity with Catholic religion, which they use in science's stead to explain the world. While these focalizers enable the text to project a magic-realist world-view quite naturally, there might also be a drawback to the choice. For in specifically linking women to a religious rather than a scientific world-view, the novel can be accused of endorsing certain cultural stereotypes, still prevalent today, which regard science as a male and the arts as a female domain. Although the women of *The 27th Kingdom* are able to assimilate the unusual events better than the men, which supports their alternative outlook, the question remains whether by pandering to received notions of a male versus a female outlook the novel does not actually perpetuate such stereotypes. A similar danger inheres when stereotypes about non-Western world-views are exploited to project an alternative perspective.

The use of multiple stigmatization to draw attention to the ex-centric position of women is especially pronounced in Carter's novels. In *Nights at the Circus*, marginality is conferred onto various female characters several times over. The whores in Ma Nelson's brothel find themselves at the very bottom of the heap due to their disrespectable profession, while the Russian women in the third part of the novel are criminals who have been imprisoned for killing their husbands (see 210). Particularly noticeable, however, is the recurring combination of the female gender with two other traditionally recognized categories of the marginal: physical abnormality and an affiliation with the world of entertainment (*varieté*, the circus).

The female protagonist Fevvers can be seen to stand outside the dominant order first of all on account of being a woman. In terms of strength, size, and sheer bluster she may outrank most men, but as the allegorical embodiment of the New Woman, who will finally come into her own in the twentieth century, the figure only underlines the extent to which gender is still a marginalizing factor (see *ibid.*, 25). Patriarchal domination is also encoded in the Grand Duke's attempt at sexual coercion and his plan to put Fevvers in a gilded cage, from where, ironically, she already flew during her stage act at the outset of the novel (see *ibid.*, 25 and 14). However, Fevvers also, and perhaps to an even

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greater extent, occupies an ex-centric position because her unusual birth and her wings mark her as physically abnormal. Like Moraes Zogoiby, she is a freak of nature; and while this provides her with a fairly good income (see *ibid.*, 11), outside the circus world her wings set her apart as a cripple, her ability to fly creating "an irreconcilable division between [her]self and the rest of humankind" (*ibid.*, 34; see also 29 and 19).

Being a woman again is linked – and thus likened – to being physically abnormal in Madame Schreck's "museum of women monsters" (*ibid.*, 55), which combines elements of the live freak shows found at fairs with those of museums of curiosities like that opened by P.T. Barnum in New York in 1842. Vividly illustrating the way magic realist fiction draws on old and not-so-old tales and legends, the cabinet includes Fanny Four-Eyes, who has eyes in the place of nipples, the Sleeping Beauty, who wakes but for a few minutes each evening, the Wiltshire Wonder, who, less than three feet high, was purportedly fathered on a milkmaid by the King of Fairies and had a cradle made of half a walnut shell, the hermaphrodite Albert/Albertina, and last but not least a girl whose face is covered in cobwebs (see *ibid.*, 59-69). Indentured to the Madame, the female exhibits are to satisfy the male customers' desire for the unusual and the unnatural – or rather, what the customers conceive of as unnatural. Here, the marginalized perspective works like a lever to unsettle ready-made assumptions about what is normal, natural, or real; for as seen from the Other side, there is nothing unnatural about these women at all. In fact, Madame Schreck's black manservant Toussaint, born without a mouth and himself a freak show veteran, suggests that perhaps the reference of the term had better be reversed, maintaining that "it was those fine gentlemen who paid down their sovereigns to poke and pry at us who were the unnatural ones, not we".[18] *Nights at the Circus* in this way draws attention to the principles of exclusion practised by the centre against those who have been conveniently defined as Other. Conflating several categories of the ex-centric enables the novel to point, *via* the rather more drastic forms of exclusion and degradation that are the fate of Madame Schreck's "women monsters", to the marginalizing effect of gender.

Physical abnormality is used to make marginality more immediate and concrete also in other cases. In *Nights at the Circus*, the mouthless

[18] *Ibid.*, 61. On the humanity of Carter's freaks and, conversely, the monstrosity of her humans, see Mary Y. Hallab, "'Human Diversity' in the Novels of Angela Carter: Which Ones Are the Freaks?", *Studies in Contemporary Satire*, 19 (1995), 108-17. A similar reversal of categories recently has been attributed to Tod Browning's 1932 horror film *Freaks* (see *Time Out Film Guide*, ed. John Pym, Harmondsworth, 2002, s.v. "Freaks").

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Toussaint can be read as a representative of both the black population and "those who toil and suffer" (60), that is, of the exploited working class, two groups whose fate of ex-centricity and subordination thereby are compared to that of a physical freak. In *The Satanic Verses*, the subhuman status ascribed to non-white immigrants is even made literally visible. The prejudices of the dominant group turn the immigrants into actual monsters, fantastic creatures that in the Western imagination have traditionally symbolized the primitive, the barbaric, the evil: the Satanic demi-goat, the man-eating manticore, the snake, and the wolf, as well as various other animal-, insect- or plant-like mutants that might have sprung from a Bosch-painting (see 157-70).

Physical peculiarity appears as a marginalizing factor also in *The Passion*, where Villanelle's webbed feet clearly mark her as different not only in Henri's eyes, but also among the population of Venice, who in themselves can be regarded as disenfranchised, having lost their independence when the Republic was conquered by Napoleon in 1797. However, it is not the webbed feet as such that mark Villanelle as different, at least not within the Venetian setting, but rather the fact that the webbed feet have, so to speak, been bestowed upon the wrong sex. As Villanelle observes: "There never was a girl whose feet were webbed in the entire history of the boatmen" (*The Passion*, 51). Being less a biological accident than the result of a magic ritual gone wrong, Villanelle's feet tie in with her non-conformist sexual preferences and her cross-dressing when working in the casino. Her occupation and habits in turn connect her, *via* the Venetian tradition of masked balls, to the traditionally ex-centric realms of the fair, the circus and the freak show.

The ex-centric perspective again is linked to physical abnormality and an affiliation with the circus in Grass' *The Tin Drum*, but with the fundamental difference that in this case, the protagonist has consciously chosen a position of exile. By deciding to stop growing at the age of three, Oskar Matzerath deliberately refuses to join the ranks of normal grown-ups, that is, of the Nazis. Although the circus where he becomes a clown stands in the service of the Nazis, Oskar's perspective nevertheless remains that of an outsider.

The marginalizing factor of breaking social etiquette and earning one's living in a dubious, "illegitimate" profession once more is superimposed on that of gender in *Wise Children*, where Nora and Dora Chance, born out of wedlock and pursuing a career on the music hall stage, find themselves excluded from, as well as by, the "legitimate" Hazard family. Told from "the wrong side of the tracks" (1), Dora's story reveals conceived notions of legitimacy and illegitimacy, both in a

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literal and a figurative sense, to be social constructions propagated by those at the top to authorize and uphold the gap between centre and margin.

The striking abundance in magic realist fiction of settings from the realms of theatrical entertainment begs the question as to the role they play for the magic realist technique of ex-centric focalization, and in how far they might be emblematic of a general feature of magic realism. In the following section, I want to suggest that magic realist fiction's predilection for these domains stems at least in part from the fact that, more so than other settings, they lend themselves to constructing an alternative world-view.

Circus, stage, magicians' ghetto: tapping the carnival tradition

Traditionally perceived in the Western imagination as an outlandish, almost marvellous domain to which the laws of nature do not apply, the circus seems an eminently suitable setting for magic realist fiction. Indeed, the similarities between the circus – or rather, its conception – and the world of magic realist fiction are so appealing that the circus has been abused as a real-life substitute for magic realism. In *A Trip to the Light Fantastic*, the British travel writer Katie Hickman deliberately chooses a travelling circus as lens through which to reflect Mexico, hoping to reveal the magic aspects of a country whose writers write in a magic realist mode because it is, according to her, "their truest expression of what life is like". Hickman's description of the circus as "a single tangible point at which fantasy and reality meet" strikingly recalls definitions of magic realism. Taking her cue from Mexican novelists, Hickman extends "*la magia del circo*" to encompass the whole of Mexico.[19] In fact, her account might itself be considered magic realist fiction, with reviewers comparing her characters to those of García Márquez and Isabel Allende.[20]

Hickman's construction of a magic realist Mexico on a circus-world matrix is problematic. Hickmann not only constructs a Mexico along the lines of Carpentier's *real maravilloso*, with excerpts from Carpentier's 1949 essay appearing as mottoes throughout the book, but also projects contemporary conceptions of magic realism as an ex-centic mode onto reality wholesale when she writes:

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[19] *A Trip to the Light Fantastic: Travels with a Mexican Circus* (1993), London, 1994, 15.

[20] See excerpts from reviews on the back cover of *A Trip to the Light Fantastic.*

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> Like the circus, the Mexican *indígenas* are a marginalized people, amongst the most dispossessed and underprivileged in the land. And yet it is in these small groups [...] that the steely flavour of old Mexico, in all its anarchy and magic, can still be found. (*A Trip to the Light Fantastic*, 59ff.)

Like so many literary critics, Hickman confuses Carpentier's notion of a marvellous Latin American reality with a mode of representation, two things which are quite distinct. But more importantly, so much theory leaves no room for actual observation – from the start, Hickman's Mexico is a Mexico already perceived, already theorized, already written.

Problematic is also the way Hickman's depiction both of the circus world and of Mexican reality falls prey to a rather disturbing exoticism. To Hickman, the circus performers appear "dazzling" and "unbearably exotic, beings from another age"; compared to her "logical, English, strictly two-dimensional" way of thinking, that of the indigenous people is "pure poetry" (*ibid.*, 15 and 72). Of course, the circus aims to strike the spectator as exotic, that is its allure. And Hickman does to a certain extent take back the spectacular picture she paints by revealing how the glamour turns out to be an illusion once you get behind the scenes (see *ibid.*, 31, also 49). However, Hickman's overall perception of Mexico as "a complicated place, a place of strong magic" (*ibid.*, 16) and her conception of magic realism as a mode of expression unique to Latin America confirm the exoticism of the text, which thereby upholds the absolute Otherness constructed by the West just as much as racist discourses do. Ironically, Hickman's book inadvertently reveals exoticism and racism to be two sides of the same coin. The utterance of a Mexico-phobic US citizen "Why, that whole goddamn country's a circus" corresponds exactly to Hickman's own perception "I had always thought of the circus as an image for Mexico", only with the valence reversed (*ibid.*, 115 and 80).

Interestingly, these drawbacks do not attend the use of circus or circus-like settings in magic realist fiction. There are several ways in which the circus and related domains can be understood as particularly well-suited to, or perhaps even reflective of, the magic realist mode. On the level of reader reception, magic realist fiction itself might be compared to a circus performance: just as the show in the circus' "magic circle" (*Nights at the Circus*, 107) evokes incredulity on the part of the spectators, who, like Jack Walser, are torn between believing their eyes and their reason, magic realist fiction makes its readers hesitate over how to interpret the narrative. On the level of plot, a circus or circus-like

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setting helps to naturalize magic realism's fantastic elements: freaks and fabulous powers appear right at home in the world of the circus. I say "appear", because as magic realist fiction makes clear, the physically or mentally different congregate in such environments as much by necessity as by choice, society often leaving them no other option.[21]

Over and beyond being located on the fringes of society, the circus is emblematic of the magic realist world insofar as it, too, is a world where that which is usually constructed as abnormal or unreal suddenly becomes the norm, where the cultural dominant is suspended, modified, turned upside down – it is a *monde*, or rather mode, *renversé*. It is from within such an upside-down order that the magic realist focalizer, who under other circumstances would be regarded a marginal, unreliable figure, can speak with authority. Magic realist fiction's choice of such settings therefore facilitates the endorsement of an alternative world-view. Circus-like settings furthermore allow the texts to explore a further aspect of magic, namely the art of conjuring, sleight-of-hand, tricks, or illusion. Magic realist fiction does in fact frequently play on the opposition between real and fake magic, as on the opposition of real and fake in general, as will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Seen as inversions of the everyday world, the circus and related settings connect magic realist fiction to the concepts of carnival and the carnivalesque, the latter having been theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin as the subversive literary mode *par excellence*.[22] Subsuming under the category of carnival all kinds of comic rituals and cults, spectacles, and parodies or secular versions of religious festivities, Bakhtin characterizes medieval carnival as a time out from everyday life: "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (Bakhtin, 10). In fact, carnival and the carnival idiom are based not only on a suspension, but an inversion of the usual order, which can be observed in many, if not all societies:[23]

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[21] Some instances of exile are more voluntary than others. *Nights at the Circus* contains both: "the Princess had chosen her exile amongst the beasts, while Mignon's exile had been thrust upon her" (153-54).

[22] See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (*Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable*, 1965), trans. Helene Iswolsky, Cambridge: MA, and London, 1968. On the circus as a continuation of the carnival tradition, see V.V. Ivanov, "The Significance of M.M. Bakhtin's Ideas on Sign, Utterance and Dialogue for Modern Semiotics", in *Semiotics and Structuralism: Readings from the Soviet Union*, ed. Henryk Baran, White Plains: NY, 1974, 340; cited in Danow, 55.

[23] For a survey, see Hans Peter Duerr, *Traumzeit: Über die Grenze zwischen Wildnis und Zivilisation* (1978), Frankfurt am Main, 1985, 118-25.

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> We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out" (*à l'envers*), of the "turnabout", of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear [....] A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a "world inside out." (Bakhtin., 11)

Bakhtin goes on to argue that the adaptation of carnival's forms and discourses, its imagery and idiom enables works of literature similarly to suspend or invert the established order. However, the elements of carnival need no longer be recognizable: "carnivalesque" does not refer to literary depictions of carnival, but to the idea of subversion. The function of "the carnival grotesque form" is

> to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things. (*Ibid.*, 34)

This reads rather like a description of some of the main features and functions critics have attributed to magic realism, and it is little surprising that the mode, given its tendencies towards transgression and excess, should have been related to Bakhtin's concept. Discussing magic realist fiction as an instance of the carnivalesque, Danow writes:

> It supports the unsupportable, assails the unassailable, at times regards the supernatural as natural, takes fiction as truth, and makes the extraordinary or "magical" as viable a possibility as the ordinary or "real", so that no true distinction is perceived or acknowledged between the two.[24]

Such approaches tie in with observations linking magic realism to other artistic modes that intricately overlap and intersect with Bakhtin's carnivalesque, such as the grotesque and the baroque. Bakhtin himself refers to the aesthetics of folk culture as "grotesque realism" (18), arguing that even after it moved away from its roots and became a literary genre, the grotesque continued to draw on carnivalesque images, albeit increasingly formalized ones. Still recognizable in Swift and

[24] Danow, 3. See also Faris, 184 and 185; Delbaere-Garant, 256; Bényei, 172; and Cooper, 23ff.

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Molière, the Romantic grotesque increasingly lacks direct representation of folk spectacles and carnival forms (see *ibid.*, 34-37). Bakhtin's different types of grotesque are useful in distinguishing between the literary fantastic and magic realism: while the Romantic grotesque seems closely related to the literary fantastic, magic realism returns to earlier forms of the carnivalesque-grotesque, as will be shown below.

Deriving from the name for a type of Roman ornament, the term "grotesque" connotes a fanciful interplay of forms, a dynamics of metamorphosis, an aesthetics of the unfinished (see *ibid.*, 32). Constantly in flux, the grotesque knows no established rules; it is, as Bakhtin writes, "noncanonical by its very nature" (30). According to Bakhtin, the grotesque has manifested itself in art at all times, even though it may often have been eclipsed by a prevailing classic standard (see *ibid.*, 32-33). Characterized as an ever-present artistic impulse diametrically opposed to a recurrent classicism, dynamic rather than static and inherently transgressive, Bakthin's grotesque strikingly resembles Carpentier's concept of the baroque as outlined in Chapter 1 above. Recalling that for Carpentier the Latin American literature of the Boom constitutes the epitome of the baroque, the circle closes, and magic realist fiction emerges as an offspring of the interconnected traditions of the carnivalesque-grotesque and the baroque.

It might be objected that, on such a general level as that of the quote above, a large number of literary works and genres can be related to Bakhtin's carnivalesque, as indeed recent criticism has undertaken to illustrate. However, the connection between magic realist fiction and Bakhtin's theory does not exhaust itself in generalities, as Danow has shown for a number of Latin American novels. The carnival tradition frequently is invoked also by magic realist texts from Britain; some of them even self-consciously reflect on carnival's subversive potential. In its specific use of carnival images as well as its challenging of established conventions, magic realism thus might be called a literature both of carnival and the carnivalesque.

More so than other off-shoots of carnivalesque literature, magic realist texts return to carnival's roots. Like Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, they litter their narratives with concrete traces of carnival culture and idiom. In fact, Rabelais' work is a more than prominent intertext for Nye's as well as Carter's and Rushdie's novels. Allusion and citation abound: in *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, the narrator not only openly acknowledges his debt to a certain translator of Rabelais (see 11), he also gives Baby Shakespeare's first words as "*Drink! Drink! I want drink! Bring me ale to drink!*" (51; emphasis in the original), an intertextual citation

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from Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.[25] *The Moor's Last Sigh* establishes Rabelais as intertext by referring to Moraes Zogoiby as "Baby Gargantua Zogoiby" (144; see also 188). And in *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers is described as "a *big* girl" who consumes huge quantities of food and champagne "with gargantuan enthusiasm" (7 and 22; emphasis in the original). Even the style of the text might be described as Rabelaisian in its excess; Carter herself has acknowledged it to be "mannerist" (Haffenden, 91).

A number of magic realist texts furthermore exhibit traits Bakhtin has identified as prominent features of the Rabelaisian carnivalesque-grotesque, such as abusive language and the "material bodily principle" (Bakhtin, 18), that is, grossly exaggerated depictions of the human body and its natural functions. Both are especially conspicuous in Nye's *Falstaff*: there is Fastolf's bulk, his insatiable thirst, his overdimensioned manhood (measuring 14 ½ inches in length and six in girth), his unusual sexual prowess, the fact that he "always fight[s] like at least seven men", and, last but not least, his fart on London Bridge, of which Fastolf proudly says:

> Such a fart. A gull fell dead.

Not surprisingly, an anonymous reviewer concludes: "Nye writes like Rabelais reborn."[26]

The irreverent Rabelaisian imagery effects the humorous degradation of all that regards itself high and sacred, as is nicely illustrated in *Wise Children*. Melchior Hazard, the embodiment of high Culture, arranges for the import of "sacred earth" from Stratford-upon-Avon in order to consecrate the film set of a production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Unfortunately, the earth has been "thoroughly desecrated" (*Wise Children*, 129) by the leading actress's Persian cat, who mistook it for cat litter, of which fact Melchior fortunately remains blissfully ignorant. The ceremony of consecration itself is then ludicrously interrupted by the film producer throwing a jealous fit over the size of Melchior's genitals (see *ibid.*, 132).

On a more literal level, carnival-like festivities themselves abound in magic realist texts. Just as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* contains gypsies' fairs and carnivals galore, Nye's novels have their country fairs and

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[25] See *Gargantua und Pantagruel* (c. 1532-4), trans. Walter Widmer, Darmstadt, 1986, Book I, Chapter 7.

[26] *Falstaff*, 199, 70 and 110 and inside cover flap.

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revels, *The Passion* offers a Venetian celebration ball, and in *Wild Nights*, the narrator and her aunt fly to night-time balls only to "come down in real carnival".[27] The time of Halloween, that carnival of the dead, plays a role both in *Wild Nights* and *Ironweed*. Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World* features fairs with spell-binding acts of levitation and a "God-machine", as well as a by any standards excessive wedding celebration. The manifold parties and costume balls in *Wise Children* also indelibly bear the stamp of carnival.[28] In *Indigo*, a political coup by an Islamic movement most symbolically coincides with preparations for Liamuiga's annual carnival, temporarily bringing about real rather than ritualized anarchy. However, the coup fails, and when order is restored, the rebels face capital punishment (see 364-66).

In addition to such instances of carnival proper, there are also the carnival-derived settings mentioned above, in which the principles of carnival, erstwhile a temporary affair, have been made permanent. There is the circus, the freak show and the *variété* in *Nights at the Circus*; the music hall, the comedy act and the theatre in *Wise Children* and *The Late Mr Shakespeare*; the magicians' ghetto in *Midnight's Children*; and the travelling show in *Illywhacker*. And last but not least, within as well as outside of these settings one comes upon the countless accoutrements of carnival: clowns and fools,[29] conjurers and magicians, freaks, masks, costumes and disguises. The importance of these elements for magic realist fiction is perhaps best embodied in the figure of Peregrine, that conjurer-magician who is "not so much a man, more of a travelling carnival" (*Wise Children*, 169).

The elements of carnival culture are used not only to exemplify, but also explicitly to address the upheaval of established order. In *Nights at the Circus*, the Imperial Circus houses "displays of the triumph of man's will over gravity and over rationality", a suspension of the natural order that spills over into the fictional world in general. In the circus arena, opposites meet and mingle; traditionally recognized category boundaries become blurred when "the titillating contradiction" between nature and culture, animal and human, are "resolved in the night-time intermingling of French perfume and the essence of steppe and jungle in which musk

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[27] See *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, 136-43; *Falstaff*, 347-49; *The Passion*, 54-61; and *Wild Nights*, 49.

[28] See *Wild Nights*, 89ff.; *Ironweed*, 23, 29,46, 60; *The Invention of the World*, 128-31 and 442-55; and *Wise Children*, 62ff., 96-109, 152-61, 194-227.

[29] Clowns feature prominently in *Nights at the Circus* (see esp. 116-25). In *Wise Children*, the clown plays a role in the figure of Gorgeous George (see esp. 64-68). I will shortly return to the significance of the fool.

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and civet [reveal] themselves as common elements" (105). Significantly, this resolution of opposition is not a mere circus trick. The circus does not simply throw together the disparate elements of perfume and animal odour to forge an artificial and temporary union, but in fact re-establishes a connection that had only been concealed, for the civet used in perfumery in fact is won from the glands of great cats and indeed has a musk-like smell. So it is not the circus that is artificial and constructed, but the outside world and its dichotomies. Carter's circus thus performs a function that has been identified as characteristic of carnival-like rituals or forms, namely allowing the reversal of order to reveal a point of origin where opposites coincide and everything is one (see Duerr, 120ff.). Its redemption of original unity links carnival to the art of alchemy, which plays a role in Winterson's *Gut Symmetries*.

However, the insight afforded by the inversion of the usual relationship between world and circus may not be unconditionally welcomed, for it distressingly unsettles established categories of perception. The comfort afforded by the easy classification into primitive versus civilized, savage versus noble, instinct-driven versus intelligent, is retracted even further when – as with the term "freak" (see 128 above) – the reference is reversed and Walser has to discover that, far from being stupid beasts, the circus chimpanzees are much more intelligent and humane than their trainer and their keeper, who spend their time drinking and filing their nails, respectively (see *Nights at the Circus*, 107). Although it looks like a parody of scientific learning, the chimps' schoolroom act turns out to be not make-believe, but full earnest. Conversely, the ape-like behaviour the chimps exhibit when under observation is nothing but a show, and Walser feels a "dizzy uncertainty about what was human and what was not" (*ibid.*, 110).

Over and beyond the distinction between animal and human, the novel here confuses or reverses an even more fundamental opposition: parody turns out to be truth, while what was taken for reality is nothing but a cheap parody. Again, the text locates the real world inside the circus arena, leaving only one conclusion: all the world's a circus, and we the monkeys in it. The old "world-as-stage" topos here undergoes a postmodern twist or two. In being identified with the circus rather than the stage, the world attains a certain touch of the ridiculous, for while both suggest that life is a mere fiction and therefore a vain and futile enterprise, the stage at least offers the dignity of tragedy; the circus turns it into mere entertainment. At the same time, replacing the stage by the circus also comments on the topos as such, showing up the stage's pretensions to high art. Carter's novel here drives home its point with a

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vengeance, showing up not only the constructedness of the categories through which the world is perceived, but also the immeasurable arrogance with which humankind, at least in the Western world, undeservedly proclaims itself the pinnacle of creation. The absurdity of any such claim is sarcastically underlined when Walser hesitantly recites Hamlet's speech "What piece of work is a man"[30] for the studious chimps, while in the background the Strong Man and the chimps' female keeper engage in completely instinct-driven fornication (see *ibid.*, 111).

The subversive function of carnival elements is made even more explicit in *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, where Pickleherring ponders the significance of cross-dressing:

> Consider: in all orgies, at all times in history, cross-dressing has been of the essence. Put a man in a woman's clothes, or a woman in a man's, and you have instantly an invitation to sweet disorder, to sexual riot and confusion, and to a breakdown of all the usual inhibitory canons of behaviour. (308)

Interestingly, Pickleherring's conclusions are not all too far from those drawn by theoretical studies identifying transvestism as a basic feature of the Western European carnival tradition and other societies' rituals. In keeping with the characteristics of carnival that have just been discussed, it has been argued that transvestism not only inverts the usual order, but actually dissolves it, uniting the opposite genders into an androgynous whole.[31]

In *Falstaff*, Fastolf's reflections on the nature and function of the clown and the fool also recall carnival theory: "I have this passion for clowns and fools, for the wisdom of foolishness, for those who dare to stand established order on its head so that its disestablishments show" (189). As "*King Riot*", Fastolf is the embodiment of the carnival principle, which appeals to Prince Hal's "delight in disorder, [his] longing to see the world turned upside-down" (*ibid.*, 217 and 216; see also 256 and 391). Fastolf also turns the order of history upside down, presenting himself as the ultimate hero.

Finally, there is yet a further use to which magic realist fiction puts the carnival tradition. Because it is based on an act of reversal, carnival

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[30] *Hamlet* (*c.* 1601), ed. Harold Jenkins, London, 1985, II.ii.303ff.

[31] See V.V. Ivanov, "The Semiotic Theory of Carnival as the Inversion of Bipolar Opposites" (Russian version, 1977), trans. R. Reeder and J. Rostinsky, in *Carnival!*, Approaches to Semiotics 64, Umberto Eco, V.V. Ivanov and Monica Rector, Berlin, New York and Amsterdam, 1984, 12-13. On the dissolution of gender roles during carnival, see also Duerr, 116-17 and 428-29, n. 1.

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cannot exist in isolation, but always also implies the existing order it seeks to dissolve. The contrast or dialogue between opposing orders is mediated by certain figures which, throughout the history of ideas, have been constructed as the everyday manifestations of the principles of carnival. Such conceptions of crossover or in-between-ness are drawn on by magic realist texts in order to effect not the replacement of one world-view by another, but the coexistence and integration of several world-views, as will be shown below.

Fools and madmen, or: constructing an interface

As Umberto Eco has pointed out, carnival proper is necessarily limited in time or, in its derived forms, in space, for example in the circus arena, on the stage, or the television screen.[32] It cannot exist always and everywhere, because as a form of parody it needs rules to violate; transgression presupposes order. Consequently, so Eco's argument, carnival does not liberate from the existing order, but actually reinforces it. In support of his thesis, Eco points out how throughout the centuries the circus has been used to pacify the crowds, and clowneries have not been thought worth censuring.[33] Modern show business is also based upon a notion of the ludicrous with no aim but to entertain (see Eco 1984, 3). *Nights at the Circus* makes a similar point when it suggests that clowns are not capable of effecting change because they need not be taken seriously: they are "licensed to commit licence and yet forbidden to act". Disorder may be wrought, but in the end, the old order is restored:

> even if the clowns detonated the entire city [...] nothing would really change. Nothing. The exploded buildings would float up into the air insubstantial as bubbles, and gently waft to earth again on exactly the same places where they had stood before. The corpses would writhe, spring apart at the joints, dismember – then pick up their own dismembered limbs to juggle with them before slotting them back in their good old sockets, all present and correct, sir. (151)[34]

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[32] See "The Frames of Comic 'Freedom'", in Eco, Ivanov and Rector, 6 (cited as Eco 1984).

[33] However, it should be noted that their literary representations were censured; *Till Eulenspiegel* for example was put on the index (see *Till Eulenspiegel*, 243).

[34] Note that this defeatism concerning the circus' subversive potential is not borne out by the novel as a whole.

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I beg to differ concerning carnival's liberating potential. Eco's conclusion is perhaps overly hasty, at least if unconditionally extended to Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque literature and parody in general. The phenomenon of carnival as such may indeed have been employed to maintain a given social or political order, the temporary suspension of social codes functioning as an escape valve for frustration and aggression. Nevertheless, it is a form of parody, and parody is capable of challenging the order from within which it speaks: to restate in transgressing is not to confirm. Instead, parody may be defined as "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (Hutcheon 1996, 26). Eco implicitly acknowledges this when he assesses parody as a threat to the dominant order (see Eco 1984, 3). The same is the case with magic realist fiction, which acknowledges and retraces – sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly – the rational-empirical outlook of post-Enlightenment Western civilization, all the while questioning that outlook's claim to sole validity.

In deliberately invoking and then subverting existing conventions, magic realist fiction is essentially dialogic in nature. Many works actually re-enact this dialogue on the level of plot by containing two perspectives or "camps", one of which adheres to the magic realist world-view endorsed by the text, while the other is in some way sceptical and has trouble accepting fantastic phenomena. Against the backdrop of such scepticism, the magic realist world emerges all the more clearly. The sceptical outsider is played by Walser in *Nights at the Circus*, by Henri in *The Passion*, and by Saleem's doctor and Padma in *Midnight's Children*.[35] In *Gut Symmetries*, Stella's mother likewise vehemently rejects the unscientific, and Jove discards Stella's mysticism as mentally unbalanced, although the text distinctly suggests that in the end it is he who no longer has a complete grasp on reality (see 92, 46 and 190-93). In this, the two are diametrically opposed to Stella and her Jewish father, who "come from a people to whom the invisible world is everyday present" (*ibid.*, 44), a definition which surprisingly also applies to the particle physicist Alice. In *Wild Nights*, the narrator's parents are simply oblivious to anything that falls outside scientific paradigms (see 151 below). And the rebellious scribe Stephen Scrope in *Falstaff* refuses to take down so much as a single word of John Fastolf's dictation, proclaiming it all "Lies!" (337). His assessment in a way is borne out by Fastolf's final confession

[35] Padma repeatedly hesitates over Saleem's fantastic claims, but unlike the doctor she does not adhere to a rational-scientific world-view (see *Midnight's Children*, 193).

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(see 102 above), yet at the same time, the novel ridicules Scrope for his narrow-mindedness and lack of imagination, for example when Scrope uses Fastolf's talk of potatoes as evidence that the man is unsound (see *ibid.*, 351). Of course, potatoes in fifteenth-century England are an anachronism (and the inattentive reader squirms at having overlooked this), but they are by no means fantastic, so that the episode undermines Scrope's bombastic claim to "Truth" (*ibid.*, 337).

The simultaneous presence of conflicting world-views is not merely a structural inconvenience necessitated by magic realism's dialogic nature, nor does it serve only to sharpen the contrast. It is a significant feature of magic realist fiction in its own right. For although the alternative world-view is presented as real, this does not mean that the dominant world-view is dismissed. Rather, the alternative world-view is recuperated as a complement to the cultural dominant, so that in the end, several world-views are accepted alongside each other, and all of them need to be taken into account in trying to understand the human mind.

Magic realism's insistence on the simultaneity of different world-views does not conflict with linking the mode to the upside-down world of carnival, but in fact ties right in with that tradition. Far from being completely isolated from everyday life in time and space, the alternative order of carnival remained present in society even in non-carnival times, most obviously in the figures of clowns and fools, whom Bakhtin describes as "the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season" (8).[36] The literature and arts of the European Middle Ages and the Renaissance bear witness to conceptions of carnival as a complement to the established order, the inverted perspective affording a kind of knowledge missing from the dominant outlook.

Among these conceptions there is that of the "wise fool", who was credited with a different, in some respects greater, insight into the world. Although the wise fool is a cultural construction, the idea to a certain extent recalls modern psychology's *savant* syndrome.[37] Nye's narrator Fastolf draws on this conception, making clear that the fool speaks with

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[36] See also Duerr, 119.

[37] Replacing the formerly used "*idiot savant*", first coined by John Langdon Down in 1887, the term refers to the phenomenon that mentally retarded or autistic persons may exhibit extraordinary abilities in certain areas, for example lightening calculation or perfect pitch (see *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, ed. Alan E. Kazdin, Oxford and New York, 2000, s.v. "savant syndrome").

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authority not only within a carnival setting, but, as a "*foolosopher*",[38] is worth listening to at other times as well:

> I am a fool.
>
> Kings need their fools.
>
> Because there is more instruction to be had from a fool than a wise man.
>
> Because *the fool dares to tell the truth.* (*Falstaff*, 347; emphasis in the original)

The notion of the wise fool is related to the medieval and Renaissance idea of madness as a state of privileged perception and revelation, an aspect shared by carnival as a temporary unhinging of reason.[39] Fools and the madmen both have been perceived as standing on the borderline between society and an untamed wilderness, a position that intriguingly became theirs in a literal sense when, as Michel Foucault reports in *Madness and Civilization*, they were imprisoned in the towevers of the city gates.[40] Literally relegated to the threshold, madness is understood as a state of passage, of belonging neither here nor there. Making no distinction between madness and folly, Foucault argues that, in the literature and art of the outgoing Middle Ages,

> the character of the Madman, the Fool, or the Simpleton assumes more and more importance. He is no longer simply a ridiculous and familiar silhouette in the wings: he stands center stage as the guardian of truth [....] (*Ibid.*, 14)

Madness was seen to grant insights unattainable to the sane, the tree of knowledge serving as mast for the Ship of Fools. However, this insight into forbidden realms was ambiguous, potentially revealing that "life itself was only futility, vain words, a squabble of cap and bells".[41]

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[38] *Falstaff*, 347, emphasis in the original. The pun was used already by the sixteenth-century scholar Sir Thomas Chaloner, who satirized as "foolelosophers" those who in order to appear learned used Latin-derived coinages or "inkhorn terms". Chaloner is quoted, without source, in Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language* (1951), London, 1993, 213.

[39] On parallels between carnival and unreason as states of insight, see Duerr, 115.

[40] See *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (*Histoire de la Folie*, 1961), trans. Richard Howard, New York, 1988 (1965), 11.

[41] *Ibid.*, 16; on the Ship of Fools, see 22. Other conceptions of madness existed at the same time which connected unreason to knowledge in different, more satirical ways (see *ibid.*, 24ff.). But these do not enter in to the discussion here.

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According to Foucault, there was a time when madness and reason were not yet completely disjunct, when they still communicated, and madness was given a voice. However, the medieval and humanist conception of madness as insight lost ground during the Age of Reason, which constructed insanity as reason's Other, that is, as unreason. As such, it was expelled from the realm of legitimate discourse and knowledge. In depriving madness of the right to speak, psychiatry initiated "reason's subjugation of non-reason" (*ibid.*, ix). The medieval notion was briefly revived by the Romantics in the figure of the mad but divinely inspired poet as depicted for example in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan":

> And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
> His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
> Weave a circle round him thrice,
> And close your eyes with holy dread,
> For he on honey-dew hath fed,
> And drunk the milk of Paradise.[42]

Though no longer specifically linked to insight, madness still furnishes a perspective that differs from the established one. In this, it obviously is akin to carnival, and Bakhtin accordingly argues that "the theme of madness is inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by 'normal,' that is by commonplace ideas and judgments" (39).

Given such constructions of madness, it is hardly surprising that mad characters should populate magic realist fiction. Interestingly, their perspectives are endorsed to varying degrees. In some instances, the mad character does appear to have access to a higher kind of truth, whereas in other cases, madness is presented as a passing stage which, while not necessarily rejected as untrue, in the end gives way to a more adequate perception of the world.

The wise fool appears in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where José Arcadio Buendía, after having reverted to "a state of total innocence" (86), spends his life tied to a tree in the courtyard. The novel here picks up on the common idea of madness as a return to an original state of emptiness or blankness, to an "innocent idiocy" (Foucault 1988, 22). To

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[42] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Khan" (1816), in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H.J. Jackson, Oxford and New York, 1985, 103; ll. 49-54. On Romantic constructions of the mad artist, see also the last chapter of Tobin Siebers, *The Romantic Fantastic*, Ithaca: NY, 1984.

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recover one's innocence is to undo or reverse the Fall, which was also the fall into worldly knowledge; to go mad therefore is to un-know the world in order that it may be known again in its original wholeness. However, as the mystic realm is not accessible to language, the closest one can come to a description is to say what it is not (see Duerr, 112ff.), meaning that the preferred idiom of madness is paradox. So while José Arcadio Buendía's madness does not divorce him from knowledge, this is not recognized as such by his family. It takes the priest to realize that the supposed nonsense he utters is Latin, and his craziness actually is a form of insight (see *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 91-92). Disregarding all social conventions, Remedios the Beauty also is thought simple-minded, although she shows considerable common sense when she calls a young man who dies for love of her "a complete simpleton". It takes Colonel Aureliano Buendía to appreciate her insight: "It seemed as if some penetrating lucidity permitted her to see the reality of things beyond any formalism" (*ibid.*, 214).

An example of more consistent focalization through a character whom his environment might consider mentally odd can be found in William Kennedy's *Ironweed*. The main filter character is Francis Phelan, an ex-baseball player turned homeless drunk. The many ghosts Francis sees and talks to are invisible to anyone but himself. The text exhibits the doubleness so typical of the magic realist mode: although real enough to Francis, the ghosts at the same time are transparently presented as a projection of Francis' guilt, and Francis' conversations with the ghosts can be read as self-accusations. However, it is his unconventional perception, his madness, which allows Francis finally to confront and come to terms with his guilt and regrets about the past, especially about the men he has killed.

Henri's madness in *The Passion* is constructed more ambivalently, drawing on two different conceptions of unreason. In certain respects, Henri's perception is presented as unreliable and erroneous, while in others, his new state does seem to allow him to see the world in a manner he hitherto rejected, namely in Villanelle's way, which is endorsed by the text (see 156 and 158). Henri's reliability as a narrator seems to be re-established toward the end of the narrative, his final line being the formula used throughout to simultaneously provoke and disperse reader hesitation:

> I'm telling you stories. Trust me. (*Ibid.*, 160)

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Madness again is ambivalent in *Midnight's Children*. Brained by his mother's silver spittoon, Saleem temporarily loses – or rather, rejects – his memory and takes on the non-identity of "the buddha" to work as a tracker dog for the Pakistani military. Described in a run-on sentence that imitates the torrent of thoughts and images rushing out of Saleem's head, the loss of memory sets Saleem free; it is an emptying-out, a ritual of ablution that leaves Saleem "restored to innocence and purity" (*Midnight's Children*, 343). The dissociation from his identity is underlined by the fact that the narrator refers to himself in the third person, even metafictionally stressing the disjunction:

> But I insist: not I. He. He, the buddha. Who, until the snake, would remain not-Saleem. (*Ibid.*, 360)

In order to achieve the integration of self that Saleem seeks throughout his narrative, he ultimately must be reconciled to his memory and his identity. Destroying rather than affording knowledge, the flight into madness therefore is not a viable approach.

A similar conclusion is reached in *Nights at the Circus*, where Jack Walser's mind goes blank after a train crash and he thinks himself a human chicken (see 222ff.). Like Saleem, Walser needs to be restored unto himself in order to be able to deal with the world. In both cases, however, the loss of reason and self seems to be instrumental in bringing about a different vision: it puts things into perspective. His spell of insanity leaves Saleem with a clearer grasp on the contingency between history and identity, and Walser loses his narrow-minded rational-empirical outlook, allowing him finally to accept Fevvers as she is. Temporary madness once again precedes and enables identity-formation in *Wise Children*, where pregnant Tiffany, abandoned by her baby's father, loses her wits in an Ophelia-like manner and is feared to have drowned, only to reappear at the end of the novel as an emancipated young woman capable of making her own decisions (see 42ff. and 210-11).

In sum, then, the state of madness plays an important role in magic realist fiction, though unlike other ex-centric perspectives it is used with considerable reservations. There is, however, another marginal perspective that lends itself quite naturally to creating a magic realist world, a perspective which throughout the history of thought has been regarded as not entirely dissimilar to that of madness. Yoked together in a proverb, both children and fools have been credited with telling the truth. In how far conceptions of the child's world-view might be relevant to the construction of a magic realist world remains to be examined now.

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Naturally magical: child(like) focalizers in magic realist fiction

If one looks at associated commonplaces[43] about the way children think and perceive the world, one might come up with the following:

1. Children have an intrinsic belief in magic and the supernatural. Be it fairies or witches, monsters or magicians, it is all part of a day's – or night's – work, and no amount of reasoning, either about the laws of nature or the drawbacks of a sleep deficit, will make them any less real.
2. Children frequently find things incredible that to grown-ups appear perfectly normal; "to look at the world with a child's eyes" implies a certain innocence, an attitude of naïve wonder at the marvels (or horrors) contained in this world. As Angela Carter has observed, "wonder, the capacity for seeing the world as if for the first time [...], in its purest state, is the prerogative of children and madmen".[44]
3. Children do not distinguish between reality and fantasy, fact and fiction, an assumption that is related to the last point, namely that
4. children do not distinguish between literal and figurative language, causing them frequently to misunderstand metaphors.

Obviously, these assumptions about children's thought and perception might well be questioned. In fact, they have been, and I will refer to psychological studies that cast doubt on some of these items. Conversely, I will look at studies which support these notions, especially that of the child's magical world-view. Immensely influential in their own academic field, such studies, particularly those of Jean Piaget, have conceivably influenced associated commonplaces about the way children think. In referring to psychological studies, I am not looking for empirical support; I merely want to examine the overlap between conceptions of the child in psychology and literature. My analysis is not concerned with whether or not the above features accurately describe

[43] The term is Max Black's; he uses it to refer to "what the man on the street thinks about the matter" (*On Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy*, Ithaca: NY, 1962, 40).

[44] Carter 1992b, 67. The notion of the child's naïveté and its resultant ability to see the world differently recalls the idea of the "mad innocent" discussed above. *Gut Symmetries* similarly identifies both childhood and madness as visionary states: "The crazy lady who frightens children. Why does she frighten children? They can still see what she sees" (43).

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real children's thought processes; this debate should be left to psychologists. Obviously, the child's point of view as it is used in fiction – or, for that matter, any other form of art – is very much a construction, and should not be confused with psychological reality. Accordingly, my focus here is on adult constructions of the child and its world-view which have entered into magic realist fiction.

Turning the child's point of view into a literary tool is not unique to the magic realist mode. Similar uses have been identified in other literary and even non-literary kinds, and some of the features emphasized point to the usefulness of the childlike perspective for magic realism. Valuable is Colin Manlove's observation that many nineteenth-century works of fantasy were written for children "because the child's mind and imagination were felt to be much more free, and therefore more attuned to the magical, than that of the adult".[45] Not all of the texts actually use children as focalizers, but constructions of the child arguably influenced the process of writing.

In a lecture on the use of the child's point of view in film, Marina Warner similarly remarks on the pervasive notions of the child's innocence and "the child's closer intimacy with the irrational and fantasy".[46] Whereas prior to the seventeenth century the child's tendency towards fantasy and the irrational were seen as base and sinful and had to be discarded in order for the child to partake of Christian salvation, the Romantics revaluated fantasy and the irrational as positive. Innocence and imagination became two sides of the same coin, and the as yet uncorrupted child was seen as perceptive to phenomena beyond the adult's ken.[47] Ursula K. Le Guin, noting the frequent use of children as characters in science fiction, likewise remarks on the innocence and unconventionality ascribed to children, factors that presumably facilitate the encounter with the alien element: "The child can hear/speak to the Other as the adult cannot" (39). A similar perception of the child's world-view as Other also lies behind the use of children as culturally marginal filter characters as noted by Attebery (25). Again, it needs to be

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[45] "Victorian and Modern Fantasy: Some Contrasts", in *The Celebration of the Fantastic: Selected Papers from the Tenth Anniversary International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, 1989*, Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy 49, eds Donald E. Morse, Marshall B. Tymn and Csilla Bertha, Westport: CT, and London, 1992, 10.

[46] "Through a Child's Eyes" (Internal BFI Seminar, 12 February 1992), in Petrie, 38-39 (cited as Warner 1993b).

[47] See *ibid.*, 40. On Romantic conceptions of the child, see also Ellen Pifer, *Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture*, Charlottesville and London, 2000, 19-22; on postmodern transformations, see *Literature and the Child: Romantic Continuations, Postmodern Contestations*, ed. James Holt McGavran, Iowa City, 1999.

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stressed that, in each case, the child's point of view is a literary construction, a tool used towards a certain effect. As Marina Warner writes, "behind the child narrator very definitely lurks the adult".[48]

But the significance of the child's point of view for magic realist fiction goes far beyond the child's cultural marginality and its adherence to a different world-view. More so than with the other ex-centric focalizers discussed above, the mental features attributed to children specifically correspond to the techniques of magic realist fiction. Not only does the child's supposedly magical mode of thought contribute to the naturalization of fantastic elements, it also provides the basis for two further strategies: the presentation of the quotidian as fantastic, and the literalization of metaphor. Theories about children's understanding of language furthermore evince parallels with other literalization techniques used in magic realist fiction, such as the treatment of words as physical objects.

Curiously, critics have so far remarked only on either one or the other of the first two aspects mentioned above, and even on these merely in passing. Wendy Faris has attested magic realism a childlike "narrative naïveté":

> 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, without undue questioning and reflection. (177)

Unlike other critics, she signals her awareness that the tone adopted by magic realist fiction is not that of a real child, but a literary construction based on social and psychological assumptions. Julio Rodríguez-Luis similarly compares *One Hundred Years of Solitude*'s deadpan tone to a child's unfazed "acceptance of the possibility of the impossible happening in his everyday life, just as it does in the stories told or read to him" (109). Rodríguez-Luis' assumption that children are unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy is disputed; studies have suggested that even pre-school children are capable of making this distinction, at least at the verbal level, although their behaviour may imply a belief in the existence of the unreal (see Subbotsky 1992, 32-39). David Danow emphasizes the flip-side of the child's matter-of-factness,

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[48] Warner 1993b, 42. As was pointed out during the discussion following Warner's talk, the child in fiction has also been constructed as inherently cruel and corrupt (*ibid.*, 58-59). However, the point does not enter here.

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that is, the supernaturalization of reality, when he notes that magic realist effects may be achieved "by reenacting in a heightened, more conscious fashion the role of the child in perceiving the world and everything in it as remarkable and new" (70).

Before turning to textual examples, I should like to mention yet another way how the child's point of view contributes to a characteristic feature of the magic realist mode, namely the text's ability to sustain readings on two levels. Marina Warner has noted how Henry James' *What Maisie Knew* uses the dramatic irony provided by the child's perspective to create a "double consciousness of what is happening" (Warner 1993b, 38). On account of her tender years, the focalizer does not fully grasp the situations she witnesses, while the more knowledgeable reader gleans from her descriptions more than is actually said in the text. The gap between what is said and what is understood enhances either the poignancy or the humour, depending on the text (see *ibid.*, 44). This effect will again be noted in connection with the presentation of everyday reality as fantastic.

Because they do not "tell all", childlike focalizers might be regarded as unreliable. However, they differ significantly from other unreliable focalizers in that they are unwittingly so, which means that the process of recontextualization is blocked. Instead, a narrative doubling occurs: rather than the focalizer's version being supplanted by a realist reading, the magical version of events remains valid insofar as it is real to the child. Of course, this curious resistance to recontextualization is characteristic not just of the child focalizer, but of magic realist focalizers in general; the magic realist narrative always forces its reader to find another standard for reliability. But the doubleness is more transparently constructed in the case of the child focalizer, underlining the significance of the focalizer for the text's ability to support both a magical and a realist reading.

The usefulness of the child as conceived in contemporary Western culture to project a magic realist world can best be seen in texts which actually use children as focalizers. In Emma Tennant's *Wild Nights*, events are seen largely through the eyes of a narrator remembering her childhood. *Midnight's Children* also over large stretches is focalized through Saleem as a child and adolescent. Both novels strikingly illustrate not only the popular notions about children's thought enumerated above, but could also be seen to exemplify many of the ideas propounded by Jean Piaget in his classic study *The Child's Conception of the World* (Piaget 1997). In noting such similarities, I do not mean to imply that the authors consciously drew on Piaget's writings; Piaget's ideas

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merely contain useful suggestions as to how a magical mode of thought arises in the first place.

According to Piaget, the young child does not distinguish between itself and the surrounding world. Just as the internal and the external coincide in the child's mind, so do thought and thing, the name and the object named; there is no distinction between mind and matter. From this egocentricity follow "a whole group of finalistic, animistic and quasi-magical conceptions" (Piaget 1997, 127). Piaget classifies the notions of participation and magic[49] on which the child's world-view is based into four different categories:[50] (1) magic by participation between actions and things, for example counting to make a desired event happen; (2) magic by participation between thought and things (thoughts, words, or looks are believed to modify reality); (3) magic by participation between objects (objects are believed to influence each other, and magic makes use of the appropriate object); and (4) magic by participation of purpose. This last category is based on animistic beliefs, which according to Piaget can be observed up until the age of eleven to twelve: failing to completely distinguish between itself and its surroundings, the child endows the inanimate world with a will and a purpose directed at the individual and attempts, through appropriate thought or action, to subject this will to its own. As Piaget takes care to point out, anything that belongs to play must be excluded from an analysis of the child's magical thought, for in the mode of "as-if" the child does not believe in the efficacy of its actions (see *ibid.*, 133).

Animistic beliefs are at work behind many of the fantastic elements in *Wild Nights*. The north wind for example is presented as a living being that is at Aunt Zita's beck and call, ready to transport the narrator and her aunt to splendid far-away night-time festivities (see 20). The leaves on the lawn tease the narrator's father, making him curse as he tries to catch them. Pursued into the house, the leaves turn into rats and, pressed even harder, they become bats and hide in the pictures on the landing (see *ibid.*, 25-26). The grandfather's car is a killing machine that "had even pretended to break down once", only to spring back into life

[49] Following the anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl, Piaget defines participation as "that relation which primitive thought believes to exist between two beings or phenomena which it regards either as partially identical or as having a direct influence on one another, although there is no spatial contact nor intelligible causal connection between them". Magic accordingly refers to "the use the individual believes he can make of such participation to modify reality". However, Piaget warns that, for all similarity in vocabulary, the child's magic is not identical with "the magic of the primitive" (Piaget 1997, 132).

[50] The following summarizes Piaget 1997, 124-33 and 228.

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unexpectedly and cause an accident (*ibid.*, 95). By contrast, the furniture at the kennel keeper's is quite obliging:

> Round satiny cushions popped up behind visitors' head when they sat down, like sudden haloes. Even the table was accommodating, dropping or raising flaps for food or games of whist. (*Ibid.*, 79)

The family mansion is presented as being in league with the narrator's aunt and father: it regularly rearranges itself in anticipation of Aunt Zita's yearly visit to make the narrator's mother feel like an unwanted intruder. The upper storeys swell to accommodate Aunt Zita's ghost maids, and the turrets she despises become cross-eyed, while her childhood possessions triumphantly spill from storage rooms to take up their old places, much to the vexation of her sister-in-law (see *ibid.*, 11 and 16ff.). The narrative doubling discussed above emerges very strongly here, for although the changes to the house are presented as real on the level of the text, the mother's symptoms of unhappiness and illness can easily be reinterpreted as signs of general suffering when Aunt Zita, in whom she sees a rival, comes to visit. However, the child's account is true in that it accurately captures the psychological mechanisms of the situation, namely the mother's feeling that her own home has turned against her. An analogous argument can be made with respect to the case of the run-away leaves, the father's exasperated curses implying that he suspects the leaves of a will of their own, though he would never admit it.

The narrator's parents do not share the magical-animistic world-view adhered to by their daughter and Aunt Zita. They never seem to notice anything unusual, even if the evidence is, at least according to the narrator, right in front of their eyes. From the child's point of view, the parents dimly realize that their rational-scientific outlook is deficient, but they simply dare not acknowledge this. The opposition between the two world-views and the way that the Other perspective is endorsed through the use of a child focalizer both become visible in a passage describing the parents' reactions to the power failure that inevitably follows Aunt Zita's arrival:

> The lights went out. My mother gave a little moan.
>
> "I said it was dim. And now the lights have gone out. How extraordinary, Zita, this happened the last time you came!"
>
> My poor mother! She still lived in the age of cause and consequence, of foreshadowings and outcomes, and she couldn't see the connections

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> between Aunt Zita and the fading lights.[51] My father, who was a century ahead of his brother Ralph but was still firmly rooted in the mechanical age,[52] said:
>
> "The dynamo's been clogged by leaves again, I'm afraid. We'll have to hope that Willie's going down to see to it tonight."
>
> "I always feel it's too dangerous to go down there at night," said my mother.
>
> Throughout all this, Aunt Zita sat quite demurely with her drink on the edge of the sofa. The logs in the hearth, encouraged by her presence, stirred, gave off a few sparks, and then slumped together again. Aunt Zita's fire burned on, a frill of yellow and poppy-red, playing round her face and down the sides of her dress. Her fire was like one of those natural but magical phenomena, the wandering flame on a marsh. But my mother and father, bumping into one another in the doorway, fetching paraffin lamps, saw nothing at all. (*Ibid.*, 15)

The parents are presented as blind to the real world – they see only what their rational-empirical world-view allows them to see, and this world-view does not admit animism or participation between objects. Nor does it allow for participation between thought and action. When towards the end of winter the house fills with clouds of butterflies produced by the mother's longing for spring, the father refuses to see them: "Even when a pair of blue wings hung over his place at the breakfast table, and he looked anxiously for a moment out of the window to see if an Asian landscape lay there instead of northern rain, he said nothing" (*ibid.*, 110).

The narrator's parents are similarly impervious with regard to the ghosts that people the house and the grounds and literally make the past present. Although they are vaguely aware of the weight and significance of the past, they will not acknowledge its ongoing presence. It is this narrow-mindedness, bordering on dogmatism, that according to their daughter prevents them from fully understanding and appreciating the world around them. But the novel's criticism of the rational-scientific outlook goes deeper than that, for a lack of insight entails a harmful

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[51] Presumably, the "age of cause and consequence" refers to the dominance of the scientific world-view, which here is opposed to a magical one. However, magic depends just as much on the idea of cause and effect as does science, as even becomes obvious here, for Aunt Zita is held responsible for the light failure.

[52] Intriguingly, the parents' scientific beliefs are presented as outdated, as though a new age had dawned in which other rules obtain. The emphasis on the "mechanical age" might be understood as a reference to the scientific revolution in the field of physics, where Newton's mechanics have been replaced by quantum theory, which would mean that the new age is still a scientific one (although quantum theory might seem like magic in some respects, as *Gut Symmetries* suggest). However, there are no other indications that Tennant's novel wants to allude to the world-view of quantum physics.

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carelessness. The narrator says of her father, who is unable to rejoice properly at the coming of spring: "He belonged in a half-lit world, where spring reduced him to creaks and aching of joints, and where the future, unconcerned with Earth's prospects for a new millennium, made composite men and sent them out to space" (*ibid.*, 123).

The idea that the child's magical world-view provides an alternative access to reality that becomes lost in the process of growing up plays a role also in *Gut Symmetries*. Out on a comet watch on the Atlantic, thirteen-year-old Alice actually sees something, although officially no comet is registered. The grown-up Alice later ponders: "What can a little girl see that astronomers and telescopes cannot?" (73). The novel suggests that both Alice and Stella retain the ability to "see" while Jove does not, which the text presents as a personal shortcoming.

The notion of childhood as a time of privileged insight again comes up in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Here, however, the loss of the ability to see is presented not so much as a personal fault, but more as an inevitable and to a certain extent regrettable encounter with the reality principle; growing up means disenchantment. As long as Abraham Zogoiby is a young boy, the legend about the blue ceramic tiles on the synagogue floor is true: the pictures really change, and if one looks long enough, they will reveal what one seeks. Young Abraham is able to follow his run-away father's fortunes in the tiles – but only until his voice breaks. With the advent of adulthood, Abraham realizes that his father will not return, and from that day onward the secret of the tiles is lost to him:

> When he returned in despondency to the synagogue, all the tiles depicting his father's odyssey had changed, and showed scenes both anonymous and banal. Abraham in a feverish rage spent hours crawling across the floor in search of magic. To no avail: for the second time in his life his unwise father Solomon Castile had vanished into the blue. (*The Moor's Last Sigh*, 77)

However, Moraes makes clear that one need not completely leave childhood behind. It is possible to retain some of one's knowledge in the form of stories, and even if one is conscious of their constructedness, this does not necessarily render them worthless. To quote once again that remark of Moraes' which constitutes such an unequivocal plea for narrative knowledge: "if I were forced to choose between logic and childhood memory, between head and heart, then sure; in spite of all the foregoing, I'd go along with the tale" (*ibid.*, 85-86).

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Interestingly, Rushdie's novel suggests that the child's alternative vision can be regained towards the end of life, thereby picking up on the common notion of old age as a second childhood. Abraham's mother has never believed in the legend of the blue ceramic tiles, her motto being:

> What you see is what there is [....] There is no world but the world [....] There is no God. Hocus-pocus! Mumbo-jumbo! *There is no spiritual life*! (*Ibid.*, 84; emphasis in the original)

Old age, however, finds her "crawling around the Mattancherri synagogue floor on her hands and knees, claiming that she could see the future in the blue Chinese tiles, and prophesying that very soon a country not far from China would be eaten up by giant, cannibal mushrooms". Little surprisingly, her environment deems her "mentally troubled" (*ibid.*, 118), and so might the reader, were it not for the fact that Flory Zogoiby makes this unlikely prophecy around the end of July 1945.

The child's egocentricity and resulting magical-animistic world-view again is instrumental in creating a magic realist world in *Midnight's Children*. A number of the fantastic aspects of the text derive from Saleem's insistence on placing himself at the centre of the world and explaining everything in relation to himself. While this looks like insufferable "hypertrophy of the sentiment of self-esteem" (Piaget 1997, 128), one might also say with Piaget that Saleem's egocentricity springs from the child's failure to differentiate between inside and outside, self and world, or, in Saleem's case, between self and nation.[53] Interestingly, Rushdie himself invokes the notion of the child's egocentricity, though without mentioning Piaget, when he explains that "Saleem's whole persona is a childlike one, because children believe themselves to be the centre of the universe, and they stop as they grow up; but he never stops" (Haffenden, 243). Intended or not, the novel reads like an echo of Piaget's thesis that the child thinks "*he is the world*" and the concomitant idea that "thought can insert itself directly into the real and thus influence events"[54] when nine-year-old Saleem, claiming to have acquired the art of "mind-hopping", reports that

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[53] For Rushdie's comments on Saleem as an opaque allegory of India, see Haffenden, 243.

[54] Piaget 1997, 152 and 155; emphasis in the original.

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> the feeling had come upon me that I was somehow creating a world; that the thoughts I jumped inside were *mine*, that the bodies I occupied acted at my command; that, as current affairs, arts, sports, the whole rich variety of a first class radio station poured into me, I was somehow *making them happen* ... (*Midnight's Children*, 174; emphases in the original)

This passage well illustrates the difference between using the child's perspective to project a magic realist world and theorizing about the way children think; the latter is the case here. Obviously, this is the grown-up Saleem looking back and not the unreflected thoughts of a nine-year-old. If the text had here used Saleem-the-child as focalizer, the result would have been a fantastic claim presented in a completely matter-of-fact way: "I was somehow creating a world; the thoughts I jumped inside were *mine* ..." etc.[55]

Unlike *Wild Nights*, *Midnight's Children* self-consciously addresses its use of a child's perspective and the resultant narrative doubling. Saleem himself points out that his fantastic account of the miraculously gifted midnight's children and his ability to hold telepathic conferences in his head sounds like a typical children's fantasy:

> I knew what they were thinking: "Plenty of children invent imaginary friends; but one thousand and one! That's just crazy!" (211)

This temptingly suggests that the magic elements might be recontextualized by seeing them as outcrops of a child's imagination. However, as has been seen above in Chapter 3, magic realist texts characteristically refuse to invalidate the alternative viewpoint, and to reject Saleem's narration as unreliable goes against the grain of the text.

Piaget's theory that the child progresses from egocentricity to objectivity does not entirely hold for Saleem's case. Here, the development of a consciousness of self does not lead to a less egocentric perspective. Rather, Saleem's growing fear that he is entirely insignificant only enhances his tendency to place himself in a central role, for in this way he can be sure to "end up meaning – yes, meaning – something" (*ibid.*, 9). Casting himself as a figure of national importance, Saleem is both the perennial hero and the perennial victim – everything is done either by or to him. As with paranoia, omnipotence and powerlessness are two sides of the same coin. In a fantastic rewrite of history, Saleem claims to have brought about, either directly or through his mere existence, the great political events of post-Independence India.

[55] On this distinction, see also the Postscript to Chapter 8.

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Assuming active responsibility not only for the partition of the state of Bombay, but, even more preposterously, also for Prime Minister Nehru's death (see *ibid.*, 192 and 279), he furthermore claims passive responsibility for the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965, whose only purpose according to Saleem was to do away with the Sinai family. Saleem's phrasing underscores the fantastic implausibility of his claim: "Let me state this quite unequivocally: it is my firm conviction that the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of the earth" (*ibid.*, 338). The sterilization programmes implemented by the Gandhi government accordingly are reinterpreted as "a diversionary manoeuvre" to cover up Saleem's arrest (*ibid.*, 432).

Saleem's unwillingness to believe that he might be no more than one of six hundred million extras in the drama of Indian history resembles the difficulty Piaget finds that children, and to some extent also adults,[56] have in accepting that the natural world is not a willed entity whose every action is directed solely at themselves. As Piaget writes: "No positive experience can in fact compel a mind to admit that things work neither for nor against us and that chance and inertia alone count in nature" (*ibid.*, 230). It is these workings of the human mind that not only Rushdie's novel, but all magic realist fiction, inquires into.

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[56] Piaget has pointed out that ideas of participation and animism as well as ensuing magical notions can also, although to a lesser extent, be found in "normal and civilised adults" (Piaget 1997, 162). His findings suggest that such notions reappear especially in situations of strong anxiety or desire (see *ibid.*, 162-66; see also Subbotsky 2000 and 1992, as well as Chapter 8 below).

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CHAPTER 5

MYTHOS MEETS *LOGOS*: PARADIGMS OF KNOWLEDGE IN MAGIC REALIST FICTION

"Is it fact or is it fiction?" Slightly rephrased, Fevvers' slogan[1] becomes one of the foremost questions tauntingly asked by magic realist fiction, pointing to its characteristic concern with issues of knowledge and knowledge production.

A number of the aspects discussed earlier have already indicated how the magic realist mode is used to explore and question ways of knowing the world. Realism's claim to objectivity is challenged when, by incongruously applying it to non-realistic elements, magic realist fiction reveals it to be a strategy of persuasion rather than a transparent window on the world. In highlighting the hesitation engendered by the transgression of literary conventions, magic realist texts self-consciously call into question the assurance and ease with which the real is generally held to be distinguishable from the unreal, the possible from the impossible, fact from fiction. The question of knowledge is also pursued in magic realism's adoption of marginalized perspectives: Chapter 4 has shown how magic realist fiction draws on concepts of carnival, madness and childhood in order to explore alternatives to the rational-empirical paradigm. Violating the norms of the literary system and the dominant world-view at every turn, magic realism unsettles received notions and conventions in order to re-evaluate human strategies of knowing and explaining the world.

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[1] See 30 above.

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Magic realism's investigation of knowledge combines two aspects. On the one hand, sanctioned paradigms of Western knowledge are scrutinized and in some sense found wanting. The texts examined here markedly focus on the established Western modes of natural science and empirical history, criticizing their claim to provide an objective and complete picture of the world. At the same time, the texts probe alternative modes of knowledge production as to their explanatory potential, illustrating how they may provide a different, but nevertheless valid, access to the world. Apart from the peripheral perspectives discussed earlier in Chapter 4, these paradigms of the Other frequently fall into the category of narrative knowledge, drawing on the oral traditions of myth, legend, and fairy tale, as well as personal accounts and memories. As in the case of reader hesitation, the texts conduct their inquiry through enactment as well as theoretical reflection.

In redeeming forms of knowledge rejected by the rational-scientific world-view, magic realist fiction can be seen to pursue, on the level of fiction, an argument that repeatedly has been made by both postmodernism and postcolonialism. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard deconstructs the Western world-view's claim to superiority, arguing that scientific knowledge in fact is no more inherently legitimized than the knowledge resulting from other paradigms. According to Lyotard, scientific knowledge is just as much the product of a certain language game, and therefore equally constructed, as narrative knowledge; only the rules of the game differ. The West, however, has declared the rules of science absolute, applying them also to items that derive from entirely different language games. Little surprisingly, these items cannot fulfil science's demand for external legitimation and consequently are dismissed as mere fictions, a status which, at least within the rational-empirical world-view, divorces them from reality and hence from knowledge. According to Lyotard, it is the West's insistence on the sole and universal validity of science that has provided the basis for cultural imperialism (see Lyotard 1984a, 26-27).

Lyotard seeks to undermine this basis by showing that, ultimately, the West does not play by its own rules. While science derives its external legitimation from the "grand narratives" brought forth by Western philosophy, these meta-narratives themselves lack any such form of legitimation. Science therefore undergoes "a process of delegitimation fueled by the demand for legitimation itself" (*ibid.*, 39). To acknowledge this is to make room for other, additional modes of knowledge production. These are needed to complement science, for, as Lyotard writes, knowledge does not exhaust itself in denotative statements or facts, but

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is also a matter of cultural competence, as becomes visible for example in the case of ethical, aesthetic and practical judgements. Traditionally, one way to store, organize and communicate cultural knowledge has been to cast it into narrative form: myths, legends and fairy tales have been seen to provide their listeners with patterns of judgement and behaviour, thereby allowing them to become competent members of society.[2] Therefore, scientific and narrative knowledge are not mutually exclusive, but complementary.

Of course, re-evaluating marginalized paradigms of knowledge is not a postmodern invention. Attempts to redress the balance between *mythos* and *logos* have been undertaken ever since what originally had merely been two different ways of explaining the world were pressed into a hierarchical relationship, myth being rejected as an inferior, primitive mode of thought, and science being installed as its evolutionary successor.[3] Recently, this evolutionary conception has been contested by psychologists and sociologists, and models of co-existence of different modes of thought have been proposed instead (see Chapter 8 below). But long before that, the Romantics already sought to reinstate myth and imagination as valid ways of accessing the world. In returning to magic, miracles and superstition, espousing the ex-centric and embracing contradiction (Siebers, 21-35), as well as in viewing metaphor as an important way of experiencing the world (Saeed, 303), Romanticism indeed appears to have bequeathed a number of its features to magic realist fiction. And there are critics who have identified points of intersection between Romanticism and magic realist texts, for example in Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*.[4] Winterson's *Gut Symmetries* in turn quite consciously places itself in a Romantic tradition, installing William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as an important intertext (see 3 and 78).

There is no denying that Winterson's novels and other magic realist works engage with the Romantic tradition, also *via* the literary fantastic

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[2] See *ibid.*, 18 and 19ff. See also Zipes 1979; Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (*Aspectes du mythe*, 1963), World Perspectives 1, New York, 1963; and Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London and New York, 1982.

[3] On myth as the pre-logical, pre-rational forerunner of *logos*, see Wilhelm Nestle, *Vom Mythos zum Logos: Die Selbstentfaltung des griechischen Denkens von Homer bis auf die Sophistik und Sokrates*, Stuttgart, 1940.

[4] See Marjean D. Purinton, "Postmodern Romanticism: The Recuperation of Conceptual Romanticism in Jeanette Winterson's Postmodern Novel *The Passion*", in *Romanticism Across the Disciplines*, ed. Larry Peer, Lanham, 1998, 67-98; and David Lodge, "Outrageous Things" (Review of Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*), *The New York Review*, 29 September 1988, 26 (cited as Lodge 1988a).

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and the Gothic. Nevertheless, there are fundamental differences that allow a distinction between magic realism and the Romantic mode. The main difference lies in the attitude exhibited toward the marginalized forms of knowledge under reconsideration. Whereas Romantic texts often seem to subscribe to the disenfranchised paradigms of knowledge they seek to redeem, presenting myth and imagination as superior to science and rationality,[5] magic realism approaches the matter in a more sceptical fashion. For all the sheer exuberance and baroque excess that continuously have the narrative straining at the seams, magic realist fiction on another level always remains the cool and often somewhat ironic observer, recording with a critical eye the various ways in which human beings try to make sense of their world.

At first glance, this stance of distantly neutral observation would seem to conflict with the fact that magic realist fiction actually adopts the perspective of the Other. However, as I have shown, the magic realist text goes into a kind of straddle, straight-facedly presenting the fantastic world-view of the ex-centric focalizer while at the same time undermining itself, thereby effecting a curious doubling that leaves the reader hovering between two readings. The constructedness of the world-view presented in the text is thereby made transparent without invalidating that world-view. In doing so, magic realist fiction basically engages in the same sort of inquiry as do anthropology, sociology or psychology, the main difference being that the fictional text analyses the meaning-making strategies employed by the human mind not primarily from the outside, that is, through theoretical reflection (although this too plays a certain role), but from the inside, that is, through exemplification.

As a tool of rational analysis, magic realist fiction does not subscribe to the patterns of thought it investigates. Some critics have maintained that magic realist fiction is based on faith (see Hancock 1986, *passim* and Foreman, 286), an idea they seem to have taken over from Carpentier, who wrote that "the phenomenon of the marvelous presupposes faith" and that "clearly there is no excuse for poets and artists who [...] invoke ghosts without believing that they answer to incantation" (Carpentier 1995a, 86). However, as a highly self-reflexive and ironic mode, magic realism undermines the very idea of absolute faith. As I have shown in Chapter 3, it is not the suspension of disbelief, but the exact opposite,

[5] Tobin Siebers even claims that "the Romantics boldly flew the banner of superstition" also on a personal level insofar as "references to demonology and popular beliefs permeate their writings and personal lives" (Siebers, 23). I should like to recall that the use of the supernatural in a writer's works does not automatically presuppose personal faith.

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namely hesitation, which is induced in the (implied) reader. Magic realist fiction's investigation into different beliefs thus is not an unqualified promotion of non-scientific paradigms of knowledge, but an attempt to understand the workings of the human mind.

That a writer's literary adaptation of belief systems in no way presupposes faith is emphasized by Liam Connell, who warns of "the mistake of thinking that just because García Márquez is Colombian, he believes in the myths that he uses".[6] Angela Carter for one has made her take on the matter unmistakeably clear. People who understand her fiction as anti-rationalist have missed the point: "Obviously the idea that my stories are all dreams or hallucinations out of Jung-land, or the notion that the world would be altogether a better place if we threw away our rationality and went laughing down the street [...], that's all nonsense" (Haffenden, 85). Instead of being based on faith, her use of myth and fairy tale has a self-subversive function:

> I become mildly irritated (I'm sorry!) when people, as they sometimes do, ask me about the 'mythic quality' of work I've written lately. Because I believe that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I'm in the demythologising business. (Carter 1997, 38)

Speculations about her own beliefs in magic or the supernatural make her lose her patience:

> I'm a *socialist*, damn it! How can you expect me to be interested in fairies?[7]

Far from unconditionally propagating magical beliefs, then, magic realist fiction presents the magical world-view as real in order to emphasize the necessity of taking non-scientific modes of thought seriously insofar as they influence people's actions. In this, the texts again resemble anthropological or sociological studies, which argue that magic must be investigated, not because it is true – to judge that is not the aim of these studies – but because it is, in Western societies no less than in others, a social fact. People who believe in magic allow their beliefs to guide their

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[6] Liam Connell, "Discarding Magic Realism: Modernism, Anthropology, and Critical Practice", *ARIEL*, XXIX/2 (1998), 107.

[7] Mary Harron, "'I'm a Socialist, Damn It! How Can You Expect Me to Be Interested in Fairies?' Mary Harron Meets Angela Carter", *The Guardian*, 25 September 1984, 10; emphasis in the original.

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decisions and their behaviour, meaning that magic may have very real effects indeed. I will return to these points in Chapters 7 and 8.

Having already touched on some modes of knowledge and perception of the Other considered by magic realist fiction in the previous chapter, I will pursue the issue in greater detail in this one. First, I will examine magic realism's critique of two prominent Western paradigms of knowledge: science and empirical historiography. Then I will turn to the alternative strategies of knowledge production espoused by magic realist characters.

Science: between blindness and insight

Science, or rather the basic rules of rational-scientific discourse, such as external legitimation, empirical proof, etc., play a significant role in a number of the magic realist novels under discussion here. Two main strategies are used to reflect critically on science's potential to provide an adequate picture of reality. First, science can be directly represented in the text, for example through characters who adhere to a scientific mode of thought, or through reflections on a meta-level. An example of this are the narrator's parents in *Wild Nights*, who function as representatives of a scientific world-view and provide a foil for the alternative perception of the child narrator (see Chapter 4 above). Second, science may achieve presence through absence: in a variation on the theme of installing/subverting, the text highlights the rules of the science game by first pretending to adhere to scientific criteria, and then revealing them to be specious. This "mock-scientific discourse" works to undermine science as the only valid paradigm of knowledge. Examples have already been mentioned, such as the presentation of empirical proof in *The Passion* (see 93 above). The magic realist penchant for truth claims also belongs in this category, underlining science's need for legitimation. The two strategies frequently appear in combination, as has already been shown in Chapter 3 for *Nights at the Circus*, where Walser with his obsession for empirical proof represents the scientific world-view, while Fevvers and Lizzie purport to back up their rather incredible story with "checkable facts" which, however, being neither verifiable nor falsifiable,[8] fail to meet the criteria of science.

[8] In the wake of Karl Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (*Logik der Forschung* [1934], Tübingen, 1989), falsification rather than verification has become the criterion for scientific knowledge.

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Many other magic realist texts also use representatives of scientific thought to explore the uses and drawbacks of a purely rational-empirical outlook. However, magic realism's critique of a scientific world-view does not mean that the texts universally condemn reason and science. Fortunately, their criticism is not as simple as that, but is formulated with varying complexity. Whereas in *Wild Nights* the parents' strictly science-based outlook is compared to a pair of blinders through which they perceive only a very small part of the world, *Nights at the Circus* takes a more complex approach, presenting science and reason as both assets and liabilities. Even while the science-born scepticism adhered to by Walser is thoroughly ridiculed, the importance of being sceptical is emphasized – with considerable glee, the narrative constantly disrupts the suspension of disbelief, mocking the reader in the manner of the tall tale. However, the kind of scepticism advocated by Carter's novel is of a rather different order than the one embraced by Walser, which is not actually scepticism, but another form of prejudice: Walser's attitude exemplifies Tobin Siebers' argument that the Enlightenment's scepticism towards all forms of superstition and belief itself is a form of superstition, governed as it is by the belief in the sole and universal validity of Rationalism (Siebers, 35). The point is that the rationalists' disbelief extends only to phenomena that conflict with their rational-scientific outlook, without questioning that outlook itself, whereas true sceptics call everything into doubt, including their own basic assumptions. Carter's novel emphasizes the necessity for an all-questioning scepticism in a passage dealing with the native Siberians' magical world-view, which is rejected just as much as Walser's scientific one (*Nights at the Circus*, 253). The point is not whether *mythos* or *logos* offers more insight, but that each kind of knowledge in the end is worthless if it leaves no room for doubt and innovation.

Nights at the Circus further explores the ambiguous potential of science, scepticism, and reason in the episode of the eminently rational Herr M., a fake medium exploiting the bereaved whose desire for news from the netherworld renders them vulnerable to his charlatanry. Ironically, Herr M. lends credibility to the supernatural by means of the latest technology: during the séance, he takes hazy photographs of the supposed deceased (played by Mignon, who slips out from behind a revolving bookcase) and presents them as irrefutable, black-and-white proof, cleverly capitalizing on the human mind's willingness to believe what it wishes to be true (see 137-38). However, although science and reason here are linked to thoroughly unethical pursuits, the novel nevertheless insists that reason is indispensable, for Herr M.'s victims are

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in turn ridiculed for being altogether too gullible and irrationally clinging to their delusions even after the fraud has been exposed. Reason is also evaluated positively in the third part of *Nights at the Circus*, where the clowns and the outlaws jointly dance up an irrational storm of protest, only to vanish from the face of the earth. The futility of their endeavour indicates that abandoning reason is not the right strategy, but that one should rather follow the example of the survivors, for "this little group of us who, however incoherently, placed our faiths in reason, were not exposed to the worst of the storm" (*ibid.*, 243). In arguing that reason is not in itself good or bad, but is only put to good or bad uses, Carter's novel takes a rather more complex view than Tennant's.

But the issue is more complicated yet, for despite its liberating potential, rational thought is no cure-all. As the case of Herr M. shows, reason alone is not capable of encompassing human experiences. In the end, the bereaved really do feel consoled by the fake photographs, and even the rational Herr M., mourning for his aged aunt whose heart could not take the scandal caused by his exposure, "sometimes, in the teeth of his own scepticism, [...] felt almost tempted, now and then, to try to pierce the veil just once, this time for *real*, and have a word with auntie, whom he missed terribly" (*ibid.*, 139; emphasis in the original). Recognizing the irrational as part of human nature, Carter's novel offers a differentiated critique of the rational-scientific world-view which suggests that reason need not be replaced, but complemented.

The relationship between science, reason and scepticism is similarly complex in *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, which also cautions against an all too uncritical suspension of disbelief while at the same time criticizing the rationalist's narrow-minded insistence on scientific proof. The argument is made mainly with reference to the Western mode of historiography, which conforms to scientific criteria in demanding external legitimation. Nye's novel contrasts this form of objective history with alternative ways of recuperating the past, such as legend, myth, or tale, which may prove more rewarding than mere facts. This point will be looked at more closely in the context of magic realism's treatment of historiography below.

Nye's novel strikes a balance also between alternative forms of knowledge and natural science, represented in the novel by the figure and writings of Dr Walter Warner, a scholar of nature from the first half of the seventeenth century. Pickleherring turns to Dr Warner's *Artis Analyticae Praxis* (1631) to provide his reader with biological facts on

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subjects ranging from feline worm infection to species of crickets,[9] using science to complement his anecdotes and tales. In these specific contexts, however, scientific facts appear rather less pertinent than other sources of information – they are interesting titbits, but not vital to the issue. As Pickleherring willingly concedes, the good Dr Warner's knowledge of crickets probably far surpasses that of little William's story-telling midwife Gertrude (see *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, 101), but in trying to account for the frequent appearance of crickets in Shakespeare's work, Gertrude's tales are more relevant than Dr Warner's zoological observations. Giving precedence to science is not always in the interest of the narrative. The "fairy rings" of withered grass young Shakespeare finds in the Stratford meadows may very well be due only to a fungus beneath the surface, as Pickleherring/Warner inform the reader in a footnote (see *ibid.*, 108); but to attribute them to fairies dancing offers so much more scope for the imagination.

This is not to say that Nye's novel generally presents natural science as extraneous. The extent to which it, too, is a necessary ingredient in perceiving the world is illustrated by the fact that the magic brew that turns young William Shakespeare into a poet is prepared in "the cauldron of inspiration *and* science" (*ibid.*, 102; my emphasis). In Nye's novel, *mythos* and *logos* are not rivals, but two equally valid ways of perceiving the world, and it depends on the specific context whether one or the other is to be preferred.

In the figure of Dr Warner, Nye's novel makes a further interesting point about the scientific mode of thought and its claim to objectivity and universal validity. While Dr Warner stands for a scientific rather than an imaginative mode of thought, his science is very much that of the early seventeenth century. The temporal and intellectual distance between then and now allows the novel to show that scientific knowledge itself is far from certain, but has always been subject to change. Some of Dr Warner's scientific theories sound rather abstruse from a present perspective, for instance the idea that humans ruminate

[9] See *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, 95 and 101. Pickleherring here might be conflating two works. Walter Warner, mathematician and philosopher, is credited with having put together the *Artis Analyticae Praxis ad Aequationes Algebraicas Resolvendas* (*The Analytical Arts Applied to Solving Algebraic Equations*) from the papers of Thomas Harriot, published in 1631 (see *The British Biographical Archive*, ed. Paul Sieveking, London, Munich and New York, 1984 [Microfiche edition], s.v. "Warner, Walter"). There also seems to exist a work on animal organisms by a certain Walter Warner, who lived from *c.* 1557-1643 (see the website *Literatuur over dierenrecht* listed in the bibliography). The entry in the *British Biographical Archive* does not mention this work, nor does it give dates of birth and death, so possibly the two Walter Warners are not the same.

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(*ibid.*, 231). Then again, some of them seem to have anticipated recent medical theories, psychosomatic medicine positing a unity of body and mind highly reminiscent of medieval and Renaissance conceptions. Modern medicine might agree in a quite literal sense with something Dr Warner "[deems] well possible – that men have been rotted away within by their own hates" (*ibid.*, 224). The scientific background in both cases of course is completely different, so that one cannot actually claim Renaissance ideas to have been rehabilitated.

Alice Thomas Ellis' *The 27th Kingdom* also stresses the need to go beyond the post-Enlightenment rational-scientific outlook, although the thrust of the argument here seems to be less an epistemological than an ethical one. While the novel criticizes the naïve acceptance of religious narratives as fact, at the same time it implies that a science-based world-view alone is equally inadequate. Significantly, it is the sceptically inclined male characters who cannot deal with the inexplicable phenomena that seem to occur in Valentine's vicinity, while the women take it all in stride. The most regrettable case is perhaps that of Major O'Connell: having sworn off drink, presumably because he saw Valentine levitate or perform some other miraculous feat and ascribed it to his intoxication, he immediately returns to the bottle when he again sees Valentine fly, this time while sober (see *The 27th Kingdom*, 113-14 and 157). Aunt Irene's nephew Kyril's rational-scientific world-view likewise is shaken by Valentine's mysterious behaviour:

> he didn't understand, and he had been quite sure that life could hold no surprises for him. He saw himself as one of those unusual and fortunate men who were able to understand and fully exploit the new insights that were being developed in every field of human endeavour, both scientific and philosophical. Comte, Darwin, Freud, Einstein had, each in his own way, done his bit to soothe Kyril's conscience and smooth his path towards untroubled self-indulgence. Kyril now knew that there were no gods or ghosts, only taboos and neuroses and $E = MC^2$ [*sic*], and very nice too. The watches of the night held no terror for Kyril, for were not all things clear, and all mysteries explained?
>
> Take more water with it next time, my dear, he said to himself, pretending he was drunk. But he wasn't. (*Ibid.*, 110-11)

The text leaves open whether Valentine here has actually infringed upon the laws of nature or has merely broken the rules of Kyril's macho-world by inexplicably disappearing when he propositions her. But in the end it makes no difference, for both phenomena equally contradict Kyril's view of the world and of himself. As Aunt Irene so aptly observes: "Kyril

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resembled a dangerous baby to whom his own desires were of paramount importance and any denial of his wishes manifest of a cosmic outrage" (*ibid.*, 123).

In Ellis' novel, it is not so much science *per se* that is the focus of critique, but rather the conceit and lack of human kindness that the stubborn adherence to a rational-scientific world-view seems to entail. The Major makes his wife's life a living hell, both on the bottle and off (see *ibid.*, 17, 48 and 134ff.). Victor O'Connor, who proudly displays his knowledge of a somewhat garbled version of Darwin's theories,[10] is a none too likeable small-time crook who treats both his mother and Valentine unkindly (see *ibid.*, 83 and 132). And the insufferable Kyril has a genuinely cruel streak:

> He enjoyed drama and disaster and executions [....] His tastes were strong and perverse and he was frightening his aunt very badly. She remembered him as a little boy with his big front teeth newly grown, pleased to see the Punch & Judy show – *That's the way to do it, that's the way to do it* – and felt the searing alarm of those who bring up children only to wonder where they have gone wrong. (*Ibid.*, 74-75; emphasis in the original).

To the news that their former lodger, Mr Sirocco, has hanged himself, Kyril responds with a sincere "Hooray" (*ibid.*, 126). As far as social skills are concerned, the rationalist men thus rank far behind the supposedly irrational Valentine, who brightens everyone's lives.

Science once again plays a highly ambiguous role in Winterson's *Gut Symmetries*. Actually, one cannot here speak of science as such, for the novel opposes two outlooks equally based on scientific paradigms, although they entail radically different approaches to reality. On one side there are characters who perceive the world in terms of classical science, an outlook that roughly corresponds to the rational-empirical/realist world-view: time is linear, reality consists of firm, material physical matter. Winterson's novel aligns this first type of science, based on Newton's mechanical model of the universe, with common sense, suggesting that both to a large part are borne out by experience.[11]

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[10] When Aunt Irene and Kyril discuss how all life, including humans, originally evolved from maritime life-forms, Victor seeks to correct them: "'I fort it wuz monkeys,' said Victor, for the theories of Darwin had already by this time percolated right down through society to the very sediment" (*ibid.*, 83).

[11] See *Gut Symmetries*, 92; also 160. Of course, common sense and the mechanical model of the universe cannot be conflated. According to Alice, the former for example intimates that the earth is flat (*ibid.*, 10 and 208), something obviously not borne out by Newtonian physics.

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This distinguished them from the second face of science in *Gut Symmetries*, which is quantum physics. In this guise, science works to overturn the very view of the world it is usually thought to uphold. As the quantum physicist Alice puts it: "The new physics belch at the politely seated dinner table of common sense" (207). In quantum physics, the "logical common sense world" is replaced by a "complex, maverick universe" in which matter no longer exists with certainty, but only with a specific probability, a universe where "the hard-hat bull-nose building blocks of matter, manipulated by classical physics, now have to be returned as an infinite web of relationships" (*ibid.*, 161). The novel links this second type of science to now marginalized modes of knowledge like Cabbalistic mysticism, alchemy, or the Renaissance world picture. The credo of Stella's mystical father is "What you see is not what you think you see" (*ibid.*, 82 *et passim*), which Alice pronounces "sound science", thereby bearing out the parallels Stella's father sees between the paradoxes of the Cabbala and the paradoxes of new physics (*ibid.*, 115 and 168). The Superstring theory of physics is compared to the Renaissance idea of the music of the spheres, while the physicists' idea of a symmetrical universe is seen as a rehabilitation of the alchemists' axiom "as above, so below".[12]

In Winterson's novel, this new science is presented as infinitely closer to human experience than classical science, which unproductively and artificially compartmentalizes the world. Alice finds that Newton's visualization of time as an arrow creates a division into past, present and future that does not adequately capture the human perception of time:

> Past. Present. Future. The rational divisions of the rational life. (*Ibid.*, 20)

By contrast, Einstein's notion of time as a river with curves, unpredictable cross-currents, eddies and whirlpools strikes her as much more appropriate, describing one's experience of past, present and future as inextricably interwoven: "The past comes with us and occasionally kidnaps the present, so that the distinctions we depend on for safety, for sanity, disappear" (*ibid.*, 105). The new physics' emphasis on connections

[12] *Ibid.*, 98-99 and 100-101. A detailed analysis of the novel's attempt to link older mystical concepts to modern physics can be found in Dirk Vanderbeke, *Theoretische Welten und literarische Transformationen: Die Naturwissenschaften im Spiegel der "science studies" und der englischen Literatur des ausgehenden 20. Jahrhunderts*, Tübingen, 2004, 272ff..

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"is more than a scientist's credo. The separateness of our lives is a sham."[13]

Classical science's tendency to distinguish and categorize is criticized also by Stella, who contrasts it with Hebrew mysticism:

> In the Torah, the Hebrew "to know", often used in a sexual context, is not about facts, but about connections. Knowledge, not as accumulation but as charge and discharge. A flow of energy from one site to another. Instead of a hoard of certainties, bug-collected, to make me feel secure, I can give up taxonomy and invite myself to the dance: the patterns, rhythms, multiplicities, paradoxes, shifts, currents, cross-currents, irregularities, irrationalities, geniuses, joints, pivots, worked over time, and through time, to find the lines of thought that still transmit.
>
> The facts cut me off. The clean boxes of history, geography, science, art. What is the separateness of things when the current that flows each to each is live? (*Ibid.*, 83)

In offering useful images through which to conceive of one's own existence, the new science becomes meaningful over and beyond the realm of scientific discourse proper. To deny this is to ignore a great potential, as becomes visible in the contrast between Alice and Jove. Although also a quantum physicist, Jove nevertheless reverts to a common-sense world view in daily life:

> Matter is energy. Of course. But for all practical purposes matter is matter. Don't take my word for it. Bang your head against a brick wall. The shifting multiple realities of quantum physics are real enough but not at a level where they affect our lives. (*Ibid.*, 191)

Significantly, Jove has no patience with his wife Stella's notions of a reality beyond the world of solid matter. He dismisses her as mad – a highly questionable judgement in view of the fact that it is Jove, not Stella, who mutilates his still living partner and eats her flesh in order to ensure his own survival when they are lost at sea (see *ibid.*, 190ff.). By contrast, Alice, who is much more attuned to Stella, wants to use notions from physics to gain a greater understanding of human existence:

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[13] *Gut Symmetries*, 98. Winterson's novel here can be linked to Romantic approaches to science, which proceed from a holistic world-view. For a Romantic model of quantum physics, see J.S. Bell, *Speakable and Unspeakable in Quantum Mechanics* (1987), Cambridge, 1989, 192ff.

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> I used to argue with Jove about wave functions. What to him were manipulatable facts were for me imaginative fictions. Experimentally, it is beyond doubt that electrons exhibit contrary and simultaneous behaviour. What does that suggest about us? About our reality? (*Ibid.*, 206)

For Alice, science takes on the consoling function of religion. Quantum theory's description of physical matter in terms of wave functions allows her to overcome the finality of her father's death: "If the physics is correct then we are neither alive nor dead as we commonly understand it, but in different states of potentiality" (*ibid.*, 207; see also 3 and 160-61). The parallel between science and religion is made even more explicit at a later point when both are discussed as ways of surpassing conventional perceptions of reality:

> I cannot see past my three-dimensional concept of reality, bound as it is to good/bad, black/white, real/unreal, alive/dead. Mathematics and physics, as religion used to do, form a gateway into higher alternatives, a reality that can be apprehended but not perceived. A reality at odds with common sense. The earth is not flat. (*Ibid.*, 208)

Science becomes one more "door of perception", invoking the Blakean tradition echoing throughout the novel.

In its personal endorsement of mysticism and a holistic world-view, *Gut Symmetries* differs somewhat from the other novels discussed here. Parallels can be made out in its criticism of a narrow-minded rational-empirical outlook and a science that prematurely dismisses anything that does not readily fit its paradigm. As in the magic realist texts analysed above, alternative modes of knowledge production are sounded out as to their potential for explaining human experience, but the novel is unique among those examined here in forging a link between the traditionally opposed realms of mystic knowledge and science.

Representation on the level of the text is only one of the ways magic realist fiction engages with the issue of science. Another strategy is to make use of what I have termed "mock-scientific discourse". Here, the narrative first installs and then subverts the rules of what following Lyotard might be called the "science game". Jean-Pierre Durix has pointed to the use of this strategy in *Shame*, where the narrator pretends to conform to scientific criteria such as rationality and verifiability, only to render them absurd through his fantastic narrative (see Durix, 119 and 134). For example, the narrator invokes "medical evidence" to argue that the handyman who installed the Shakil sisters' dumb waiter died not

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from poisoning, but of natural causes (*Shame*, 17). Strangely enough, he only succeeds in making the rational explanation sound less plausible than the fantastic one. The same strategy of installing and subverting a scientific mode can be made out behind *Shame*'s use of absurdly accurate numbers, which Durix reads as a parody of "the ludicrous thirst for precision characteristic of the Western logos", a strategy that serves to "implicitly [question] the imperialistic arrogance of 'scientific' explanations" (134).

Shame's mock-scientific discourse is further endorsed on the level of plot. Forced to realize that his mentally retarded wife Sufiya Zinobia is capable of extreme violence, the rational and medically trained Omar Khayyam acknowledges "that science was not enough, that even though he rejected possession-by-devils as a way of denying human responsibility for human actions, even though God had never meant much to him, still his reason could not erase the evidence of those eyes, could not blind him to that unearthly glow, the smouldering fire of the Beast" (235). Interestingly, however, Omar Khayyam arrives at his conclusion about the limitations of science by staying within the scientific paradigm, turning as he does to reason and evidence.

The West's obsession with science is played on in other magic realist texts in a similar fashion. *The Late Mr Shakespeare* parodies the Western demand for scientific authentication when Pickleherring invokes Dr Warner's authority to support claims which might otherwise be dismissed as mere fabrications, for instance the theory that Robert Greene died from a kidney failure caused by his excessive jealousy of Shakespeare (see 224; for another example, see 231). *Falstaff* also highlights the Western need for scientific legitimation, the narrator painstakingly pointing out how he provides his reader with a "bit of authentic History from a disinterested but well-instructed source" (see 96 above). Ostensibly intended to lend credibility to his account, the manoeuvre only undermines Fastolf's narrative by drawing attention to the problem of knowing the past in the first place. The passage further ridicules the scientific demand for external legitimation in that these pieces of "authentic History" do not necessarily appear any more trustworthy than Fastolf's tale, merely because they are in Latin and have been canonized. Written by the king's chaplain at Agincourt, the official account is just as tainted as Fastolf's – after all, it is not unthinkable that Henry V had a word or two to say in the matter.

The Western craving for science's seal of approval is even more clearly parodied at the outset of Peter Carey's *Illywhacker*, where the chronic liar Herbert Badgery, claiming that for once he is telling the truth

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when he gives his age as 139, reels off a whole list of Western authorization strategies:

> My age is the one fact you can rely on, and not because I say so, but because it has been publicly authenticated. Independent experts have poked me and prodded me and scraped around my foul-smelling mouth. They have measured my ankles and looked at my legs [….] When they photographed me I did not care that my dick looked as scabby and scaly as a horse's, even though there was a time when I was a vain man and would not have permitted the type of photographs they chose to take. Apart from this (and it is all there, neatly printed on a chart not three feet from where I lie) I have also been written up in the papers. Don't imagine this is any novelty to me – [...] I don't mention it now so that I may impress you, but rather to make the point that I am not lying about my age. (11)

In putting medical charts on a par with newspaper reports, the novel implies that science is to be met with just as much scepticism as the notoriously unreliable press.

The strategy of mock-scientific discourse plays a particularly conspicuous role in *Nights at the Circus*. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 3, Fevvers and Lizzie pander to Jack Walser's need for proof by obligingly providing the names of eye-witnesses as well as bibliographical references for Toussaint's operation. However, as Fevvers, who "[gives] him this scientific verification of Toussaint's existence with a dazzling smile" (60), is of course fully aware, the operation means that no mouthless Toussaint is available as empirical proof, thereby foiling any attempt to confirm the truth of her story – although she does supply Toussaint's address, just in case Walser cares to check (*ibid.*, 85). The names of the "witnesses" are equally worthless, their social status making any questions Walser could ask too impertinent to even contemplate. In fact, all empirical evidence that might bear out Fevvers' tale in the end turns out to be quite inaccessible, subverting any pretence to verifiability: Ma Nelson is dead, the whores have all taken on more or less respectable professions, and the whorehouse has burned down. As Fevvers cheerfully informs Walser: "And so the first chapter of my life went up in flames, sir" (*ibid.*, 50). The same holds for the following chapters: the "exhibits" from Madame Schreck's cabinet have "gone their ways" (*ibid.*, 85), Toussaint has received a mouth, and Madame Schreck herself has most conveniently been reduced to dust. Most importantly of all, Fevvers always keeps her infamous wings under tight wraps, lest their reality be unambiguously confirmed, which would reduce her from a wonder to a mere freak (*ibid.*, 161).

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However, the speciousness of proof is not the only way Carter's novel makes fun of the scientific paradigm. An all too naïve faith in rationalism and science is further criticized when even "checkable facts" and one's own senses are shown to be unreliable. The issue comes up for example when Walser, convinced that Big Ben must have chimed the same hour once before, refuses to believe that it is only midnight, and Fevvers uses Walser's obsession with empirical evidence to force him to accept what in the end she admits to have been a mere trick:

> "Did it [strike midnight already once before], sir? How could it have, sir? Oh, dear, no, sir! Didn't it go – ten, eleven, twelve – just this very minute? Didn't we both sit here and hear it? Look at your own watch, sir, if you don't believe me."
>
> Walser obediently checked his fob; it clasped its hands at midnight. He put it to his ear, where it ticked away industriously in the usual fashion. (*Ibid.*, 42-43)

A similar point is made in the passage about Herr M. analysed above (see 163ff.), which also emphasizes how purportedly scientific evidence – in this case the spectre and the photographs[14] – may be rigged. A further example of mock-scientific discourse is Fevvers' and Lizzie's pseudo-scientific account of Fevvers' first flight intended to overcome Walser's scepticism about Fevvers' wings (*Nights at the Circus*, 32, 34-35 and 40). By absurdly applying the scientific method to a completely incongruous object, they once again undermine the scientific paradigm, revealing how scientific discourse functions as a strategy of authorization.

History as fiction, fiction as history: magic realist revisions of historiography

Apart from the natural sciences, the post-Enlightenment West recognizes another language game entitled to present facts about the world: history, or rather: historiography, is the acknowledged mode of knowledge production when it comes to establishing what happened in the past. Post-Enlightenment historiography resembles science in that it, too, aims at an accurate and objective representation of an external

[14] Debunking photography's claims to objectivity is a recurring theme in postmodern literature, art and theory. As Linda Hutcheon has observed, within a postmodern philosophical framework photographs no longer are accepted as "technological windows on the world" (Hutcheon 1996, 7).

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reality. Leopold von Ranke's famous *dictum* on the duty of the historian "to tell it as it really was"[15] sharply distinguishes history from fiction:

> Man kann von einer Historie nicht die freie Entfaltung fordern, welche wenigstens die Theorie in einem poetischen Werke sucht [....] Strenge Darstellung der Thatsache, wie bedingt und unschön sie auch sei, ist ohne Zweifel das oberste Gesetz.[16]

This aim admittedly is not entirely unproblematic. Although historians and philosophers have long been aware of the problems involved in representing the past, recent times have witnessed a surge of scepticism about historiography's ability to produce objective knowledge. Scholars have shown that historiography fundamentally relies on the same narrative strategies as fiction in bestowing form, teleology and coherence on historical events, and there have been calls for a form of historical discourse that reveals, rather than obscures, the constructedness of historical accounts.[17] Laying claim to objectivity and factuality, history has traditionally needed to conceal its reliance on narrative. As the philosopher of history Hayden White writes, "the plot of a historical narrative is always an embarrassment and has to be presented as 'found' in the events rather than put there by narrative techniques" (21).

As outlined above, the realist mode has been considered one of the strategies that enables historiography to produce a plausible and convincing account of events. At the same time, realism arguably obscures the historical account's narrative nature, creating an illusion of immediacy and transparency by editing out all markers of discourse, thereby rigorously suppressing all evidence of the context of production. Roland Barthes has argued that positivist history resembles realist fiction in that both not only scrupulously refrain from alluding to the receiver of the message, they also systematically erase all signs of the sender, with the effect that "the history seems to be telling itself all on its own."[18] To

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[15] My translation; the original reads "zu erzählen, wie es eigentlich gewesen" (Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494-1514* [1824], Leipzig, 1885, vii).

[16] *Ibid.* "One cannot demand of a history the free unfolding that theory at least looks for in a poetic work [....] Strict representation of the fact, however contingent and unpleasant it may be, without doubt is the supreme law" (my translation).

[17] See Barthes 1981 and Hutcheon 1989a, Chapter 3.

[18] Barthes 1981, 11; see also Hutcheon 1996, 91-92. Without wanting to detract from Barthes' argument, I should like to point out that a number of great realist works from the nineteenth-century contain plenty of discursive markers, allowing Henry James to criticize authors like Anthony Trollope vehemently for "giving themselves away" (Henry

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achieve this "*illusion référentielle*",[19] the realist text craftily conflates the referent with the signified, thereby falsely suggesting that an act of semantic reference involves only the signifier and the referent. Dropping the signified from the equation hides the traces of narrative construction. It is the direct link between the signifier and the referent, that is, the referential illusion, that gives rise to realism's characteristic *effet du réel.*

Further strategies to authorize historical accounts include referring to empirical evidence such as historical artefacts or written documents, and quoting authorized sources. In this, history again compares to science and its demand for external legitimation. Postmodern approaches to history and historiography have examined how authorization strategies serve to gloss over the essentially constructed and provisional nature of historical knowledge, thereby implying a factuality that can never be achieved.

Magic realist fiction's critical inquiry into the practice of historiography, frequently identified by critics as one of its most salient characteristics, links it not only to a number of other postmodern and postcolonial texts, but also to the theoretical debate outlined above. As has been mentioned in the working definition, works of fiction can be seen to pursue an agenda similar to that of recent theory insofar as they, too, emphasize how historical knowledge can never be absolute, but, being full of gaps usually concealed by the historian's acts of construction, is at best partial and always provisional. They further show how the historical account, being told from a certain point of view, is never disinterested, but serves – at least potentially – to uphold existing power structures.

Coining the term "historiographic metafiction", Linda Hutcheon has examined how works of contemporary fiction, pretending to be histories, use metafictional techniques to draw attention to the process of narration and the narrating agent, thereby highlighting the constructed nature of historical accounts.[20] In narratological terms, the texts might be said to reinstate the level of *discours*, which in positivist historiography is suppressed in favour of the level of *histoire* so that the account will look like an unmediated representation of the past.[21] In doing so, they exemplify exactly the kind of discontinuous and "ruptured" history that

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James, "The Art of Fiction" [1884], in *Victorian Criticism of the Novel*, eds Edwin M. Eigner and George J. Worths, Cambridge, London and New York, 1985, 196).

[19] Barthes 1968, 88; emphasis in the original.

[20] See Hutcheon 1996, esp. Chapter 6; also Hutcheon 1989a, Chapter 5.

[21] Reckwitz 1986, esp. 145. The terms *discours* and *histoire* broadly denote the same distinction as the Russian formalist terms *fabula* and *sjuzet.*

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theoreticians of history like Michel Foucault have called for (see Hutcheon 1996, 97ff.).

However, to understand history as the product of meaning-making strategies does not mean that the whole endeavour of trying to know the past is futile, a point both theoretical and fictional texts hasten to make.[22] Showing up the methodological and ideological limitations of historiography offers new chances, for it now becomes possible to question received versions of history as well as historiography's claims to neutrality and validity. This aspect becomes important especially in a postcolonial context, history having frequently been enlisted as a legitimizing discourse for the colonial enterprise. Therefore, it is little surprising that postcolonial theory should so concern itself with historiography's reliance on narrative, while much postcolonial fiction offers a critique of Western historiography that intersects with a revision of official history, the events being retold from a different, usually marginalized perspective.

Sometimes categorized as historiographic metafiction, many magic realist texts likewise challenge Western history by telling alternative versions from an ex-centric point of view while at the same time self-consciously foregrounding the constructedness of the account. However, their critique of Western historiography begins already on a much more basic level, for magic realism fundamentally interrupts and thereby subverts history's mode of choice, which is realism. By incongruously adapting the realist mode to elements traditionally considered extraordinary, impossible or fantastic, magic realist fiction underlines how realism functions as a strategy of persuasion and authorization.

But to reveal history's claims to transparency and objectivity to be untenable is only one of the concerns of magic realist fiction. Over and beyond that, its criticism is constructive insofar as it identifies other possibilities of representing the past. In and through their fantastic versions of history, magic realist texts suggest that, even if historical facts were less problematic to come by, a historiographic practice based solely on such data would still fall short. The point has already come up above: while the facts may be interesting, on their own they are insufficient to give an adequate account of human experience. The texts argue that, in trying to understand how individuals and communities conceive of their past and which repercussions these conceptions have in the present, it becomes necessary to take other types of historical narrative into account. Local tales and legends, anecdotes, gossip and rumour are all

[22] See White, 20; Hutcheon 1989a, 57, also 81; and Hutcheon 1996, 92 and 97.

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shown to be equally part of what people know, or think they know, about the past, shaping their perception of the world and their identity. In complementing an empirical historiographic practice with other types of discourse, magic realist texts go beyond revisions of specific historical accounts to a revision of historiographic practice itself.

A number of the texts under discussion here strikingly address the problems involved in knowing and representing the past. Frequently, they do so through a combination of exemplification and theoretical reflection. In mimicking the practice of historiography, the texts exemplify and thereby reveal the problems that accompany the writing of history, providing the narrator or other characters with an opportunity explicitly to reflect on these issues, although the amount of reflection varies from text to text.

Marina Warner's *Indigo* largely relies on the strategy of exemplification, without its inquiry into historiography being any the less clear-cut for all that.[23] In the sections of the narrative that are set in the past, the novel paradigmatically re-tells one instance of a colonial encounter, juxtaposing the colonizer's account with that of the colonized in order to show up Western history's selectivity and one-sidedness. Focalized for the most part through characters native to the island, the narrative is interspersed with letters in which the British explorer Kit Everard tells his version of events, so that both sides of the story are heard (see 151-53 and 199-202). In emphasizing the plurality of perspectives from which the past can and must be told, the novel sharply contrasts its own view of history with the monolithic view embraced by the Western colonizer: on the level of plot, only Everard's version survives. Included in the family memoirs published by one of his descendants, Kit Everard's letters metonymically stand for a history told

[23] In Warner's novel, any explicit or "theoretical" observations on the problem of representing reality concern not history, but photography. The protagonist reflects: "When I take a photograph it still comes out with my stamp on it [....] The so-called 'authentic' snapshot always pretends that the photographer didn't have to be there, isn't responsible, hadn't anything to do with it. Like a realist novel" (*Indigo*, 320). Similarly suspicious of photography, a film-maker practices film's equivalent of metafiction: "My films never pretend to be anything but artefacts – they're unnatural, contrived, fashioned, unrealistic, on purpose. They're directed [....] Not *vérité* photographs – pretending there isn't a mind behind the camera or a finger on the button" (*ibid.*, 261). This approach is obviously diametrically opposed to that of persons who that regard photography and film as the mimetic medium *par excellence*. Jean-Luc Godard, for example, once had a character proclaim: "Photography is truth ... and the cinema is the truth twenty-four times per second" (*Le Petit Soldat: Screenplay* [French version, 1967], trans. and with an Introduction by Nicolas Garnham, London, 1967, 37).

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purely from the colonizer's perspective. The novel here also reveals the role that writing, printing and publishing play in the making of history, the written word lending authority and permanence to Everard's account, while Sycorax's tale persists only in the whisperings of the wind. This mirrors the historical condition that puts the colonized at a disadvantage right from the start, reducing any chance of being heard even further than the imbalance of power does already.

A fairly complex interplay of exemplification and reflection can be observed in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, in which the reader is offered rather unorthodox histories of post-Independence India and Pakistan. In all three novels, self-conscious narrators present their narratives as historically true, while at the same time telling them in such a way that their biases and the many discontinuities and inconsistencies usually glossed over in the process of reconstruction become glaringly visible. The narrators' claims to factuality are further undermined by their all too vigorous insistence to be telling the truth. The novels also each make use of a meta-level, from which the narrator explicitly comments on the problems involved in writing history, biography and autobiography. Saleem for instance philosophizes about the unreliable nature of memory and the gaps in knowledge that the historian and the autobiographer must make up for.[24] He furthermore complains of the difficulty of extricating "good hard facts" from the overwhelming amount of contradictory and possibly manipulated information available, and highlights his tendency to cast himself as the protagonist of historical events, admitting that he is not above "cutting up history to suit [his] own nefarious purposes" (*ibid.*, 338 and 259). Discovering that he (inadvertently?) allowed Mahatma Gandhi to be assassinated on the wrong date,[25] Saleem asks: "Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything – to rewrite the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role?" (*Ibid.*, 166)

The narrator of *Shame* similarly stresses the extent to which he is "obliged to leave many questions in a state of unanswered ambiguity" (18). He argues that history is always the story of those in power, thereby formulating on a theoretical level the same point *Indigo* makes through plot:

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[24] See *Midnight's Children*, 211, 222 and 427-28.

[25] Saleem does not specify the date of the assassination in his narrative (see *ibid.*, 143), but according to the text it takes place some time after the end of February 1948 (see *ibid.*, 137), whereas Gandhi was assassinated already on 30 January 1948.

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> History is natural selection. Mutant versions of the past struggle for dominance; new species of fact arise, and old, saurian truths go to the wall, blindfolded and smoking last cigarettes. Only the mutations of the strong survive. The weak, the anonymous, the defeated leave few marks [....] History loves only those who dominate her. (*Ibid.*, 124)

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Moraes Zogoiby likewise comes up against the problems of memory and self-aggrandizement, which speedily reveal any notion of a historically accurate autobiography to be a fond delusion. Having tried to sort out the multiple and contradictory accounts his mother and father give of one and the same event, Moraes reflects: "The old biographer's problem: even when people are telling their own life stories, they are invariably improving on the facts, rewriting their tales, or just plain making them up" (135). Of course, Rushdie's inquiry into the issue is much more intricate than this brief glance could possibly suggest. However, as his novels have been repeatedly examined with a view to their treatment of history,[26] I should like to forego a longer analysis of his texts and instead turn to the other works under discussion here.

Although not generally approached from this perspective, Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* also explores the possibilities and pitfalls of writing history, using both exemplification and metafictional reflection.[27] In attempting to give a historically accurate account of his experiences of fighting under Napoleon, Henri has to discover how difficult, if not impossible, it is to reconstruct the past from memory. Frustrated, he starts keeping a diary, thereby hoping to have "something clear and sure to set against [his] memory tricks". However, this does not do away with the meaning-making strategies and the interpretative bias that colour all accounts, past or present. As Henri's friend Domino is quick to point out, a diary is no less a construction than a narrative written in retrospect: "The way you see it now is no more real than the way you see it

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[26] See Hutcheon 1996, ix *et passim*. See also Carol Ann Howells, "Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*", *The Literary Criterion*, XX/1 (1985), 191-203; David Horrocks, "The Undisciplined Past: Novel Approaches to History in Grass and Rushdie", in *The Novel in Anglo-German Context: Cultural Cross-Currents and Affinities*, Papers from the Conference held at the University of Leeds from 15-17 September 1997, ed. Susanne Stark, Amsterdam and Atlanta: GA, 1999, 347-55; and Lorna Milne, "Olfaction, Authority, and the Interpretation of History in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum*, and Michel Tournier's *Le Roi des Aulnes*", *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, LIII/1 (1999), 23-36.

[27] On the novel's interest in historiography, see French 1996 as well as Pauline Palmer, "*The Passion*: Storytelling, Fantasy, Desire", in *"I'm telling you stories": Jeanette Winterson and the Politics of Reading*, eds Helena Grice and Tim Woods, Amsterdam and Atlanta: GA, 1998, 103-16.

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then." The idea that there is something like an absolute, universally true representation of the past is a delusion, and a dangerous one at that. The story that gets told always depends upon the teller and his or her place in the scheme of things. Aware of this, Domino most emphatically rejects Henri's aspirations to History:

> "Look at you," said Domino, "a young man brought up by a priest and his pious mother. A young man who can't pick up a musket to shoot a rabbit. What makes you think you can see anything clearly? What gives you the right to make a notebook and shake it at me in thirty years, if we're still alive, and say you've got the truth?" (*The Passion*, 28)

For Domino, the impediments to gaining certain knowledge of the past make any form of history a waste of time. Significantly, he only talks of his past when inebriated. In fact, he thinks trying to know the past is about as much use as trying to see into the future:

> He told me about the fortune tellers he'd known and how crowds came every week to have their future opened or their past revealed. "But I tell you, Henri, that every moment you steal from the present is a moment you have lost forever. There's only now." (*Ibid.*, 29)

Frustrated by his failure to hold on to the past, Henri at times is tempted to take Domino's advice and live entirely in the present. New Years Eve brings home the futility of his attempt to preserve the memory of his fallen comrades:

> This year is gone, I told myself. This year is slipping away and it will never return. Domino's right, there's only now. Forget it. Forget it. You can't bring it back. You can't bring them back. (*Ibid.*, 42)

The novel does suggest that forgetting is necessary in order to go on with life. Pondering how one could possibly cope with the infinite variety of the world, Henri concludes:

> By forgetting. We cannot keep in mind too many things.[28]

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[28] *Ibid.*, 43. The alternative is explored in Jorge Luis Borges' short story "Funes el memorioso", where the protagonist's ability to remember every single detail leaves him no space to ever experience anything new (see "Funes, His Memory", in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley, Harmondsworth, 1999, 131-37).

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However, the novel also exemplifies a different method of dealing with, and even profiting from, the past, and this is storytelling. Through selection and arrangement, narrative makes the past both manageable and meaningful. The importance of knowing the past is stressed by Villanelle, who takes up a position diametrically opposed to Domino's:

> The future is foretold from the past and the future is only possible because of the past. Without past and future, the present is partial [….] There is no sense in forgetting and every sense in dreaming. Thus the present is made rich. Thus the present is made whole. (*The Passion*, 62)

Henri's and Villanelle's narratives are histories that accept and even turn into an advantage the fact that all historical representation is necessarily, and in both senses of the word, partial. Their accounts of the Napoleonic Wars and Venice are narrative mosaics made up of a multiplicity of stories, told from different points of view and belonging to different modes of discourse. In Henri's account, historical facts such as dates and the number of men wounded stand side by side with stereotypes and absurd rumours that the enemies believe about each other, for instance that the English are child-eating heretics who "committed suicide with unseemly cheerfulness",[29] while the English in turn believe Napoleon's army "to be digging a tunnel ready to pop up like moles in the Kentish fields" (*ibid.*, 20). Henri also indiscriminately includes marvellous stories and tall tales, such as Patrick's stories about his telescope eye and Channel mermaids, or Domino's account of meeting the later empress Joséphine in a circus and being hired as the royal groom (see *ibid.*, 21-22, 24, 29). Villanelle likewise presents a narrative patchwork, incorporating into her autobiographical account other modes and genres such as the rumour and the legend, as well as the fairy tale (see *ibid.*, 49ff.). The mixture blurs the easy distinction between fact and fiction, between what may be presumed real and what fantastic. Winterson's novel suggests that historical truth is not restricted to the realist discourse of post-Enlightenment historiography, but may also be conveyed through overtly fictional forms, which sometimes are better suited to express human experience. Seen in this light, the narrators' paradoxical slogan "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" becomes the quintessence of a new historiographical practice.

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[29] *Ibid.*, 8. The last item recalls Montesquieu's observation that "the English kill themselves without any apparent reason for doing so; they kill themselves in the very lap of happiness" (quoted in Foucault 1988, 213; no source given).

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Henri and Villanelle's catch-phrase could equally well have been coined by the narrators of Robert Nye's *Falstaff* and *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, who show themselves similarly intent on outlining a new type of history that not only admits to its own constructedness, but actively incorporates the fictional. Easily among the most complex examples of historiographic metafiction to date (something academic criticism apparently has not yet noticed),[30] the novels present themselves as autobiography and biography, respectively. Much like Rushdie's novels, Nye's texts use the device of the self-conscious narrator to challenge history's claim to objectivity, exposing the various conventions and authorization strategies upon which Western historiography relies. Fastolf mocks historical discourse's use of empirical proof when he triumphantly announces that he will now present the reader and, even more importantly, "[his] critics, the Historians" with "a piece of history" in the form of "a *unique document*" that will supposedly allay all doubts about the reliability of his narrative. Parodying the rules of Western historiography, Fastolf tells his readers, tongue-in-cheek:

> It's History with a capital H you're after. And a dose of that I can now provide. In the shape of a letter. An authentic letter. A letter as real as my boots. (*Falstaff*, 154; emphasis in the original)

Interestingly, Fastolf's point about such "authentic" material is not so much that it might have been manipulated or even entirely fake, as was the focus in *Midnight's Children* and *Nights at the Circus*. Rather, the problem is that such "pieces of history" are, as Fastolf warns his readers, "VERY BORING INDEED" (*Falstaff*, 154). They may be real, but by themselves they are none too helpful. As Fastolf shows, it takes the historian's art, that is, the art of narrative, to craft the bits and pieces into a coherent and meaningful whole.

Fastolf's claim that he will have "none of your literature", but will tell it "like it was" (*ibid.*, 2), is entirely undermined by the attention he deliberately draws to the processes of construction, for instance by offering not one, but three versions of "How the Battle of Gadshill was won" and subsequently analysing the merits and drawbacks of each

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[30] Surprisingly, Nye's novels do not feature in recent discussions of historiographic metafiction. On the issue of history in *Falstaff*, see Beate Neumeier, "Die Lust am Intertext: Robert Nyes Roman *Falstaff*", in *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, CXXIV, eds Günther Klotz and Armin-Gerd Kuckhoff, Bochum, 1988, 152-55; and Enno Ruge, "The Disappearing Act: Zwei fiktionale Shakespeare-Biographien von Robert Nye", in *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, CXXXVII, ed. Ina Schabert, Bochum, 2001, 50-65.

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version (see *ibid.*, Chapters 54-57). Fastolf justifies his unusual approach to historiography: "If you want to come at the truth of a single event you had better allow for at least three stabs at it, and then allow for the fact that you may still have missed the heart in some way" (*ibid.*, 265). He also reveals the very personal interests that have shaped his account when on his deathbed he admits to having indulged in lies in order to make himself seem a person of importance (see *ibid.*, 445ff.). Remarking on the discrepancies between his version of history and official accounts, Fastolf philosophically concludes that

> truth is not a goddess or any other manner of immutable or immortal, but simply what men of power repeat long enough in the ears of other men of power. Certainly there are times when it is more than that, but there has never been a time in the history of the world when it has been less. (*Ibid.*, 83)

Quite unabashedly, Fastolf identifies himself as *agent-constructeur*:

> Fact? My belly gives me license to give imaginative body to what is essentially sparse, even skeletal material: memories, biographies, jokes, histories, conversations, letters, images, fragments. I make patterns of my fragments. (*Ibid.*, 159)

However, in openly acknowledging this, Fastolf can no longer be said falsely to pretend to transparent representation. Instead, the reader is free to reconstruct the story from a text which is essentially *scriptible* or, as David Lodge has paraphrased Barthes, "invites its readers to an active participation in the production of meanings that are infinite and inexhaustible" (Lodge 1988b, 167). Fastolf tells the reader:

> But I give you also the fragments in giving you this book, my pattern – I give you the fragments to a great degree untrammelled by *my* pattern – so that you, the reader, are free to put upon them *your* pattern; or simply to find within them or beyond them another pattern, or patterns, an infinite series of possibilities. (*Falstaff*, 159ff.; emphases in the original)

While its dependency on narrative obviously means that history is never entirely objective, the novel suggests that this does not automatically invalidate the historical account's claim to truth. Instead, Fastolf's "fictitious immodesties" (*ibid.*, 447) as well as the many fantastically implausible anecdotes and tales he includes provide an image of Fastolf and his times which, while perhaps not true in the sense of any

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correspondence theory of truth, nevertheless is more revealing than any purely factual portrayal could be. Laying no claim to absolute correctness or universal validity, histories of the type told by Fastolf present themselves as one way among many of recovering the past.

The importance of including the fictional in any representation of the past is foregrounded even more insistently in *The Late Mr Shakespeare*. In Pickleherring's biography, historical fact jostles with folk tales,[31] rumours, and superstitions, for example concerning the death of Shakespeare's young sister Anne, who is believed to have "perished as a direct consequence of bringing hawthorn blossom across the threshold of the house on Henley Street" (168; see also Chapter 23). The biographer offers multiple possibilities for Shakespeare's last words and several contradictory versions of the "lost years" (see *ibid.*, 385-86 and Chapters 47-50). As Pickleherring helpfully observes upon starting on another alternative version: "OR should be this book's subtitle" (*ibid*, 187). Even literary analyses of Shakespeare's work are undertaken, even though Pickleherring acknowledges that the biographer needs to tread carefully here. However, according to Pickleherring the trick is to use those bits which seem irrelevant, incoherent, extraneous in the context of the Bard's work, for only they will reveal something about the author's life (see *ibid.*, 219). All of this adds up to a rather idiosyncratic, but undeniably stimulating and insightful whole. Pickleherring defends his unorthodox method, arguing that sticking to known facts would not yield a satisfactory account of the Bard's life. Having proved that "all the facts about Mr Shakespeare's life could be written on a single page", which is no great feat, as there exist only twelve pertinent entries in the public records, he continues: "But a man's life does not just consist of facts" (*ibid.*, 23 and 24). Facts, such as the date of baptism or number of brothers, belong to the "uninteresting things" that can be told about William Shakespeare: "there are things like this in everyone's life, and [...] they are not what matters in the end, not what makes each one of us unique, although we like to know them". The reader is advised that some things are more important than the facts: "Be sure that fiction is the best biography" (*ibid.*, 302-303).

But Pickleherring's refusal to restrict history to empirical data does not mean that history becomes mere fabulation. Although one needs to differentiate between fact and fiction, fictions are eminently relevant to

[31] See Chapter 16, "Shakespeare's breeches", an adaptation of the Celtic fairy tale "The Sprightly Tailor" (in Joseph Jacobs, *Celtic Fairy Tales* [first published as *Celtic Fairy Tales*, 1891, and *More Celtic Fairy Tales*, 1894], London, Sydney and Toronto, 1970, 44-45); see also Chapter 20.

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understanding the past. Admitting one of the items he has presented to be "mere gossip", Pickleherring argues that "gossip plays its part too in the life of a man" (*ibid.*, 40). In a central passage, Pickleherring eloquently expands on the issue of fact versus fiction, contrasting his own philosophy of history with traditional post-Enlightenment historiography (although to label it thus is perhaps something of an anachronism, considering the year in which Pickleherring is supposed to be writing[32]):

> Reader, there are, in truth, as I would now make clear for your better understanding of this sorry mad book of mine, two kinds of history, as different from each other as chalk and cheese.
>
> There is *town* history and there is *country* history.
>
> Town history is cynical and exact. It is written by wits and it orders and limits what it talks about. It relies on facts and figures. It is knowing. Dry and sceptical and clever, it is ruled by the head. Beginning in the shadow of the law courts, at the end of the day your town history tends to the universities – it becomes academic. Town history is believable and reliable. Offering proofs, it never strains credulity. But sometimes it can't see the Forest of Arden for the trees. And it falls probably short of the mark when it comes up against Mr Shakespeare.
>
> Your country history is a different matter. Country history is faithful and open-ended. It is a tale told by various idiots on the village green,[33] all busy contradicting themselves in the name of a common truth. It exaggerates and enflames what it talks about. It delights in lies and gossip. It is unwise. Wild and mystical and passionate, it is ruled by the heart. Beginning by the glow of the hearth, at the end of the night your country history tends to pass into balladry and legend – it becomes poetic. Country history is fanciful and maggoty. Easy to mock, it always strains belief. But sometimes it catches the ghostly coat-tails of what is otherwise ungraspable. It is the only possible way of accounting for Mr Shakespeare. (*Ibid.*, 67-68; emphases in the original)

Pickleherring's philosophy of history gives a whole new slant to the current theoretical debate about the narrative nature of historiography, turning the much-abused fictional aspects of historical discourse from a vice into a virtue: instead of distorting the truth, fictions give access to it, whereas traditional historiography alone, with its narrow-minded focus

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[32] Namely, between the Plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of 1666 (see *ibid.*, 90-91 and 382-83).

[33] Macbeth goes on to characterize the tale as "full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing" (*Macbeth* [*c.* 1606], ed. Kenneth Muir, London, 1967 V.v.27-28). What this is to suggest about "country history" is not quite clear to me, since quite unmistakably country history is a positive concept in Nye's novel.

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on facts, fails to provide an adequate account of the past. Though fictions and legends do not correspond to empirical reality, they can nevertheless communicate important truths about the people who believe in them – or about the people who make them up. As Moraes Zogoiby reports, in all probability neither his mother's nor his father's version of a certain incident corresponds to the facts, but each spring from particular needs and desires: "The truth of such stories lies in what they reveal about the protagonists' hearts, rather than their deeds" (*The Moor's Last Sigh*, 135).

In arguing that traditional historiography's focus on empirical data needs to be complemented, Nye's novel can be seen to provide a theoretical framework for the revisionist historiography put into practice by a large number of magic realist works. However, the passage from *The Late Mr Shakespeare* also illustrates a more fundamental feature of magic realist fiction. This is its concern with the non-realistic and the non-empirical as indispensable elements of the human experience, elements that must be acknowledged if one wants to understand this experience. I will therefore conclude this chapter by having a closer look at ways in which magic realist fiction seeks to redeem alternative, frequently marginalized kinds of knowledge.

"Tales, tales, tales, tales":[34] narrative as an existential mode of knowledge production

As I have suggested at the outset of this chapter, magic realist fiction's inquiry into issues of knowledge and knowledge production recalls Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, which argues that the West needs to overcome its fixation on science and should reconsider the epistemological potential of narrative. Showing up the limitations of empiricist or positivist disciplines like science and historiography, works of magic realist fiction go on to sound out the potential of narrative as a way of knowing the world. This does not mean that magic realist fiction uncritically advocates narrative modes of knowledge production, presenting them as unconditionally superior to rational-scientific ones. While narrative forms are redeemed as important complements to the scientific paradigm, they are nevertheless evaluated critically: keeping a distance, the magic realist texts show how, just like science and historiography, narrative constructions of the world may be put to good as well as bad uses. As Danow observes, magic realist fiction's "reliance on folk

[34] As Pickleherring says in *The Late Mr Shakespeare* (68).

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wisdom [...] provides a vital source of (mis)understanding", the mode "[borrowing] as much from the wisdom as the folly of the 'people'" (119).

On the most general level, magic realist fiction's fascination with stories and storytelling becomes visible in its taste for intertextual allusion and metafiction. Chapter 3 has looked at some of the specific ways in which the mode employs fairy tale conventions to subvert literary realism. But tales and the telling of tales fulfil further important functions in magic realist fiction. For one thing, existing narrative material is identified as a reservoir of communal knowledge that vitally contributes to people's understanding of the world. Magic realist narrators and characters frequently turn to myths, legends or fairy tales, using age-old and long-familiar patterns to make sense of their own experiences and guide their decisions. However, in their search for meaning the figures avail themselves not only of existing stories, but also of the various storytelling modes as such, generating their own myths, legends or fairy tales, for turning their lives into stories allows them to confer at least a basic amount of coherence and unity onto a haphazard, frequently incomprehensible existence.

Closely related to this is a third point I will look at, namely the way that storytelling is presented as an existential, life-sustaining activity. Realized most vividly in *The Arabian Nights*, where the act of storytelling literally guarantees Scheherazade's life, this literary topos resurfaces in a number of magic realist works.[35] Storytelling is thereby identified as one of the most fundamental activities of human existence, as necessary to survival as nourishment and procreation. In *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, Pickleherring most appropriately characterizes "Love", "eating" and "telling lies" as "indispensable to mankind" (329),[36] while in *The Passion*, Patrick includes storytelling among the essentials needed on a trek through sub-zero Russia (89). In *Falstaff*, Fastolf explicitly equates literature with sex in a chapter entitled "About Sir John Fastolf's prick", musing: "It occurs to me that if I didn't have secretaries and couldn't write with my own hand, here is the ideal instrument with which to tell my story" (206).[37] In *Midnight's Children*, narrative not only guarantees Saleem's existence, but also takes the place of procreation, for Saleem's

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[35] On the use of "hommes-récits" or "story-persons" in modernist and postmodernist works, see McHale, 228. The term is Tzvetan Todorov's, translated as "narrative-men" in *The Poetics of Prose* (*La Poétique de la Prose*, 1971), trans. Richard Howard, Ithaca: NY, 1977, Chapter 5.

[36] Pickleherring claims to be paraphrasing a proverb from John Florio's *Second Fruits*.

[37] On the equation of bodily lust and writing in *Falstaff*, see also Neumeier 1988, 156-59.

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"other pencil" proves useless (121), adding Saleem to the illustrious ranks of sexually impotent narrators.[38]

The first aspect to be examined, then, is the use to which existing narratives such as myths, fairy stories, old wives' tales or their modern-day analogues are put by magic realist narrators and characters. In showing how stories provide their listeners or readers with ways of interpreting the world, magic realist texts present in fictional terms an argument that has also been a focus of attention in theoretical disciplines such as narratology, philosophy and sociology, which have identified narrative as a medium not only for storing and communicating, but also for creating knowledge about the world. Narrative has also been seen as a way of encoding guidelines for appropriate moral and social behaviour, or, as Jean Baudrillard explains it in a more postmodern fashion, as a means of circulating ready-made identities or "codes" that control the process of socialization.[39] Many of the texts under discussion here demonstrate how, even in a Western environment, people turn to stories to help explain the world. *Mythos* and *logos* as the two basic modes of knowledge production are presented not as successive and mutually exclusive, but as simultaneous and complementary.

One narrative that repeatedly functions as a source of knowledge in magic realist fiction is the Bible. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Fernanda, intent on concealing the fact that her daughter has given birth to an illegimitate son, comes up with the idea of telling people that the baby was found floating in a basket. The story's implausibility does not deter her: "If they believe it in the Bible, [...] I don't see why they shouldn't believe it from me" (322). *The 27th Kingdom* likewise has its characters turn to the Bible and other religious writings for guidance. Aunt Irene, finding Darwin's theory of evolution too confusing, instead opts for "that simplest of all views: the one expressed so cogently in the book of Genesis, which explained everything with appealing clarity" (83). However, in rather flippantly maintaining that the miracles of mayonnaise and meringues could only have originated with Divine Providence and therefore clearly disprove Darwin's theory, she comically undermines her use of the Bible as a substitute for science.

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[38] Recall among others Laurence Sterne's tragically unmanned Tristram Shandy (see *Tristram Shandy* [1760], ed. Howard Anderson, New York and London, 1980, 264), or Perseus' impotence in John Barth's *Chimera* ([1972], New York, 1993, 76ff.).

[39] See Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (*L'échange symbolique et la mort*, 1976), trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 1993 (cited as Baudrillard 1993a).

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Mrs O'Connor by contrast really does seem to take religious stories at face value. Having seen Valentine levitate, she turns to the Saints' Lives much as other people might to an encyclopaedia:

> "What's it called?" Mrs O'Connor asked Victor over supper. "What's it called when they float in the air? *You* know."
>
> "Eh?" said Victor.
>
> [….]
>
> She returned with a sheaf of booklets published by the Catholic Truth Society.
>
> "There y'are," she said, slapping one open on the table. "*Levitation.* Tha's what it's called. St Joseph of Cupertino used ter fly in the air and sit in trees."
>
> "Go on," said Victor. "Pull the uvver one."
>
> "Everybody saw 'im," said Mrs O'Connor. "Bishops and mayors and magistrates. And there's St Martin de Porres," she said, slapping down another booklet with an air of triumph. "'E was a saint – an' 'e's black."
>
> "You're nuts," said Victor. (*Ibid.*, 60-61; emphases in the original)

Notably, the novel here pokes fun at Mrs O'Connor's all too ready belief in religious writings while at the same time also rejecting Victor's narrow-minded scepticism. Valentine's supernatural abilities are not recontextualized in the course of the novel, so that Mrs O'Connor is not quite the deluded individual Victor thinks her. However, her pseudo-religious sensationalism is the wrong approach. The novel sharply criticizes people's craving to prove the existence of the supernatural, be it diabolical or divine, such proof being completely irrelevant. In a typically magic realist manner, the Reverend Mother finds Valentine's miracles not at all astonishing or disquieting, only terribly inconvenient, as they are bound to attract tiresome sightseers, relic-hunters and journalists who will only pollute the environment and destroy all peace and quiet (see *ibid.*, 86). She reflects:

> How the vulgar loved portents, prodigies and the untoward. Only the religious knew how embarrassing they could be – and quite beside the point.

The real miracles, the novel suggests, take place in human interaction. For this reason, Valentine needs to renounce her marvellous abilities before she can return to the convent. Her progress is monitored by the Reverend Mother by means of an apple that miraculously stays fresh. Only when it has "conformed to the laws of nature – which after all were

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also God's laws" (*ibid.*, 87) does the Reverend Mother call Valentine back.

Narrative is further characterized as a communal store of knowledge when magic realist narrators anchor their own narratives to specific intertexts. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Moraes Zogoiby casts his young parents-to-be as latter-day versions of Romeo and Juliet. The "star-crossedness" of their union as well as their meeting at the church and the subsequent "wedding night" firmly establish Shakespeare's play as intertext, thereby foreshadowing an unhappy ending to the union between "*Christian heiress* and *Jewish employee*", even if the ending is rather different from Shakespeare's.[40] The tale of Abraham Zogoiby's economic downfall and the loan his mother grants him in return for his firstborn son, "these promised pounds of unborn flesh", draws on both Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and the Rumpelstiltskin tale.[41] To present Flory Zogoiby as a mixture of Shylock and Rumpelstiltskin is to mark her as inhumanly harsh, while Abraham becomes the somewhat naïve but nevertheless blameless victim. In a similar fashion, Moraes uses intertextual allusion to identify Aurora Zogoiby with both Snow White's stepmother and Hans Christian Andersen's Snow Queen, thereby effectively characterizing her as a woman who tolerates no rivals and has a fatal effect on her would-be lovers.[42] In *Shame*, the narrator self-consciously presents Sufiya Zinobia as an inversion of the Beast in "Beauty and the Beast": in Sufiya's case, physical beauty hides moral hideousness, giving a cynical twist to the fairy tale's moral that outer appearance is no reliable guide to character.

In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem maps events from his life onto Hindu mythology, thereby removing them from the contingency and insignificance of ordinary mortal life to a higher plane, while at the same time foreshadowing and explaining the course of events. In keeping with the name Saleem gives him,[43] Saleem's arch-rival Shiva not only is eternally bent on destruction, but, as in the myth, has a son with Parvati-the-witch who sports the huge ears of the elephant-headed god Ganesh (419-20). This signals hope for the little boy's future, for Ganesh is associated with wisdom and the overcoming of differences. However, for all the advantages there are to Saleem's strategy, it also has its downsides, illustrating the ambiguous potential of narrative as a source

[40] See *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 103-104, 97-99, 89-90.
[41] *Ibid.*, 112; see also 111, 110 and 113.
[42] *Ibid.*, 206 and 155.
[43] Saleem replaces the real names of the midnight's children with more appropriate ones (see 199).

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of knowledge. While likening one's life to a myth creates a sense of meaning and significance, there also is the danger of coming to believe too strongly in one's own construction. The future then seems foreordained, and the mechanism of the self-fulfilling prophecy is set into motion. At that moment, the knowledge provided by the narrative is no longer an asset, but a liability, for it limits the individual in his or her decisions.

In *Indigo*, the function of structuring and foreshadowing is fulfilled by the fairy tale of "Sleeping Beauty". The "curse" put on Xanthe by a jealous aunt at her christening at first seems to have been averted by the godmother's "counter-spell" (see 58ff.): instead of growing up eternally insecure and discontent, Xanthe in fact develops a "special, vintage-label, common sense" (*ibid.*, 60). While her common sense might also be called heartlessness, it at least enables Xanthe to sail through life untroubled by emotion: up until her mid-thirties, "repining, yearning, experiencing absence or loss continued to be foreign to her nature" (*ibid.*, 344). But like in the fairy tale, the curse has not been deflected entirely. In a situation of crisis, Xanthe suddenly realizes how much she really loves the man she had originally married merely out of complacency. Setting out desperately in a small boat to find him, she is drowned at sea. Xanthe's change of heart is explicitly linked to the events at the christening, affirming the fairy tale as intertext: "Only at the very last minute, when so much was coming apart around Xanthe, did that fairy decree of long ago stop working and Xanthe Everard become vulnerable to love" (*ibid.*, 373). Presenting Xanthe's story as a version of Sleeping Beauty is a way of making sense of a life, and a death, that might otherwise have seemed a chain of random events.

Stories and fairy tales abound as meaning-making matrixes also in Angela Carter's *Wise Children* and *Nights at the Circus*. As examples have already been mentioned in Chapter 3, I will here select one instance which illustrates particularly well how not only similarity to, but also deviance from an original serves to create meaning.

At the beginning of *Wise Children*, the reader is deliberately set up to expect a version of the Ophelia-motif, only to have to discover that, in this day and age, the outcome of the story is quite different indeed. In order to designate pregnant and jilted Tiffany as another candidate for insanity and a watery death, the novel adapts scene IV.v from *Hamlet*, in which Ophelia goes mad (see *Wise Children*, 42ff.). But far from playing out her allotted part and tragically ending up in the Thames River, an expectation reinforced by reports of a dead girl's body, Tiffany radically changes the script and surprisingly turns up again at the end of the novel

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to announce that she does not care a whit about her fiancé, but will raise the baby by herself (see *ibid.*, 210-11). Deliberately invoking and then overturning Shakespeare's story serves to emphasize those features of Tiffany's that mark her an emancipated woman.

Magic realist texts further characterize narrative as a medium of knowledge when they cast their own narratives into traditional moulds, giving them the shapes of myths of fairy tales. This return to older, originally oral forms manifests itself already in magic realist fiction's tendency to put telling on a level with writing. *Wise Children* is a good example of a story that is being "told" rather than written, ostensibly being narrated in a pub (see 107 above). But even where the story is presented as written, or in the state of being written, magic realist fiction tends towards the oral. Frequently, the narrator will address the reader directly, creating the atmosphere of a conversation, as for example in *Midnight's Children*, *Falstaff*, *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, *Wise Children* and *Illywhacker*.

Oral narrative also is revalued by being among magic realist narrators' prime sources of information. Pickleherring typically stresses that his biography is based on anything but documents, parish registers, or inventories. Like his informants, he is essentially a storyteller:

> it's told tales I'm telling you. Tales told me. Twice told tales. Tales, tales, tales, tales. (*The Late Mr Shakespeare*, 68)

However, the focus on oral sources, including rumour, gossip and hearsay, is not to be mistaken for unequivocal endorsement. In inquiring into the production of knowledge, magic realist fiction here is merely observing one more set of methods by which individuals and communities gather and spread information about the world.

Traditionally oral forms are exploited quite specifically by many a magic realist narrator. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem deliberately casts his life-story in the venerable tradition of the epic. The painstaking stylization of his visit to the licentious Midnite-Confidential Club as a journey to the Stygian underground clearly is intended to fulfil an important convention of the genre – as Saleem self-consciously observes, "every saga requires at least one descent into Jahannum" (453). In both *The Passion* and *Gut Symmetries*, characters use the rigorous form of the fairy tale to narrate aspects of their lives. The inset tales are immediately recognizable as separate narrative pieces and adhere to the fairy tale vein throughout, without the subversion discussed earlier in Chapter 3.

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Nevertheless, they intersect and overlap with the story and the characters in a way that inset tales usually do not.

It is striking that these tales are primarily used to present unpleasant experiences or conflicts, almost as though a more realistic mode were felt not to have been equal to the task, and these matters therefore had to be conveyed in the form of a fairy tale. This ties in with Oskar's use of fairy tale markers when he speaks of the "*Reichskristallnacht*" in *The Tin Drum* (see 87 above): reality having surpassed the bounds of the conceivable, the narrator must turn to a decidedly non-realistic form of representation. In *The Passion*, Villanelle relates all of her previous life to Henri and Patrick in the first person and a fair approximation of the realist mode – except for those two years when she lived with a husband she loathed, which she compresses into a fairy tale about a young woman who travels the world without her heart (see 97-98). The novel here characterizes the fairy tale as a valuable way of expressing a truth too painful to tell directly. Just how true the fairy tale really is becomes visible only in retrospect, when the narrative makes clear that it is not a metaphorical representation of Villanelle's unhappy state, but is meant to be taken literally.

The inset fairy tale in *Gut Symmetries* (see 140-41) is less directly connected to the plot, a circumstance already signalled by its being printed in italics. It further differs from the fairy tale in *The Passion* in that it is not offered as a tale within the tale; none of the three narrators explicitly signs responsible for it, although certain re-occurring ideas and phrases suggest that the voice behind it is Alice's.[44] Nevertheless, the fairy tale intersects with the plot of the novel, for the tale's three protagonists are on a quest for "that which cannot be found" (*ibid.*, 140), which makes them travellers on the Ship of Fools, just like the three narrators (see *ibid.*, 6 and 24). As in *The Passion*, telling fairy tales is characterized as a way of communicating issues that could not easily be told in the realist mode. This idea also reverberates throughout Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World*, where the long inset story entitled "The Eden Swindle" (91-162) combines aspects of foundation and messianic myth and serves to explain the protagonists' here and now. Revealingly, Jack Hodgins himself has referred to that part of his novel as "a mock myth", though without commenting on its meaning-making function.[45]

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[44] See *Gut Symmetries*, 141 and 67, also 72.

[45] See Hancock 1979, 63. On mythic dimensions in Hodgins' novel, see also Delbaere-Garant 1995, 254ff.

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Finally, there is yet a third way in which magic realist fiction redeems storytelling. Within the texts, the act of narration not only generates meaning, but guarantees life itself – often in a quite literal sense. Aptly having been regarded as Scheherazade's postmodern offspring, many magic realist narrators darkly equate the end of their narrative with death. While this topos may be understood metaphorically, storytelling becoming a means of averting "the proverbial death of fiction itself" (Faris, 164), I here want to draw attention to the degree to which the topos continues to exist in magic realist fiction also on a literal level.

The equation of narrative with life appears already in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where the obliteration of Macondo coincides with Aureliano Babilonia's reading of the last lines of Melquíades' history of the Buendía family (see 446ff.). In *Midnight's Children*, the co-extension of life and narrative becomes a topic on the very first page when Saleem, predicting his impending death-from-crumbling-apart, unfavourably compares his own situation to Scheherazade's:

> I have no hope of saving my life, nor can I count on having even a thousand nights and a night. I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something. (9)

Saleem's narrative and life finally do end with his prophesied disintegration into "(approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust".[46] However, while in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the narrative erases every last trace of itself, Macondo being "wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men" (448), Saleem's story goes into an endless loop, his fate being mirrored by that of "[his] son who is not [his] son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until the thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died" (*Midnight's Children*, 463).

Life again is linked to narration in *The Moor's Last Sigh*; but whereas Saleem tells his story in a race against a preordained death, Moraes' stories actually save him from being executed. Imprisoned by the insane Vasco Miranda in his fortress at Benengeli, Andalusia, Moraes' life-span

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[46] *Ibid.*, 37; also 463. This corresponds roughly to the number of inhabitants India had at the time Saleem pretends to be writing (see *The Encyclopaedia Britannica 2001 Standard Edition CD-ROM*, Britannica.com Inc., 2001, s.v. "India/Demographic Trends").

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depends on how long he can spin out the family saga. As Moraes observes of his jailkeeper:

> He had made a Scheherazade of me. As long as my tale held his interest he would let me live. (421)

In the end, Vasco Miranda's attempt to kill Moraes is pre-empted by Vasco's own death. And yet, narrator and narrative come to an end simultaneously: switching to the manuscript Moraes has been writing for Vasco Miranda (the change being indicated by the use of italics), the narrative closes with Moraes lying down to await his own death (*ibid.*, 432ff.).

The idea that the act of narration sustains or even bestows life appears once again in Robert Nye's novels, this time taking its cue not only from the age-old tradition of Scheherazade, but also from postmodern literary theory. In *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, Pickleherring transparently invokes *The Arabian Nights* as intertext when he promises his readers: "A thousand stories, ladies. A thousand and one, good sirs" (8). As in Scheherazade's case, he aims at more than mere entertainment: "I shall tell you tales to keep me alive while I do so" (*ibid.*, 9). Unlike Scheherazade or Moraes Zogoiby, however, he does not face literal execution should his tales run out. Rather, telling tales is a way of affirming life while the Plague rages in London:

> That's what I'm doing, reader. I play my pipe to prove I am not dead.
>
> I began in a week when upwards of ten thousand were reported dead. My Life of Mr Shakespeare was conceived first as an answer to the plague.[47]

Although Pickleherring knows quite well that any hope of averting his own death by means of narration is a delusion, he nevertheless intends to cheat death out of a life, namely that of William Shakespeare. This, as well as the pleasure to be gained from writing, make storytelling a source of consolation preferable to simply waiting for the end. Pickleherring explains:

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[47] *Ibid.*, 93. Storytelling here can once again be linked to sex, which has also been constructed as a reaction against death. As Fastolf observes: "Venus and death go hand in hand. There is always a lot of fucking after a flood or a fire, or in times of war" (*Falstaff*, 96).

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> My purpose is to postpone and even exorcise my own death by writing the Life of Mr Shakespeare, and by certain "magical operations" with words to make him live again before your eyes. There is a pleasure of playing with vocabulary, also. It cannot delay the fatal issue by one minute, but one can act as if it could. (*Ibid.*, 192)

Moving to a more abstract level, Pickleherring's tales keep him alive also in another respect. In linking existence to the act of narrating, Nye's novel plays on the post-structural conceit of "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*",[48] which has been shortened to "all is text". Though disputable when applied to the world at large, in this case the claim is undeniably true, for a narrator does cease to exist when he falls silent, just as he comes into existence only at the moment in which he begins to speak or write. Pickleherring is one of few narrators to take this aspect into account by suggesting that he had no life of his own prior to the narrated time of his novel, that is, prior to the moment when he first met William Shakespeare.[49] To the extent that every person narrates him- or herself, life can, in a sense, be said to consist of text, or, more generally, of discourse. This point comes out quite forcefully in *Falstaff*, when Fastolf regrets having neglected his autobiographical project, which he calls "this making of the substance of my life". He argues that

> because I have not written, *I might as well have been dead.* What a curious discovery. At my age, at my stage, to learn that there could be such power in language, such mortal magic in words. (227; emphasis in the original)[50]

Just as Pickleherring seeks to give life to the Bard once more, Fastolf aims to bring himself to life before the reader's eyes. But not only himself: in his best metafictional manner, he time and again claims that, as the narrator/author, it is he who graciously provides not only the characters, but also the reader with existence (see *ibid.* 118, 119 and 159).

In keeping with the topos, for both of Nye's narrators the end of the story inevitably spells death, or, in Pickleherring's case, "flight" over the burning city of London (*The Late Mr Shakespeare*, 399). In the last chapter of *Falstaff*, Fastolf's rebellious nephew and scribe Stephen Scrope rejoices: "He is dead!" However, for all Scrope's vehement denials that, after his uncle's death, he heard a voice like Fastolf's say "Remember

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[48] Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, Paris, 1967, 227; emphasis in the original.

[49] See *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, 93; Pickleherring later revokes the account he initially gave of his childhood (see 191).

[50] See also an earlier passage, where Fastolf, having drawn the reader's attention to the book in his (or her) hands, claims: "You hold a man's life in your hands" (159).

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me!" (448 and 450), Fastolf remains present – exactly through Scrope's denials. Although the story ends with a literal death, at the same time it preserves life through being retold or reread. The text here recuperates the metaphorical dimension of the life-sustaining power of narrative, expressed so famously in the concluding lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18:

> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.[51]

In the above examples, magic realism's literalization of the life-sustaining power of narrative is a strategy to emphasize the importance of narrative. None of the scenarios transfer to the extratextual world except in a metaphorical sense. There is, however, a way in which the act of narration could be understood as a life-prolonging measure in more realistic sense as well. On a psychological level, narration can serve as an instrument of healing, and its effects are quite real insofar as it enables the individual in question to function normally again. This is the case for example with Saleem-buddha in *Midnight's Children*, who overcomes the numbing amnesia induced by the horrors of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965 by telling stories about his past: "The child-soldiers listened, spellbound, to the stories issuing from [the buddha's] mouth, beginning with a birth at midnight, and continuing unstoppably, because he was reclaiming everything, all of it, all lost histories, all the myriad complex processes that go to make a man" (364-65).

The healing power of narrative is also explored in Graham Swift's *Waterland*, a novel that, while not actually written in the magic realist mode, shares many of the concerns of magic realist fiction. One of the characters returns from the battlefields of the First World War in a completely traumatized, dysfunctional state that he at first tries to overcome by forgetting (or, as psychoanalysis would have it, repressing) the terrible scenes he has witnessed. However, this strategy fails, and he is sent to a home for the shell-shocked, where his nurse and later wife in the best magic realist fashion advocates a different remedy, namely

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[51] William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (1997), London, 1998, 147.

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stories, for they are "a way of bearing what won't go away, a way of making sense of madness" (225).

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CHAPTER 6

MAKING THE REAL FANTASTIC AND THE FANTASTIC REAL: STRATEGIES OF DESTABILIZATION

"Matter of fact descriptions of the outré and bizarre, and their reverse, namely heightened, stylized versions of the everyday"[1] – Saleem, himself a well-versed practitioner of magic realism, obligingly identifies one of the most intriguing features of the mode: its inversion of the Western categories "real" and "fantastic". It should be noted right away that the term "inversion" is a bit misleading, for a closer look reveals that, in many texts, the categories do not simply trade places, but are reworked completely. Not everything that is improbable or fantastic according to the Western world-view will automatically be accepted as real in the magic realist world, and vice versa. The inhabitants of Macondo find the story of a ship stranded eight miles inland just as implausible as representatives of a rational-empirical world-view probably would.[2] But the redefinition becomes most noticeable in those cases where the categories have actually been inverted, making the overall impression one of reversal.

As has been noted in the working definition, the naturalization or, to speak with McHale, "banalization" of the fantastic is only one of a pair of techniques used by magic realist fiction, its complement being the supernaturalization of the extratextual world. Just as the first strategy is employed by other literary kinds as well, so does the presentation of the ordinary as odd, incredible or unreal also look back on a long tradition. It

[1] *Midnight's Children*, 218.
[2] See *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 210.

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is little surprising that the German *Verfremdung* and Russian formalism's *ostranenie*, both coined to describe literature's capacity for making the familiar world strange, should have been linked to this facet of magic realist fiction.[3] However, the defamiliarization produced by magic realist fiction is due not only to supernaturalization, as critics suggest, but equally to magic realism's matter-of-fact presentation of the unreal, which engenders a considerable amount of reader hesitation. Consequently, the two apparently opposed techniques of naturalization and supernaturalization actually have a similar function. In both cases, the violation of literary conventions fundamentally interrupts the process of reading, drawing attention to the unspoken norms and assumptions by which a reader will judge a fictional world as realistic or fantastic. In destabilizing received notions of the real and the fantastic, magic realist fiction reveals the extent to which both categories are a matter of social and cultural consensus, or even of rhetorical effect.

Magic realist fiction's self-subversive matter-of-factness having been dealt with in Chapter 3, this chapter will concentrate on the flip side of the coin, that is, magic realism's supernaturalization of extratextual reality. Far from denying the existence of reality, magic realist fiction here provides Hamlet's observation about there being more things between heaven and earth than we could ever imagine with both a positive and a negative interpretation: the world contains things more wonderful, but also vastly more horrific, than the human imagination will allow for.

Supernaturalization is achieved by using two different, on the surface apparently diametrically opposed techniques, whose common denominator lies in the fact that both present elements from extratextual reality as transgressing natural law. The first strategy is to adopt a "fantastic rhetoric": techniques reminiscent of the literary fantastic are applied to empirically real elements, thereby marking them as violations of the fictional world. This deliberate misapplication of techniques creates an incongruity between matter and manner of presentation which evokes a sense of defamiliarization.

The second strategy is to use a "rhetoric of banality", rendering elements from the extratextual world fantastic by relating them in the calm, everyday tone of the realist mode. Upon first consideration, this sounds paradoxical: empirical reality is the subject proper of literary realism, so how can the application of realism to reality create a sense of the fantastic? However, it seems that there are events or facts which,

[3] See Chanady 1986, 53; Spindler, 79; and Bényei, 153.

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although they do not conflict with rational-scientific tenets of the empirically real, nevertheless are highly unrealistic. The transgressive application of realism to such elements produces a tension not dissimilar to the one caused by applying the realist mode to magic elements. In fact, the tension is even greater, for the incongruity lies within the subject matter itself, which at one and the same time is empirically real, but somehow not realistic. This serves to highlight the discrepancy between the world and realist constructions of it.

Magic realist fiction's rhetoric of banality is capable of two fundamentally different effects, depending on whether the banalized elements are immediately recognizable as real or whether the reader experiences initial doubt as to the possibility of their empirical existence. This of course is a problematic distinction, since what will readily be recognized as real is culturally contingent. However, in many cases the texts for their effect depend not only on the reader's familiarity with realist conventions, but also on his or her knowledge of empirical reality, especially of historical events. The incongruity between the real-but-unrealistic subject matter and the unfazed manner of narration emphasizes the extent to which reality surpasses, often in an ethically outrageous way, standards that had been taken for granted. This becomes especially clear in Holocaust literature, where the events told jar painfully with the matter-of-fact tone they are told in. If the events are not recognized as empirically real by the reader, much of the shock impact is forfeit.

If, however, the reader hesitates over the empirical possibility of a certain event, this effects a disconcerting blurring of the categories "real" and "fantastic". Playfully making the reader aware of his or her own insufficient knowledge, magic realist fiction suggests that the distinction between the two categories is perhaps less easy than generally acknowledged within a rational-empirical framework. Here, one might speak not so much of a reversal than of a levelling of categories. Again, however, the effect is to expose the way that experiences of the real and the fantastic depend on pre-existing assumptions.

Magic realism's rhetorical strategies tie in with other forms of literary and visual representation that pursue similar effects. Among these are works of fiction and film dealing with the Holocaust, works of the New Journalism, and the cabinet of curiosities and related items. Apart from its presentation of reality as marvellous, the curiosity cabinet exhibits interesting parallels with magic realist fiction in that it, too, blends the empirically real with the fictional in such a way that the two become hard to distinguish indeed. This blurring of boundaries generates a hesitation

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not dissimilar to the one evoked by magic realist fiction, causing spectators to wonder just how reliable their senses and faculties really are.

Reality as violation I: A fantastic rhetoric

According to Todorov, characters in and readers of fantastic fiction find themselves confronted with items or events that unaccountably and disturbingly conflict with natural law. The resulting hesitation is openly endorsed by the narrative, often through enactment on the level of the text; typically, characters in a fantastic narrative will refuse to believe in the ontological reality of an apparently supernatural occurrence, searching for a rational explanation instead.

Magic realist texts follow the same recipe. Narrators or characters reject something as incredible or impossible that, seen from the focalizers' perspective, transgresses natural law. The crucial difference is that the magic realist world does not function according to rational-empirical laws, but adheres to other standards of what is credible, natural, or possible. Chapter 4 has shown how magic realism's characteristic matter-of-factness is brought about quite naturally through the use of ex-centric focalizers. The reverse follows equally naturally from the adoption of such a perspective: elements that from a rational-empirical view would be judged normal are perceived as fantastic. This makes the off-centre focalizer an important device of *Verfremdung* or defamiliarization (see Šklovskij, 21-22). The point comes out beautifully in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London, 1997), where a character from the wizard world is amazed at the normal world, the world of the Muggles:

> Hagrid [...] kept pointing at perfectly ordinary things like parking meters and saying loudly, "See that, Harry? Things these Muggles dream up, eh?" (52)

One Hundred Years of Solitude well illustrates how the ex-centric perspective not only naturalizes the magical, but at the same time super-naturalizes the real. Faced for the first time with a set of dentures and the startling effect they have on a person's features, the inhabitants of the culturally secluded and technologically backward Macondo evince much the same reaction a character in a fantastic narrative would when confronted with a ghost:

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> they saw a youthful Melquíades, recovered, unwrinkled, with a new and flashing set of teeth. Those who remembered his gums that had been destroyed by scurvy, his flaccid cheeks, and his withered lips trembled with fear at the final proof of the gypsy's supernatural power. The fear turned into panic when Melquíades took out his teeth, intact, encased in their gums, and showed them to the audience for an instant – a fleeting instant in which he went back to being the same decrepit man of years past – and put them back again and smiled once more with the full control of his restored youth. (8)

José Arcadio Buendía's first encounter with a block of ice is another instance in point. Again, what the reader easily recognizes as empirically real is felt by the character to transcend the order of the natural, except that in this case the reaction is not horrified panic, but religious awe (see *ibid.*, 19). Similarly, the many technological innovations brought by the gypsies, such as magnets, telescopes or magnifying glasses, are considered "magical instruments" (*ibid.*, 9). The same strategy is at work in Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*, only that here feats of technology are not regarded as magic, but as too absurd to be true:

> Heck, when asked about the world beyond the municipality, would start to answer then he'd say, "It would make a pig laugh," and he'd burst into uncontrollable laughter. When finally he got control of his laughter, he sometimes told, in the beer parlor, of airplanes that flew without propellers, of highways that were made of solid cement but soared through the air. Then everyone else in the beer parlor broke into uncontrollable laughter. (126)[4]

Like fantastic narratives, both novels use reactions on the level of plot to indicate that a particular item transgresses the characters' idea of what is naturally possible. However, tone and effect intriguingly differ from those of a fantastic text. In the literary fantastic, the reader must adopt the focalizer's world-view in order for the text to work, while magic realist fiction, despite the fact that the text is told from the focalizer's perspective, maintains a certain distance between reader and focalizer, thereby producing a feeling of incongruity or absurdity rather than apprehension. The effect of defamiliarization depends on the transparency of the magic realist text and its trick of simultaneously

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[4] The motif is explored also in Jack London's short story "Nam-Bok the Unveracious" (1902), in which an Inuit traveller returns from civilization to find that his reports of schooners and steam-trains make his people believe he has died and is telling tales about the "shadow land" (in *Children of the Frost*, London, 1915, 64-95).

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lighting up the world familiar to the reader and the strange perspective taken on by the text. The contrast between the two triggers a reinterpretation of received assumptions. In attributing to the reader a surplus of knowledge, that is, knowledge not held by the focalizer, defamiliarization can be compared to dramatic irony, which likewise uses asymmetrical knowledge to create a distance between the reader or viewer and the characters, opening up two perspectives simultaneously.

Midnight's Children also uses the reaction of characters to suggest that empirical reality surpasses what might reasonably be supposed possible. Again, the characters' rejection of events as fantastic are made transparent – the empirical reality of the events in question quite clearly shines through. In fact, the characters' vigorous denial paradoxically enough is a way of acknowledging and even driving home the reality of events, for the refusal to believe amounts to a moral indictment. When Saleem tells Padma of the atrocities committed by the West Pakistani army in East Pakistan in March 1971, he characterizes these events as fantastic. The soldiers see "things that weren't-couldn't-have-been-true"[5] – not, as the novel makes clear, because such things are physically impossible, but because they exceed all standards of civilized behaviour.

A fantastic rhetoric bordering on the surreal again is used to emphasize the monstrosity of human behaviour in a later passage. The scene is Dacca, December 1971, on the night before the West Pakistani army surrendered to the Indian intervening forces:

> Shaheed and I saw many things which were not true, which were not possible, because our boys would not could not have behaved so badly; we saw men in spectacles with heads like eggs being shot in side-streets, we saw the intelligentsia of the city being massacred by the hundred, but it was not true because it could not have been true, the Tiger was a decent chap, after all, and our jawans were worth ten babus, we moved through the impossible hallucination of the night, hiding in doorways while fires blossomed like flowers [...] there were slit throats being buried in unmarked graves, and Shaheed began his, "No, buddha – what a thing, Allah, you can't believe your eyes – no, not true, how can it – buddha, tell, what's got into my eyes?" (*Ibid.*, 375)[6]

Reality has transgressed so far beyond the boundaries of the ethically thinkable that simply to accept it as normal would be to bid farewell to all hope for a humane world. In rejecting these events as fantastic while

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[5] *Midnight's Children*, 356.

[6] In questioning the reliability of the sense of sight, Rushdie's novel uses a further motif characteristic of the literary fantastic.

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yet making their empirical reality transparent, Rushdie's novel highlights the discrepancy between the world as it deplorably is and the world as it should be, at least from a humanist point of view.

Shame more explicitly links the human tendency to disavow the horrific aspects of human nature to the principles of the fantastic. In the novel, the human potential for unmitigated cruelty and violence is symbolically concentrated in the beautiful Sufiya Zinobia, who actually has "a Beast" lurking inside. However, to acknowledge this would mean accepting the existence of something that cannot be permitted to exist. Sufiya Zinobia's killing sprees are like the supernatural creatures of fantastic literature: they may be contemplated with a pleasurable thrill, but only as long as their status as fiction is understood – "because we know (but do not say) that the mere likelihood of their existence would utterly subvert the laws by which we live, the processes by which we understand the world" (197). In Sufiya's case, ontological violation becomes ethical violation, but the reaction is the same:

> there is no place for monsters in civilized society. If such creatures roam the earth, they do so on its uttermost rim, consigned to peripheries by conventions of disbelief ...

In refusing to acknowledge Sufiya Zinobia's deeds, which are openly double-coded as the countless infractions of human rights and democracy committed in Pakistan, Sufiya's family and acquaintances display a fundamental human trait: "the will to ignorance, the iron folly with which we excise from consciousness whatever consciousness cannot bear" (*ibid.*, 199). To do otherwise would be to "[lay] bare what-must-on-no-account-be-known, namely the impossible verity that barbarism could grow in cultured soil, that savagery could lie concealed beneath decency's well-pressed shirt" (*ibid.*, 200). While the strategy of "see no evil, hear no evil" may superficially work to uphold the illusion of a basic human decency, it does not pay in the long run, as the characters in *Shame* have to discover; and they are certainly not the only ones whom history has taught that lesson.

Shame's meta-discourse on the human "will to ignorance" makes clear the distinction between "transparent" and "non-transparent" denials of reality. Saleem's protests that the events of the civil war "weren't-couldn't-have-been-true" and then describing them in detail is quite a different story from the people of Pakistan – or rather, not-quite-Pakistan, as the narrator insists (*ibid.*, 29) – wilfully closing their eyes to political crimes. Because non-transparent rejections of reality as fantastic

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do not ironically subvert themselves, but are made by the characters in all earnest (although in how far the self-delusion actually works is a different question), they must be made transparent from the outside. This may be achieved by means of an omniscient narrator, as when in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the denial of the banana company massacre is unmasked as "the false [version] that historians had created and consecrated in the schoolbooks" (375). Another option is a self-conscious analysis of the mechanism of denial, as just illustrated above for *Shame*. Counter-statement, analysis and irony may also appear in combination, as for example in a passage in *Shame* in which the rationalization of countless instances of post-Partition lawlessness as "accidents" is rendered transparent, allowing the reader to see the reality behind the text. The text is heavily ironic:

> Nobody was surprised there were a few accidents ... well, there were a few voices saying, if this is the country we dedicated to our God, what kind of God is it that permits – but these voices were silenced before they had finished their questions, for their own sakes, because there are things that cannot be said. No, it's more than that: there are things that cannot be permitted to be true. (*Shame*, 82)

Analogous to magic realism's use of a fantastic rhetoric is its adaptation of the marvellous. As I have shown in Chapter 3, magic realist texts incongruously use traditional fairy tale formulas in recounting events that, according to realist standards, are perfectly ordinary. Fairy tale formulas are furthermore used in narrating events which, while anything but quotidian, are certainly recognized by the reader as historically real. This is the case in the passage from Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum*, in which the fairy tale formulas mark the Nazi persecution as too horrific for a realist framework. The fairy tale rhetoric stands in sharp contrast to the reader's knowledge that this really happened, and the incongruity conveys a heightened sense of horror over the events' reality.

Reality as violation II: A rhetoric of banality

In the above examples, items or events that clearly reflect empirical reality are transparently rejected as strange or fantastic because they are perceived to violate the fictional world's norms of the possible. The norms that are breached derive from various sources, recalling the different paradigms of knowledge discussed in Chapter 5. They may be based on personal experience or common sense, as in the case of

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Melquíades' dentures. Norms of the possible may derive from religious writings, as when in *Shame* a young woman who speaks of trips to the moon is chastised for blasphemy, "because the faith clearly stated that lunar expeditions were impossible" (146). They may furthermore be based on the basically humanist assumption that, even if human nature is not inherently good, at least there is a limit to the atrocities human beings are capable of dreaming up, much less committing. Such norms are transgressed in the above passages from *Midnight's Children*, causing the events to be rejected as too incredible to be true. And finally (which is not to imply that this list considers itself complete), norms violated by empirical reality can be based on the conventions of realism.

Reality violating realism – this sounds paradoxical, for the declared aim of traditional realism has been to provide a factual, objective description of the external world. Therefore, a conflict between empirical reality and realist representation should be ruled out by definition. However, as a closer look reveals, this is by no means the case. Quite to the contrary, empirical reality from time to time simply appears to refuse to conform to the norms of a realist world-view. To describe such a reality in realist terms constitutes a transgression of conventions that makes this reality appear fantastic.

The discrepancy between realist norms and empirical reality becomes a focus of literary attention already in Book VIII of *Tom Jones*, where the narrator in a rather tongue-in-cheek, but nevertheless enlightening manner endeavours to prepare his reader for "some matters of a more strange and surprising kind than any which have hitherto occurred".[7] Initially, the narrator firmly advises that narratives, lest they incur the reader's displeasure, should "not only [...] keep within the limits of possibility but of probability too" (*ibid.*, 338). The narrator's advice is problematic insofar as his attempts to define the two realms, of whose cultural contingency he is well aware, are not successful (see *ibid.*, 335). Roughly, however, "possible" and "probable" here conform to rational-empirical tenets, mirroring the rise of scientific thought in the eighteenth century. As the narrator himself admits, the criterion of probability "may be thought impracticable to extend [...] to the historian; for he is obliged to record matters as he finds them, though they may be of so extraordinary a nature as will require no small degree of historical faith to swallow them". Unable to omit or alter essential historical facts, the historian is allowed to "[sacrifice] to oblivion in complaisance to the scepticism of a reader" only those facts which appear "not of such

[7] Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones* (1749), Harmondsworth, 1994, 335.

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consequence or not so necessary", thereby keeping the historical account's ventures into the realm of the marvellous to a minimum (*ibid.*, 337). Forced from time to time to exceed the scope of probability, the historian nevertheless possesses a decided advantage over the realist[8] writer in that his account is corroborated by external evidence, whereas any forays into the improbable on the part of realist fiction are likely to arouse displeasure (*ibid.*, 338). Therefore, "every good author will confine himself within the bounds of probability" (*ibid.* 341).

Obviously, Fielding's advice has gone unheeded by writers of magic realist fiction, who regularly violate not only what realist norms hold probable, but also possible. Many of magic realism's magic elements are easily recognizable as empirically impossible, although the ease may differ with cultural background. However, in addition to these there are certain items that unmistakably duplicate extratextual reality even while transgressing realist norms of probability, thereby also appearing fantastic. In these cases, it does not take a fantastic rhetoric or character reaction to indicate that extratextual reality surpasses belief; its transgressiveness itself suffices to characterize reality as fantastic. Significantly, the rejection of reality as fantastic again is rendered transparent. The point of the text is not to suggest that these items or events are in any sense exaggerated, fictional, or unreal. Rather, the strategy emphasizes the gap between reality as it lamentably is and realist constructions of it.

Interestingly, when empirical reality violates realist norms and appears fantastic, the norms in question often are not those concerning the physically possible or probable, but, as in the examples from *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* above, ethical norms. Like other norms on which realism is based, these can also be traced back to the rational-empirical world-view. Reinstalled during the Enlightenment's rediscovery of classical learning, rationality was regarded as the supreme principle not only in the field of epistemology, where it furthered the rise of the natural sciences, but also in the field of ethics, where it took the place of religion. Gifted with rational thought, human beings were thought inherently capable of recognizing and achieving the high moral ideals of humanism. Standing in a humanist tradition, the rational-empirical world-view considers the development of a just society based on mutual respect and democratic values possible, at least in theory.

[8] My usage is anachronistic: "realism" as a literary term came into use only a century later. However, the narrator's argument reflects the fundamental conventions of realist fiction.

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As the main representational mode of the rational-empirical world-view, classical realism is indebted to a basically humanist ideology. Realism's implicit reliance on humanist values is exploited by many works of magic realist fiction, as indeed by a number of other literary works, many of them dating from the second half of the twentieth century. Taking events that crassly violate humanist assumptions about human decency and reasoned behaviour, the texts calmly portray these as though they were ordinary, everyday occurrences, thereby creating a tension which expresses that the events in question are beyond all belief – or would be, if they were not so obviously true. An important pre-requisite is that the text in question either explicitly or implicitly acknowledge its adherence to humanist values. Magic realist fiction does so by installing the realist mode. By contrast, a mere matter-of-fact description of cruelty and violence is not in itself sufficient to convey a sense of horror. The writings of the Marquis de Sade for example soberly relate the most hideous atrocities without transporting any feeling of ethical outrage at all.[9]

In using a rhetoric of banality, magic realism once again is engaged in de-installing the realist world-view it relies on, only this time, subversion leaves a bitter taste. Exploiting the discrepancy between humanist ideals and the state of the world to indict the latter rather than mock the former (unless in a very cynical way), magic realist fiction quite forcefully endorses the self-same values it reveals to be wishful thinking.

A rhetoric of banality is used in many magic realist works to characterize events of war or cruelty as "weren't-couldn't-have-been-true", although not always do either the narrator or any of the characters explicitly say so. The inhumane sufferings of war are related in what Timothy Brennan with reference to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Shame* has called a "stylistic veneer of [...] matter-of-fact violence" (66). This produces an incongruity, for according to realist norms, such extreme events call for a treatment that takes their deviance into account. The text's utter lack of reaction and its neutrality of tone function in the same way as the explicit denial and the fantastic rhetoric practised by the narrators and characters in the examples given in the previous section. Inappropriate to the subject matter, a rhetoric of banality highlights the absurd, nonsensical, fantastic nature of reality. The effect is metafictionally reflected on in *The Moor's Last Sigh* when Moraes Zogoiby's incredulity over his father's unscrupulous business ploys is further heightened by his father's failure to acknowledge that here might

[9] That the reader may feel outraged is a different matter.

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be anything unethical about them. To Moraes, his father's accounts are "like fairy tales, in a way; goblin-sagas of the present day, tales of the utterly abnormal recounted in a matter-of-fact, banal, duty manager's normalising tones" (333).

A rhetoric of banality is put into practice in *The Passion* when Henri laconically reports: "July 20th, 1804. Two thousand men were drowned today", only to relate a few lines later in an equally dispassionate tone: "In the morning, 2,000 new recruits marched into Boulogne" (24 and 25). Treating horrific events as though they were banal, Henri here manages to convey the cruel absurdity of war in a shockingly direct manner without actually formulating it. The same incongruity between matter and manner of narration is employed to impart a sense of the unbelievable suffering during Napoleon's Russian campaign:

> The Russians didn't even bother to fight the Grande Armée in any serious way, they kept on marching, burning villages behind them, leaving nothing to eat, nowhere to sleep. They marched into winter and we followed them. Into the Russian winter in our overcoats. Into the snow in our glued-together boots. When our horses died of the cold we slit their bellies and slept with our feet inside their guts. One man's horse froze around him; in the morning when he tried to take his feet out they were stuck, entombed in the brittle entrails. We couldn't free him, we had to leave him. He wouldn't stop screaming. (*Ibid.*, 80)

The passage displays a certain similarity to the tall tale: the items seem progressively more incredible to the average contemporary reader, who presumably has not experienced such things. However, instead of finally giving way to outright disbelief and comic resolution, the tension engendered by the incongruity here only produces a mounting sense of horror in the face of the fact that, this time, the narrator is in dead earnest.

A similar incongruity between a horrific subject matter and the lack of reaction displayed in and by the text creates a sense of disbelief also in a passage from *The Late Mr Shakespeare* in which Pickleherring recounts scenes from the London plague of 1665. Unlike Henri, Pickleherring does acknowledge the exceptional status of the situation, speaking of "this memorable calamity", "the most dismal scenes", and later even of "such horror" (90-91). But in the face of the events he describes, these phrases pall – words simply cannot do justice to a reality that exceeds all standards of normality. What finally suggests that the events of the Plague should properly belong to the realm of the fantastic is people's

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inability to react appropriately to a situation defying all usual codes of behaviour:

> Sometimes a man or a woman dropped down dead in the street below. Many people that had the plague upon them knew nothing of it till the inward gangrene had affected their vitals. They died then in a matter of moments. I saw one man who had just time to run to the porch of the little Quaker meeting house opposite and put on his hat to sit down in the doorway to die. By the end of the summer, such things were commonplace, and one no longer noticed them. Dead bodies lay here and there upon the ground. People stepped over them quickly, or went the long way round. By night the bearers attending the dead-cart would take up the bodies, and carry them away. I watched it by moonlight from my window. Nor did those undaunted creatures, who performed these offices, fail to pick the pockets of the dead, and sometimes strip off their clothes if they were well-dressed. (*Ibid.*, 91)[10]

In view of the circumstances, a dying man's clinging to polite conventions and putting on his hat to meet his Maker is just as grotesque as the indifference that the inhabitants of London after a time evince towards the horrors of the plague. Their familiar world has become unrecognizable, and yet they continue to go about their business – arguably a psychologically natural and perhaps even healthy reaction, but the stark contrast between the population's lack of reaction and piety and the nightmare world around them nevertheless serves to convey the dreadfulness of the situation better than explicit description can.

Significantly, there is nothing in either Henri's or Pickleherring's description that conflicts with rational-empirical norms of physical possibility or even probability. In fact, the verisimilitude of their accounts is more than corroborated by historical evidence. Yet, although so obviously true to life, the accounts nevertheless exude a fantastic quality – the world they outline has more in common with the realms of the absurd or the grotesque than with the solid and rationally conceivable world of realist fiction.

That a fantastic effect should be obtained when extreme instances of war, violence or death are subjected to a detailed, matter-of-fact description might appear almost inevitable, for if the norms of the everyday are overturned already in the extratextual model, any attempt at mimesis arguably will yield the carnivalesque. This argumentation seems to be borne out by the texts to be discussed below, where all attempts at

[10] Nye here very closely follows a description from Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), ed. Paula R. Backscheider, New York and London, 1992, 67-68.

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objective depiction only reinforce the sense that reality surpasses belief. However, as has been noted above, the impression of a "fantastic reality" does not automatically arise from the use of a sober, almost banal tone. Rather, a system of humanist values must be installed by the text so that these values can then clash with the subject matter narrated. It is therefore the simultaneous reliance on and violation of realist conventions that characterizes the fictional reality as transgressive, rhetorically placing it beyond the pale of what is generally accepted as realistic.

Despite their transgressions of realism, magic realism as well as the other literary kinds to be discussed below imply that they come closer to conveying certain experiences than realism does. If, as Moraes Zogoiby would have it, "the truth is almost always exceptional, freakish, improbable, and almost never normative, almost never what cold calculations would suggest"[11] – or rather, if it is perceived as such – then the violation of realism achieves a greater degree of verisimilitude than realism itself. Indeed, to some contemporary writers this strategy may appear the only remaining option, as it does to their fictional colleague Moraes, who pithily-ambiguously explains his departures from realism to the reader: "what choice did I have", he writes, "but to embrace [...] *unnaturalism*, the only real ism of these back-to-front and jabberwocky days" (*ibid.*, 5; emphasis in the original). Magic realism's suggestion that truth to life and realism have gone their separate ways is further illuminated by looking at other literary kinds that likewise present a fantastic reality.

Fantastic or banal? Representing reality in Holocaust literature

Trying to come to terms with the trauma of the Holocaust, Holocaust literature frequently suggests the events of the time to be so far beyond the thinkable that they seem unreal. This assessment has been echoed by critics attempting to anchor the emergence of Holocaust literature in a historical context. Writing about works of Holocaust literature,[12] David

[11] *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 331.

[12] Danow avoids the term, categorizing the works as "grotesque realism" instead (41-42). In contrast to "magic realism", the term is to indicate that Holocaust literature explores the "dark, death-embracing, horrific aspect" of an essentially dualistic carnivalesque-grotesque (*ibid.*, 5). As I outlined in Chapter 4 above, this is not the Bakthinian sense of "grotesque realism", which is a very humorous and life-affirming affair indeed and enters into many magic realist works.

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Danow stresses how the events of the Second World War surpass anything hitherto known – or, come to that, imaginable – in the history of humankind (see *ibid.*, 5 and 123-24). Concurring with the literature he analyses, Danow characterizes historical reality as fantastic when he writes that

> one might say, risking the charge of poor taste and gross insensitivity (no matter how strongly the case is put), that those were the days of the darkest (yet known to man) *carnivalized reality*, during which every "inconceivable" reproach to humanistic principle, humane conduct, and human dignity was, indeed, not only conceived but perpetrated. (*Ibid.*, 105; emphasis in the original)

Danow argues that this carnivalized, nightmarish reality – or rather, its perception as such – gave rise to a "peculiarly twentieth century brand of realism", expressed in Holocaust literature *(ibid.*, 107; see also 124). Seeking to convey the experience of living in a world that has overturned all standards of normality, these works employ techniques similar to the ones identified for magic realism in the preceding section.

The extent of this similarity is overlooked by Danow. While he observes a resemblance in so far as "both appear fantastic, straining credibility" (*ibid.*, 7), he is curiously intent on establishing Holocaust literature and magic realism as separate kinds. He argues that magic realism uses supernaturalization to present the world as a far more marvellous place than generally appreciated, while Holocaust literature, as magic realism's darker counterpart, reveals the world and especially human nature to exceed every nightmare. However, this neat distinction does not hold. As shown above, magic realist fiction takes both the wonderful and the horrific into account. Somewhat contradictorily, Danow himself observes that, in magic realism, "there is [...] the frequent intrusion of the dark side of life into the much celebrated bright" (*ibid.*, 92). D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel*, which Danow quite rightly counts as Holocaust literature, may profitably be discussed as magic realism;[13] the same can be said of Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum*. Instead of being its polar opposite, then, Holocaust literature can be used to reflect magic realism's techniques more clearly.

Like magic realist texts, works of Holocaust literature adapt strategies of the fantastic, using character reaction and narrator discourse to

[13] See Foster 1986, as well as Richard Todd, "Convention and Innovation in British Fiction 1981-1984: The Contemporaneity of Magic Realism", in D'haen, Grübel and Lethen, 361-88.

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directly characterize events as unreal. In D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel*, the narrator explicitly identifies the massacre of Babi Yar as an event which is so outrageous that it should by rights belong to the realm of the fantastic: "There are things so far beyond belief that it ought to be possible to awaken from them."[14] As in magic realist fiction, typical character reactions adapted from the literary fantastic include denial and rationalization. Again, the denials are transparent, making the reality of events painfully clear.

As I have suggested above, the transparent use of a fantastic rhetoric is not unlike dramatic irony. The characters' rejection of events as fantastic is contradicted by the reader's knowledge that they are true, the resulting tension underscoring the events' outrageousness. Though rejection and rationalization differ from dramatic irony in that the characters are not necessarily ignorant of what is going on, but may merely be dissembling, the strategies resemble dramatic irony in that the text sets up two contradictory perspectives to make its horrible point. In *The White Hotel*, the focalizer refuses to believe in the nightmarish reality of Babi Yar, complementing outright denial by attempts at rationalization: "It could not be that people were being shot – perhaps people who had tried to evade the deportation order and had been rounded up" (210). Suspicions raised by the sound of machine gun fire are rejected as unreasonable: "Were not", the focalizer asks at the outset of her journey, "the Germans a decent, civilized race?" (*ibid.*, 206). Given the reader's historical knowledge, the focalizer's doubts become horribly ironic. As evidence mounts that a massacre is actually taking place, the focalizer resorts to increasingly unlikely constructions in order to avoid having to acknowledge what cannot be acknowledged:

> She did not know where the people were being taken, but they were not being killed [....] there was simply no reason to kill all these people. The Germans were lining the people up, firing over their heads at the ravine side, laughing at the joke, and telling them to get dressed in fresh clothes and go and sit in the train. It was mad, but not so mad as the alternative. (*Ibid.*, 215)

By implying that to anyone in their right mind even the most implausible scenario will appear more likely than the truth, while at the same time relentlessly insisting on that truth, the text manages to convey how horrendously inconceivable a fact the Holocaust is.

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[14] D.M. Thomas, *The White Hotel* (1981), London, 1999, 214.

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A similarly powerful instance of transparent denial that twists back on itself to render more starkly that which it feigns to disavow can be found in Roberto Benigni's film *La vita è bella* (1997). The protagonist pretends to his small son that their deportation to a Nazi concentration camp is actually a game: if they play according to the rules and collect a thousand points, they will win a tank, something the boy wishes for. The plan works out. Conscientiously following the "rules" his father makes up, the boy survives until the camp is liberated. The father's strategy highlights how far beyond belief the reality of the concentration camp is, the situation being so absurd that it can be made plausible to the child only in terms of a game, where the rules need not make sense. The fantastic dimensions of the Holocaust become even more dreadfully clear in a scene where the boy has inadvertently heard the truth about the camp and his father tries to convince him that this is just a tall tale – surely, the idea of turning human beings into buttons and soap is preposterous, and any intelligent child would have realized he was having his leg pulled. Faced with the poignant discrepancy between the make-believe version the father tells his son and historical reality, the audience are asked to judge for themselves what, by rational standards, would be considered more believable: the truth or the lie.

In addition to these means of characterizing reality as fantastic, works of Holocaust literature also employ a rhetoric of banality, that is, they treat as perfectly normal and plausible a subject matter that most decidedly is anything but that. Danow observes how texts dealing with the Holocaust are "scoured of all passion and emotion", the narrative's "stunning simplicity" jarring cruelly with the stupefying events it depicts (134 and 135; see also 105 and 107). However, beyond all question of technique, the reader's knowledge that the narrated events are historically true is vital to the effect of the text. This comes out equally clearly in texts belonging to the category to be examined below: the New Journalism.

When reality is no longer realistic:[15] strategies of representation in the New Journalism

"Exit reality, enter fantastic fiction" – these might have been the stage directions that ushered in the 1960s in the USA. The historical events of the decade were so unprecedented, so incommensurable with existing

[15] That "reality is no longer realistic" is the reason given by one of Norman Mailer's characters for not writing a realistic novel (see Hollowell, 6; the source in Mailer is not given).

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ideas of how the world should be, so transgressive in negative as well as positive respects, that empirical reality itself engendered a feeling of incredulity. Or at least that is what both literary and theoretical writings dealing with the time period suggest. Taking a sociological approach to literature, criticism has held the social and political events of the decade responsible for the emergence of new kinds of writing such as the New Journalism and its close relative, the non-fiction novel.[16] The modification of traditional realism undertaken by these forms is seen as a response to an altered, destabilized, essentially unrealistic reality. John Hollowell writes:

> Throughout the decade the events reported daily by newspapers and magazines documented the sweeping changes in every sector of our national life and often strained our imaginations to the point of disbelief. Increasingly, everyday "reality" became more fantastic than the fictional visions of even our best novelists. (3)

According to Hollowell, the techniques of the New Journalism are "the direct products of the turbulence of recent life in America" (*ibid.*, 15). The relationship between reality and literature surely is more complex than this statement suggests; after all, the "perceived unreality of contemporary life" (*ibid.*, 6) gave rise to rival forms such as myth and fantasy, surrealism and the absurd as well.[17] Nevertheless, the New Journalism certainly reflects its context of production. In the face of an ever-changing reality that thwarted comprehension, realist fiction with its conventions of probability and coherence no longer appeared a suitable mode of expression. The rise of non-fiction and especially the New Journalism's lacing of journalistic reporting with overtly fictional techniques are one attempt to provide a solution to this dilemma.

Likewise arguing that the New Journalism springs directly from the historical circumstances of its production, Tom Wolfe does not stick to mere theory. As one of the leading practitioners of the form, he turns his argument into a graphic demonstration of the effect that the perceived unreality of life had on journalistic writing, or at least on his:

> When I reached New York in the early Sixties, I couldn't believe the scene I saw spread out before me. New York was pandemonium with a big grin on it. Among people with money – and they seemed to be multiplying like shad – it was the wildest, looniest time since the 1920's ... a universe of

[16] On the New Journalism's claim to non-fiction, see Hollowell, 11, 22, 30ff. and 44ff.
[17] As Hollowell himself notes (see 17ff.).

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> creamy forty-five-year-old fashionable fatties with walnut-shell eyes out on the giblet slab wearing the hip-huggers and the minis and the Little Egypt eyes and the sideburns and the boots and the bells and the love beads, doing the Watusi and the Funky Broadway and jiggling and grinning and sweating and sweating and grinning and jiggling until the onset of dawn or saline depletion, whichever came first .... It was a hulking carnival. (Wolfe, 44ff.; ellipses in the original)

In presenting a "carnivalized reality" (to adapt Danow's phrase to a somewhat brighter context), the passage is highly reminiscent of magic realism not only in tone, but also in technique. Wolfe's text resorts to a subversive strategy of excess on the semantic as well as the syntactic level, both the richness of the language and the run-on-sentence evoking a sense of being out of bounds. Reality is characterized as transgressive by means of a vocabulary of unreason, using terms like "pandemonium", "wild", "loony", and "carnival". The description's carnivalesque exuberance subverts literary realism's notion of the world as an ordered, rationally intelligible place. Though not all New Journalists depart from the realist mode to this extent, many do present empirical reality as fantastic, an approach arguably abetted by their subject matter, the pieces generally focusing on "the extreme experiences of the social and political climate of the decade" (Hollowell, 40). Wolfe argues that in departing from realism, the texts comes closer to giving a true account of life "as it is". The same argument has been advanced also with respect to magic realist fiction, not only by critics and writers, but also within magic realist texts themselves, as I will show in Part Three.

Other texts considered paradigmatic of the New Journalism further illustrate the overlap of techniques with magic realist fiction, likewise making use of a fantastic rhetoric, accompanied by denial or rationalization, as well as an incongruous and consequently self-subversive rhetoric of banality. The use of a fantastic rhetoric is especially conspicuous in Michael Herr's "Khesanh", an account of a siege in the Vietnam War first published in the September 1969 issue of *Esquire*. In order to convey his impression of the situation at Khe Sanh, which he (and, by implication, the US marines as well) experienced as unfathomable and incredible, Herr makes use of narrative moves that are typical of the literary fantastic. As in *Midnight's Children*, the empirical reality of war thereby is characterized as something that should by rights belong to the realm of the supernatural, for it is too horrible to be true. The text notably uses a vocabulary of vagueness or singularization that is characteristic of the literary fantastic. The lack of definite knowledge and

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especially the obstruction of vision, so prominent a motif in fantastic texts, serve to communicate a sense of mystery, obscurity and fear. The enemy is "Somewhere Out There", with "somewhere" occurring thrice more in the subsequent paragraph; his position is "unknown", and his divisions remain "unidentified" in a terrain "cloaked by triple canopy and thick monsoon mists" (Herr, 109).

In a projection of the US troops' bewilderment onto their physical environment,[18] the language used to describe the surroundings of Khe Sanh essentially is that of the horror tale. The Vietnam Highlands are "spooky, unbearably spooky, spooky beyond belief", a place where "sudden contrary mists offer sinister bafflement" and of which Herr writes: "The Puritan belief that Satan dwelled in nature could have been born here" (*ibid.*, 107). The terrain is of a "bloody, maddening uncanniness", the place names "lay a quick chilly touch on your bones", and the population is "mysterious" (*ibid.*, 108 and 107). As in the literary fantastic, events are felt to surpass the pale of the possible – except that this time, it is empirical reality itself that commits the violation. Herr writes of the bunker at Khe Sanh that "it is more terrible in there than anyplace I can even imagine"; a napalm attack can only be described as "ineffable horror" (*ibid.*, 117 and 120). Once again, the inability of the imagination and language to grasp and express what is happening characterizes reality as fantastic.

The breakdown of representation becomes visible in a further move made by the text, which again is highly reminiscent of fantastic fiction. Having hinted at a certain occurrence, the narrative takes an entire paragraph to establish the horror of the event before divulging what actually happened:

> During the early morning of February seventh, something so horrible happened in the Khesanh sector that even those of us who were in Hué when we heard news of it had to relinquish our own fear and despair for a moment to acknowledge the horror and pay some tribute to it. It was as though the very worst dream any of us had ever had about the war had come true; it anticipated nightmares so vile that they could take you off shuddering in your sleep. No one who heard it was able to smile that bitter, secret, survivor's smile that was the reflex to almost all news of disaster. It was too awful even for that. (*Ibid.*, 120)

[18] Though Herr denies that projection is involved (*ibid.*, 108), surely his description evinces the same ethnocentricity as Danow's description of Latin American geography as "imposing" and "daunting" quoted in Chapter 1.

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Only after this exposition does Herr relate how North Vietnamese troops overran an American camp near Khe Sanh called Langvei, using Russian tanks they had not been known to have, and napalm.

Herr's text also stresses the fantastic quality of the Vietnam War by remarking on the reactions it aroused. These range from uncomprehending horror, correspondents "still [shuddering] uncontrollably at what they remember", to incredulity: "you could not believe that Americans were living this way, even in the middle of a war." There is complete helplessness, not only on the part of those who were there, but also on the part of those who were not; as Herr writes of one soldier's parents, "they could no more deal with the fact of shell shock than they could with the reality of what had happened to this boy during his five months at Khesanh" (*ibid.*, 107-108, 116 and 105).

A fantastic rhetoric is also employed by Hunter S. Thompson in *Hell's Angels, a Strange and Terrible Saga*, an inside report on California's infamous motorcycle gang dating from 1967/1968. The title of the piece already indicates that its subject matter is far more likely to have been taken from the realm of myth and legend than from reality. To Thompson, the Hell's Angels are fiction come true:

> there were characters so weird that I couldn't even make them up. I had never seen people this strange. In a way it was like having a novel handed to you with the characters already developed.[19]

However, if the existence of a phenomenon like the Hell's Angels in a presumably civilized place like California sounds like a saga, the behaviour of the normal population is no less fantastic, for instead of avoiding the designated weekend destination of the motorcycle gang, tourists flock to the site of expected confrontation in a manner whose implications for the tourist trade Thompson can only describe as "eerie".[20]

Far more than on a fantastic rhetoric, however, Thompson's text relies on a rhetoric of banality. Events that can hardly be considered quotidian by realist standards are presented in a quite unfazed, conversational tone, the resulting incongruity marking the subject matter as fantastic. Even more so than in the examples from magic realist fiction and Holocaust literature discussed above, Thompson's text reveals how the rhetoric of banality hinges on irony. Though Thompson does remark

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[19] *Songs of the Doomed: More Notes on the Death of the American Dream* (1990), Gonzo Papers, London, 1991, III, 109.

[20] "Excerpt from *The Hell's Angels, a Strange and Terrible Saga*" (1966, 1967), in Wolfe, 389.

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on the situation's abnormality, it is the conversational tone that brings out its grotesqueness in full:

> I glanced at the mother and wondered what strange grooves her mind had been fitted to in these wonderfully prosperous times [....] It was a vivid Pepsi Generation tableau ... on a hot California afternoon a sag-bellied woman wearing St Tropez sunglasses is hanging around a resort-area market, trailing her grade-school daughter and waiting in the midst of an eager crowd for the arrival of The Hoodlum Circus, as advertised in *Life*. (*Ibid.*, 386)

A similarly nonchalant, almost clinical tone is used to recount the unusually cruel and violent fighting tactics of the Hell's Angels. But rather than to make the events seem normal, the text's and the character's absolute lack of emotion only produces a heightened sense of incredulity:

> Big Frank from Frisco, for instance, is a black belt in karate who goes into any fight with the idea of jerking people's eyeballs out of their sockets. It is a traditional karate move and not difficult for anyone who knows what he is doing ... although it is not taught in 'self-defense' classes for housewives, businessmen and hot-tempered clerks who can't tolerate bullies kicking sand in their faces. The intent is to demoralize your opponent, not blind him. "You don't really jerk out the eyeball," Big Frank explained. "You just sorta *spring* it, so it pops outta the socket. It hurts so much that most guys just faint."[21]

In exploiting the discrepancy between an extreme subject matter and a realist tone to provoke a sense of incredulity, the New Journalism can be compared not only to magic realist fiction, but is strikingly reminiscent also of the tall tale. Both lay claim to factuality, though in the case of the tall tale this pretence is subverted in the course of the narrative and the tale's fictitious nature is revealed, at least in most cases. By contrast, the New Journalists insist that their accounts are entirely true to life, and no twinkle can be made out in the teller's eye. Nevertheless, the tension created by the implausibility of the narration and its claim to truthfulness induces a hesitation and incredulity similar to that provoked by the tall tale. Writers of the New Journalism have in fact been accused of "making it up", their reports being rejected as fiction on account of

[21] *Ibid.*, 384; ellipsis and emphasis in the original. The passage would be funny if it were not for the fact that during his time with the Hell's Angels, Thompson himself became the victim of a "stomping" (Wolfe, 373).

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being too detailed (see Wolfe, 39). It is quite telling that critics should have included among the forerunners of the New Journalism not only essays and travel accounts, but also fictions masquerading as fact and Mark Twain's *Roughing It* and *Life on the Mississippi*, works in which, as John Hollowell puts it, "one is hard pressed to distinguish factual reporting from what Twain called 'stretchers'" (34).

In sum, then, the generation of hesitation is common to kinds of writing as different as the purportedly factual New Journalism, which presents empirical reality as fantastic, and the fictional tall tale, in which the fantastic is so skilfully blended with everyday reality that the outcome could likewise be termed a "fantastic reality". The disbelief engendered by these two forms differs qualitatively, since in the case of the New Journalism, the reader will assume the account, regardless of its fantastic appearance, to be based on facts, trust in the account being demanded by the New Journalism's claim to serious reporting. Unlike in the tall tale, the incredulity provoked is not directed at the empirical possibility of the events related, but at the fact that such events should be possible, for they are felt to violate civilized standards. Nevertheless, the effect is similar in that both unsettle received notions about where the real ends and the fantastic begins. In characteristically combining the two strategies, namely presenting the fantastic as real and conversely characterizing empirical reality as fantastic, magic realist fiction likewise succeeds in blurring the categories "real" and "fantastic", showing them to correspond only so far to the world they claim to describe.

In causing uncertainty about a distinction usually taken to be self-evident, thereby prompting reflection on the certainty of knowledge, magic realism is comparable to another field entirely. Taking a huge leap, I will now turn to the tradition of the curiosity cabinet and related forms, all of which, diverse as they are, likewise engage in a dizzying destabilization of the boundaries of the real.

Marvel or manipulation? The fantastic reality of the curiosity cabinet

Genuine or fake, phenomenon or illusion, scientific fact or just a hoax? These questions might easily arise in the post-Enlightenment observer when confronted with the assorted oddities contained in the curiosity cabinets that multiplied rapidly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The collector's principle was "*Pansophia*, or the amassing of

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things based on their interesting looks".[22] No explicit distinction was made between the natural and the artificial, original and imitation, the modern and the antique; only in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did the contents of the wonder cabinet begin to be classified according to scientific criteria, a development which ultimately led to the differentiation into the museums of art, natural history, and technology that can be found today (see *ibid.*, 242 and 262ff.).

The failure to differentiate between the natural and the artificial does not mean that the intention was to deceive: rather, the cabinet was to acknowledge the various splendours of God's world. Harold J. Cook writes about the cabinet of the Dutch naturalist Jan Swammerdam: "Perhaps in one respect we are not so far from the amusing, implausible and miraculous fourteenth-century stories in Sir John Mandeville's *Travels*: beneath the welter of appearances lay God's providence." However, for all their emphasis on wonder, the naturalists' approach was nonetheless scientific in that doing justice to God's work "demanded getting the details unassailably correct".[23] It is perhaps only from a present-day perspective that the assorted improbabilities the spectator encounters in wonder cabinets – saints' relics, a unicorn's tail, a siren's hand[24] – look suspiciously like irony; at least this is what Lawrence Weschler suggests in his essayistic study of the wonder cabinet (see 61-62). Weschler finds the attitude of the early collectors echoed in David Wilson, founder and director of a modern-day wonder cabinet, who, keeping a completely straight face, enthusiastically remarks about his patently implausible collection: "Nature is more incredible than anything one can imagine" (*ibid.*, 63).

By insisting that the natural world by far outstrips the human imagination, the wonder cabinet can be seen to participate in a project of

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[22] Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment, Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education*, Cambridge: MA, and London, 1994, 248.

[23] Harold J. Cook, "The Cutting Edge of a Revolution? Medicine and Natural History Near the Shores of the North Sea", in *Renaissance and Revolution: Humanists, Scholars, Craftsmen and Natural Philosophers in Early Modern Europe*, eds J.V. Fields and Frank A.J.L. James, Cambridge, 1993, 56.

[24] The first two items were to be found in the collection of Sir Walter Cope, as described by the Swiss traveller Thomas Platter in 1599 (see Arthur MacGregor, "The Cabinet of Curiosities in Seventeenth-Century Britain", in *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*, eds Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, Oxford, 1985, 148). The siren's hand is mentioned in Edward Brown's 1673 monograph *A Brief Account of Some Travels in divers Parts of Europe* (see Lawrence Weschler, *Mr Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* [1995], New York, 1996, 118, note to page 77; the source is acknowledged on page 160).

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defamiliarization similar to the one undertaken by magic realism. Once again, reality is shown fantastically to exceed received expectations and assumptions, although the emphasis here is on the wonderful rather than the horrific. The intention of defamiliarization arguably survived even when the wonder cabinet developed into the modern museum, which despite its emphasis on the scientific still aims to induce a sense of amazement at the world's diversity, a feeling of seeing things as if for the first time (see Stafford, 252ff.). However, there is – at least from a post-Enlightenment point of view – a further dimension to the sense of incredulity induced by the cabinet of wonder, a dimension shared by magic realism, though not by the modern museum nor the other literary kinds examined above. Over and above showing how the world time and again manages to amaze, the wonder cabinet's mixture of the natural and the dubious also emphasizes, in Stafford's formulation, "just how complicated the verification of authentic experience was and still is".[25]

With the rise of rationalism, the wonder cabinet's emphasis on the marvellous became increasingly suspect. Critics objected to the splashy and ostentatious arrangements of curiosities which were regarded, as Stafford writes, as "'popish' miracles" that merely "inspired wonder and empty gaping". Accused of "the wasteful accumulation of preposterous *bizarreries*" and a "superficial exhibitionism", the reputation of the wonder cabinet went rapidly into decline (*ibid.*, 252). Disconcertingly blurring the line between the real and the fake, the collection of curiosities posed, if not actually a threat, at least a challenge to rational-scientific classification. For in blending the natural and the manufactured, it dismayingly revealed how unstable and provisional the distinction which the rational-scientific world-view so confidently posits between reality and fiction actually is. When all items, be they real or fictional, strike the viewer as equally unlikely, it becomes clear that plausibility and probability cannot be relied on in distinguishing the fake from the authentic. Abstracting from his experiences at the Museum of Jurassic Technology, Lawrence Weschler vividly describes the double sense of disbelief that the cabinet of wonder arouses in the contemporary beholder:

> it's a special kind of wonder, and it's metastable. The visitor to the Museum of Jurassic Technology continually finds himself shimmering

[25] *Ibid.*, xxiv. According to Stafford, the eighteenth century in general was preoccupied with the distinction "fake" vs. "authentic", the problem being exacerbated by numerous technological innovations of the time that facilitated the manufacture of illusions.

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> between wondering *at* (the marvels of nature) and wondering *whether* (any of this could possibly be true). (60; emphases in the original)

Over the centuries, the sense of "wondering whether" arguably became an increasingly important aspect of the cabinet viewer's experience, the titillation of hovering between belief and scepticism enhancing the thrill of encountering the unusual. The serious exhibits having been re-routed to forerunners of the present-day museum, the originally bourgeois cabinet of wonder moved closer to the popular freak show, which already in medieval times sought to instil wonder in the masses and where, too, the question of "real" versus "fake" is an important ingredient of the fascination exerted by the collection. The convergence of the curiosity cabinet and the freak show is illustrated by P.T. Barnum's American Museum in New York City, where from 1842 onwards spectacular exhibits drew huge crowds. It is quite revealing that the "Prince of Humbugs" professed to an educational purpose, thereby outwardly aligning his establishment with the more respectable museum of natural history, rather than the disdained freak show.[26] However, this claim to education seems to have been geared mainly towards providing the museum and its visitors with an alibi, for no matter how pseudo-scientific a varnish Barnum gave his exhibits, they were quite clearly designed and advertised to appeal to the paying public's taste for the freakish and mind-boggling. The public in turn may well have been aware of this and, what is more, have enjoyed the game of "artful deception".[27]

In exploiting his audience's tastes, Barnum certainly was not above resorting to outright fraud, as for example in the case of the "Feejee Mermaid".[28] A former collaborator of Barnum's posed as a Dr J. Griffin from England and presented to the New York public in a one-week-only showing what allegedly was a preserved mermaid originally caught off the Fiji islands. Barnum cashed in on the overwhelming interest, fuelled by a spectacular advertising campaign, by exhibiting the "mermaid" for another month in his own museum and then sending it on a tour of the American South. The authenticity of the exhibit, which actually consisted

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[26] See Andrea Stulman Dennett, *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America*, New York and London, 1997, 23.

[27] James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, Cambridge: MA, and London, 2001, 90ff. and 1-29.

[28] For accounts of Barnum's mermaid, see Cook 2001, 73-118; Jan Bondeson, *The Feejee Mermaid and Other Essays in Natural and Unnatural History*, Ithaca: NY, and London, 1999, 36-63; and Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination*, Cambridge: MA, and London, 1997, 178ff.

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of withered orang-utan and baboon parts stitched to a dried fish tail, of course did not go unchallenged. Aware of the scepticism his "mermaid" was likely to arouse, Barnum cleverly argued that it was analogous to creatures that looked like equally incredible hybrids of different species, but had already been scientifically authenticated, such as the duck-billed platypus and the flying fish. Significantly, the duck-billed platypus after its discovery in the late eighteenth century had also long been thought a hoax, naturalists suspecting the specimens sent back from Australia to have been assembled by a skilful taxidermist (see Ritvo, 3). By the 1840s, however, the existence of the platypus was no longer in doubt, allowing Barnum to cite it as a case in point.

In attempting to lend scientific authority to his "mermaid" by comparing it to the platypus, Barnum adopts a strategy that at first glance seems diametrically opposed to the fantastic rhetoric of his advertisements. Intriguingly, however, the possibility that the presumably fantastic might have a scientific basis after all does nothing to render it mundane. As has been seen in the literary examples above, the supposedly impossible come true can appear more fantastic than figments of the imagination. Barnum's clever appropriation of the structures of scientific discourse both highlights their function as strategies of authorization and reveals their openness to abuse. As the case of the Feejee Mermaid illustrates, the trappings of science are not to be mistaken for science itself, and one had better beware of an all too uncritical suspension of disbelief.[29] At the same time, the wonder cabinet's ambiguous exhibits also mock those who are too sceptical: as the naturalists' initial rejection of the platypus shows, it is all too easy to see fraud everywhere. As I have shown above, magic realism likewise pokes fun at both the uncritical suspension of disbelief and a superstitious scepticism, so that one might regard it as a cabinet of wonder in written form.

The strategic use of the authorizing discourses of science and realism is pointed to also by Lawrence Weschler, who remarks on their role in David Wilson's present-day curiosity cabinet. Comparable to the way that magic realist fiction and even more so the tall tale use the realist mode to install credibility, Wilson's cabinet employs a number of devices usually used to establish a museum exhibit's authority, only immediately to undermine them by the absurdity of the item on display. As in magic realist fiction and the tall tale, the incongruity between matter and manner of presentation goes completely unremarked. When confronted

[29] James W. Cook argues that this was in fact Barnum's message (17).

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with his visitors' hesitation, Wilson's expression is a "beatific deadpan"; he remains completely "unfazed", "never ever breaks irony", and in a "literal-minded way [...] earnestly and seemingly openly answers all your questions, [...] never ever cracking or letting you know that, or even whether, he's in on the joke" (Weschler, 25, 26 and 39). Once again, the nonchalance only serves to heighten the viewer's sense of "wonder whether". Weschler suggests that viewer hesitation is provoked as much by the preposterousness of the exhibits as by the observation that they are "all properly certified with the requisite letters of authentication" (*ibid.*, 14). Many come with scientific-looking models and diagrams, while others are explained by an utterly matter-of-fact recording that might well be the principle of realism rendered audible – as Weschler notes, it is "the same bland, slightly unctuous voice you've heard in every museum slide show or Acoustiguide tour or PBS nature special you've ever endured: the reassuringly measured voice of unassailable institutional authority" (*ibid.*, 15-16).

As with magic realism and the tall tale, the exaggerated use of these devices draws attention to the fact that, far from being transparent, the mode of representation fulfils an additional function, namely to endow the exhibits with authority. Revealing how authorization strategies are used for purposes of influence, if not manipulation, arguably inspires a healthy scepticism and mistrust of established authority. As one of Weschler's interview partners observes of Wilson's museum,

> it deploys all the traditional signs of a museum's institutional authority – meticulous presentation, exhaustive captions, hushed lighting, and state-of-the-art technical armature – all to subvert the very notion of the authoritative as it applies not only to itself but to any museum. The Jurassic infects its visitor with doubts – little curlicues of misgiving – that proceeds to infest all his other dealings with the Culturally Sacrosanct. (*Ibid.*, 40)

It may of course be that this reading of Wilson's museum is a good deal more postmodern than its inventor would agree with. However, if one switches the focus from intent to effect, within a rational-scientific framework the presentation of the unusual as though it were normal engenders hesitation and uncertainty. This may be exploited for the postmodern project of deconstructing established authority and emphasizing the provisional and constructed nature of all knowledge.

Returning from the sphere of visual representation to the realm of the written, there are a number of forms that can be regarded as off-shoots

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of the wonder cabinet in that they likewise appeal to the reader's taste for the marvellous or fantastic. In a very broad sense, one could include the tall tale in this category; as has been seen, it bears resemblance in strategy and effect to the modern-day wonder cabinet as experienced by Lawrence Weschler. Overlaps can also be made out between the cabinet of wonder and the writings of the New Journalism, which likewise inspire a sense of disbelief. However, while the tall tale and the New Journalism are useful points of reference, I would like to focus on works that more immediately resemble the curiosity cabinet.

A veritable collection of curiosities can be found in the writings of Charles Fort. Between 1919 and 1932, Fort published four volumes containing the "data of the damned", by which he meant data that "Dogmatic Science" had – in his opinion arbitrarily and wrongfully – excluded because it conflicted with natural law.[30] Pouring over scientific journals and newspapers, mainly at the New York Public Library and the British Museum, he amassed thousands of notes on reports of strange and apparently inexplicable phenomena – objects falling from clear skies, omens and portents, spontaneous combustion, poltergeists, aliens and UFOs, to name but a few. All of these incidents scientists had either explained away, discredited, or simply ignored. Fort accused the scientific community of arrogance in trying to define the limits of the possible; he believed there were more things between heaven and earth (quite literally so in the many cases of falling objects that he chronicled) than science was yet, or perhaps ever would be, able to explain. Appearing to pre-empt some of the arguments voiced by sociologists of science today, albeit in a considerably more fanatical fashion, he argues that scientific knowledge is a matter of consensus, a constructed system of belief, rather than unassailable and objective truth (see *ibid.*, 12-13).

Fort's works resemble David Wilson's museum, which is dedicated to "presenting phenomena that other natural history museums seem unwilling to present" (Weschler, 26). They also recall the cabinet of wonder in their overwhelming accumulation of an unbelievable variety of items, only loosely arranged by topic and indebted to an overall leitmotiv of the bizarre. Fort claims that he is not out to distinguish the true from the false, nor does he want to reconcile the strange to the rational-scientific world-view; he merely wants to present the evidence of the natural world (see Fort 1974, 11ff.). Such claims to objectivity rightly

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[30] Charles Fort, *The Complete Books of Charles Fort*, New York, 1974, 11 and 3. The volume includes *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

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set off alarm bells, for Fort decidedly uses the data to argue his case. Furthermore, living and writing in a post-Enlightenment world, he cannot avoid addressing the question of knowledge. Ever the sceptic, his proclaimed intention is to emphasize the uncertain nature of all knowledge and destabilize preconceived notions, especially the ideological blinders that in his opinion cause science to exclude inconvenient data. Fort attacks scientists' refusals to believe in reports of animate organisms falling from the sky:

> It is the profound conviction of most of us that there has never been a shower of living things. But some of us have, at least in an elementary way, been educated by surprises out of much that we were "absolutely sure" of, and are suspicious of a thought, simply because it is a profound conviction.[31]

While this sounds very like the project that postmodern critics have imputed to the cabinet of wonders, Fort's approach fundamentally differs in one respect. Instead of focusing on the difficulty of drawing a line between the real and the unreal, Fort holistically maintains that there is no such line in the first place; all things proceed from "one interconnected nexus" and testify to an "underlying oneness" (*ibid.*, 7 and 3; see also 4).

Although in the introductory passages the style tends to the prophetic or mystic, Fort also takes recourse to the tone and the authorization strategies of scientific discourse. However, unlike magic realist fiction or the tall tale or even Wilson's museum, all of which self-consciously subvert the authorizing mode they install, Fort actually seems to intend his claim to scientific method to validate the phenomena he recounts. Trying to render his case plausible by appealing to the reader's rationality, he uses argumentative logic, strives for a level, reasoned tone, and provides a vast amount of supporting details. Fort shows himself quite aware that realist discourse is a means of persuasion when he says: "The outrageous is the reasonable if introduced politely" (Fort 1974, 18). In the manner of the scientist and the historian, he seeks to establish credibility by stressing the trustworthy nature of the sources to which he turns in absence of personal observations. He continuously and painstakingly provides bibliographical data, or claims reliability on account of personal acquaintance – although whether these intricate and sometimes circular manoeuvres are actually convincing is another question. Fort's argumentation in places is so absurd that it seems it

[31] *Lo!* (1931), revised by X, London, 1996, 5-6.

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simply must be a parody, and it is hard to conceive of his writings as anything other than a huge joke at the expense of the all too gullible. Yet, at the same time, there remains a sneaking suspicion that Fort is in dead earnest.[32] But regardless of his own take on the matter, Fort's writings cater to a certain readership's desire for a wondrous reality. In combining a pretence to science with the fantastic, they essentially exploit the same principle as Barnum's museum.

The lure of the fantastic is still going strong some three-quarters of a century later, as a throng of publications attest. More so than Fort's works, which try to avoid sensationalism (an attempt that, given their subject matter, is not entirely successful), these more closely resemble Barnum's exhibitions in that they combine a fantastic rhetoric with claims to a scientific basis. One might here differentiate between publications that, for all their alleged adherence to the rational-scientific world-view, depart from contemporary science, and those that are in accordance with it.

Reminiscent of Fort's compilation of inexplicable phenomena are publications like Tim Healey's *Strange But True: The World's Weirdest Newspaper Stories*.[33] Prominent already in the title, a fantastic rhetoric is used throughout to hint at a reality that violates natural law. Chapter headings enticingly promise "A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities" or mysterious "Fires from Nowhere" (121 and 150). The reader is regaled with a similar range of topics as collected by Fort: aliens and UFOs, objects falling from clear skies, cases of spontaneous combustion, Yeti sightings. However, the book fundamentally differs from Fort's writings in that it offers rational explanations for mysterious phenomena, attempting to either reconcile them to science or debunk them as hoaxes – without, however, entirely renouncing the thrill of the fantastic. As one chapter symptomatically concludes: "An aura of mystery still lingers about the whole affair" (*ibid.*, 147). Like Barnum's Museum, the book strives to maintain a delicate balance between being acceptable in a predominantly rational-scientific society and fulfilling an illicit desire for

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[32] Take the following attempt at authorization, which surely is so ludicrously overdone as to quite undermine itself – except that it is impossible to tell, at least for me, whether Fort is being ironic or not: "I got the story of the terrified horses in the storm of frogs from Mr George C. Stoker, of Lovelock, Nevada. Mr John Reid, of Lovelock, who is known to me as a writer upon geological subjects, vouches for Mr Stoker, and I vouch for Mr Reid. Mr Stoker vouches for me. I have never heard of anything – any pronouncement, dogma, enunciation, or pontification – that was better substantiated" (Fort 1996, 6).

[33] *Strange But True: The World's Weirdest Newspaper Stories* (1983), ed. Tim Healey, London, 1984.

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the sensational, the irrational and the inexplicable. Because serious contemplation of the supernatural or the occult is frowned upon by the dominant Western paradigm, publications dealing with such matters will arguably reach only a minority unless they pretend to adhere to rational-scientific standards.[34] One could perhaps say that, in professing a rational approach, publications of the type of *Strange But True* provide readers with a disclaimer along the lines of "Of course I don't believe in any of this stuff myself", while at the same time allowing them to enjoy forbidden goodies.

Interestingly, a fantastic vocabulary can also be found in publications which do not primarily hint at the existence of the supernatural, but endeavour to explain the natural world within a rational-scientific framework. As in the early museum, the aim seems to be to produce a sense of defamiliarization or "wonder at". This is the case with a publication alluringly entitled *The Reader's Digest Book of Strange Stories, Amazing Facts: Stories that Are Bizarre, Unusual, Odd, Astonishing, Incredible... but True* (London, New York, Montreal *et al.*, 1975). The table of contents seems heavily indebted to the thesaurus entry under the keyword "wonder", abounding in terms like "astonishing", "miraculous", "surprising", "strange", "mysterious", "marvel", "amazing", "weird", "wonderful", "intriguing", "legendary", "curious", and "bizarre". This vocabulary is further spiced up with lexical terms and phrases reminiscent of the literary fantastic and its neighbouring genre of the uncanny, such as "enigma", "secret", "unknown", "unsolved mysteries", and "detectives".

However, for all these allusions to the fantastic, the contributions themselves are firmly entrenched in the rational-scientific. In fact, the first two parts of the book represent a fairly typical example of a popular introduction to science. Explaining to the general reader issues of astronomy, physics, biology, geography and other natural sciences, as well as scientific and technological achievements and epoch-making historical accomplishments, the book amply conveys the impression that, as one eminent biologist once put it, "the world is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose".[35]

In the third and fourth part, the book turns to potentially more contentious topics, such as magical beliefs and practices, as well as questions and phenomena that so far have stumped science. As before,

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[34] Admittedly, one could ask how minor this minority actually is. The amazing number of publications dealing with New Age thinking, astrology, paranormal phenomena, or the occult suggests that the demand is greater than one would think.

[35] J.B.S. Haldane, *Possible Worlds and Other Essays*, London, 1927 (quoted in Stephen Jay Gould, *Dinosoaur in a Haystack*, London, 1996, 387; no page given).

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the stance is predominantly a rational-empirical one, the overall thrust apparently being to demystify irrational notions and tall tales by bringing the light of science to bear on them.[36] Belief in the supernatural is at no time openly endorsed, although in some cases concessions seem to have been made to the reader's taste for the fantastic, leaving it open whether or not phenomena rejected by science might exist.[37] However, while legends and non-scientific explanations are recounted for their sensationalist value, the general attitude towards such "benighted" beliefs is one of mildly bemused condescension. Even in cases where no scientific answer can be provided, the text implies that it is merely a matter of time until all phenomena can be reconciled to a rational-empirical world-view.

As the book does not present anything outside the rational-scientific paradigm as real, it does not actually provoke destabilization. There is no hesitation whether the item is to be taken at face value, or whether, alternatively, fun wickedly is being had at one's own expense. The ulterior motive behind allusions to the fantastic seems to be quite mundane, namely to raise the number of copies sold. Nevertheless, the publication does support one of the points magic realist fiction makes, for in focusing on matters that seem to contradict the rational-scientific paradigm, it illustrates the continuing attraction these exert over the human imagination.

If *Strange Stories, Amazing Facts* can be compared to that part of the wonder cabinet that eventually developed into the different modern museums, there is also a class of publications that could be compared to the cabinet's less respectable side, simultaneously inducing a sense of incredulity at the ways of the world and severe doubts as to whether or not one is falling victim to a lie, or at least to gross exaggeration: the tabloids. Scepticism will, I think, be the reaction at least of readers who adhere to a rational-scientific paradigm and who, furthermore, are dimly aware of the pressure to sell. Of course, there may be a number of readers who experience no doubts as to the tabloids' reliability.

Unabashedly exploiting the principle – and not infrequently also the subject matter – of the freak show, quite a few tabloid newspapers and popular magazines use a fantastic vocabulary to advertise with utmost shrillness their ostensibly true revelations. Frequently dealing with matters that violate realist notions of probability or possibility, these

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[36] See especially the chapters "Strange customs and superstitions", "Popular facts and fallacies" and "Hoaxes, frauds and forgeries" (*Strange Stories, Amazing Facts,* 280-313, 314-33 and 450-85).

[37] See for example the enticing title "The Angels of Mons: Did a phantom army save the British from a certain death?" (*ibid.*, 376).

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publications nevertheless lay claim to the factuality of journalism.[38] Unlike with the New Journalism, however, a circulation-raising sensationalism not infrequently seems to win out over whatever factual basis there may be. The USA's leading tabloid, *The National Enquirer*, unintentionally highlights the connection between circulation and sensationalism when it invites the reader on the front page to "Find out why we're the best-selling paper in America!".

In featuring freak coincidences, occult powers, extraterrestrials and other items that according to the rational-scientific world-view should be found only in the realms of fiction, the tabloids depict a reality strikingly similar to the world of magic realist fiction. Of course, the two kinds of writing are diametrically opposed in style, for magic realist fiction remains matter-of-fact where the tabloids prefer screaming triple superlatives. Furthermore, while the one is clearly fictional, the other claims to be reporting actual events. Nevertheless, both can be seen to present, within the fictional and non-fictional world respectively, that as real which by rational-empirical standards would be considered fantastic. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 1, Wendy Faris has suggested that the fantastic reality of the tabloids and analogous publications functions as a source for Western works of magic realism much in the same way as do myths, legends and other elements of folklore, which in some places still are regarded as empirically real. Angela Carter has made a similar observation concerning a novel by Louise Erdrich, who has also worked in a magic realist vein.[39] Carter compares Erdrich's novel to works of fiction by authors like Thomas Pynchon, John Barth or Robert Coover, who already in the 1960s successfully mined the unbelievable world presented in the tabloids, or, as Carter puts it,

> the furious contemporary folklore of America enshrined in those magazines at the supermarket check-outs brimming with the raw material of the marvellous – stories about UFOs, levitation, unnatural births ("73-year-old mother's 16-month pregnancy"), weird deaths (the girl who

[38] The tension between the tabloids' claims to truth and their preposterous content is comically highlighted in the science fiction parody "MIB – Men in Black" (1997): all evidence of alien life-forms being suppressed in quality newspapers, the tabloids become the main source of information about alien activity on earth.

[39] See Alan Velie, "Magical Realism and Ethnicity: The Fantastic in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich", in *Native American Women in Literature and Culture*, eds Susan Castillo and Victor M.P. Da Rosa, Porto, 1997. While I would agree that Erdrich's fiction uses magic realist strategies, Velie's essay leaves one with the impression that Erdrich's fiction comes closer to the fantastic.

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> succumbed to hypothermia after eating too much ice-cream). (Carter 1992a, 151-52)

More often than not, the sceptical reader of such publications is hard put to discern where fact ends and fiction begins. As with the wonder cabinet, whenever one is firmly convinced that something is just too implausible for words, exactly that item will turn out to be true. Again, the notion that one can easily tell reality from fabulation is undermined.

Closely related to the tabloids is another potential source for magic realist fiction: the urban or contemporary legend.[40] Often told orally, they may also appear in newspapers or, in the day and age of computers, be posted on the Internet or sent as emails. Like tabloid contributions, urban legends deal with strange or incredible incidents, are told as true, and often have at least some basis in fact. However, unlike the tabloid press, they do not necessarily make use of a fantastic or sensationalist rhetoric, but may also be told in the manner of the tall tale, the implausible subject matter conflicting with the narrator's straight face and truth claims.

At the end of the fourth chapter on magic realist literary techniques, it is possible to see a common principle emerge. Analysis has revealed that, different as they may be, the various techniques exhibit many points of connection and overlap and collectively aim at destabilizing and subverting numerous aspects of established knowledge. Just as magic realism's self-conscious hybridization of literary kinds challenges existing notions about genres and modes, its disconcerting inversion or levelling of the real and the fantastic calls into question two of the categories that fundamentally structure human thought. The pattern extends into the next chapter, which examines the strategies by which magic realist fiction questions traditional Western distinctions on both a conceptual and a linguistic level.

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[40] See *Monsters with Iron Teeth*, Perspectives on Contemporary Legend III, eds Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith, Sheffield, 1988.

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CHAPTER 7

MAKING THE IMMATERIAL MATTER: TECHNIQUES OF LITERALIZATION

Tzvetan Todorov writes in *The Fantastic*, "The supernatural often appears because we take a figurative sense literally" (76-77). It seems that, for once, one of Todorov's observations about the fantastic and in this case also the marvellous applies to magic realist fiction as well. Nevertheless, there are important differences to the way literalization works in magic realism, as will be seen below.

As the working definition noted, a striking number of magic realism's magic elements result from a rendering real of what is usually conceived of as a mere figure of speech or thought. Examples have come up in the course of the analysis, such as Villanelle lost heart or Saleem's midnight's children. These illustrate how magic realist fiction frequently insists that metaphors, idioms and sayings are to be understood as literally true, thereby committing a disconcerting act of transgression that highlights the linguistic norms governing literal and figurative language use. But taking figures of speech literally is not the only way literalization generates magic elements. Extending the notion beyond the strict sense of the word, magic realist fiction similarly violates linguistic and conceptual categories for example when psychological concepts and conditions of the mind become physically real, or when the abstract is made concrete. Even language itself occasionally is endowed with a distinctly material presence, thereby exemplifying "the power of words". Literalization can also be regarded as the underlying principle when magic realist fiction makes the past present in the shape of ghosts or reified memories.

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Examining magic realism's fantastic elements with a view not to theme, but to their generating principle, shows them to be part of a larger scheme. They are more than the reworking of a cultural heritage or just another magic ingredient added to enhance the overall flavour; upon a closer look, these apparently so disparate elements turn out to share a common function. Moving from the figurative to the literal, from the abstract to the concrete, from the word to the thing, they each draw attention to and effect a levelling of traditional dichotomies – dichotomies which, at least from a Western perspective, are also of a hierarchical nature, for figurative language has long been regarded as inferior to referential language, and language and concepts in general have been considered less real than empirical reality. Through techniques of literalization, magic realist fiction puts the immaterial on a par with empirical reality: endowed with material existence, metaphors and memories, concepts and emotions are shown to be as important as the material world. In emphasizing the role that language and thought play in human perception and, consequently, human action, magic realist fiction states in its own terms an argument that has been formulated in different fields of contemporary theory such as cognitive linguistics and philosophy, but also in postcolonial studies.

An intriguing aspect of magic realism's use of literalization is the way the process is made transparent by the text. Unlike the literary fantastic, the magic realist text will, even while adamantly insisting that it be taken literally, characteristically allow literalized elements partly to retain their figurative or abstract character. In fact, in places the text actually seems to take pains that the reader be made aware of a possible figurative reading, only to block such attempts by rendering the metaphor or the allegory opaque.[1] Once again, the bifurcation so typical of magic realist fiction can be observed: in a manner akin to the double perspective discussed above, the text is suspended halfway between the literal and the figurative, paradoxically encouraging a metaphorical and a literal reading at once.

In the following, I will look in more detail at the different aspects of literalization, using examples to illustrate how magic realist fiction redeems what in the rational-empirical world-view has frequently been dismissed as immaterial (in both senses of the word). I will furthermore discuss how literalization may serve as a criterion in differentiating magic realism from the literary fantastic. An interesting overlap can also be made out between magic realism's use of literalization and its adoption

[1] On McHale's concept of opaque allegory, see 59 above.

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of certain ex-centric perspectives, especially that of the child. Finally, in looking at magic realism's reification of language, I will point out connections with postmodern notions of a linguistically constructed reality as well as with magical structures of thought.

More than a manner of speaking: magic realism's literalized figures of speech

> "Why is it that the furthest reaching truths about ourselves and the world have to be stated in such a lopsided, referentially indirect mode?"
>
> – Paul de Man on allegory[2]

Confronted with Villanelle's argument that one can very well exist without a heart – for are there not a great many heartless people in the world? – Henri protests, "It's a way of putting it, you know that" (*The Passion*, 116). In Villanelle's Venice, however, figures of speech tend to become curiously real. Not infrequently, it turns out that what looks like a mere idiom, a saying, or a metaphor must, contrary to all linguistic intuition, be taken at face value.

As in the case of magic realism's transgressive adaptations of the realist and the fantastic mode discussed in Chapters 3 and 6, the violation of the boundary between the literal and the figurative disrupts the reading process, engendering a certain amount of hesitation in the reader about how the text is to be understood. Angela Carter observes the defamiliarizing effect: "Another way of magicking or making everything strange is to take metaphor literally" (Haffenden, 92).[3] The literalization of figurative language thus fulfils one of the same central functions as other magic realist techniques: to draw attention to the categories and conventions within which the world is perceived and represented, and to the ways in which these categories and conventions shape social reality.

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[2] "Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion", in *Allegory and Representation: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979-80*, New Series 5, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt, Baltimore and London, 1981, 2.

[3] On the defamiliarization brought about by the literalization of metaphor in Salman Rushdie's works, see Shaul Bassi, "Salman Rushdie's Special Effects", in *Coterminous Worlds: Magical Realism and Contemporary Post-Colonial Literature in English*, Cross/Cultures. Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English 39, eds Elsa Linguanti, Francesco Casotti and Carmen Concilio, Amsterdam and Atlanta: GA, 1999, 58-59.

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In deliberately using figurative language contrary to convention and endowing it with the same referential function as literal language, magic realist fiction suggests that expressions often dismissed as "mere ways of putting it" are perhaps more revealing of, and more relevant to, reality than speakers are generally aware of. This does not mean that magic realist fiction abolishes the distinction between literal and figurative language use. Obviously, literalization can be appreciated as an instance of transgression only if the contrast remains visible. To level the hierarchy traditionally constructed between the literal and the figurative therefore is not to deny the difference between them. In fact, retaining the difference is crucial if figurative language is to be revalued as a mode of thought and expression that, in its own way, may afford a considerable amount of cognitive insight. Literalization accordingly works not to erase the boundary between the literal and the figurative, but to bring that boundary all the more sharply into focus – paradoxically, the figurative dimension of language is emphasized even while being denied on the surface of the text.[4]

This effect can be observed in *The Passion*, where literalizing the expressions "to lose one's heart to someone" and "to be heartless" serves to revitalize metaphors usually considered dead insofar as they are no longer perceived as instances of figurative speech.[5] This paradoxical revival of the figurative through literalization is foreshadowed in a statement of Henri's which already highlights the metaphorical origin of the word "heartless". Although Henri is speaking figuratively when he explains that "to survive the zero winter and that war we made a pyre of our hearts and put them aside for ever" (*The Passion*, 82), the elaborately constructed context transcends the usual unreflected use of the term "heartless" in the sense of "unfeeling", allowing Henri to claim with justification: "When I say I lived with heartless men, I use the word correctly" (*ibid.*, 83).

Both the term "heartless" and the expression "to lose one's heart" are restored to their full metaphorical status by Villanelle, who in taking them absolutely literally employs them even more "correctly" than Henri. Moreover, her literal usage emphasizes the way metaphors can express very tangible truths. As the events in *The Passion* show, people

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[4] I here disagree with David Danow, who claims that the distinction between the literal and the figurative is erased in magic realist works (see 84).

[5] On the distinction between imaginative or poetic and conventionalized, lexicalized, or "dead" metaphor, see John R. Searle, "Metaphor", in *Metaphor and Thought* (1979), ed. Andrew Ortony, Cambridge, 1993 (revised edition), 110. See also Ungerer and Schmid, 117 and Saeed, 305.

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are heartless not merely in a manner of speaking. Their lack of empathy and conscience have quite real, often even drastic consequences: Napoleon's soldiers go to war, and Villanelle's future husband rapes her (see *ibid.*, 64).

Literalization strikingly underlines the relevance of figurative language also in many other works of magic realist fiction. The technique is particularly noticeable in many of Rushdie's novels, where the mechanism frequently is rendered transparent in a highly self-conscious manner. In *The Satanic Verses*, Saladin Chamcha's metamorphosis into an obscene demi-goat is quite obviously a representation of the prejudices of the British police officers and immigration officials, who think of their charge as a "fucking Packy billy" (163). The same racist perception of foreigners as sub-human also lies at the heart of the monstrous shapes and guises assumed by the other immigrants Saladin encounters at the police hospital. One of the inmates explains the mechanism to the non-plussed newcomer: "They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct" (*ibid.*, 168).

The Satanic Verses here exemplifies a point that has often been raised in postcolonial theory and related fields, for example by Edward Said, who in *Orientalism* traces the social and political impact discursively constructed stereotypes have had on the relationship between West and East. Said argues that insofar as the notions propagated in Orientalist discourses did not remain abstract academic ideas, but were implemented in politics, economics, and culture, they must be considered real (96). *The Satanic Verses* similarly stresses the very real force that racism exerts on the lives of individuals and communities, though the novel makes its point not through explicit reflection or theoretical analysis, but through literalization. At the same time, however, the figurative meaning remains visible, revealing racist stereotypes to be discursive constructs rather than objective reflections of empirical reality. This is an important point, for in allowing the figurative to shine through, the text identifies the possibility of resistance and change. As the immigrant-turned-manticore announces, "some of us aren't going to stand for it. We're going to bust out of here before they turn us into anything worse" (168). The same will to oppose the constructions of the "centre" characterizes other texts, theoretical as well as fictional, which seek to deconstruct colonial discourse by "writing back" from a postcolonial perspective.

Other instances of literalization further illustrate magic realism's argument that figurative speech is not merely the rhetorical icing on the cake of language, but may express truths that are just as significant, and in this sense just as real, as statements couched in referential language. In

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Nights at the Circus, the black butler Toussaint has no mouth, which is most appropriate considering that, as Lizzie observes, "it is the lot of those who toil and suffer to be dumb" (60). To be deprived of speech in a figurative sense, that is, to lack political and social participation, in many respects comes to the same as being physically unable to speak. *The Late Mr Shakespeare* in turn underlines the immense importance of language when it takes the idea of inflammatory writing or speech literally, suggesting that Pickleherring's narration has caused a real fire (see 383). *Shame* revalues the figurative when it literalizes the postcolonial metaphor of marginality in the figure of Omar Khayyam, who as a child suffers from "the fear that he was living at the edge of the world, so close that he might fall off at any moment", and even after being successfully integrated into society is "sometimes plagued by that improbable vertigo, the sense of being a creature on the edge: a peripheral man" (21 and 24). In this choice of phrasing, the text shrewdly invokes contemporary theory and its vocabulary of margin and centre. The fact that the world has to be thought of as flat in order to even entertain the notion of living on or speaking from the edge only emphasizing how backward and artificial the unfortunately very real social division into margin and centre is. Turning marginality into a medical condition emphasizes the material and psychological realities that lie behind this figure of academic speech. In fact, in view of post-coloniality's effects, one might indeed ask in how far critics are still speaking figuratively.[6]

In *Midnight's Children*, the fantastic pigmentation disorder that befalls so many Indian businessmen after Independence also turns out to be a literalized metaphor. Significantly, it is Saleem himself who, even while presenting the phenomenon as literally real, first hints at a figurative reading when he cynically explains:

> It seems that the gargantuan (even heroic) efforts involved in taking over from the British and becoming masters of their own destinies had drained the colour from their cheeks [....] The businessmen of India were turning white. (179)

Literalizing the metaphor emphasizes how Westernization is a decidedly real aspect of post-Independence Indian society.

Literalization also lies at the root of Saleem's rather implausible claim to be falling apart, which can be understood as a projection of India's

[6] On this point, see also Söderlind 1994.

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political and social disintegration onto the physiological level. Even more than in the example of the businessmen, it is the text itself that draws attention to the possibility of a figurative reading. As in the case of the midnight's children analysed in Chapter 3, the literal level is paradoxically undermined by Saleem's excessive insistence on it:

> I am not speaking metaphorically [...] I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug – that my poor body [...] has started coming apart at the seams. In short, I am literally disintegrating. (*Ibid.*, 37)

The text further supports a figurative interpretation of Saleem's condition by strongly suggesting that Saleem can be read as a personification of India. However, a possibly figurative dimension does not detract from the reality of the phenomenon. When the doctor consulted by Saleem fails to confirm the diagnosis, stubbornly saying "I see no cracks", Saleem scornfully makes clear that it is the doctor who fails to grasp the situation: "Damn fool, [...] can't see what's under his nose!" (*ibid.*, 65). Clearly, the doctor's inability to see is not due to an eye-problem. In fact, it arises from his paying attention exclusively to what is empirically discernible; as befits a representative of Western science, he fails to see that Saleem's claim might be true in another sense. In discrediting the doctor as (wilfully?) blind to the deteriorating nation around him, *Midnight's Children* exemplifies the philosopher Nelson Goodman's observation that, in certain contexts, "metaphorical or allegorical truth may matter more".[7]

In attributing to metaphor a potential for truth, magic realist fiction ties in with contemporary theories of language and metaphor. In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson set out to rethink a Western philosophical tradition that has restricted truth to literal statements. At best, figurative language has been seen as some kind of aesthetic extra – pleasing to the mind, but affording no cognitive insight. At worst, figurative language has been rejected as a source of misunderstanding or even a means of deception. Lakoff and Johnson trace this "Fear of Metaphor"[8] as far back as Plato's condemnation of poetry as mere imitation that pales before true knowledge, and of rhetoric as ignoble and counterfeit, aiming at pleasure rather than the good.[9] Mistrust of poetic and rhetorical language figures prominently

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[7] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis, 1978, 18.
[8] *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Chicago and London, 1981, 189.
[9] See *The Republic*, ed. G.R.F. Ferrari, trans. Tom Griffith, Cambridge, 2000, Bk. 10; and *Gorgias*, trans. with notes by Terence Irwin, Oxford, 1982 (1979).

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also in the empiricist philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In "Of the Abuse of Words", John Locke most vehemently denounced it as inimical to truth:

> all the artificial and figurative application of Words Eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *Ideas*, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheat: And therefore [...] are certainly, in all Discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where Truth and Knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the Language or the Person that makes use of them.[10]

A little earlier, Francis Bacon in his *idola fori* ("idols of the marketplace") had proclaimed language in general to be problematic, words being capable of colouring human perception and clouding the faculty of reason.[11]

Some three and a half centuries later, linguists and philosophers of language find themselves in perfect agreement with Bacon's observations, likewise maintaining that, far from being a docile means of description, language decisively influences how speakers conceptualize their world. In this sense, language is, at least to a certain extent, constitutive of reality. As opposed to Bacon and the empirical tradition, however, contemporary scholars have regarded the ineluctably linguistic nature of reality not as a lamentable shortcoming, but as a great chance: for if reality is shaped by language, it may also be re-shaped for the better.

Lakoff and Johnson's revaluation of metaphor as an epistemological tool stands in a tradition that can be traced back as far as Romanticism (see Saeed, 303). Anticipating the linguistic turn of the twentieth century, I.A. Richards suggested that the study of metaphor and rhetoric might provide valuable insights into the workings of the human mind.[12] More directly influential on Lakoff and Johnson's work was probably Max Black's interaction view of metaphor, which argues that instead of being objectively given, similarity and meaning are first created by metaphor,

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[10] *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), ed. Peter H. Nidditch, Oxford, 1975, 508 (3.10, §34); emphasis in the original.

[11] See *The New Organon*, 48 (I.59). For a more detailed exposition of Bacon's views on rhetoric and poesy, see for example Jürgen Klein, *Francis Bacon oder die Modernisierung Englands*, Anglistische und Amerikanistische Texte und Studien 4, Hildesheim, Zurich and New York, 1987, 68-82.

[12] *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, New York and London, 1936, 136.

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thereby allowing metaphor to contribute greatly to "our powers of inquiry" into the world.[13]

Showing the human conceptual system (as rendered accessible through language) to be based on an intricate network of metaphorical concepts, Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors play a fundamental – if usually unnoticed[14] – role not only in human perception and understanding, but, insofar as they determine what counts as real, also in human action. Metaphors can be considered real to the extent that changing a metaphor has repercussions on reality. To conceive of love in terms of a collaborative work of art will obviously engender a different attitude towards a relationship than if one adheres to other conceptualizations encoded in the English language, for example love as magic ("She *cast her spell* over me", "She is *bewitching*"), love as insanity ("I'm *crazy* about her", "He constantly *raves* about her"), or love as war ("He is known for his many rapid *conquests*", "He *won* her hand in marriage", "She is *besieged* by suitors").[15] Similarly, subscribing to the Western capitalist notion that time is money, which becomes manifest in expressions such as "to spend (invest, budget) one's time", clearly entails a different lifestyle than if one relies on alternative, non-commodity oriented conceptualizations of time (*ibid.*, 8-9). When one becomes aware of the metaphors governing one's perception of the world, it becomes possible to choose a different structuring principle, though given the conventionalized nature of language, this is harder in practice than it sounds in theory.

Magic realist fiction strikingly illustrates just how consequential the choice of a guiding metaphor can be in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, where Aurora Zogoiby's jet-set lifestyle tragically causes her son Moraes to age at twice the normal speed – or at least so the text implies. Once again, it is the text itself which conspicuously suggests that the narrator's weird congenital condition is a literalized metaphor. Moraes describes himself as "being forced, against my will, to live out the literal truth of the metaphors so often applied to my mother and her circle": he is "in the fast lane, on the fast track, ahead of my time, a jet-setter right down to my genes" (161).

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[13] Black, 47; see also 37. For a more recent discussion of the functions of metaphor in discourse and reasoning, see Albert N. Katz, Cristina Cacciari, Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. and Mark Turner, *Figurative Language and Thought*, New York and Oxford, 1998, 119-57.

[14] Lakoff and Johnson's analysis heavily relies on expressions that often no longer are perceived as instances of figurative speech, such as "to construct a theory" (see 53).

[15] *Ibid.*, 49; emphases in the original.

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Shame testifies to the transformational power of metaphor in the story of the boy who mysteriously burst into flame:

> He burned to death, and the experts who examined his body and the scene of the incident were forced to accept what seemed impossible: namely that the boy had simply ignited of his own accord, without dousing himself in petrol or applying any external flame. We are energy; we are fire; we are light. Finding the key, stepping through into that truth, a boy began to burn. (117)

The motif of spontaneous combustion appears in other magic realist texts as well, though with a different source metaphor. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, a woman's sexual desire causes a wooden shower stall to ignite. A male onlooker helpfully clarifies which metaphor is being literalized: "This woman desperately needed a man to quench the red-hot fire that was raging inside her" (52; also 221).[16]

As these examples show, magic realist fiction characteristically renders its technique of literalization transparent, deliberately drawing attention to and more often than not even formulating the figurative expression that has given rise to a certain magic element. One could say that the text, in a counter-move of "figurization", hesitates or suspends the literalized element, causing the reader to hover between two possible interpretations. In this, magic realism differs significantly from other literary genres and modes that have been seen to make use of literalization, most notably from fantastic fiction, where it is typically left to the readers or critics to formulate the metaphor they believe to discern behind the supernatural occurrences. By contrast, science fiction evinces a surprising proximity to magic realism in its use of literalization, likewise often making the source metaphors or idioms explicit. This serves to revive an imagery that is "dead" in everyday usage, thereby highlighting usually invisible assumptions, perceptions and convictions (see Le

[16] As transparent instances of literalization, these examples fundamentally differ from other instances of spontaneous combustion in literature, for example in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* ([1853], Ware: Hertfordshire, 1993, 375-76) or John Banville's *Birchwood* ([1973], London, 1998, 72ff.). For further examples, see *The Oxford Book of the Supernatural*, ed. D.J. Enright, Oxford and New York, 1994, 421-26. Pseudo-scientific theories of spontaneous combustion that came up during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often linked the phenomenon to alcohol abuse, arguing that the alcohol-drenched tissue spontaneously combusted when the person sat or stood too near an open fire (see Sheila Shaw, "Spontaneous Combustion and the Sectioning of Female Bodies", *Literature and Medicine*, XIV/1 [1995], 1-22). Illustrating the topic's ongoing appeal, spontaneous combustion also appears in Charles Ford's works (see Ford 1996, 118ff.) and in Healey's *Strange But True* (see 150-51).

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Guin, 31). A classic technique also of allegorical writing,[17] literalization here works yet again differently, for although the elements are to be taken literally within the context of the allegory, a consistent reading on the allegorical level is possible, whereas in magic realist fiction such a reading typically is blocked.

Unlike magic realist fiction, fantastic texts do not generally render the process of literalization transparent by self-consciously identifying the underlying metaphor or concept. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is one of the more transparent examples of literalization in fantastic literature, at times bordering on the allegorical. However, in many fantastic texts the source metaphor is reified so completely that it takes considerable critical ingenuity to discover one at all. In fact, Todorov expressly presents it as one of the fantastic's defining features that the supernatural elements resist a metaphorical or allegorical reading (see Todorov 1975, 32-33). He excludes both Honoré de Balzac's novel *The Magic Skin* and Nikolai Gogol's story "The Nose" from the realm of the fantastic proper because they are too suggestive of a figurative reading, though in Gogol's case the text ultimately refuses to yield a clear allegorical meaning (see *ibid.*, 67-68, 72 and 73). Todorov argues that in inducing a sense of allegory that is never gratified, Gogol's story anticipates the development – or, as he sees it, the disappearance[18] – of the literary fantastic in the twentieth century (see *ibid.*, 169ff., esp. 172). In both Gogol and Kafka, Todorov finds the impression of allegory to hinge fundamentally on the fact that the supernatural causes no hesitation on the level of the text, even though the fictional world is not that of the marvellous. Such a transgression of generic and linguistic conventions prompts attempts at recontextualization on the part of the reader, in this case through an allegorical reading, the move to the figurative level being a standard reaction if a literal reading will yield no or only an absurd meaning.[19] Seeing that magic realist texts use an

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[17] See Gay Clifford, *The Transformation of Allegory*, London and Boston, 1974, 30 and Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre*, Ithaca: NY, and London, 1979, 188.

[18] Todorov provocatively argues that in the twentieth century, "psychoanalysis has replaced (and thereby made useless) the literature of the fantastic", having made socially acceptable themes that hitherto could be addressed only under the guise of fantastic literature (*ibid.*, 160).

[19] On figurative reading as a strategy of unscrambling, see Searle, 103; Saeed, 17; Ellen Winner, *The Point of Words: Children's Understanding of Metaphor and Irony*, Cambridge: MA, and London, 1988, 11; and Samuel R. Levin, "The Language of Allegory", in *Allegory, Myth and Symbol*, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield, Harvard English Studies 9, Cambridge: MA, and London, 1981, 23-38.

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incongruous rhetoric of banality, complemented by a self-consciously metafictional commentary, to propose figurative interpretations that in the final instance remain perplexingly blocked, magic realism might indeed legitimately be counted among the twentieth-century heirs of Todorov's fantastic. Conversely, it makes sense that both Gogol's "The Nose" and Kafka's "Metamorphosis" should have been seen as precursors of magic realism.[20]

Magic realism's tendency to suspend literalized items halfway between the literal and the figurative by making the process of literalization transparent becomes visible even more clearly in an interesting passage from Marina Warner's *Indigo*. Strictly speaking, the passage does not qualify as magic realism, for the fantastic element is in fact recontextualized, working on a purely metaphorical level after all. However, this does not prevent the passage from suggesting that the metaphor is true in an important sense, so that the example remains comparable to magic realist instances of literalization. Regarded by her people as something of a sorceress among whose many skills there is the Circe-like power of changing people's shapes (see *Indigo*, 102), it is at first glance not unlikely that the indigo-stained Sycorax is speaking literally when she muses: "I used to change men into beasts [....] Now I can only turn them blue." However, the subsequent paragraph makes clear that the transformation takes place not physically, but only psychologically: dispensing her favours freely, young Sycorax "had started the animal from many a reticent lover's cover" in a figurative sense only (*ibid.*, 110). And yet, there is more literal truth to Sycorax's claim than one might think, as her reminiscences show:

> How they would rootle, lap and snuffle at her! How they would stamp and whinny when she made them wait for her. (*Ibid.*, 111)

As the text proceeds, metaphor gives way to simile, affirming the figurative reading: the lovers are *like* beasts only. Nevertheless, the passage recalls magic realist literalization in that it revitalizes a dead metaphor, for Sycorax's almost-but-not-quite literal usage highlights the originally figurative nature of an expression no longer consciously processed in all its metaphorical dimensions – her lovers in important ways do resemble beasts.[21] Also, it raises the same question as literalization, namely in how far metaphors can be dismissed as a mere

[20] See *Magical Realist Fiction: An Anthology*, 11-29 and 135-43.

[21] For another sense in which the novel suggests men to be beasts, see Chapter 9 below.

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way of putting things if they manage to convey a so much more vivid, and in this sense true, impression than a literal description can.

Before examining how magic realist fiction uses literalization to redeem other "immaterialities", there is one final point I should like to raise concerning figures of speech. As mentioned earlier, magic realism's technique of taking the figurative literally ties in with its use of childlike focalizers, for there exists the psychological commonplace that, up to a certain age, children do not understand metaphorical expressions or idioms. Literalization would thus appear quite natural in a text told from a child's perspective. This is exploited in Gabriel García Márquez's story "La luz es como el agua" (1978),[22] in which an apartment is literally flooded with light, drowning the children in it.

Child psychology has confirmed the widespread assumption that figures of speech are problematic for children. Empirical studies indicate that, on average, children do not have a full command of metaphor before the age of ten or eleven.[23] However, it appears that children mainly have trouble processing metaphor not because they fail to realize the non-literal intent of the utterance, but rather because they cannot construct a meaningful similarity between the topic and the vehicle (see Winner, 35ff.). It has been argued that metaphors are taken literally primarily in cases where they span conceptual domains not yet differentiated by young children, for example the animate and the inanimate (see *ibid.*, 62). From the child's perspective, these misinterpretations are only natural, as the child perceives no violation of linguistic or conceptual boundaries that would prompt a figurative interpretation. On the whole, however, studies on metaphor comprehension in children support the argument already presented in Chapter 4, namely that in using childlike focalizers to generate a magic realist worldview, magic realist fiction is drawing more on a construct convenient to its purpose than on the behaviour of real children.

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[22] "Das Licht ist wie das Wasser" ("La luz es como el agua", 1978), in *Zwölf Geschichten aus der Fremde*, trans. Dagmar Ploetz and Dieter E. Zimmer, Cologne, 1993, 189-94.

[23] See Winner, Chapter 3. Depending on the experimental measures used, even far younger children exhibit some understanding of metaphor, but only older children are able to demonstrate their full understanding by verbalizing it. See also Barbara Z. Pearson, "The Comprehension of Metaphor by Preschool Children", *Journal of Child Language*, XVII/1 (1990), 185-203.

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Variations on literalization I: concretization and externalization

Chapter 5 has shown how magic realist texts critically examine the West's emphasis on science, suggesting that it needs to be complemented by alternative modes of knowledge production. By rendering abstract concepts concrete and psychological processes material, magic realist fiction once again takes issue with tendencies to restrict reality to what is empirically observable. In transgressing linguistic and conceptual boundaries, these acts of literalization also once again highlight usually invisible categories that govern processes of thought and perception, thereby making them accessible to reflection.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one current meaning of the adjective "abstract" is:

> Withdrawn or separated from matter, from material embodiment, from practice, or from particular examples. Opposed to concrete.[24]

This definition is reflected by the semantic constraints governing the usage of abstract nouns, which prohibit them from being used in connection with verbs that require their subject or object to display the semantic feature of material existence. The violation of semantic constraints will result in constructions that the listener or reader experiences as semantically odd, as is illustrated by that perhaps most widely quoted example of semantic oddness, Noam Chomsky's sentence "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously".[25]

As has already been noted, semantic incongruity typically prompts a search for non-literal meaning. Magic realist fiction exploits the hesitation engendered by semantic oddness when it endows abstract concepts with a distinctly material presence, thereby generating elements that strike the reader as fantastic. Recalling the illogical tall tale and its category mistakes, these elements differ significantly from other fantastic elements in that their perception as fantastic is not culturally contingent: arising from the transgression not of literary conventions or cultural assumptions, but of basic rules of language, they will disconcert all competent speakers of a language equally.

It is therefore not a matter of cultural background or even individual belief whether or not Saleem's insistence that he can smell "[t]he perfumes of emotions and ideas, the odour of how-things-were"

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[24] *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), Oxford, 1989, s.v. "abstract", I.4.
[25] Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (1957), The Hague, 1962, 15.

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(*Midnight's Children*, 424) will strike the reader as fantastic, for the claim is anomalous already on a semantic level. Because the semantic features of abstract nouns do not include smell, it is not usually possible to speak of "acrid fumes of [...] envy", "the nauseating odour of defeat", or "the orotund emissions of power" except in a figurative sense (*ibid.*, 316 and 317). Hesitation similarly is engendered when Saleem claims to be able to smell things which, while perfectly concrete, nevertheless are not usually thought of as having an odour, as in the case of "the cheap and tawdry perfumes of imported spaghetti Westerns and the most violent martial-arts films ever made" (*ibid.*, 317). Interestingly, Saleem's classification of smells in terms of colour, weight, or shape, which at first seems entirely fantastic, recalls a phenomenon not altogether unheard of in the medical sciences: synesthesia, or crossing of the senses, which may result for example in "coloured hearing".

Abstract concepts also acquire smells in *Shame*, although the text here allows a figurative reading, so that the semantic oddness is not quite as great. The narrator observes of the quarter reserved for military officers' housing in Karachi:

> the air there is full of unasked questions. But their smell is faint, and the flowers in the many maturing gardens, the trees lining the avenues, the perfumes worn by the beautiful soignée ladies of the neighbourhood quite overpower this other, too-abstract odour.

Noting a tacit agreement between the military officers and the informants spying on them, the narrator ironically remarks on "the civility growing in those gardens, perfuming the air" (27).

A common motif is the use of abstract entities, especially emotions, as gastronomic ingredients. In *The Tin Drum*, Oskar Matzerath's father puts his feelings for Oskar's mother into the soups he cooks.[26] In *Midnight's Children*, food curiously tends to transmit the cook's emotions to those who eat it; Mary Pereira's pickles for example, "since she had stirred into them the guilt of her heart, and the fear of discovery, [...] had the power of making those who ate them subject to nameless uncertainties and dreams of accusing fingers" (139). In *Like Water For Chocolate*, the text suggests that Tita's sadness over losing Pedro to her sister is transferred to the wedding cake she bakes, causing all the guests to exhibit severe symptoms of lost love, as well as physical indigestion (see 35-36 and 38ff.). *The Moor's Last Sigh* once more violates the distinction

[26] See *Die Blechtrommel*, 32 (*The Tin Drum*, 39).

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between the abstract and the concrete when the Zogoiby cook tells Moraes:

> Baba sahib, sit only and we will cook up the happy future. We will mash its spices and peel its garlic cloves, we will count out its cardamoms and chop its ginger, we will heat up the ghee of the future and fry its masala to release its flavour [….] We will cook the past and present also, and from it tomorrow will come. (273)

As "to cook up" is quite frequently used in a metaphorical sense, any semantic oddness that could possibly arise when it is combined with abstract nouns should be easy to resolve through a shift to the figurative level (although many speakers might still perceive this as literal, the metaphor having become lexicalized).[27] In this passage, however, the shift is impeded by the extension of the conventionalized metaphor:[28] the future is to be "cooked up" not only in the usual figurative sense, but is semantically treated as though it were an actual dish of Indian cuisine. This lends the abstract entities of past, present and future a disturbing degree of concreteness.

In *Shame*, the abstract notion of shame likewise acquires a curiously concrete quality through extension of metaphor. In isolation, the statement that shame "becomes part of the furniture" would probably trigger a figurative reading. But by elaborating on this idea, the narrator succeeds in almost making shame tangible:

> In "Defence" [the Pakistan Defence Services Officers' Co-Operative Housing Society], you can find shame in every house, burning in an ashtray, hanging framed upon a wall, covering a bed. But nobody notices it any more. And everyone is civilized. (28)

Although here the metaphorical level remains much more in the foreground than in the example from *Midnight's Children*, where Saleem insists that he can literally smell emotions and ideas, the technique still serves to destabilize the boundary between the abstract and the concrete. It emphasizes that, as far as human experience is concerned, concepts

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[27] See *OED*, s.v. "cook" (*verb*), 3.

[28] Conventionalized metaphors can be extended to generate new imaginative metaphors. For example, the conceptualization of theories as buildings, encoded in expressions such as "to construct a theory" or "the foundation of a theory", may be extended to generate new metaphors such as "These facts are the brick and mortar of my theory" (Lakoff and Johnson, 53). Extension strikingly highlights the essentially metaphorical nature of many expressions usually considered literal.

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and feelings are as pervasive and as vital as the things that one can actually see, smell or touch. *Shame* suggests that Pakistan's shame is ever present, even if it is conveniently ignored, while *The Moor's Last Sigh* shows how one needs to have digested the past in order to be able to face the future. As Moraes observes *apropos* the cook's "culinary magic": "With yesterday in my tummy, my prospects felt a lot better" (*The Moor's Last Sigh*, 273).

Other magic realist texts from Britain also render the abstract concrete in order to argue that the immaterial must be taken into account. *Wild Nights* has boredom tapping on the window like a branch, expressing how, at least for the child narrator, boredom is a very material menace indeed (see 17). In *Wise Children*, Grandma Chance's arrival in Hollywood cheers Dora up to no end, because her presence literally leaves no space for insecurity (see 160). Watching Fevvers perform in *Nights at the Circus*, Jack Walser "almost displaced his composure but managed to grab tight hold of his scepticism just as it was about to blow over the ledge of the press box" (16). In *The Passion*, Napoleon, in illusory anticipation of a victory over Russia, "[writes] surrender notices, filling the space with humiliation and leaving just enough room at the bottom for the Czar to sign" (83). And in *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, little William is made a poet when he tastes "the three precious drops of Inspiration" from his mother's cauldron (103). The importance of memories likewise is underlined by turning them into material objects: in *Midnight's Children*, Saleem puts his memories into his chutney, thereby hoping to heal "the amnesiac nation" (460).

Literalization is used analogously in magic realist texts from other continents. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, "Amaranta's sensibility, her discreet but enveloping tenderness had been weaving an invisible web about her fiancé, which he had to push aside materially with his pale and ringless fingers in order to leave the house at eight o'clock" (117), and in Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*, Old Lady Lang is shown "clutching in the folds of her apron the special ball of sorrow that was hers" (4). Emotions become perceivable by the physical senses also in Jack Hodgins' *The Invention of the World*: Donal Keneally can "smell the high bitter stench of burning indignation" and hears "the ugly sound of a nursed grudge" (126). Memories are rendered real once more in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where Ursula "[spends] the whole morning looking for a memory of her son in the most hidden corners" (191) – unfortunately, to no avail.[29]

[29] On the reification of memory and the past, see also 265ff. below.

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Abstract entities again acquire a curiously material quality when they are indiscriminately listed along with concrete items in lengthy inventories. The catalogue of the various items falling from the airplane that explodes on the opening pages of *The Satanic Verses* is an instance in point. Tumbling through the air alongside the protagonists are not only "reclining seats, stereophonic headsets, drinks trolleys, motion discomfort receptacles, disembarkation cards, duty-free video games, braided caps, paper cups, blankets, oxygen masks", but, reflecting the passengers' immigrant identies, also other, more personal "possessions":

> mingling with the remnants of the plane, equally fragmented, equally absurd, there floated the debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, *land, belonging, home.* (4; emphases in the original)

The technique is expanded in the description of a poor area of London at the end of the novel, which intriguingly shifts from the concrete to the abstract and back again:

> there is the howling of a perpetual wind, and the eddying of debris: derelict kitchen units, deflated bicycle tyres, shards of broken doors, dolls' legs, vegetable refuse extracted from plastic disposal bags by hungry cats and dogs, fast-food packets, rolling cans, shattered job prospects, abandoned hopes, lost illusions, expended angers, accumulated bitterness, vomited fear, and a rusting bath. (*Ibid.*, 461)

Similar enumerations yoking the abstract to the concrete can be found in other magic realist texts. In *Wise Children*, Melchior and Peregrine find themselves left with "only an actor's inheritance of unpaid bills, paste jewellery, flash attitudes" (21). The narrator in *Nights at the Circus* observes of the Strong Man that "all of his bulk was muscle and simplicity, there was neither flesh nor flab nor wit on him" (167). In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, open shutters let in not only the dust and the sounds of the harbour, the sunlight and the insufferable heat, but also

> the wafting sadness of the unmarried Jews across the waters in Mattancherri, the menace of emerald smugglers, the machinations of business rivals, the growing nervousness of the British colony in Fort Cochin, the cash demands of the staff and the plantation workers in the Spice Mountains, the tales of Communist troublemaking and Congresswallah politics, the names *Gandhi* and *Nehru*, the rumours of famine in the east and hunger strikes in the north, the songs and drum-

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> beats of the oral storytellers, and the heavy rolling sound (as they broke against Cabral Islands rickety jetty) of the incoming tides of history. (9)

The list of Maggie's and Wade's wedding presents in *The Invention of the World* is similarly all-encompassing, indiscriminately ranging from "bedroom slippers, baby diapers, pepper shakers, oven cleaners, window washers, cheese cutters, pie servers, ice crushers" to all the good and bad things that marriage and Canada have to offer, among them "a promise of peace", "The right to vote", "Restless youth", "Neglect", "Loneliness", and "Love" (453-54). Reeling off the abstract and the concrete in one breath, as though there were no difference between them, the text creates a kind of semantic vertigo in the reader. Freely transgressing linguistic and conceptual boundaries, it insists that, although some things may exist only in an ideal sense, this does not make them any less important.[30]

In presenting the abstract as real, magic realist fiction can be related to a number of theories from the field of epistemology which similarly argue that reality cannot be restricted to the empirically perceivable. Interestingly enough, such proposals can be found not only in approaches usually considered relativist. Karl Popper, self-declared objectivist by trade,[31] has equally maintained that thoughts and concepts need to be regarded as real. Popper proposes an epistemological scheme that divides reality into three ontologically distinct sub-worlds: world 1 is the world of physical objects and states, world 2 is the world of the mind, or mental states, and world 3 is the world of ideas in an objective sense, which include theories, arguments, problems, logic, and language in its signifying function (see *ibid.*, 106-107 and 154). Because ideas in the objective sense have clearly observable repercussions on physical reality, they must be regarded as real: "That the third world is not a fiction but exists 'in reality' will become clear when we consider its tremendous effect on the first world" (*ibid.*, 159). In asserting the independent

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[30] In form and effect, the list-technique is comparable to a strategy used in Grass' *The Tin Drum*, where figures of speech are partially literalized by being juxtaposed to literal expressions: "Mama schüttete mich aus und saß dennoch mit mir in einem Bade [....] Sie setzte sich manchmal ins Unrecht, obgleich es ringsherum Stühle genug gab. Auch wenn Mama sich zuknöpfte, blieb sie mir aufschlußreich. Mama fürchtete die Zugluft und machte dennoch ständig Wind" (*Die Blechtrommel*, 132). The translation reads: "Mama would throw me out with the bath water, and yet she would share my bath [....] Sometimes she put her foot in it even when there were plenty of safe places to step [....] Even when Mama buttoned up, she was an open book to me. Mama feared draughts but was always stirring up a storm" (*The Tin Drum*, 157).

[31] See the Preface to *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* (1972), Oxford, 1973.

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existence of a world of ideas, Popper's scheme recalls magic realism's argument that a conception of reality cannot reasonably be confined to the empirical.

Popper's world 3 of objectively existing ideas furthermore lays the philosophical groundwork for magic realism's insistence that even while ideas, concepts and language must be acknowledged as real, at the same time they are only human constructions. Popper stresses that, unlike Plato's divine and unchanging world of Ideas, world 3 consists of human creations, even if not all of these creations came about intentionally, as for example in the case of language (see *ibid.*, 112-23 and 158ff.). However, Popper argues that this in no way keeps world 3 from being autonomous, for ideas can become independent from their makers. This is illustrated by the sequence of natural numbers, which, though created by humans, "creates its own autonomous problems in its turn", such as the distinction between odd and even numbers, or prime numbers, which are "unintended autonomous and objective facts" (*ibid.*, 188; also 160). Language is another instance in point. As Saussure pointed out, although it is of human making, it nevertheless exists independently, as can be seen by the fact that it cannot be changed at will.[32]

Magic realist fiction continues to argue for the importance of the immaterial when it externalizes psychological processes and phenomena. I will discuss externalization as a separate category, although there is no clear-cut line dividing it from the literalization of metaphor or concretization of the abstract. However, I would suggest that in externalizations of the psychological, semantic oddness generally is less pronounced than in the other two cases, and the technique is made less self-consciously transparent, as the examples below will show.

Many of magic realism's fantastic elements arise when the text presents as material fact something which, in a realist context, would be rejected as "mental" (probably in more than one sense of the word). Although it is tempting to recontextualize these elements as mere impressions, wishful thinking, or the projection of dreams and fears, magic realist fiction characteristically insists that they must be taken at face value – on the level of the text, they are real, no matter how easily recognizable they may be as products of the mind.

This is the case in *Wild Nights*, where the child narrator reports how her parents' house alters its appearance to fit the occasion. With the

[32] See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (original French edition, 1916), trans. Wade Baskin, New York, 1966, 71ff.

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imminent arrival of autumn and Aunt Zita,[33] the house changes its shape and rearranges its interior according to the latter's sentiments and memories. When the family ghosts re-enact a baptism scene in the entrance hall, the room obligingly imitates a Victorian church: "the hall had grown even taller, and had sucked in its windows to a religious shape" (29). And when the house is to be closed up for the family's annual trip to the south, it seems to take delight in exasperating the housekeeper, deviously turning into a veritable maze and producing for cleaning "rooms that appeared only when the house was to be abandoned" (*ibid.*, 107), thereby probably confirming secret suspicions long harboured by many a harassed housewife. The clouds of butterflies that mysteriously appear at the end of winter are even more transparently presented as the externalization of a psychological condition: "Straight out of my mother's longing for the south, they flew out of cupboards and dropped limply to the floor before going into flight" (*ibid.*, 109). Considering the focalizer's tender years, it might seem tempting to dismiss all these strange occurrences as mere figments of a childish imagination, thereby reconciling the text to realism. But this would be too simple. For in presenting the psychological as real, the text stresses just how relevant subjective impressions, dreams or fears are to an individual's perception of reality.

The environment again mirrors human sentiment in *Midnight's Children*, where Indira Gandhi's emergency rule produces an endless midnight (see 422 and 428), a claim Saleem later makes transparent as a form of literalization when he admits that his "presentation of the Emergency in the guise of a six-hundred-and-thirty-five-day-long midnight was perhaps excessively romantic, and certainly contradicted by the available meteorological data" (443). In Hodgins' *The Invention of the World*, the mist that envelops the village of Carrigdhoun for an entire year can similarly be read as an externalization of the villagers' loss of certainty after Donal Keneally's departure (see 137ff.). And in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the four years, eleven months and two days of rain that follow the banana company massacre are blamed on the head of the company: with deliberate ambiguity, the text speaks of "the night that Mr Brown unleashed the storm" (339).

In implying a direct connection between the human mind, or the ethics of human action, and the realm of nature, magic realist fiction can be seen to take up a magical mode of thought that dominated Europe

[33] The text strongly suggests that Aunt Zita can be read as a personification of autumn and winter storms (see 60 and 110).

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until the Renaissance and was based on the medieval system of correspondences. These beliefs are amply reflected in Renaissance literature; take *Macbeth*, where Duncan's murder most tellingly coincides with, or rather, provokes a savage storm and an earthquake.[34] E.M.W. Tillyard stresses that, to an Elizabethan audience, such correspondences would not have been merely a matter of symbolism, or at least not entirely; they were "metaphor strengthened by literal belief".[35]

Another interesting example of externalization can be found in Marina Warner's magic realist short story "Ariadne after Naxos". The setting appears to be a contemporary one (indicated by the use of plastic rubbish bags),[36] but at the same time the story has a curiously timeless quality, retaining a strong mythological flavour. Drawing on Ovid's account of the Minotaur's tale in his *Metamorphoses*, the story is told by Ariadne, who, having been deserted by her lover T., is completely disillusioned with men and decides to stay on the island of women where T. left her and her daughter. Here, Ariadne surprisingly comes upon her brother the Minotaur, who had not been killed, only wounded. Repulsed but also fascinated, Ariadne makes the Minotaur her constant friend and companion. Detailed and vivid description lends the beast the concrete physical presence typical of magic realism's fantastic elements. In the course of the narrative, however, it becomes clear that the beast is to be read as a reification of the narrator's enmity towards men. The narrator's reference to the Minotaur as "my monster" directs the reader back to the beginning of the story, where the narrator had already drawn a parallel between her "deformed, slobbery brother" and "the monster of [her] misanthropy", which, like the Minotaur, she had believed tamed by the heroic T. (*ibid.*, 110, 103 and 104). The beast is made increasingly transparent as a literalization of Ariadne's emotions also on the level of plot: as the narrator mulls over the wrongs T. has done her, the Minotaur grows bigger and bigger – not in size, but in compact weight, becoming increasingly dense and solid until the earth begins to shake. By contrast, he diminishes and finally disappears when she falls in love and departs with a male visitor, causing her to observe: "I'd shed him, my other self, my monster of loathing" (*ibid.*, 118).[37]

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[34] See *Macbeth*, II.iii and iv.

[35] E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943), Harmondsworth, 1978, 100.

[36] See *The Mermaids in the Basement*, 107.

[37] In most versions of the myth, Ariadne marries Dionysos. Using the god's Roman name, Ovid writes: "and she,/ Abandoned, in her grief and anger found/ Comfort in Bacchus' arms" (*Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville, Oxford and New York, 1986, 176).

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Externalizing Ariadne's misanthropy in the form of a beast allows the text to explore aspects of Ariadne's experience which might have been difficult to express directly without turning the story into a psychologist's report. It illustrates how Ariadne at first is frightened by her hatred of men, but gradually grows used to it and feels comforted by it. It also shows that this comfort is an illusion, for allowing her hatred to become dominant ultimately threatens destruction. Finally, the technique once again stresses the reality of a plight sceptics might dismiss as existing only in the mind.

The "other self" is externalized also in *The Invention of the World*, where the adolescent Donal Keneally turns into a pair of twins, one of whom is docile, hardworking and well-liked by the whole village, whereas the other is nothing but a troublemaker, chasing girls, drinking and flying into rages (see 110ff.). After some time, Donal breaks the spell by hitting his brother, and the two reunite. Though the split is presented as factual, the text hints that it can also be read as a literalization of psychological theories which construct adolescence as a period of identity crisis, allowing adolescents to try out different, even mutually exclusive roles before integrating them into a more or less coherent ensemble.[38]

In suggesting that the processes of the psyche are just as important as a person's material environment, magic realist fiction takes a position increasingly found also in contemporary Western medicine, especially in fields concerned with alternative methods of healing. But even established school medicine, which traditionally differentiated quite sharply between the physiological and the psychological, has begun to acknowledge the manifold and complex connections between body and mind that become manifest in psychosomatic illness. As has already been suggested in Chapter 5, this holistic approach to a certain extent recalls earlier theories of medicine, which still regarded body and mind as a unity. Looking back might prove enlightening with respect to magic realism's technique of literalization, for medieval and Renaissance medicine still treated as literal or concrete what nowadays would be regarded as merely figurative or abstract. The term "humour" for instance referred not only to a disposition of character, but also to the bodily liquid regarded as the cause of the corresponding disposition; melancholy was both a state of mind and the black bile that could give

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Warner's story adapts this part of the tale also metaphorically, for prior to the advent of the stranger, Ariadne had developed a drinking problem.

[38] See Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, New York, 1968, esp. Chapter I 7.

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rise to psychological as well as bodily symptoms.[39] The gradual dissolution of the realms of body and mind is traced by Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilization*, which examines how, towards the end of the eighteenth century, insanity began to be treated as purely mental disease, whereas previously it had been attributed to organic defects that could be cured by physical means (see 161-63 and 178-83).

The notion of a return to earlier or alternative patterns of thought will play a role in the following section as well, for magic realist fiction can profitably be related to pre-Enlightenment and non-Western conceptions also in its reification of language. At the same time, the technique irresistibly calls to mind some of the most recent and fashionable theoretical reflections, the reality of language – or rather, the linguistic nature of reality – looming large in postmodernist and post-structuralist theory. Finally, magic realism's materialization of language can also be related to psychological theories on children's acquisition of language and their perception of reality.

Variations on literalization II: the reification of language

In a striking extension of the literalization of metaphor, magic realist fiction frequently treats language as though it possessed a material presence of its own. In this, it recalls both the tall tale and many works of postmodern fiction, which likewise often play with the reification of language.[40] As in the case of the abstract rendered concrete, the text creates a linguistic context which endows language with semantic features usually restricted to physical objects, such as tangibility or visibility. Once again, such constructions will be perceived as semantically odd, causing the reader to hesitate.

Midnight's Children reifies language when it takes the notion that words can inflict wounds literally, claiming one of the midnight's children to be so sharp-tongued that several victims of her wit "[find] themselves bleeding freely as a result of some barb flung casually from her lips" (198). In *Shame*, Iskander Harappa's swearing amounts to a physical attack: "The obscenity of his language inflicted stinging blows, Shuja felt them piercing his skin" (237). Once again, *Shame* enforces literalization to a lesser degree than *Midnight's Children*, a purely figurative reading

[39] See Tillyard, 76-77.

[40] See for example Woody Allen's short story "The Kugelmass Episode" (1977), which closes with the protagonist being pursued by a hairy, spindly-legged Spanish verb (in *The Norton Anthology of Contemporary Fiction*, ed. Ronald Verlin Cassill, New York, 1988, 10-19).

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remaining an option. Nevertheless, both texts argue the same point, namely that language can inflict as much harm as physical weapons. The point is strikingly underlined by the fact that the addressee of Iskander Harappa's harangue, unable to bear the verbal violence, takes a gun and shoots his attacker (*ibid.*, 237-38).

Language is potentially physically dangerous also in Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989). Though the novel is not part of my text corpus, the passage about words cluttering up the London sky nicely illustrates magic realism's reification of language:

> [The] words, rising up, form a thick cloud over the city, which every so often must be thoroughly cleansed of too much language. Men and women in balloons fly up from the main square and, armed with mops and scrubbing brushes, do battle with the canopy of words trapped under the sun.
>
> The words resist erasure. The oldest and most stubborn form a thick crust of chattering rage. Cleaners have been bitten by words still quarrelling, and in one famous lawsuit a woman whose mop had been eaten and whose hand was badly mauled by a vicious row sought to bring the original antagonists to court. The men responsible made their defence on the grounds that the words no longer belonged to them. Years had passed. Was it their fault if the city had failed to deal with its overheads? The judge ruled against the plaintiff but ordered the city to buy her a new mop. She was not satisfied, and was later found lining the chimneys of her accused with vitriol.[41]

The cloud of words is not all bad: in between the quarrels and the swearing, one also comes across love-sighs and sonnets (*ibid.*, 18). But even the language of love can prove overwhelming, as in the case of the two lovers in the church:

> Their effusion of words, unable to escape through the Saturnian discipline of lead, so filled the spaces of the loft that the air was all driven away. The lovers suffocated, but when the sacristan opened the tiny door the words tumbled him over in their desire to be free, and were seen flying across the city in the shapes of doves. (*Ibid.*, 19)

The visualizing of words as material objects can be understood as the literalization of a pervasive structural metaphor of the English language (and probably others, too): the conduit metaphor, which conceives of

[41] Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), London, 1996, 17-18.

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words as containers in which to send ideas to a recipient.[42] The message accordingly becomes a kind of parcel in *Indigo*: "Sycorax's lips moved and something floated into the air and was gathered by Ariel" (137). Literalization here draws attention to the metaphorical dimension of the term "to gather" when used in the sense of "to understand".

The message-equals-parcel metaphor appears slightly modified also in *The Moor's Last Sigh*. A curse uttered by Moraes' paternal grandmother "flew into the air like a startled chicken and hovered there a long while, as if uncertain of its intended destination", with Moraes' own birth eighteen years later being the point at which "the chicken came home to roost" (72 and 73). Adapting a cartoon convention, the novel furthermore comically reifies words as writing that remains suspended in the air. Eagerly welcomed to India by a host of Indian Lenin-impersonators, the visiting Russian Lenin-double flies into an insulted rage, whereupon "Leninist vituperations issued from his mouth and hung in the air above his head in Cyrillic script" (*ibid.*, 31). From thence, they must be collected by the interpreter and passed on to the Indian crowd.

In *Shame*, violent language shows its materiality by causing perturbation and discolouring of the air. Old Mr Shakil spews forth "long passages of obscenity, oaths and curses of a ferocity that made the air boil violently around his bed", and Iskander Harappa on his campaigning tour "allowed the air to turn green with obscenity", while his curses in detention result in "wisps of blue smoke emerging through the keyhole" (11, 125 and 225). In an analogous fashion, the air turns blue with Gorgeous George's bawdy jokes in *Wise Children*.[43] Words once more take on the quality of objects when unspoken resentment physically disfigures Bilquis Hyder, the words "fill[ing] up her mouth, making it puff up into a pout" (*Shame*, 67).

In its reification of language, magic realist fiction can be seen to undertake a re-evaluation of a Western tradition which, since the early days of modernity, has tried to demarcate sharply between the realm of words and the realm of things. Michel Foucault has argued that from the seventeenth century on, a shift took place from a medieval, basically magical outlook that still merged words and things to rational-empirical paradigms of representation and signification:

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[42] See Michael J. Reddy, "The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict in Our Language about Language" (1979), in Ortony, 164-201. See also Lakoff and Johnson, Chapter 3.

[43] See 65. It should be noted that the text here allows a figurative reading.

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> The profound kinship of language with the world was thus dissolved [....] Things and words were to be separated from one another.[44]

The Enlightenment distinction between ideas and material reality becomes visible in Locke's warning not to confuse the sign and the referent: "Another great *abuse of Words is, the taking them for Things*" (Locke, 497; emphasis in the original). However, this rational-empirical focus on material reality has led to language being dismissed as a mere fiction. Barred from the order of the real, language becomes irrelevant; compared to the empirical realm, language is "just words", which come in for secondary consideration at best.

That, at least, is the official version. It has in fact been suggested that, regardless of the parole given out by the rational-empirical world-view, notions of a sympathetic connection between language and reality have continued to inform Western thinking. In the 1920s, Ogden and Richards complained that "in some ways the twentieth century suffers more grievously than any previous age from the ravages of such verbal superstitions", and that "the persistence of the primitive linguistic outlook not only throughout the whole religious world, but in the work of the profoundest thinkers, is indeed one of the most curious features of modern thought" (38 and 39). The persistence of magical thought in Western culture will be examined more closely in Chapter 8.

Trying to correct the rational-empirical world-view's myopic focus on material reality, contemporary theoreticians have argued that one cannot ignore the vital role language plays in human perceptions and constructions of reality, as well as in social interaction. Apart from being seen to provide the structural metaphors and conceptual categories that are prerequisite to any knowledge of the world, language has also been theorized as an instrument of power and oppression (see Foucault 1981). The connection between language and power particularly informs the postcolonial debate about who can participate in social and political processes.[45] Furthermore, language, especially in the form of narrative, has been seen as an important means of constructing individual as well as collective identities (as mentioned in Chapter 5).

Magic realist fiction takes part in the linguistic turn of twentieth-century philosophy and theory, using techniques of literalization to close

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[44] *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (*Les Mots et les Choses*, 1966), London, 1970, 43.

[45] See for example Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Basingstoke, 1988, 271-313.

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the gap between the word and the world. In its own way, it argues for the need to recognize the very real force that language constitutes on both a psychological and a socio-political level. However, especially postmodern literary theory is taken up not altogether without irony. In *Falstaff*, Fastolf's excessive emphasis on the fact that reality exists only in and through his narrative borders on parody. When one of his scribes dares to doubt his truthfulness, Fastolf simply deletes him:

> I create you. You are my man. Go. I write you out of my book. You're gone. You're nothing. (118)

However, Fastolf's imperious notion of the author as *auctor* is comically undercut when his figures rebel: the scribe Stephen Scrope for instance deprives the reader of some episodes by simply inserting his own discourse (see *Falstaff*, Chapters 78, 81, 88 and 90).

Leaving the realm of contemporary theory behind, magic realism's reification of language can also be related to pre-rational conceptions of language.[46] The "kinship of language with the world" (to return to Foucault's formulation) that prevailed in pre-Enlightenment times becomes visible in the functions ascribed to language by magic and religion. Both modes of thought postulate a factual connection between language and reality. Words are granted the power to alter or even create reality; linguistic manipulation is tantamount to empirical intervention. This becomes manifest in the treatment of names, which in many belief systems are regarded as extensions of the things themselves and so may be abused as instruments of power and control. In the Book of Genesis, Adam's dominion over the newly created world expresses itself in his right to name all the things it contains; indeed, his naming can almost be regarded as second act of creation. Similarly, in a number of creation myths the world is brought forth from chaos or nothingness when someone, or something, first utters the names of all the things in it.[47] In many cultures, individuals seek to keep their names from being spoken

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[46] Of course, postmodern theory has likewise been understood as a "return" to older conceptions. Maureen Quilligan finds it to have a rather pronounced medieval streak (see 157-58), while Umberto Eco has discovered all the paradigmatic features of the postmodern in old hermetic texts (see "Il discorso alchemico e il segreto differito", in *I limiti dell'interpretazione*, Milano, 1990, 71-85; a German translation is included in *Die Grenzen der Interpretation*, trans. Günter Memmert, Munich and Vienna, 1992).

[47] This is the case in the cosmogonic myth of the Maori, although in being transcribed the myth may have been contaminated by Christian beliefs (see Dirk Vanderbeke, *Worüber man nicht sprechen kann: Aspekte der Undarstellbarkeit in Philosophie, Naturwissenschaft und Literatur*, Stuttgart, 1995, 122 and 203-204, n. 78). See also Horton, 155.

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or even from being known, lest someone else gain power over them. This is illustrated by a number of European folk and fairy tales, where knowing the name allows the adversary to be defeated, as for example in "Rumpelstiltskin". Often, the names of gods are secret or must not be pronounced (see Ogden and Richards, 136ff.). Equally widespread is the belief that to speak the name of a spirit or demon is to conjure it, which may tie in with the fact that in many cultures the names of the deceased are taboo.[48]

Going beyond names in a strict sense, there is the superstition that speaking of a dreaded event will cause it to happen, unless immediate precautionary measures are taken, such as "knocking on wood". As these measures are not directed at the event itself, but against the verbal magic one might have inadvertently practised, they might easily strike non-believers as completely absurd. The "power of words" is further illustrated by the ubiquity of sacred or secret vocabularies and verbal taboos in general, as well as the prominence of spells and incantations in magical rituals. Notably, such beliefs in the power of words to transform reality are by no means restricted to cultures generally seen to adhere to a magical world-view. They also have a living tradition in the Western world, for example in the Christian doctrine of transubstantiation, according to which the priest's words literally transform the bread and wine into Christ's body.

Closely related to these notions there is yet another conception of language to which magic realist fiction's technique of reification can be related: that which psychologists have attributed to children. The reasons for the perceived overlap are quite similar to the ones discussed in Chapter 4, for children's attitude towards language is – at least according to a number of psychological studies – an inherently magical one. Piaget maintains that, before the age of eleven, children do not distinguish thoughts from the things thought of, nor words from the things named. Dreams are in the same way regarded as physically real (see Piaget 1997, 54-60). Moreover, thought itself is seen as a material thing that can exert material action on other things or persons, a notion that strikingly recalls the examples of reified language discussed above. The child's "nominal realism" (*ibid.*, Chapter 2), that is, the belief that names inherently belong to and mirror the essence of a thing, once more illustrates the similarity between magical conceptions and Piaget's construction of children's

[48] See Sigmund Freud, *Totem und Tabu: Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker* (1991; individual essays 1912/13), Frankfurt am Main, 1998, 105ff.; also 132.

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understanding of language. As in the case of literalized metaphors, using a child focalizer allows the magic realist text to introduce magical elements in an apparently quite natural fashion.

Moving beyond reification in the strict sense, magic realist fiction reworks magical and postmodern conceptions of language also in instances where language is seen to bring forth reality. Mixing magical beliefs and poststructuralist theory, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* humorously testifies to language's powers of creation when the inhabitants of Macondo, beset by the insomnia plague, try to counteract gradual but inevitably total amnesia by pasting name signs onto every object in the village. Unfortunately, the inhabitants may also be expected to forget how to read and write, at which point reality would, for all practical purposes, disappear. Luckily, a remedy is provided in the nick of time (see 51ff.). In *The Satanic Verses*, Rosa Diamond interprets the sudden appearance of shapes on the beach as the direct result of her having whispered her old lover's name, "as if the forbidden name had conjured up the dead" (138). Although in this instance the ghosts turn out to be policemen, the other figures invoked by Rosa's "narrative sorcery" are real, at least to Gabriel (*ibid.*, 148).

The topos of narration as a form of magic is an old one and has been reworked a number of times. Given the name of the mode, it is little surprising that critics should have felt inspired to apply the topos to magic realism, though in some cases the argument does not go beyond semantic association.[49] Magic realist writers have been seen to attempt a kind of "textual magic", paradoxically intending the magical elements to create a greater sense of reality than realism could.[50] Conversely, it has been suggested that magic realism debunks the "magic" that literary and historical realism practice in trying to "conjure up" reality.[51] Yet again a different aspect of the topos is investigated by Jorge Luis Borges in his essay "Narrative Art and Magic", to which I will return in more detail in Chapter 8.

In *The Late Mr Shakespeare*, Pickleherring invokes the topos of narration as magic when he muses whether there is a causal connection between his intention to write of fire and the outbreak of the Great Fire

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[49] This is the case for example with Luis Leal, "Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature" (Spanish version, 1967), trans. Wendy B. Faris, in Zamora and Faris, 122.

[50] See Scott Simpkins, "Sources of Magic Realism/Supplements to Realism in Contemporary Latin American Literature", in Zamora and Faris, 145ff.

[51] See Bényei, 155ff. Bényei further argues that "magic realism uses certain structuring principles of the 'magical' world view, that is, a number of its textual strategies can metaphorically be called 'magical'" (Bényei, 159). Unfortunately, he does not elaborate.

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of 1666. Though initially presented as literal, the idea quickly acquires a pronounced figurative dimension, for Pickleherring's suspicion that "what I write comes true" is valid only insofar as things must be put into words before they can be understood. It is by giving form to events and providing patterns that literature creates reality:

> So it seems to me that what I have in mind to write may already be the truth, but that I make it true by my writing of it. And this has been my task right from the beginning: to make truth come true. Mr Shakespeare did no less in his plays and poems. Much of what he put on the stage proved strangely prophetic. *Macbeth* says much about Cromwell, and *King Lear* prefigures poor King Charles I – the king hunted, like an animal, through his own land. The late Civil Wars are everywhere foreshadowed in Shakespeare's imaginings.

In this passage, Nye's novel also hints at yet another, slightly more literal sense in which literature may create reality. In addition to rendering the world accessible to human understanding, literature also serves to communicate new ideas and perspectives and may thereby have repercussions on the level of social and political reality. Nye's narrator in the end leaves the efficacy of such narrative "magic" open, asking ambiguously: "Can a word set the world on fire?" (383). However, there are surely enough examples from history that show how effective both literature and film can be in propagating ideas as well as actions to make Pickleherring's question a purely rhetorical one.

When the past is made present: a note on ghosts in magic realist fiction

> "Do not ghosts prove – even rumours, whispers, stories of ghosts – that the past clings, that we are always going back?"
>
> – *Waterland*, 103

I want to conclude this chapter by reading the many ghosts that haunt magic realist fiction as one further type of literalization.[52] Through ghosts, the texts make the past become part of the present in a very immediate way, thereby exemplifying the tremendous influence that the past exerts over the human mind and over an individual's perception of the present. Of course, this is only one of many conceivable ways in

[52] For a different reading, see Zamora, 497-550.

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which ghosts can be read as instances of literalization. They might equally be discussed as externalizations of the psychological, or, if equated with the concept of the past, as instances of the abstract made concrete. However, magic realism's use of ghosts to emphasize the importance of personal and collective histories is so noticeable that it deserves consideration under a separate heading.

Once again, literalization is rendered transparent. The strategy is made explicit already in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where in Rebeca and José Arcadio's house "memories materialized through the strength of implacable evocation and walked like human beings through the cloistered rooms". The materiality of the past is further underlined by the fact that Rebeca, having searched for peace all her life, finds it not in material possessions or physical relationships, but in her memories, which to her are so immediate that the world becomes unreal. When Colonel Aureliano Buendía comes to call on Rebeca, she feels "as if he were the one who looked like a ghost out of the past" (172).

In a number of magic realist texts, ghosts are self-consciously identified as the all too real offspring of a guilty conscience. As Rosa Diamond so pithily observes in *The Satanic Verses*:

> What's a ghost? Unfinished business, is what. (129; also 540)

Accordingly, the material intrusion of figures and scenes from Rosa's past into the London present can be seen to arise directly from the final confession she makes to ease her guilt (see *ibid.*, 149-56). For Gabriel, the ghost of Rheka Merchant similarly takes on the role of conscience personified when she berates him for driving her to suicide.[53] In William Kennedy's *Ironweed*, the ghosts of the many people Francis Phelan killed clearly are conjured by his attempts finally to come to terms with his past. Their status as materialized memories is made explicit when Francis addresses the whole crowd:

> You ain't nothin' more than a photograph, you goddamn spooks. You ain't real and I ain't gonna be at your beck and call no more. (177)

Tony Morrison's *Beloved* makes the technique of literalization even more transparent when it characterizes the figure of Beloved as "past errors taking possession of the present".[54]

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[53] See *ibid.*, 7, 26 and 200ff.; for Rheka Merchant's story, see 14-15 and 26ff.
[54] *Beloved* (1987), London, 1997, 256-57.

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However, although the texts themselves deliberately point to the ghosts' figurative dimension, this does not mean that the supernatural spectres can be recontextualized. For all that even the characters are aware of the psychological mechanisms underlying their ghosts, these cannot be dismissed as mere outcrops of the mind, but must be accepted as part of reality. Francis Phelan's attempt to exorcise the "spooks" through rationalization fails to make them disappear (see *Ironweed*, 180-81). In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar also continues to appear to Úrsula and José Arcadio Buendía, despite the fact that the latter, having killed his friend Prudencio in a fight, quite rationally puts the sightings down to a guilty conscience (see 24ff.). By insisting on the literal presence of the past, magic realist fiction exemplifies how one's preoccupation with bygone events can become so great as to make the past just as real as the present, if not more so.

Magic realist fiction suggests that the past-made-present can take on a number of different functions. As the above examples illustrate, it may provide an opportunity to confront and settle one's guilt. However, the past may also come to dominate, causing individuals to relinquish their grip on the present. Towards the end of his life, José Arcadio Buendía mistakes everyone for the ghost of Prudencio Aguilar, and Sethe in *Beloved* becomes so obsessed with pampering what she takes to be the ghost of her baby daughter that she completely loses contact with everyday life.[55] In other texts, the past is less overwhelming. The ghosts may simply accompany the living, as in the case of the bag containing the bones of Rebeca's parents, which "for a long time [...] got in the way everywhere and would be found where least expected, always with its clucking of a broody hen".[56] In *Wise Children*, the "ghost" of the British Empire haunts Gorgeous George in the form of a raspberry-red map on his torso; Britain's colonial past has indelibly inscribed itself on the body of the colonizer, eternally recalling itself to memory (see 66-67).

On a more positive note, the past may also provide a sense of continuity and orientation. In *Wise Children*, Grandma Chance's ghost manifests itself through footsteps and smells, flickering light bulbs, hats leaping from shelves, and clothes tumbling out of closets (see 28, 186 and 189ff.). For the Chance twins, their grandmother's posthumous presence provides counsel and consolation in affairs both mundane and philosophical. It recalls them to their vegetarian upbringing when, during a TV cooking-programme featuring a dish of hare, it bombards them

[55] See *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 84ff. and 152; and *Beloved*, esp. 239ff.
[56] *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 46.

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with "a sharp blast of cabbage" (*ibid.*, 181). And the poltergeist-like emptying-out of the wardrobe tells them not to submit to nostalgia and self-pity, but to give life their best shot, even at seventy-five (see *ibid.*, 190). The past is a source of insight and moral support also in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where the ghost of Melquíades over the course of several years imparts his learning to Aureliano Segundo (see 200-201). In *Like Water for Chocolate*, Tita similarly receives guidance and reassurance from the ghost of Nacha, the old woman who raised her, whereas the ghost of Tita's mother once again functions as an externalized guilty conscience (see 68, 114 and 219; 157-58, 160 and 179-80).

The past proves a somewhat more problematic source of orientation in *Wild Nights*, where the ghosts of family members move among the living almost continuously, forever re-enacting scenes from the family history. This constant awareness of the past for the most part is perceived as oppressive and inhibiting. The narrator, finding herself ignored by the ghosts of her paternal grandmother and aunts, complains that "from the grave their disapproval washed over my mother and myself" (29). The past is exploited as an instrument of punishment when the narrator's frustrated mother invokes the family ghosts to remind her husband and Aunt Zita of their eldest brother's tragic death. Unfortunately, this strategy to a certain extent backfires: "Once summoned, the long-dead relations never entirely went away, and after her first anguish at coming up against the past, Aunt Zita would introduce them and laugh in triumph at my mother's confusion" (*ibid.*, 34). As visible reminders of the past, the ghosts also prevent the advent of a progressive way of life in the village; laughing at the newfangled appliances of modern living, they bring about a return to traditional ways (see *ibid.*, 64). What is more, the narrator's family strategically uses its ghosts to uphold the social and political structures that empowered them:

> If Aunt Zita was there it was hard to get rid of [the family ghosts] – and in those times, when there was talk of land belonging to everybody, and the valley no more under the long entails of my father's grandfather, my father was as much responsible for the restoration of his family as she was. (*Ibid.*, 65)

Its constraining effects are partially offset by the fact that a past may also prove enabling, endowing the individual with a sense of identity. This function of the past is emphasized in *The Passion*, where Villanelle, other

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characters' scepticism notwithstanding, nostalgically affirms a need for history:

> There is a certainty that comes with the oars, with the sense of generation after generation standing up like this and rowing like this with rhythm and ease. This city is littered with ghosts seeing to their own. No family would be complete without its ancestors.
>
> Our ancestors. Our belonging. The future is foretold from the past and the future is possible because of the past. Without past and future, the present is partial. (62ff.)

The identity-bestowing function of the past is exemplified also in *Midnight's Children*, where Saleem has to discover that denying one's past is not satisfactory, but leads into madness, as I have shown in Chapter 4. In the end, Saleem realizes that one's past is the key to understanding oneself, the present, and even the future:

> I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each "I", every one of the now six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. (383)

Although Tennant's novel remains considerably more ambivalent on this point, it also acknowledges that history is not only a burden, but also a privilege, one that is denied to the family's kennel keepers: "Willie and Minnie were allowed no ghosts" (*Wild Nights*, 82). While they might be considered fortunate in that they "had only their own youth to haunt them" (*ibid.*, 82ff.), their lack of ghosts paradoxically deprives them of substance, rendering them less material even than the narrator's family's ghosts:

> The real existence of the couple was more frail than the life in the corridors and rooms of the big house, where my father's Aunt Louisa, and his elder brother, and his mother who sat sewing when Aunt Zita came, had their names in porcelain by the bells that rang at their command in the basement. (*Ibid.*, 83)

By contrast, the kennel keepers do not even have their names listed in the house directory – they exist solely as a number. *Wild Nights* here illustrates the extent to which the issue of history is intertwined with that

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of identity, critically revealing how a potentially positive function of the past can at the same time be abused as an instrument of social domination.

In its differentiated critique, Tennant's novel engages with some of the same issues as do postcolonial theory and writing, which likewise regard history as an ambivalent force. On the one hand, history can be used to establish political power and validate a social hierarchy. Contemporary theory has laid bare enough of these mechanisms to make history, along with the notions of origin and authenticity, a very suspect matter indeed. At the same time, history is an important tool in the construction of personal and collective identity, and as such is practically indispensable to postcolonial concerns. Many works of postcolonial literature and criticism try to engage with this dilemma by affirming the importance of writing history while at the same time refusing to elevate it to the status of "History", emphasizing its provisional and plural nature. Postcolonialism's ambivalent attitude is mirrored in the works of Salman Rushdie, which employ the medium of history in manifold ways, only to warn against attaching too much importance to history. Rootlessness is problematic, but to cling blindly to invented roots is to diminish one's own possibilities. As the narrator of *Shame*, himself a historiographer, puts it: "Roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places" (86).

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Part Three:

Magic or Mimesis? Reading the Mode

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MAGIC OR MIMESIS? READING THE MODE

Attempts to grasp the specifics of magic realism almost invariably set out from the mode's deviations from traditional literary realism. And with good reason, for as the above analysis has shown, magic realist fiction in a variety of ways enters into a critical dialogue both with realism and the rational-empirical world-view that realism is based on.

And yet, despite the mode's departures from realism – or rather, because of them – writers and critics alike have overwhelmingly stressed the "mimetic quotient of magic realism".[1] Gabriel García Márquez, whose works have so prominently shaped the contemporary understanding of the mode, most decidedly objects to the assumption that his fictions in any way aim fantastically to surpass reality. As he sees it, magic realism's excesses are an attempt to capture a reality which he pronounces "in itself out of all proportion".[2] If magic realist fiction is in any way unrealistic, then because it falls too short, the writer's imagination being outstripped by the fantastic reality around him.[3]

Other magic realist writers have likewise rejected the label because of the divorce from reality that it implies. Jack Hodgins has categorically stated: "What I write is to me 'realistic', though not everyone thinks I'm describing 'reality'" (Hancock 1979, 48). His fellow Canadian Robert

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[1] *PMLA*, XCVIII/6 (November 1983), 1104.

[2] Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza and Gabriel García Márquez, *The Fragrance of Guava*, trans. Ann Wright, London, 1983, 60; quoted in Simpkins, 148.

[3] See Gabriel García Márquez, "Fantasia y creación artística en América Latina y el Caribe", *Texto crítico*, XIV (1979), 8; cited in Chanady 1986, 51 and n. 11. The argument strikingly recalls the one encountered in connection with the New Journalism in Chapter 6 above.

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Kroetsch has suggested that magic realism yields a more accurate portrayal of the world and the people who live in it than "some of those older conventions of realism, and of narrative, [which] really were deceiving us about our world".[4] And Salman Rushdie explains:

> I don't even really like the word fantasy as a description of that kind of non-naturalistic material in my books, because fantasy seems to contain that idea of whimsy and randomness, whereas I now think of it as a method of producing intensified images of reality – images which have their roots in observable, verifiable fact. (Haffenden, 246)

Neil Cornwell, referring to a slightly later statement of Rushdie's, concludes that "Rushdie would even argue that his work falls within 'realism'" because he finds the magic realist mode much better suited than traditional realism to represent contemporary reality (186). Paraphrasing Rushdie's argument, Cornwell writes: "The world is not what it seems and reality is not 'realistic' any more: therefore monsters may be required in books, to reflect our monstrous age."[5]

Analogous arguments pervade the critical debate, with the majority of critics firmly absolving magic realist fiction from the stigma of escapism. Zamora and Faris argue that, for all its resistance to literary realism and post-Enlightenment rational-empirical assumptions, "magical realism may be considered an extension of realism in its concern with the nature of reality and its representation" (6). Amaryll Chanady has suggested that magic realism "challenges realistic representation in order to introduce *poeisis* into *mimesis*", thereby restoring to the Aristotelian concept of mimesis an aspect that had been forfeited in realism's restriction to the imitation of a merely external reality (Chanady 1995, 130; see also 125). And Scott Simpkins has maintained that, paradoxically enough, magic realism's fantastic elements are intended to make the text approximate reality better than a realist text.

Simpkins here differentiates between two aspects: first, the mode is realistic in that it accurately reflects the bizarre occurrences of reality, and second, invention and fabulation offer a privileged access to reality not

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[4] Linda Kenyon, "A Conversation with Robert Kroetsch", *New Quarterly* (Waterloo, Ontario), V/1 (1985), 14; quoted in Delbaere 1992, 94.

[5] Cornwell, 243, n. 15. Cornwell is referring to a statement Rushdie made at The Watershed, Bristol, on 30 September 1988.

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available through classic realism (see Simpkins, 148-54). Echoing the latter point, numerous critics have argued that magic realism's fantastic elements actually function to heighten or amplify reality,[6] even though this strategy may backfire, magic realist writers inadvertently "providing precisely the exotic escape from reality desired by some of their Western readership" (Cooper, 32; see also Haffenden, 82 and 91). However, far from seeking to escape into an exotic utopia, authors employ the mode "just at the point when they have something particularly significant to say".[7] Geoff Hancock takes up the first argument when he claims that reality frequently is just as fantastic as magic realist texts suggest, and that the writer need only copy the world as it presents itself, an argument which, as I have pointed out, is not entirely unproblematic. Lori Chamberlain puts the same point somewhat more cautiously when she suggests that magic realism may be understood as a response to a world its inhabitants find increasingly incredible (9).

There are, then, two main lines of argument to be made out about what constitutes the mode's realism. While some writers and critics suggest that magic realism seeks faithfully to reproduce a fantastic extra-textual reality, others emphasize how the inclusion of non-realistic elements aims poetically to recreate the experience of living in the contemporary world. These different approaches agree, however, in their assessment of traditional literary realism as incapable of conveying an adequate impression of reality. Or, as a character in *Indigo* puts it rather more bluntly: "The great lie of the last two-hundred years has been the mistaken idea that realism is a way of telling the truth" (261).

Of course, this sentiment is not exclusive to magic realist writers and critics. In fact, they find themselves in time-honoured company, for long before postmodernist fiction set out rebelliously to brand literary realism as a "literature of exhausted possibility",[8] modernist writers had already declared the mode inadequate. In a backlash reaction against their great realist predecessors, they heralded new and transgressive modes as immeasurably more true to life. A writer and a critic, Virginia Woolf

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[6] See Cooper, 32; Delbaere-Garant 1995, 261; Haffenden, 92; and Foreman, 298.

[7] Delbaere-Garant 1995, 261. Strangely enough, Delbaere here excepts *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, implying that it abolishes not only the real, but the moral to boot. How she arrives at this conclusion about a novel which so obviously indicts the most brutal aspects of Colombian politics and colonialism is a complete mystery to me.

[8] John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion", *The Atlantic*, CCXX (August 1967), 29.

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vigorously chastised realism for its excessive use of description, arguing that no amount of extraneous detail will create characters that are "real, true, and convincing". In order to capture the reality of life, new modes of representation are needed. Crediting the young James Joyce with such an attempt at renewal, Woolf provocatively proclaims his iconoclastic *Ulysses* true realism: "If we want life itself, here surely we have it."[9]

Taking their cue from their predecessors, postmodernist writers have similarly sought to overcome what to them are worn out conventions. Challenging the concepts of coherence, causality, teleology and closure, the possibility of transparent representation and the referentiality of language, they ask in how far a literary mode based on these assumptions can be used to represent a reality felt to exhibit none of these features. Postmodernist fiction's "flights from realism"[10] have taken various forms, ranging from metafictional techniques to the more radical experimental strategies employed by writers like Raymond Federman or Ronald Sukenick, whose texts frequently dissolve grammatical structure and semantic meaning altogether.[11] A return to fantasy and the fantastic has been made out as one further avenue taken in the hope that it will lead not away from, but towards reality.

Likewise understanding magic realism as "a way out of [...] realism",[12] I will in Part Three explore two ways in which the mode can be seen to provide a realistic reflection of the extratextual world. Both draw on the analysis of magic realist techniques conducted in Part Two, showing how the different strategies, dissimilar though they may be, nevertheless contribute to a common end. Chapter 8 will offer a reading of magic realism as a fictional analogue of anthropological, sociological or psychological studies: like these, magic realism inquires into the workings of the human mind, though less on a theoretical level than through exemplification. In its findings, magic realist fiction concurs with a number of contemporary theoretical approaches. Chapter 9 will then take up the notion of magic realism as a reflection of a world that is increasingly per-

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[9] Virginia Woolf, "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (talk given 1924, first published 1952), and "Modern Fiction" (1925), in *Collected Essays*, London, 1966, I, 319 and II, 105 and 107. The collection is cited as Woolf 1966a, the essays as Woolf 1966b and 1966c, respectively.

[10] See the title of Marguerite Alexander's work.

[11] Under the term "surfiction", Raymond Federman includes minimalism and nihilism within metafiction (*Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow* [1975], Chicago, 1981, esp. 295).

[12] Hancock 1980, 12.

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ceived as fantastic. Going beyond the idea of mimesis as a more or less accurate reproduction of material reality, magic realist fiction seeks to recreate more fully the experience of living in a world where post-Enlightenment assumptions about plausibility and possibility no longer hold.

Before I start on Chapter 8, let me mention one way of linking magic realism to mimesis that will not enter into my discussion. It has been suggested that works of magic realist fiction produced by authors from non-Western cultures might be considered mimetic in that they are accepted as unproblematic reproductions of material reality by readers from those cultures. However, although Jean-Pierre Durix is undoubtedly right when he notes that what will be perceived as realistic depends on the reader's cultural background,[13] a point in fact exploited by magic realist fiction in its use of ex-centric focalizers, I think my analysis has sufficiently shown how magic realist texts themselves make such a reading impossible by quite deliberately disrupting any illusion of transparent reflection. Chapter 3 has demonstrated how magic realist texts point to and even play with the hesitation they engender, be it by encoding it on the level of plot or by self-consciously referring to it on a meta-level. The techniques of literalization discussed in Chapter 7 also show the traditional concept of mimesis to be inapplicable, for unlike the violation of cultural norms, the transgression of linguistic and conceptual conventions will disconcert every competent speaker of a language. This means that the magic realist text will be perceived as fantastic both by readers who adhere to a rational-empirical world-view and those who do not, if perhaps to differing degrees. It therefore becomes necessary to take a look at other ways in which magic realism might be regarded as a verisimilar mode.

[13] Durix, 46, 57 and 76.

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CHAPTER 8

MIMICKING THE MIND:
MAGIC REALISM AS AN INQUIRY INTO HUMAN THOUGHT

Legend becomes reality and fairy tales fact, stories make history, dreams and fears are tangible, and metaphors true. For all their apparent heterogeneity, the magic realist techniques examined above fulfil a similar function: each in their own way, they suggest that reality is not merely a matter of the physical senses and empirical observation, but that other, non-material factors such as language and belief also enter into human constructions of the world, and must therefore be acknowledged.

To interpret magic realist techniques in this way is not to suggest that magic realism seeks to propagate mystical or New Age beliefs in a transcendental reality, the existence of paranormal phenomena, or the viability of magic – far from it. As I have pointed out, any notion of uncritical faith is immediately undercut by the mode's ironic, self-conscious and subversive attitude; not the suspension, but the creation of disbelief is magic realism's hallmark, the constructed nature of knowledge its topic. Constructed knowledge is not automatically invalid: magic realist fiction argues that constructions may prove useful, provided they are recognized as such. But even if they are not, they must still be taken seriously because of the ways in which belief may shape reality.

Employed in what Angela Carter has called "the demythologising business",[1] magic realist fiction undertakes a rational inquiry into the

[1] See 161 above. See also Gina Wisker, "On Angela Carter", in *Gothic Horror: A Reader's Guide from Poe to King and Beyond*, ed. Clive Bloom, Basingstoke, 1998, 245.

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ways people rely on a multiplicity of meaning-making strategies in order to know and understand the world around them. Narratives from various walks of life, be it fairy tales, newspaper ads or television stereotypes, as well as the act of narration itself, linguistic structures and cognitive concepts, beliefs and magical modes of thought – all of these are shown to play a decisive role in how reality is perceived, both by the individual and within the community. To the extent that knowledge or belief is the basis for all human action, such constructions of reality must be taken into account if one wants to understand what makes people tick. Regardless of their empirical validity, they are real in their consequences for individual lives and society. Angela Carter has argued that "dreams [...] are in fact perfectly real: they are real as dreams, and they're full of real meaning as dreams", and that "there's a materiality to symbols and a materiality to imaginative life which should be taken quite seriously".[2] Jeanette Winterson has made the same point in an interview following the publication of *Gut Symmetries*:

> I think it would be very foolish not to take the irrational seriously. There are two ways of understanding reality. There is physical reality, the table, the chairs, the cars on the street – what appears to be the solid, knowable world, subject to proof, all around us. But there is also the reality of the psyche, imaginative reality, emotional reality, the things which are not subject to proof and never can be. We understand the world as oppositions: black/white, good/evil, male/female, mind/matter. What can be touched and what cannot be. But what's invisible to us is also so crucial for our own well-being or health.[3]

In rationally inquiring into the relevance of non-scientific modes of thought, magic realist fiction serves as an instrument of investigation much in the same manner as a number of theoretical disciplines. It thereby nicely ties in with two statements of Angela Carter's, who once said that "narrative is an argument stated in fictional terms" and, more specifically, fiction is "akin to anthropology, and to sociology as well".[4]

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[2] Haffenden, 82 and Olga Kenyon, *The Writer's Imagination: Interviews with Major International Women Novelists*, Bradford, 1992, 33.

[3] Laura Miller, "Rogue Element: The Salon Interview" (Interview with Jeanette Winterson), *Salon Magazine*, 6 December 1999, <http://www.salonmagazine.com/april97/winterson970428.html>.

[4] Haffenden 1985, 79 and 95. Actually, in the first instance Haffenden is quoting an earlier formulation of Carter's back at her, unfortunately without mentioning the original source. Carter, thus prompted, agrees that her narratives quite often are discussions of intellectual or philosophical ideas. They sometimes also take on the function of literary

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To understand disciplines like anthropology and sociology as magic realism's non-fictional analogues ties in with my argument that magic realist fiction presents alternative world-views without itself subscribing to them. As academic studies clearly show, an inquiry into marginalized modes of thought presupposes no mystical leanings or faith whatsoever on the part of the inquirer; they may be undertaken from a thoroughly rational and scientific perspective. Indeed, unless one wanted to incur the displeasure of a number of scientists and scholars, one does well to distinguish between the objects of investigation, which often are subsumed under the label "irrational", and the investigations themselves, which generally seek to conform to scientific and rational paradigms.[5]

That scholars researching into magic, paranormal phenomena, or similarly disreputable subjects sometimes fear being suspected of harbouring unscientific sympathies for their subject matter becomes visible in a certain defensiveness on their part. Not infrequently, such studies conscientiously justify their inquiries into realms that the scientific community generally regards as humbug. The argument they make is as simple as it is convincing, and essentially the same I have attributed to magic realist fiction: in trying to understand people, one cannot simply ignore what, to them, is real. Pointing to the persistence of magic even in contemporary Western cultures, Daniel Lawrence O'Keefe writes:

> I tend to feel, with Adorno, that the occult is "the metaphysics of the dopes." But I also think that dismissing magic as merely "superstitious" is a circular position and pointless. Is it not better to find out what magic is all about and why it persists?[6]

Keith Thomas similarly argues in the Introduction to *Religion and the Decline of Magic*:

> Astrology, witchcraft, magical healing, divination, ancient prophecies, ghosts and fairies, are all now rightly disdained by intelligent persons. But

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criticism, although this to her unpleasantly smacks of escapism: "Books about books is fun but frivolous."

[5] It goes without saying that some authors do subscribe to the world-view presented; publications on New Age mysticism, the paranormal, or the occult come to mind. The question is in how far these are accepted as scientific research.

[6] *Stolen Lightening: The Social Theory of Magic*, Oxford, 1982, xviii. The reference is to Theodor Adorno, "The Stars Down to Earth: The Los Angeles Times Astrology Column" and "Theses Against Occultism", *Telos*, Spring 1974, 13-90 and 7-12 (cited in O'Keefe, xxii, n. 24).

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> they were taken seriously by equally intelligent persons in the past, and it is the historian's business to explain why this was so. (ix)

Whether the belief in magic and similar systems is justified is a question seen to fall within the jurisdiction of other disciplines, although, as the above quotes show, scholars incline towards scepticism. The important point, however, is that many people still adhere to magical beliefs, allowing them fundamentally to shape the perception, thought and behaviour of individuals and communities.[7] Scholars have spoken of "the social reality of magic"; as an institution, it is a "total social fact".[8] Contemporary theory stresses that non-scientific beliefs exist not only in what have conventionally been called primitive cultures, but in all cultures, albeit to differing extent.[9] The argument that non-scientific modes of thought abound universally is made also by magic realist fiction, as becomes particularly conspicuous in many of the works discussed here, where the use of Western settings serves to undo the associations relegating magic to the non-Western world.

As a psychological or social construct that becomes real through its influence on human thought and behaviour, magic can be compared to a number of other cognitive concepts such as language or cognitive categories, which likewise are more than mere fictions insofar as they are implemented on the level of social and material reality. Philosophers of language and linguists have argued that metaphors, lying at the very heart of language and the conceptual system, exert so decisive an influence on human thought and action that they can be regarded as constitutive of reality (see Lakoff and Johnson, 146). Epistemologists have developed models of reality which, for analogous reasons, recognize the ideal as real: as I have already outlined in Chapter 7, Karl Popper proposes that language and ideas should be regarded as part of an autonomous ontological world, their reality being amply demonstrated by the effects they have on the physical world. The same argument can be rehearsed quite specifically with respect to narratives and narration, which, as cognitive tools and strategies of meaning-making, likewise have considerable effects on social and physical reality. Perhaps the analogy to magic becomes most visible here, for like magical beliefs, stories and rumours may become social facts even if they are demonstrably false, provided enough people believe in them.

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[7] On this point, see also Haarmann 1992, 24 and O'Keefe, 7.

[8] O'Keefe, xvii and 1; also 25-38. O'Keefe is here drawing on theories by Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss.

[9] See O'Keefe, esp. 458ff.; and Haarmann, 295-313.

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In the following sections, I will establish magic realist fiction as an analogue of theoretical approaches which suggest that, in seeking to understand the world, the human mind often takes recourse to modes of thought that lie outside the rational-empirical paradigm. Having already discussed the mode's overlap with theories of metaphor and language earlier, I will now concentrate on magical thought and narration as two of the main meaning-making strategies that magic realism investigates. The following section will outline studies which identify magical thought as a fundamental strategy of constructing reality. The subsequent section will then look at analogous proposals concerning narrative. In the final section of this chapter, examples from fiction will be used to illustrate how these issues and concerns reappear in magic realist texts.

In drawing parallels between fiction and theory, I am not suggesting a relationship of influence between certain theories, or even specific theoretical texts, and works of magic realism. It is not the aim of this study to inquire into magic realist authors' reading lists. I will treat magic realist fiction as a mode of inquiry in its own right, which conducts its investigation quite independently from theoretical disciplines, but whose findings may nevertheless profitably be compared to those of theoretical studies. My aim is not to reduce magic realism to a theoretical foundation, but to see it as part of a network of ideas, whose various components creatively reflect on one another.

Anthropological dispositions (I): the ongoing appeal of magical thought

In the Introduction to his social theory of magic, Daniel O'Keefe argues:

> the difference between modern and primitive societies is not that they had magic and we do not. The difference is that they accepted the magic around them, whereas we deny it. (xv)

Observing that in post-Enlightenment Western cultures magical thought has been driven underground time and again, only invariably to resurface, O'Keefe's study seeks to explain why magic persists even in today's scientifically-oriented societies (see *ibid.*, 458-520). Other studies have similarly noted the amazing tenacity of magical thought in the face of severe social marginalization (see Haarmann, *passim*). Jointly, they suggest that magical patterns of thought are more widespread in supposedly rational Western societies than is apparent at first glance.

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In diagnosing magical thought as a universal phenomenon, these studies radically contradict the assumption that contemporary Western societies will have no more truck with magic or superstition, having progressed from such presumably primitive stages into the enlightened age of scientific thought. At least this is suggested by nineteenth-century approaches such as that of Sir James Frazer, who maintained that "belief in magic [...] represents a ruder and earlier phase of the human mind, through which all the races of mankind have passed or are passing on their way to religion and science" (237). Looking back on more than two centuries of vociferous condemnation of magical thought, Frazer's evolutionary scheme is perhaps only the logical and self-confirming outcome of the establishment of a rational-scientific world-view. The question, however, is in how far the West's understanding of itself as pre-eminently rational was conditioned by factors and interests other than anthropological and sociological observations, for undeniably, this self-image was ideologically propitious, especially where colonization was concerned. Not only was the colonizer able to demarcate himself from the colonized Other, but, speaking from an ostensibly higher state of intellectual evolution, was also able to legitimate his claim to hegemony.

Regardless of the West's profession to the rational-scientific paradigm, however, it remains debatable whether the structures of thought underlying magical beliefs have in fact been displaced by rational-scientific ones, or whether they to a certain extent continue to exist even in individuals with a Western world-view. To be sure, on the surface magical thought is rejected by the cultural dominant: mysticism and magic are not acceptable in predominantly scientific societies, and their mention in an official or public context will generally elide bemusement, condescension or even derision. As psychological studies indicate, already young children are aware of the social pressure to relinquish magical beliefs, as I will shortly show. However, this does not mean that there are not quite a number of people who will privately entertain the possibility of magic. Indeed, magical thought appears to be a fundamental aspect of human thinking which always is at least potentially available as a cognitive resource, even when individuals consciously reject it. Harald Haarmann has characterized magic as an "anthropological constant" (22), arguing that, as a way of counteracting existential fears, magic continues to be an elementary aspect of daily life. Maintaining that magical thought offers individuals relief from the pressures of society, Daniel O'Keefe similarly concludes:

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> Therefore, magic is found in almost every age and society; it advances with civilization for long periods instead of declining; and it is inextricably woven with other human institutions, including the ego itself. Magic as one of man's most typical resources is a ganglionic human institution, a total social fact of enormous complexity. (503)

This argument is supported by psychological studies which show that even adults who profess to a rational-empirical outlook in situations of stress will exhibit behaviour prompted by beliefs of a magical nature. The ongoing presence of magical thought arguably becomes visible also in phenomena such as advertising, politics or propaganda, which have been regarded as modern analogues of magic insofar as they suggest the reassuring presence of causal connections where objectively there are none, thereby aiming to control the behaviour of a large number of people (see Haarmann, 11 and 168-77; also O'Keefe, 473-74).

A recent attempt to provide magical thought with a biological basis has been undertaken by Pascal Boyer in *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London, 2001).[10] According to W.G. Runciman, Boyer draws on cognitive and developmental psychology to argue that magical beliefs persist "because the subconscious architecture of the human mind has so evolved over many millennia as to be receptive to them" (23). While finding an evolutionary approach to magical thought not implausible, Runciman points out that Boyer's hypothesis cannot account for the emergence of heretical views and scepticism, and asks whether one might not reasonably assume a diametrically opposed tendency to question existing traditions and beliefs to be equally part of the human species' evolutionary heritage, allowing our predisposition to belief to "be diverted, modified or overridden" (*ibid.*, 24). This suggests that it might be better to view magical thought as an anthropological disposition rather than a constant.

Contemporary studies suggest that the historically observable decline of magic in the Western world does not actually conflict with the notion of magical thought as a fundamental aspect of human nature. Paradoxically, attempts to account for the shift from a magical to a scientific paradigm partly proceed from the same basic assumptions as studies which emphasize magic's ubiquity. It therefore is not at all contradictory

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[10] Cited in W.G. Runciman, "Why are we here? *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* by Pascal Boyer", *London Review of Books*, XXIV/3 (7 February 2002), 23-24. The Basic Books edition of Boyer's work goes by the slightly different title of *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York, 2001).

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when Keith Thomas traces the decline of magic and religion in seventeenth-century England, only to conclude that magic will continue to exist in every society (see 800).

Several reasons have been proposed why the neat colonial division into magical versus rational-scientific societies will not hold. For one thing, the establishment of a rational-scientific paradigm does not automatically entail a change on the level of individual thought, even if this world-view is professed to. Ogden and Richards' assessment that the twentieth-century Western attitude to language still abounds in "verbal superstitions" has been mentioned (see 261 above). The social anthropologist Robin Horton even goes so far as to claim that, in modern Western Europe and North America, a scientific way of thinking

> has nothing like a universal sway. On the contrary, it is almost a minority phenomenon.

This does not at all conflict with the fact that most people possess some basic scientific knowledge: "For all the apparent up-to-dateness of the content of his world-view, the modern Western layman is rarely more 'open' or scientific in his outlook than is the traditional African villager" (171). Keith Thomas in turn has argued that the Western derision of magical beliefs in most cases has to do less with real insight into the mechanisms of science than with the simple fact that science is socially acceptable, whereas magic is not:

> New techniques and attitudes are always more readily diffused than their underlying scientific rationale [....] Most of those millions of persons who today would laugh at the idea of magic or miracles would have difficulty in explaining why. They are victims of society's constant pressure towards intellectual conformity. Under this pressure the magician has ceased to command respect, and intellectual prestige has shifted elsewhere. (774)

However, a world-view that has been accepted only on someone else's authority without being backed by personal insight will often be relinquished quite easily when a different world-view appears more advantageous. In studies with children and adults, the psychologist Eugene Subbotsky has found his test subjects' rational-scientific world-view to be quite vulnerable to the resurgence of magical convictions. The experiments suggest that, despite social pressure towards intellectual conformity, magical thought continues to exist, if only in a marginalized and latent form. When children aged four to six were asked whether certain phenomena that clearly violate scientific presumptions were

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possible, the majority of them denied this possibility. On the level of real-life behaviour, however, a considerable percentage of them evinced a belief in object impermanence and magical causality. Motivated by a reward, they attempted to work magic in the way previously suggested to them by the experimenter, showing themselves disappointed when their attempts failed. Notably, the children performed these actions only in the absence of the experimenter. For Subbotsky, the discrepancy between the verbal level and the level of behaviour indicates the degree to which the scientific world-view is, at least initially, adopted for reasons of social conformity, the presence of the adult experimenter prompting the child to profess to the socially approved scientific world-view. With increasing age, social pressure apparently becomes a less important factor, for the majority of older children refrained from attempts to work magic even in the experimenter's absence.[11]

However, lack of scientific insight cannot alone be held responsible for the persistence of a magical mode of thought. Experiments by Subbotsky and his fellow researchers indicate that especially in situations of cognitive or psychological frustration, even educated adults are willing to believe in object impermanence and magical causality, both of which, as Subbotsky remarks, are accepted as completely unproblematic in the context of religious beliefs (see Subbotsky 1992, 55). Interestingly, the subjects' willingness to entertain notions such as willpower or telekinesis increased if the experimenter implied that these phenomena might legitimately be considered within a scientific framework (see *ibid.*, 56-77 and 107-108). The hypothesis that magical thinking subliminally persists even in educated adults is further supported by a later study. Presented with a scenario in which a "magic spell" was used to damage an object, only a minority of test subjects acknowledged the possibility of magical causality. Nevertheless, fifty percent of the subjects refused to submit an object they valued to the test, causing Subbotsky to conclude that "adults' beliefs in the possibility of magical causality recover their strength as soon as the cost of disregarding these beliefs becomes high enough" (Subbotsky 2000, 341).[12]

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[11] See Eugene Subbotsky, *Foundations of the Mind: Children's Understanding of Reality*, New York, London and Toronto, 1992, Chapters 2 and 3. For further experiments, as well as references to other studies presenting similar conclusions, see Eugene Subbotsky, "Causal Reasoning and Behaviour in Children and Adults in a Technologically Advanced Society: Are We still Prepared to Believe in Magic and Animism?", in *Children's Reasoning and the Mind*, eds Peter Mitchell and Kevin John Riggs, Hove, 2000, 327-47.

[12] To state this as a scientifically proven fact seems a little premature considering that the number of test persons was very small (16), and that subjects might have been afraid of

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From his results, Subbotsky infers that the "linear replacement model" suggested by Jean Piaget and others, according to which the child progresses from a magical-animistic to a rational-scientific mode of thought, does not adequately capture psychological reality (see Subbotsky 1992, 83-84 and 110-11). In its place, he proposes a "coexistence model", which considers both modes of thought to emerge simultaneously in the young child's conception and continue to remain available, although the rational mode predominates in the domain of everyday reality, while the magical mode is resorted to mainly in alternative contexts such as stories, dreams, or play.[13] Under special circumstances, however, the magical mode of thought can be reactivated also in the sphere of everyday reality, there being "some irreducible 'vestige' in the psychological life of an adult that is outside the control of rational scientific instruments and leaves a 'vital space' for the appearances of the practice of magic" (*ibid.*, 111). A pluralistic model of human consciousness had previously been proposed by anthropologists (*ibid.*, 128), for example by Bronislaw Malinowski in "Magic, Science and Religion" (1925), which argues that so-called primitive peoples resort to either a rational or a mystical mode of thought, depending on the circumstances. Conversely, so-called civilized societies are by no means free of magical thought, either (see Malinowski, 25ff.).

Paradoxically, the reason given to explain the ongoing appeal of magic even to scientifically educated minds ultimately is the same as that which has been proposed for its demise. In both cases, the basic assumption is that magical thought is a vital resource in dealing with situations and phenomena for which no rational-scientific explanations or means of control are available. According to Malinowski, magic "supplies primitive man with a number of ready-made ritual acts and beliefs, with a definite mental and practical technique which serves to bridge over the dangerous gaps in every important pursuit or critical situation" (90). This would explain the decreasing significance of magic in the Western world: with advances in science and technology, magic simply became more and more superfluous. This line of thought, formulated for example by E.E. Evans-Pritchard,[14] also underlies Keith

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their property being destroyed by a trick, as Subbotsky himself concedes. However, on the whole Subbotsky's thesis seems to be supported by everyday observations.

[13] I think that Subbotsky somewhat exaggerates Piaget's emphasis on the linear succession of the two modes of thought in order to promote his own model. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, Piaget already noted the spontaneous recurrence of magical thought in educated adults.

[14] *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford, 1965, 113. See also O'Keefe, 71.

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Thomas' theory of the decline of magic, although historical evidence causes him to modify the argument somewhat. Finding that magical practice in fact had begun to drop off even before science and technology were sufficiently developed to offer satisfactory explanations and effective means of control, Thomas proposes that the decline of magic was due not so much to the actual existence of scientific and technological alternatives, but to the change in outlook that accompanied the rise of scientific interest. From a passive and fatalistic outlook, in which magic and the supernatural were the only sources of relief, English society proceeded to a "spirit of practical self-help" that was based on "a new faith in the potentialities of human initiative" (789 and 791-92). This focus on human capacities was fuelled by the experiments and investigations done by early scientists, which, even if at first unsuccessful, signalled a new attitude:

> In the eighteenth century, for example, physicians finally ceased to regard epilepsy as supernatural, although they had not yet learned to understand it in any other way. But now they grasped that the problem was a technical one, open to human investigation [....] The change was less a matter of positive technical progress than of expectation of greater progress in the future. Men became more prepared to combine impotence in the face of current misfortune with the faith that a technical solution would one day be found, much in the spirit in which we regard cancer today.[15]

It might be asked whether Thomas here is not overestimating the human capacity for rational thought and behaviour. Most Westerners would probably agree that scientific research is more promising than magic in the fight against cancer, just as they would probably agree that cancer is merely a disease based on certain biological and chemical factors, not a punishment. But when it comes down to a personal level, as for example in the case of cancer patients and their families, the role of magical thought needs to be re-evaluated. Observations suggest that in the face of trials and tribulations, the rational belief in scientific progress and statistical explanations of misfortune[16] go only so far, and not in-

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[15] *Ibid.*, 790. As to the original impetus for the shift, Thomas tentatively proposes that it might be connected to the rationalist tradition of classical times as well as the Christian doctrine of a single all-directing Providence. But he admits that he cannot offer a conclusive answer (see *ibid.*, 794).

[16] Thomas links the development of mathematical theories of probability to the decline of a belief in fate, arguing that a sense of statistics brought about a decisive change in outlook (see *ibid.*, 785). However, I have my reservations about how far personal misfortune will be seen as a merely random event, rather than personal punishment.

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frequently individuals will take recourse to alternative modes of thought. Even in contemporary Western cultures, it is by no means unheard of that illness and disease are in fact interpreted as punishment, that divine aid is enlisted, and individual "magical rituals" are performed in hope of a cure. Even Malinowski, who distinguishes the "modern man of science" from "primitive man" (26), observes that illness seems to promote magical thought also in Western minds:

> But who of us really believes that his own bodily infirmities and the approaching death is a purely natural occurrence, just an insignificant event in the infinite chain of causes? To the most rational of civilized men health, disease, the threat of death, float in a hazy emotional mist, which seems to become denser and more impenetrable as the fateful forms approach. (*Ibid.*, 32)

It is its ability to imply answers or practical solutions where none are available that ensures magic's survival, for people will always happen upon situations where their knowledge or their means prove insufficient. As Keith Thomas himself acknowledges, the rational Western credo of self-help has not actually banished magical thought. Given the flourishing practices of astrology and fortune telling, horoscopes and lucky mascots, he finds it not unlikely that a significant part of England's population should hold a world-view that includes magical structures (see *ibid.*, 799). He somewhat resignedly concludes: "If magic is to be defined as the employment of ineffective techniques to allay anxiety when effective ones are not available, then we must recognize that no society will ever be free from it" (*ibid.*, 800). Subbotsky's experiments with adults point in the same direction: it may take extreme conditions before the possibility of magic will be conceded, but when all rational explanations and measures seem to fail, the attraction of magic makes itself felt.

Intriguingly, extreme conditions are exactly what scientifically and technologically advanced industrial and post-industrial societies have been seen to provide. Reversing the argument that progress has made magic redundant, critics have proposed that it has in fact perpetuated it. For while science and technology may have provided understanding and insight in some respects, they have also done much to render the world unintelligible. Arthur C. Clarke has postulated: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."[17] Keith Thomas concedes the point. Noting that crafts and manufacturing techniques

[17] *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible* (1962), London, 2000, 2.

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have always appeared slightly magical to the uninitiated, an impression encouraged by those seeking to maintain their privileged position, he observes that the situation is not all that different today: the "underlying scientific rationale" escaping them, to many people modern theories and inventions are just as mysterious as magic (795-96 and 800).

Daniel O'Keefe likewise suggests that the age-old connection between magic and technologies, including the arts, to a certain extent still holds today. Elaborating on his view of magical thought as a fundamental defence-mechanism of the self, he proposes that, even while marginalizing magical thought and practices, the conditions of modern society actually foster their reappearance. Individuals have become so alienated and excluded from society that it strikes them as uncanny, causing them to turn to magical thought in order to cope. O'Keefe writes:

> Perhaps the occult is the natural expression of a society in which we live surrounded by machines, bureaucracies, technologies and planning systems made by human rationality but unfathomable to us personally. (458; see also 471-78)

Harald Haarmann essentially heads in the same direction when he points out that individuals today are confronted with an overwhelming amount of specialized knowledge which they can no longer assimilate and which does not help them to conquer the anxieties of their everyday lives, once again leaving magic to fill the gap (33-34). In arguing that the post-industrial world in its hyper-rationality has become so unfathomable as to appear uncanny, all of these approaches exhibit an interesting overlap with magic realist fiction, which likewise suggests that reality is too fantastic to be contained within the limits of the rational-empirical discourse of realism.

As a way of making sense of the world, magical thought is a fundamental aspect of human thinking. However, simply to state this as a psychological and sociological insight and then refrain from any further comment appears little satisfactory. Of course, it could be argued that, after several centuries of relegating magical thought to the realm of the inferior Other, to acknowledge its presence in Western societies already is an act of re-evaluation. But seeing that human beliefs essentially motivate human actions and thus may have significant effects on social reality, one might ask how the human propensity for magical thought has been assessed. Is it an unfortunate heritage, an evolutionary deficit that calls for redoubled efforts to complete the Enlightenment's project? Or

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are there aspects that make magical thought more than a necessary evil, in certain contexts perhaps even turning it into an epistemological and social tool? Seeing that magic realist fiction offers some thoughts on the matter, I briefly want to examine the positions that can be made out in the studies discussed above.

One of the main drawbacks of magical thought identified in the studies is the way it discourages individuals and societies from actively shaping their existence. Keith Thomas has suggested that social and political activism first became possible when the reliance on magic was gradually supplanted by the notion of self-help (792). Daniel O'Keefe draws a telling connection between magic and modern phenomena such as various forms of psychotherapy, millenarian movements, propaganda or advertising, all of which can be regarded as attempts to impose a ready-made world-view on individuals, thereby relieving them, at least to a certain extent, from responsibility for their decisions. O'Keefe warns: "A society that is increasingly magical in its communications, its public gestures, its very language, is a society that may be easy to dominate" (478). Haarmann likewise argues that it is through the use of quasi-magical strategies that politics, advertising or the entertainment industry succeed in manipulating and controlling individuals and society (see 168-77).

Conversely, the radical suppression of magical thought has also been regarded with scepticism. Quite apart from the fact that magical structures appear to be indelibly inscribed into human thinking and might simply have to be accepted as part of human nature, theorists have suggested that magical thought can actually fulfil positive functions. As a quintessentially anthropocentric mode, magical thought characteristically works to bestow meaning and significance on events, thereby possibly preventing the resignation that might well be engendered by the idea of a completely random universe. Paradoxically, it would seem that, while magical thought on one level is inimical to action and self-determination, on another it enables people to act in the first place. It has been argued that, by bestowing confidence on the believer, a magical object or ritual may actually increase the level of physical or mental performance. Resorted to mainly in situations beyond human control, magic provides an illusion of power, thereby enabling the individual or the group to take action.[18] Magical beliefs have also been known to aid or bring about a recovery from illness not thought physiologically possible (see O'Keefe,

[18] See Malinowski, 29ff. For application to a Western context, see O'Keefe, 26 and Haarmann, 44, also 74-78.

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95ff.). This ties in with O'Keefe's notion of magical thought as a means of defending the self against an increasingly incomprehensible world. Though the strategy undeniably has its weaknesses in that it renders the individual vulnerable to manipulation and domination, O'Keefe suggests that in certain contexts it may be the only available method of coping (see 489ff.).

Going beyond the individual sphere, magic has been seen as a stabilizing force also on a collective level. Picking up a point of Malinowski's, O'Keefe observes that magic provides a social rallying point which works to concentrate group effort and produce a group feeling (see *ibid.*, 67; also Haarmann, 44-45). It has furthermore been suggested that the capacity for magical thought may be an important prerequisite for human creativity. Artistic and literary representation have been regarded as historically derived from and essentially analogous to magical practices. Not only are both types of action mimetic, but both the artist and the magician strive, by means of thought or imagination, to shape reality according to their wishes.[19] It has also been argued that, far from being primitive or immature forms of consciousness, the magical realities constructed in dreams, art, or children's play in fact serve to organize and enrich everyday reality, capturing aspects that escape rational constructions (see Subbotsky 1992, 28 and 32). To suppress these modes of thought is not only to deny – possibly at a considerable psychological expense – a basic "transcendental need", but also to ignore alternative possibilities of accessing reality and creating understanding that may in turn have positive repercussions on rational-scientific thinking (see *ibid.*, 76 and 139ff.).

All in all, these studies advocate a differentiated approach towards magical thought. Manipulative quasi-magical practices need to be demythologized and a rational discourse reinstalled, ensuring social and political participation and self-determination. Yet at the same time, magical thought needs to be acknowledged: more than a troublesome anthropological disposition, it is a valuable cognitive resource, provided it is dealt with in an emancipated way. Given that magical thought seems to inhere in human thinking, Subbotsky advocates turning a vice into a virtue: "Since beliefs in magic and object non-permanence cannot (and should not) be ultimately eradicated from children's minds, they must be given a certain 'place' and even cultivated, rather than just declared 'false' and forgotten" (Subbotsky 1992, 140). Haarmann similarly argues that there is no point in trying to repress magical thought. Rather, one needs

[19] See Benyei, 155-56; Freud, 141; and O'Keefe, 460 and 485.

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to become aware of this facet of one's own nature in order to self-reflexively take it into account (see 21 and 319).

Considerably more critical of the quasi-magical structures propagated and exploited by post-industrial society, O'Keefe nevertheless also suggests magical thinking to be an inevitable and even indispensable element of human thought. Significantly, he maintains that being reduced to rational thought would render the individual incapable not only of spontaneous action, but of action altogether. Conversely, a complete loss of rationality would result in an equally detrimental regression to psychotic thought. Rational and irrational thought therefore complement each other (see 486-87). This argument is supported by findings from the field of neurobiology, which similarly suggest that the loss of non-rational modes of thought renders an individual dysfunctional. Studies have shown that brain damage which impairs emotional behaviour but leaves memory, language and basic reasoning intact, will not lead to an increase in rationality, as might be expected, but, conversely, promotes irrational behaviour. The neurobiologist Antonio Damasio has argued that, without emotions, the process of decision-making breaks down, because the individual can no longer fall back on "somatic markers". These are positive or negative bodily states associated with certain scenarios that serve to narrow down the number of alternatives from which an individual will choose, thereby vitally increasing the efficiency and accuracy of decision-making.[20]

However, for all the positive aspects of magical thought, it is crucial that magic not be mistaken for absolute and self-evident truth. Its potential for domination can be defused, and its positive effects come to bear, only if it is recognized as a human construction. As O'Keefe says:

> In a secular age when the ego is cramped for breath, magic can seem releasing; it can remind us of the transcendent and miraculous in everyday life which we are inured to ignore [....] Magical revivals today consist partly of new vocabularies to remind us of the transcendent all around us. But the transcendent is nothing more or less than the remarkable social-symbolic realm which we ourselves partly make, and every magical victory is potentially alienating by mystifying this [....]
>
> If the bureaucratic net of modern life so tightens that individuals are socialized to helplessness, they will try to build pseudo-communities of escape through religious cults, and to regain the illusion of having an effect, through magic [....] But if, on the contrary, social thought and collective action rediscover the miraculous in our symbolic-social universe

[20] *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, New York, 1994, Chapter 8.

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> – the possibility of continuous self-creation of our individualities and our world – we will remain self-constituting and engaged. (506-507)

It remains to be explored in more detail below how magic realist texts in turn evaluate the human propensity for magical thought and its ambivalent potential.

Before returning to the realms of literature, I will look at theoretical approaches dealing with another non-scientific mode of knowledge production that has been regarded as fundamental to human thought: narrative. As in the case of magical thought, it can be argued that narratives and narration must be considered real insofar as they influence people's perception and behaviour. And once again, these, too, may prove either detrimental or enriching, depending on whether they are recognized as human constructs or not.

Anthropological constants II: man, the story-telling animal

> "Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man – let me offer you a definition – is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories, he has to go on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right. Even in his last moments, it's said, in the split second of a fatal fall – or when he's about to drown – he sees, passing rapidly before him, the story of his whole life."
>
> – *Waterland*, 62ff.

As has been outlined in Chapter 5, contemporary theorists have condemned the way the West has proclaimed the rational-scientific paradigm the only valid mode of knowledge production, thereby delegitimizing all other paradigms, narrative among them. Unable to meet the criteria imposed by the science game, narratives are disqualified as "fables, myths, legends, fit only for women and children" (Lyotard 1984a, 27). However, this is to ignore the fact that narratives provide valuable social and psychological knowledge. The exaltation of rationality and science thus proceeds at the expense of other epistemological resources, a situation which theorists find to be in dire need of redress.

Although not necessarily in direct response to this complaint, contemporary theory has in fact widely remarked on the significant role

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narrative plays in producing and conveying knowledge, not only through myths and folk tales, but also in the fields of history and science. However, to admit that knowledge and narrative are intertwined is not necessarily to rehabilitate the latter. Especially in the context of history and science, the inevitability of resorting to narrative has been seen as a liability, for in imposing upon the material an order and a perspective that cannot be considered objectively given, narrative renders knowledge dangerously vulnerable to charges of fictionality. Accordingly, sociologists of science frequently point to the ubiquity of narrative not in order to revalidate the concept of narrative knowledge, but rather with the intention of undermining science's claim to objectivity.[21]

But regardless of all stigmatization and marginalization, narratives and narration have been considered crucial sources of knowledge even within cultures characterized by a rational-scientific world-view. Roland Barthes has written on the new "myths" that pervade postindustrial societies, showing how stereotypes and images, understood as narratives in the broadest sense of the word, decisively shape individual and collective perception.[22] Jean Baudrillard similarly speaks of media-fashioned "codes", which provide individuals with ready-made identities. Returning to the realm of narrative proper, sociologists and narratologists have pointed to the phenomenon of urban or contemporary legend. Reminiscent of the tall tale in their outrageousness but not necessarily self-subversive, contemporary legends illustrate an ongoing demand for storytelling as a means of presenting implausibly fantastic but nevertheless allegedly factual experiences.[23] Finally, rumour has been characterized as an important strategy to counteract uncertainty, abounding when

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[21] On historiography's reliance on narrative, see Chapter 5 above. On science as a narrative construction, see for example Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (1979), Princeton, 1986.

[22] *Mythen des Alltags* (*Mythologies*, 1957), trans. Helmut Scheffel, Frankfurt am Main, 1964. Angela Carter's remark about "demythologising" quoted above is based on this understanding of myth (see Anna Katsavos, "An Interview with Angela Carter", *Review of Contemporary Fiction* XIV/3 [1994], 11-12; quoted in Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, Manchester and New York, 1998, 4).

[23] For discussions of the concept and examples, see Bennett and Smith 1988; for a refutation of the concept, see Jean-Noël Kapferer, *Gerüchte: Das älteste Massenmedium der Welt* (*Rumeurs: le Plus Vieux Média du Monde*, 1987 and 1995), trans. Ulrich Kunzmann, Leipzig, 1996, 328ff. For a wide range of examples, see *The AFU&Urban Legend Archive*, 21 February 2002. <http://www.urbanlegends.com> and *The Urban Legend Magazine*, 21 February 2002, <http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~dbaxo/urban_legend.htm>.

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information is scarce or when events are felt to threaten an existing world-view.[24]

Given that within a rational-scientific framework it is an essentially suspect mode, narrative in Western countries does not, despite its continuing presence, enjoy the same status as in cultures which recognize narrative as a legitimate form of producing and transporting knowledge. It is quite revealing that, in the Western world, storytelling is an activity associated with leisure time and often also with children, whereas for example in Hindu culture, to interrupt a story is considered a crime tantamount to murder.[25] Nevertheless, the ubiquity of narrative suggests that it constitutes a universal human resource.

Narrative's unflagging appeal can be explained by what innumerable theorists have identified as one of its most prominent aspects, namely the way it manages to impose form onto the world; and, with form, meaning. This capacity for creating meaning becomes strikingly visible when one thinks of the same set of elements being presented twice, once at random and once in form of a narrative. While in the former case connections laboriously need to be forged through acts of interpretation, the latter already offers an integrated and meaningful whole. As the philosopher of history Hayden White has pointed out, it was the shift from annals to narrative historical accounts that first allowed past events to be perceived not merely as a random sequence, but as constituent parts of a larger scheme. Presented in terms of plot, historical events acquired significance; under the sway of narrative, gaps were glossed over, causality was installed, and closure provided, suggesting coherence, continuity and teleology (see 11-12).

It is this ability to respond to the human craving for a world that makes sense, a world that can be explained and thus at least potentially controlled, which has caused people of all times and in all places to cast their knowledge into narrative form. Like magical thought, narrative has been regarded an anthropological trait of the most fundamental order. Recalling Pascal Boyer's biological grounding of magical thought above, Alex Argyros has argued that narrative's meaning-making potential proved such an evolutionary asset that the use of narrative evolved as

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[24] See Kapferer, 17ff. Other social functions of rumour are the augmentation of status or the forging of social bonds (see *ibid.*, esp. Chapters 2 and 3).

[25] The *Devī Bhāgavata* warns: "To disturb one in sleep, to interrupt a story, to separate a husband and wife as also a mother and child from each other – these things are tantamount to Brahmahatya (killing of the brahmin)" (Vettam Mani, *Purānic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purānic Literature* [1964], Delhi, 1989, 183).

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part of the human species' biological make-up: "The universality of narrative implies that it reflects an underlying neural substrate or a set of epigenetic rules predisposing human beings to organize experience in a narratival manner."[26] Part of humankind's epigenetic heritage or not, storytelling has been widely acknowledged as a strategy of survival, enabling individuals and groups to construct a reality that is meaningful to them and allows them to act. By constructing "causal frames", narrative allows even the most random and unconnected information to be processed, facilitating the construction as well as the storage, retrieval and dissemination of knowledge. Seeing narrative as a natural strategy of information management, Argyros argues that it should be accepted and profitably employed, rather than rejected or deconstructed as an instrument of oppression, as he accuses contemporary theorists of doing. However, to demystify narrative as a human construction is not to deny its enormous potential. Magic realist fiction for instance redeems narrative as a cognitive tool even while self-consciously revealing it to be a strategy of meaning-making.

Approaching narrative from a sociological and psychological perspective shows it to share a considerable number of features with magical thought. At the most obvious level, narrative and magic both bestow meaning and coherence on the world. In his essay "Narrative Art and Magic", Jorge Luis Borges has furthermore argued that fiction frequently makes use of a magical concept of causality. In magic, the infinitely complex and all too often unsatisfyingly obscure web of causes and effects that governs real life is replaced by causal links that are lucid and immediate. The same goes for narrative fiction:

> That dangerous harmony – a frenzied, clear-cut causality – also holds sway over the novel [.... The] fear that a terrible event may be brought on by its mere mention is out of place or pointless in the overwhelming disorder of the real world, but not in a novel, which should be a rigorous scheme of attentions, echoes, and affinities. Every episode in a careful narration is a premonition.[27]

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[26] Alex Argyros, "Narrative and Chaos", *New Literary History*, XXIII (1992), 667.

[27] "Narrative Art and Magic" ("El arte narrativo y la magia", *Sur*, V [Summer 1932]), in *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine and Eliot Weinberger, Harmondsworth, 2000, 80-81. Borges notes that not all narrative fiction makes use of a magical causality: the psychological novel attempts to imitate the intricate causality of real life, though in Borges' eyes this is not good fiction.

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The teleological nature of narrative, postulated already by Aristotle, ensures that all its constituent elements are meaningful, for they all contribute towards a certain outcome.[28] However, Borges argues that they do so not only on a material and psychological level, but also on a symbolical level: in the well-constructed novel, the symbol will invariably be followed by the real thing in such a way that it almost seems to have induced it. Such a sympathetic relationship between signifier and referent is characteristic of a magical world-view. In addition to the similarities identified by Borges, there is yet another parallel to be made out between narrative and magical thought: both are anthropocentric, turning the individual from an insignificant bystander into the centre of events. Whenever anything happens, it happens either to, for, or because of the protagonist. Once again, each element has its place in a precise scheme, stilling the desire for order and meaning.

Magic and narrative also compare in their social and psychological effects. Characterizing magic as a form of "social action", Daniel O'Keefe has emphasized the power of magic to change reality, albeit through means other than its practitioners believe:

> Magic is real action. Something really happens, often something violent, usually something of consequence. People are shaken, influenced, healed, destroyed, transformed. The social situation is altered. Magic is not mere illusion just because its efficacy depends on beliefs in illusory entities [....] It is important to demonstrate that it is effective social action in order to show that the phenomenon is real. (25)

How magic may work by virtue of psychological mechanisms for those who believe in it has been mentioned above. Magic can also work by means of social mechanisms, and these affect also those who do not actually believe in the magic being practised. Performing magical rites or spells publicly is a way of applying social pressure and creating new states of social existence. These are not merely symbolic or linguistic, but real, for the pronouncement of magical sentences entails changes in the behaviour of those who believe, which has consequences for believers and non-believers alike. Verbal magic thus strikingly illustrates the performative function of language, outlined by John Austin in his speech

[28] In Chapter 8 of *The Poetics*, Aristotle prescribes that, in a well-constructed tragedy, "the component incidents must be so arranged that if one of them be transposed or removed, the unity of the whole is dislocated and destroyed" (35).

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act theory.[29] The performative aspect of linguistic utterances emerges most clearly in explicit performative utterances, in which the speaker expressly states the act that is being performed. Such an utterance does not merely describe an action; rather, it constitutes the action itself, and as such has repercussions on the level of empirical reality. One need only consider the legal and social consequences entailed by a simple "I do", uttered at the appropriate point in a marriage ceremony. A sentence of excommunication, pronounced by a representative of the church within a Christian community, equally creates an altered social reality. The same is true of a magical spell, provided that it is pronounced under what Austin would call "felicitous" circumstances, that is by someone with the authority to do so and among a group of believers.[30]

While not actually making use of performative utterances in the same way as magic does, narratives may also exert social pressure, alter states of social existence, and create new realities. A simple example is the power of rumour. Even if there is no truth to it, it only takes enough people who believe in it to make the rumour real, for the community will implement it through their actions, either to the detriment or (more rarely) to the benefit of the rumour's target. This illustrates the extent to which reality depends on a social contract or agreement about what is real, an agreement fundamentally achieved through language and narration.

O'Keefe touches on a closely related point when he observes how talking about paranormal experiences and validating them collectively makes people "see" the same things. His somewhat provocative formulation that "our agreement that it is happening helps make it happen" emphasizes the extent to which words can create reality without there being anything supernatural about it (103). Extreme instances of this effect are phenomena like group hallucinations or other collective experiences of the fantastic, which generally are observed in situations characterized by psychological stress and heightened suggestibility, for example during intense fear. They are also known from religious contexts: there exist numerous reports of glossalalia (speaking in tongues), visions, or miracles. Psychologists have suggested that, rather

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[29] From among Austin's many publications, I am here drawing on his essay "Performative Utterances", based on a talk delivered on the BBC Third Programme in 1956 and later included in his *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford, 1961).

[30] Austin observes that performative utterances may "fail to come off" (224), in which case they are not false, truth and falsity applying only to statements, but infelicitous. Infelicities arise for example when the convention on which the speech act is based does not exist or is not accepted in a given culture, or if the circumstances are inappropriate.

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than all persons involved actually seeing the same thing, the group discursively establishes a common version of events, of whose factuality everyone then becomes convinced. Charismatic leader figures can decisively influence the group's perception; drugs may also play a role.[31]

O'Keefe's point about discursively established realities ties in with the way that the stories and histories a community or nation tells can redefine, and in this sense actually remake, the past, or, conversely, how by not being talked about, past events may effectively be deprived of existence. However, it is not only the past that is reshaped through narratives, but the present, too, for people's actions and decisions significantly depend upon their picture of the past. In their potential to alter reality, narratives closely resemble metaphors, of which Lakoff and Johnson write:

> New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it. (145)

Below, I will show how magic realist fiction emphasizes narrative's power to fashion reality by laying bare the mechanisms at work.

As the short foray into theory has shown, magical thought and narrative are comparable on several counts. Both are important strategies of meaning-making, providing explanations in situations that would otherwise seem distressingly meaningless or random. Both are gratifyingly anthropocentric, placing the individual at the hub of the universe. Both are, according to the Western world-view, fictions, which must nevertheless be acknowledged as real, seeing that they have very real effects indeed on social reality. And finally, both appear to be fundamental to human thought, persisting in human cultures throughout space and time.

Conducting its own inquiry into human thought, magic realist fiction intersects with these findings on a number of levels. Like the theoretical approaches outlined above, magic realist texts suggest that the human mind cannot be restricted to a rational-scientific mode of knowledge production, but will inevitably turn to other resources. As becomes especially obvious in the texts from Britain discussed here, magic and myth are seen to belong not only to non-Western, allegedly un-

[31] On these phenomena and further agreements to agree, see O'Keefe, 99-110.

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enlightened cultures, but are presented as universal aspects of human thought. This tendency is judged to be ambivalent. Beliefs may be harmful: mistaken for absolute truth, they will keep those who adhere to them imprisoned in an illusory world, preventing them from taking charge of their own lives. If, by contrast, beliefs and stories are recognized for the human constructions that they are, they may provide an access to the world not afforded by the rational-scientific paradigm.

Magic realist fiction presents: man, the meaning-making animal

An "amalgamation of realism and fantasy" – Flores' formulation pinpoints magic realism's most notable feature, yet remains insufficient to characterize the mode. Returning to it after a detailed analysis of magic realist techniques, Flores' attempt at a definition might nevertheless prove useful if one focuses not on the feature as such, but on its function. The point is not that magic realist fiction mixes traditionally incompatible modes; obviously, other literary kinds do that, too. The important question is: what is the function of integrating into an essentially realistic framework items that, according to the norms of realism, ought to be rejected as fantastic?

A useful hint is provided by Salman Rushdie's observation that, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, "Márquez decided to elevate the village world view above the urban one; this is the source of his fabulism" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 301). As Chapter 4 has shown, magic realist fiction strategically employs ex-centric focalizers in order to present, in a characteristically matter-of-fact way, a basically realistic fictional world which continuously and disconcertingly violates the Western world-view and its chosen mode of representation: realism. By typically refusing to recontextualize its fantastic elements, magic realist fiction argues that post-Enlightenment restrictions of the real to the empirically observable are inadequate.

The same point, each time made from a different angle, underlies magic realism's other techniques. Chapter 5 analysed how magic realist texts argue that, in their emphasis on fact, science and historiography need to be complemented by other, non-scientific modes of knowledge production, especially overtly narrative ones. By presenting experience in terms of poetic rather than factual truth, stories and legends may provide different, but equally valuable insights into the world as the rational-empirical paradigm. Magic realist fiction furthermore argues that

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narratives constitute a fundamental part of social reality, and as such must be taken into account. As Pickleherring puts it, "gossip plays its part too in the life of a man" (see 185 above). The vast importance of narrative is exemplified in the way that stories and legends are presented as real on the level of the text. Chapter 7 went on to show how the same strategy is extended to other modes of knowledge production that generally have been marginalized or not recognized by the Western dominant, such as metaphors, concepts, ideas, and language itself. Once again, magic realist fiction characteristically renders these literally real in order to emphasize that they are no less important in constructing a world than empirical data.

Magic realist fiction's revaluation of world-views and forms of knowledge that in the wake of Enlightenment thought have found themselves excluded from the Western canon has frequently been put down to its context of production. Regarding it as an inherently postcolonial mode, critics have argued that magic realism presents a formerly colonized people's myths or legends as real in order to redeem their world-view as a legitimate alternative to the Western outlook. This would mean that magic realist fiction accepts and thereby perpetuates the old imperialist distinction of a rational-empirical West versus a magical or mythical Other. However, as Chapter 4 has shown, magic realist fiction does not simplistically construe the adherence to an alternative or magical world-view as the result of ethnic identity. Significantly, magic realism's magic is not restricted to the West's Other, but persists at the very heart of the West itself. In other words, the easy equation of the village or margin with magic, and the city or centre with a rational-scientific world-view, as Rushdie would have it, is proven too schematic by countless works of magic realist fiction. Ironically, Rushdie's argument is undone not least of all by his own novels – as I have shown, in *The Satanic Verses* the official representatives of the political, social and economic centre espouse a much more magical world-view than some of the so-called ex-centrics.

To disconnect magic realism from postcolonial literatures is not to say that the mode is not essentially a postcolonial one. In challenging the rational-empirical world-view's claim to hegemony and revaluing alternative modes of thought, magic realism pursues decidedly post-colonial aims. At the same time, however, it is a global mode in that it suggests that all human thought tends to take recourse to multiple, oftentimes incompatible modes of knowledge production, and that these must be recognized as human creations if their totalizing potential is to be defused.

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Essential to magic realism's project of simultaneously revaluing and deconstructing – or, as Angela Carter would have it, "demythologizing" – different modes of thought is a curious strategy that has been discussed at several points of the analysis. This is the way magic realist fiction tends to support a magical and a realistic reading at once, often paradoxically drawing attention to the latter by strenuously denying it. The magic realist text creates a distance between itself and the focalizer, making clear that the narration is subject to a specific perspective and that it is this perspective which generates the fantastic elements. However, whereas classic unreliable narrators are exposed and discredited, the magic realist text refuses to invalidate the presumably unreliable perspective. For all that the fantastic elements are made transparent as acts of construction, they must still be accepted because they are real to the focalizers. I have mentioned how *One Hundred Years of Solitude* implies that, seen from the outside, Remedios' ascension may well appear only a story concocted to explain the girl's sudden absence; but for the inhabitants of Macondo, the miracle constitutes reality, and it is this perspective which is endorsed by the text. In *Midnight's Children,* the text even more self-consciously draws attention to the way Saleem's fantastic claims can be read as the egocentric and animistic fantasies of a child, or, alternatively, as literalized metaphors. Yet, Saleem turns out to be a trustworthy narrator, whose psychological and poetic truths are as important as the more factual or realistic versions he consistently allows to shine through.

In presenting the fantastic elements as real even while rendering them transparent as acts of construction, magic realist texts can be seen simultaneously to enact and lay bare the workings of the human mind. But magic realist fiction conducts its investigations also on another, more explicit level, thereby offering further support for my reading of the mode as an anthropological inquiry. In addition to using magic realist techniques to enact how people construct their world, many magic realist texts also directly analyse how linguistic, narrative or magical constructions emerge and what repercussions they have on reality. Typically, this involves taking a perspective external to the constructing agent, which means that the fantastic element is rendered transparent as a construction not only indirectly by the text, but is explicitly characterized as such by the narrator. In such cases, the fantastic elements can no longer be said to be presented as real on the level of the text, so that these passages do not, strictly speaking, qualify as magic realist. However, these examples are analogous to magic realist passages in that they pursue the same line of argument. In many cases, observations from an

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external perspective are accompanied by analysis from a meta-level. One could say that, as fictional analogues of anthropological, sociological and psychological inquiries, the texts offer a "theory" to go with their "case studies". Examples of this strategy will be examined now.

Located at the self-reflexive end of the fictional spectrum, Rushdie's novels typically complement their magic realist techniques with both case studies and theory. It has already been shown how, amazingly true to psychological theories of the child's egocentricity and magical-animistic world-view, Saleem reveals himself to be constructing the whole world in relation to himself. His urge for meaning is betrayed not only by the outrageousness of his constructions; Saleem is also eminently capable of self-analysis, as he demonstrates by informing his reader at the very outset of his narration: "I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity" (*Midnight's Children*, 9). Later, he pleads guilty to a "desperate need for meaning" (*ibid.*,166) when, once again in surprising accordance with Piaget's theories, at the age of nine he begins to suspect that the world does not revolve around him after all: "I became afraid that everyone was wrong – that my much-trumpeted existence might turn out to be utterly useless, void, and without a shred of purpose" (*ibid.*, 152). Unable to deal with insignificance, Saleem wilfully continues with his strategies of meaning-making. Of course, in revealing himself fully aware of his actions, Saleem has gone beyond the stage of childhood and is now analyzing his younger self from a meta-level.

Moraes Zogoiby is not immune to meaning-making strategies, either. Looking to explain his less than ideal life, he blames it on Flory Zogoiby's curse (*The Moor's Last Sigh*, 72f.). Like Saleem, he too shows himself aware of his acts of construction, for example when he self-consciously reflects on the perennial human business of meaning-making:

> A sigh isn't just a sigh. We inhale the world and breathe out meaning. While we can. While we can. (*Ibid.*, 54)

Significantly, both novels emphasize the ambivalent consequences of the narrators' acts of construction. Saleem's insistence on placing himself at the centre of the universe leaves him burdened with guilt, not only over a murder, his uncle's suicide, and his grandfather's death, but, by sympathetic connection, also over Nehru's assassination (see *Midnight's Children*, 278-79). Conversely, it saves him from the void of absurdity he

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so dreads, and provides him with a sense of identity, something which the novel suggests is a crucial prerequisite for action.

Even more revealing than the acts of construction perpetrated by the narrators themselves, however, are the ones they observe in others. The external perspective gives them the opportunity to reflect on the mechanisms of belief and to show how belief may prove both a liability and an asset. Moraes coolly analyses his mother's reasons for choosing to portray him not as a freak, but as a "magic child".[32] His argument strikingly recalls the psychological and sociological approaches outlined in the preceding sections:

> It seemed that she had decided to fight fear – hers as well as my own – by espousing such strategies of conjecture, by making my lot a privileged one, and presenting me to myself as well as to the world as someone special, someone with a meaning, a supernatural Entity who did not truly belong to this place, this moment, but whose presence here defined the lives of those around him, and of the age in which they lived. (*Ibid.*, 220)

Moraes here suggests that his mother's constructions work not only to her own advantage, but also to his, keeping randomness and insignificance at bay.

Instructive in a more negative way is the example of Saleem's maternal grandmother, whose religious beliefs cause her to live "within an invisible fortress of her own making, an ironclad citadel of traditions and certainties" (*Midnight's Children*, 40). Her religious beliefs – or, as Saleem puts it, her "supernatural conceits" – persuade her "that aeroplanes were inventions of the devil, and that cameras could steal your soul, and that ghosts were as obviously a part of reality as Paradise" (*ibid.*, 100). The Reverend Mother's submission to the authority of religion is total, leaving no room for independent thoughts or decisions. This, Saleem suggests, is fatal – and his story shows how it nearly proved so in a quite literal sense. When Aadam Aziz refuses to have their children educated by a fundamentalist tutor, his wife stops cooking for him, and Aadam almost starves to death out of pride (see *ibid.*, 42ff.). In unfavourably comparing absolute belief – Saleem speaks of "credulity" (*ibid.*, 100) – with a reasonably sceptical attitude, *Midnight's Children* joins rank with other magic realist novels such as *Falstaff*, *The Late Mr Shakespeare* or *Nights at the Circus*, which I have all shown to advocate a certain amount of scepticism towards all forms of belief, including an absolute belief in science and reason.

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[32] *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 219.

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How harmful the mistaking of constructions for reality can be is once again illustrated in the figure of Saleem's father. Seeking to impress the departing English colonizer William Methwold, Ahmed Sinai invents "a family pedigree that, in later years, when whisky had blurred the edges of his memory and djinn-bottles came to confuse him, would obliterate all traces of reality" (*Midnight's Children*, 110). Befuddled by time and alcohol abuse, Ahmed comes to believe in the tale he concocted, with grotesque and this time unfortunately truly fatal consequences. When the family dog fails to succumb to the family curse that presumably goes with the pedigree, Ahmed cruelly revenges himself on the animal by making it chase after the car until it ruptures an artery (see *ibid.*, 203ff.).

It does not, however, take religion or a drinking problem to turn fiction into reality, nor is the process a purely individual affair. Many magic realist texts show community consensus to be equally efficient, thereby illustrating the social and psychological mechanism of collective validation discussed above. In giving rumour or legend precedence over bare historical facts, the texts emphasize that, if enough people agree on a certain version of "what really happened", it is no good simply to reject that version on account of its being fictitious, at least not if one wants to understand the people's motivations and actions. Saleem makes this point when he recounts the popular and patently fantastic version of the assassination of Mian Abdullah. As I have shown in Chapter 3, Saleem here involves his readers in a dizzying spiral of truth claims and disclaimers, at the end of which they find themselves left with the betel-chewers highly implausible version of events as the only one they will get. Saleem prepares the reader for this outcome when he laconically remarks by way of introduction: "Sometimes legends make reality, and become more useful than the facts" (*Midnight's Children*, 47). This observation is echoed almost verbatim by Dr Babington in *The Satanic Verses*. Noting that Amerigo Vespucci's travel accounts caused the newly discovered continent to be named after him rather than its real discoverer, Dr Babington reflects that "fantasy can be stronger than fact" (150).

And indeed, either formulation could be regarded as one of magic realist fiction's credos. With disclaimers such as "people said" or "rumour had it" abounding in a thousand and one variations to mark accounts as potentially fictitious, these accounts must nevertheless be acknowledged as valid because of the explanatory function they fulfil for the communities who believe in them. This is well illustrated by Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*, which contains two hedges already in the opening sentence: "People, years later, blamed everything on the bees; it

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was the bees, they said, seducing Vera Lang, that started everything" (1). However, the seduction by bees is the only explanation given for the ensuing events, indicating that the real explanation, if indeed any there is, is less important than the stories told by a community imaginatively reconstructing its past.

This argument is put into words by Moraes Zogoiby when he justifies even bothering to recount a version about whose literal truth he has "grave doubts" (*The Moor's Last Sigh*, 77). He argues that "the approved, and polished, family yarn [... is] so profound a part of my parents' picture of themselves – and so significant a part of contemporary Indian art history – [that it] has, for those reasons if no other, a power and importance I will not attempt to deny" (*ibid.*, 78). The issue of legend making reality again comes up when Moraes observes how rumour and gossip can retrospectively influence what people saw, or think they saw. A kiss that in fact was a "shy peck" on the cheek is, by means of a painting and society gossip, transformed into a "full-scale Western-movie clinch":

> It was Aurora's version – quickly displayed by Kekoo Mody and much reproduced in the national press – that everyone remembered; even those who had been at the ground that day began to speak – with much disapproving shaking of heads – of the moist licentiousness, the uninhibited writhings of that interminable kiss, which, they swore, had gone on for *hours*, until the umpires prised the couple apart and reminded the batsman of his duty to his team. "Only in Bombay," people said, with that cocktail of arousal and disapproval that only a scandal can properly mix'n'shake. "What a loose town, yaar, I swear." (*Ibid.*, 228-29; emphasis in the original)

The 27th Kingdom similarly illustrates how sometimes words can make reality, their power of suggestion being so great as to override the senses. Having bought from Mrs O'Connor a dress that one of her sons claims to have "found" while clearing out bombed buildings,[33] Mrs Mason has the ill fortune to run into the legitimate owner of the dress at the news-agent's. The woman recognizes the dress and remarks loudly on this fact, causing Mrs Mason, who is perfectly aware of the O'Connors' reputation, to go into a cold sweat. At this point Valentine, already established

[33] *The 27th Kingdom*, 57. The reader knows quite well what to make of this claim: "Victor's family [....] specialised in clearing out bombed houses, though as some of the brothers seemed not too adept at discriminating between these and ordinary standing inhabited houses, one or two of them were currently putting in a spot of time at the Awful Place on Dartmoor" (*ibid.*, 41).

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as a "fully functioning thaumaturge" (*ibid.*, 86), comes to the rescue and, as the text implies, magically turns the sea-green dress into a blue one. At the same time, the text renders the underlying psychological mechanisms of suggestion, wishful thinking and collective validation quite transparent:

> "Good morning, Mrs Mason," said a voice. "I like your blue frock." Valentine was standing between her and the women.
>
> "It's green," began Mrs Mason frailly, looking down at herself. But it wasn't. It was, in this light, undeniably blue, and the material was coarser than she remembered, the thread in the centre seam clumsily drawn.
>
> "Turquoise," she said, feeling suddenly stronger. "Such a deceptive shade, especially in this shot material. Sometimes blue, sometimes green, like a zircon."
>
> "Like the sea," said Valentine.
>
> Mrs Mason now realised who she was talking to – in public – and said goodbye very coldly.[34] She went out with the Major, who, deaf to these female entanglements, was flipping through the day's fixtures as he walked.
>
> The woman bereft of the green dress was staring open-mouthed and blushing slightly. "I could've sworn ..." she said. "I couldn't have been mistaken."
>
> "You never know," said her friend, who was clearly easily influenced. "Not with that shade of turquoise." (*Ibid.*, 137-38)

The powerful mechanism of suggestion is explored on a more collective scale in *The Satanic Verses*, where Saladin Chamcha's transformation into a Satanic demi-goat depends on the rumour propagating the monster's existence:

> What was happening, although nobody admitted it or even, at first, understood, was that everyone, black brown white, had started thinking of the dream-figure as *real*, as a being who had crossed the frontier, evading the normal controls, and was now roaming loose about the city. Illegal migrant, outlaw king, foul criminal or race-hero, Saladin Chamcha was getting to be true. Stories rushed across the city in every direction: a physiotherapist sold a shaggy-dog tale to the Sundays, was not believed, but *no smoke without fire*, people said; it was a precarious state of affairs, and it couldn't be long before the raid on the Shaandaar Café that would send the whole thing higher than the sky. (288; emphases in the original)

[34] Mrs Mason has a decidedly racist streak (see *ibid.*, 58).

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In a fashion characteristic of magic realism, the demonic figure hovers on the brink of allegory, as becomes clear when it is described as a collective fantasy of both blacks and whites:

> While non-tint neo-Georgians dreamed of a sulphurous enemy crushing their perfectly restored residences beneath his smoking heel, nocturnal browns-and-blacks found themselves cheering, in their sleep, this what-else-after-all-but-black-man, maybe a little twisted up by fate class race history, all that, but getting off his behind, bad and mad, to kick a little ass. (*Ibid.*, 286).

Illustrating the mechanism of sociology's labelling theory, the coloured population have come to think of themselves in terms of racist stereotypes. As one character remarks *apropos* Saladin's monstrous transformation: "It's an image white society has rejected for so long that we can really take it, you know, occupy it, inhabit it, reclaim it and make it our own" (*ibid.*, 287). Turned into reality by virtue of language and belief, racist stereotypes prove detrimental not only in a social, but also in a quite material way, for in the race riots sparked off by reports about a biased police investigation, houses are burned down and people killed, Saladin almost among them (see *ibid.*, 453ff.).

The very real effects of gossip and rumour are emphasized also in Marina Warner's *Indigo*, in which the villagers' superstitions exile Sycorax from the community. Presented from an external perspective, the villagers' magical constructions reveal themselves as strategies to deal with the disruptive and frightening event of a large number of shipwrecked slaves washing up on the beach and a baby being rescued from one of the dead women's womb. The text traces how the magical explanations construct Sycorax and the child as Other in order to justify their expulsion:

> It wasn't natural, some said. It was pure witchcraft. Sycorax had cast a spell and brought the dead to life. Nor should she have done it, even if the child were still alive. He isn't one of us, some muttered. He comes from a people who are strangers to us, outsiders, wildmen. Others remembered the seamonster Manjiku, who swallows babies in his burning desire to be a woman: Manjiku has spewed up the children he once stole, this blackened carrion is his vomit. Others feared that Sycorax had accomplished what no one ever had before, the taming of Manjiku, and he had made a gift to her of his victims. But not all agreed: the baby was only a baby, pale-brown and mottled purplish from his amniotic limbo, with the umbilical cord still twisting from his small and drumlike belly like a flayed snake [….] (85)

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However, the rational and humane voices are in the minority, and Sycorax's reputation as a sorceress provides her husband with a convenient excuse to divorce her. Back in her brother's village, speculations about the child's origins equally abound, some believing him to be the result of a magical concoction, others of a liaison between the witch Sycorax and one of her familiars, while the more down-to-earth simply believe him an illegitimate child (see *ibid.*, 86-87).

But whether construed as supernaturally evil, as blessed and holy, or merely as immoral, Sycorax and Dulé are viewed and treated as different. Focalized through Sycorax rather than the community, the underlying social and psychological mechanisms are laid bare: "She had changed in their eyes; become charged with their fears of death, though it was life she had brought to Dulé" (*ibid.*, 88). Defined as different, Sycorax must live apart; regardless of its validity, belief has shaped reality. To be venerated and feared as a sorceress is Sycorax's fate even beyond death, people bringing gifts to her grave in the hope of having their wishes granted. The novel here once again suggests that these convictions must be taken seriously, even if Sycorax, more an allegorical representation of the island than anything else, cannot actually ease their plight:

> They push a tack into the bark of the saman tree and make a wish, they whisper their pleas to the spirit inhering in the tree, as they imagine, rightly (though Sycorax has no power, nor ever had, except in dreaming). (*Ibid.*, 210)

Complementary to its use of magic realist techniques, the text here illustrates and acknowledges the reality of belief and narrative even while demythologizing them on the level of the text.

As another extremely self-conscious piece of fiction, *The Late Mr Shakespeare* also typically complements its magic realist techniques with theoretical reflection, thereby making their function explicit. As has been shown in Chapter 5, Pickleherring's account is chockfull of information about Shakespeare which he freely admits to be uncorroborated and in many cases overtly fictitious. However, this in no way undermines his claim to be a biographer, at least according to Pickleherring. In seeking to present Shakespeare, thus his argument, one also needs to look at what an admiring popular imagination made of the great writer. This process is transparently re-enacted in the text through magic realist techniques, for example by making Shakespeare the hero of tales known

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from other contexts,[35] by fantastically endowing him with a royal lineage, or by relating the poetic, wise, banal, touching, or cryptic first and last words popular imagination has attributed to him (see 73-80 and 43, 51, 385-86).

Significantly, the novel does not imply that these items are accurate reflections of extratextual speculations and stories ranking about the great Bard; the legends and rumours Pickleherring claims to have heard about Shakespeare obviously are a literary device. Nevertheless, the novel can be considered to reflect extratextual reality insofar as it imitates how people think about Shakespeare, drawing attention to the same craving for form and meaning diagnosed by, and in, so many magic realist narrators. The text's mimetic potential is revealed when Pickleherring analyses how wishful thinking tends to make facts, as in the case of Shakespeare's date of birth. Having informed the reader fairly early on that "William Shakespeare was born in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon on St George's Day, Sunday the 23rd of April" (*ibid.*, 13), Pickleherring at a later point subversively re-examines this statement, in case its more than doubtful claim to factuality should have passed unnoticed:

> [...] we all know that Shakespeare was born on the 23rd of April, 1564 – and that he might well not have been.
>
> In other words, that birthday belongs to beauty, not to truth. April 23rd is of course St George's Day. April 23rd is also without doubt or dispute the day on which Shakespeare died in 1616. So we round out our man's little life with a timely coincidence, a chime or rhyme of dates, linked St George's Days. But to say that WS was born on that feast is conjecture. The life of Shakespeare starts with a conjecture. We want him to be born then, so he was.[36]

It should be mentioned that Pickleherring gave his readers a fair chance of catching him out before he revealed himself, for he scrupulously and even rather conspicuously excluded Shakespeare's date of birth from Chapter 7, entitled "All the facts about Mr Shakespeare" (*ibid.*, 23). Pickleherring's point in laying bare such acts of construction and the desire for meaning from which they spring is not that historians should try harder to restrict themselves to known facts. Much less does he suggest that, given the difficulty of establishing facts in the first place,

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[35] Examples have already been mentioned in Chapters 3 and 5.

[36] *Ibid.*, 41. While Shakespeare's birthday traditionally is celebrated on 23 April, no record exists for this: the parish register documents only his baptism on 26 April 1564 (see *Shakespeare-Handbuch: Die Zeit – Der Mensch – Das Werk – Die Nachwelt* [1972], ed. Ina Schabert, Stuttgart, 2000, 139).

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history is a futile endeavour. Instead, he is all for the inclusion of conjectures and even overtly fictitious kinds of knowledge, arguing that they form an indispensable and enlightening part of history – though only as long as they are not mistaken for fact.

Across the Atlantic, Pickleherring's approach finds another champion in Strabo Becker, who in *The Invention of the World* narrates the myth of Donal Keneally. Faced with Maggie's unwillingness to believe in the Keneally-stories, or, as Maggie, puts it, "the lies about him", Becker explains:

> Myth, [...] like all the past, real or imaginary, must be acknowledged [….] Even if it's not believed. In fact, especially when it's not believed. When you begin to disbelieve in Keneally you can begin to believe in yourself. (406-407)

In arguing for alternative forms of knowledge while at the same time advocating a certain amount of scepticism, Becker not only puts into words magic realist fiction's dual project of revaluation and deconstruction, but also recalls scholars' differentiated approaches to magical thought outlined above, once again underlining how fiction and theory can be seen to pursue a similar project.

In sum, then, magic realist fiction advances two basic arguments against short-sightedly rejecting the non-empirical as unreal. What might be called the "psychological" or "sociological" argument perhaps is most vividly summarized by Herbert Badgery's clinching observation that his readers might explain away the ghost that haunts him as the manifestation of a guilty conscience until they were blue in the face, but their sophisticated reasoning would do nothing to relieve him of the undeniably real, and not altogether pleasant, physiological effects of fear:

> Now you can say that I manufactured this ghost myself, and that it was nothing more than my guilty conscience scorched on to the night [….] You are free to argue it, but it makes and made no difference, not to the story, not to my prickling skin, or to my bowels which loosened and gave me a liquid shit to spray and splatter around the dunnycan at odd and unpredictable hours of the night and day. (*Illywhacker*, 194-95)

Together with several of the examples discussed above, this recalls philosophical and sociological arguments why language and belief, however much one may think the latter deluded, must be acknowledged as social facts.

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A second line of argument is pursued by magic realist statements which, approaching a theory of poetic truth, explicitly argue for the epistemological potential of stories, images and metaphors. While these clearly are not true in the sense of corresponding to empirical reality, they may nevertheless fulfil important cognitive functions. What is exemplified through magic realist techniques such as literalization finds explicit expression in Saleem's observation that "what's real and what's true aren't necessarily the same", in Fastolf's notion of "*true* lies", in Henri/Villanelle's injunction to trust the storyteller, or in Pickleherring's characterization of his writing as an attempt to "come at the truth by telling lies".[37]

Using both case studies and reflection to argue that the constructions of the human mind need to be acknowledged as real, magic realist fiction notably concurs with the theoretical approaches outlined above. It also supports the idea that narrative and magical thought are not restricted to so-called primitive cultures, but reveal general human dispositions. Magic realist texts strikingly show that, far from being mutually exclusive, magical and rational-empirical modes of thought may well co-exist not only in one and the same society, but also in one and the same individual. Especially the more self-conscious texts explicitly comment on this intriguing feature of the human mind. Calling to mind the co-existence model proposed by Subbotsky, the narrator of *Shame* finds people to be perfectly capable of embracing opposite poles at once:

> The inconsistency does not matter; I myself manage to hold large numbers of wholly irreconcilable views simultaneously, without the least difficulty. I do not think others are less versatile. (241-42)[38]

He makes the same point as magic realist fiction, namely that the world cannot be divided into black and white, realists and fantasists, rational-scientific and magical cultures. Upon a closer look, things will prove to be a mixture of both, and this needs to be acknowledged, whether for

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[37] *Midnight's Children*, 79 (for the other quotes, see Chapter 3 above).

[38] While psychologists have described the human mind in these terms, test subjects themselves are unlikely to do so. It has been observed that if people become aware of inconsistencies in their world-view, be they of a cognitive or ethical nature, they immediately seek to resolve them. This is illustrated for example in Jean Piaget's theory of equilibration, according to which a perceived discrepancy or "disequilibrium" between a child's model of the world and incoming information will motivate the child to construct a more fitting model, thereby propelling it to the next higher stage of mental development (see *Die Äquilibration der kognitiven Strukturen* [*L'Équilibration des Structures Cognitives*, 1975], trans. Luc Bernard, Stuttgart, 1976).

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good or ill. As my analysis has shown, magic realist fiction presents the heterogeneity of human thought as basically enriching, showing different modes of thought to provide manifold means of accessing experience. Moreover, to acknowledge the heterogeneity of human thought in itself is already beneficial, because it entails an awareness of the inevitable processes of construction that underlie all human knowledge. One might thus say that magic realist fiction advocates what Pickleherring has called the "Shakespearean kind of mind", which is "capable of holding two quite different beliefs in balance at the same time" (*The Late Mr Shakespeare*, 73).

Postscript: Graham Swift's *Waterland* as meta-magic realism

Before going on to the next chapter, I would like to return briefly to a point raised earlier, as far back as Chapter 3. There, I rejected approaches that regard Graham Swift's *Waterland* as magic realist, suggesting that it was perhaps better described as a meta-magic realist text. Having shown how magic realist fiction unfolds its argument not only through typically magic realist techniques, all of which basically depend on endorsing the alternative perspective as real, but also through reflection from an external perspective, I am now in a position to elucidate that perhaps somewhat cryptic remark.

In a nutshell: while pursuing essentially the same questions as magic realist fiction, and even suggesting similar answers, *Waterland* differs in the literary techniques it employs. Like magic realist fiction, *Waterland* inquires into the human desire for meaning and the ways in which narrative and belief can become reality. Unlike magic realist fiction, however, *Waterland* does not actually present its fantastic elements as real on the level of the text; in the end, the reader is always able to recontextualize them as fantasies, dreams, superstitions, or rumours. Although magic realist fiction also renders its fantastic elements transparent, thereby engendering a sometimes not inconsiderable amount of reader hesitation, it nevertheless characteristically endorses the Other perspective. By contrast, *Waterland* scrutinizes, lays bare and explicitly comments on the constructedness of its implausible or fantastic elements from an external, and therefore invalidating, perspective.[39]

[39] For the sake of the argument, I generalize. *Waterland* at times also produces an atmosphere of doubt, insinuating that perhaps there actually might be some truth to the fantastic stories told by the people of the Fens, or that apparent coincidences might be more than that (see, for example, 71-72). In these cases, one might say that the fantastic

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The difference is nicely illustrated by the following example from *Waterland*, which explores the power of belief to affect reality. Having vainly tried to drown his guilt over his son's death in alcohol, Jack Parr decides to end his life by placing himself on the railroad tracks. Unable to dissuade him from his plan, his wife manages to reroute all night trains, and Jack escapes unscathed. However, his wife never tells Jack about her intervention, so that he goes through life believing he survived due to a miracle, and henceforth remains blessedly abstinent. The text makes unmistakably clear that there was no miracle, first by relating the actions of Jack's wife, and then by qualifying Jack's perspective as a mistaken one:

> [Jack] awoke [...] to discover that he was not dead but alive and that by his calculation (for Flora Parr said nothing) two passenger trains and three goods had roared over him without leaving a single mark. And thus Jack Parr, who was a superstitious man and that very morning swore to forsake drink, came to believe that God, who sometimes brings about by way of punishment inexplicable cruelties and drowns a man's own son, also performs inexplicable wonders. (*Waterland*, 115-16)

If the passage were written in a magic realist mode, the miracle would be presented as real, just as the ascension of Remedios in *One Hundred Nights of Solitude* is presented as real even while the text manages to suggest that it might just be a construction. Therefore, this passage from *Waterland* is better comparable to the "case studies" from *Midnight's Children* in which Saleem explicitly characterizes his grandmother's and his father's beliefs as constructions, his observations of their behaviour serving to complement the magic realist techniques the novel uses.

It is little surprising that the other complementary technique found in *Midnight's Children* and so many other works of magic realist fiction also abounds in *Waterland*, namely that of theoretical reflection. Time and again, *Waterland*'s narrator explicitly points to the universal human craving for meaning, for example when he observes "And there's no saying what heady potions we won't concoct, what meanings, myths, manias we won't imbibe in order to convince ourselves that reality is not an empty vessel" (*ibid.*, 41).

On the whole, then, *Waterland* exhibits a considerable resemblance to certain works of magic realist fiction, both in its line of inquiry and in its

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elements are allowed to stand, moving the text within the vicinity of magic realism. On the whole, however, the fantastic elements lack the straightforward and (sometimes suspiciously) unproblematic sense of realness they enjoy in magic realist texts.

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use of the strategies of observation and reflection which in magic realist texts complement specifically magic realist techniques. However, taken by themselves, these complementary strategies do not produce that disconcertingly matter-of-fact mixture of realistic and fantastic elements that characterizes the magic realist mode. There is no sense of transgression, there are no markers of hesitation, the narrator does not seem gleefully to be putting the reader on. This is why I suggested that *Waterland* might rather be called a meta-magic realist novel.

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CHAPTER 9

"THE ONLY REAL ISM OF THESE BACK-TO-FRONT AND JABBERWOCKY DAYS"

MIMICKING A FANTASTIC REALITY

When Moraes Zogoiby wittily identifies his "*unnaturalism*" as the only way of conveying his far from plausible experiences in a far from plausible world,[1] he provides a more than conspicuous pointer as to how magic realism's absurd, grotesque, or fantastic departures from traditional realism might be read. As I have outlined earlier, writers and critics alike have argued that magic realism better captures the experience of living in the contemporary world than classical realism. This makes the mode comparable to a host of other postmodern genres and modes that according to critics likewise reject the coherent, causal, teleological and eminently meaningful world of realism, paradoxically enough, as meaningless.

However, if magic realist fiction can indeed be understood as a new kind of mimesis, it becomes necessary to take a closer look at the reality it presents. Which aspects of experience are emphasized, and how are they evaluated? Returning to this question in the second section of this chapter, I will start out by examining how magic realist fiction can be related, or rather, quite self-consciously relates itself, to the current debate about fictional departures from realism and their mimetic potential.

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[1] For the full quote in context, see 212 above.

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Claiming verisimilitude: conceptions of a "fantastic realism"

Tzvetan Todorov concludes his classic study on the literary fantastic by declaring its subject dead. Having made his definition so narrow that barely a handful of nineteenth-century works qualify, Todorov can indeed safely make this pronouncement. And yet, on the final pages of his study, he sneaks an ever so brief but nevertheless vastly stimulating peek at subsequent literary developments, developments that have prompted numerous of his colleagues to proclaim the exact opposite, namely that the fantastic is alive and kicking. Broadly subsuming under fantastic literature all fiction deviating from so-called consensus reality, literary critics have argued that the fantastic has in fact come to eclipse realist fiction. Only recently has the late twentieth century been seen as the site of "a revival of the fantastic on a scale unprecedented since the Middle Ages" (Alexander, 13), an assessment echoed by numerous other critics (see for example Hume, 30 and Cornwell, 145).

However, fiction's tendency to jettison realism does not signal a withdrawal from the world. On the contrary, critics have argued that in many cases these fantastic detours are taken in the hope of arriving at a more adequate representation of reality, or rather, of the experience of reality. Although Kathryn Hume acknowledges that some contemporary fantasy may be regarded as escapist, she identifies several types of non-realist fiction which, in important ways, use fantastic forms to engage more closely with reality.[2] Neil Cornwell likewise attests the majority of contemporary fantastic fiction "a strong social, political and ethical thrust" (211). And Christine Brooke-Rose argues that the newly emerging forms of the fantastic must, for all their apparent departures from reality, be considered just as much, or just as little, mimetic as realist conventions. Finding that these forms of writing "merely [show] the real, in its unique 'idiocy', as the fantastic which it is", she suggests that they might perhaps best be called a "fantastic realism" (Brooke-Rose, 388).

Analogous approaches have been formulated for magic realist fiction. Reality itself having become unrealistic, departures from realism are necessary if any degree of verisimilitude is to be obtained. This shows that magic realism's concern is first and foremost with the real world, and not, as its detractors would have it, with exotic utopias. Indeed, Angela Carter might easily have been speaking about magic realist fiction in general when she observes of the characters in Louise Erdrich's *The*

[2] These include defamiliarization, satire, utopias, or rendering the world unintelligible (Hume, 55ff.).

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Beet Queen that they are "never, for all the elements of the fantastic, less than true to life" (Carter 1992a, 153).

Arguments that magic realism aims to be mimetic are borne out by magic realist fiction itself. I have shown in Chapter 6 how magic realist texts use two strategies of supernaturalization, namely a fantastic rhetoric and a rhetoric of banality, to characterize the reader's extratextual world as incredible. Through these, reality is presented as amazing and wonderful in some respects, grotesque and horrific in others. The impression of a fantastic reality is further enhanced by magic realism's matter-of-fact attitude towards its magic elements, the implicit argumentation being that, since the unbelievable itself has already come true, there is no reason why the fantastic should arouse any disbelief. Toni Morrison has made this line of thought explicit when she remarked *apropos* the ghosts contained in her fiction that, surely, they were no more incredible than the phenomenon of slavery appears, or ought to appear, from a present-day perspective.[3]

In addition to the inversion of categories on the level of plot, magic realist texts resort to explicit argumentation on a meta-level. Having characterized the world as fantastic by means of different literary techniques, a number of magic realist narrators do not hesitate to put this assessment into words as well, once again offering a theory to go with their writing. A good illustration of this can be found in Moraes Zogoiby, who draws a direct connection between the state of the world and his style of writing. He argues that magic realism's technique of treating the real as fantastic and the fantastic as real is nothing if not appropriate to a reality that lays bare the illusion of normality underlying realist fiction. Looking back to his childhood, Moraes recalls

> the parental bizarreries which came to feel like everyday occurrences, and in a way still do, they still persuade me that it is the idea of the norm that is bizarre, the notion that human beings have *normal, everyday* lives ... go behind the door of any household, I want to argue, and you'll find a macabre wonderland as untamed as our own. (*The Moor's Last Sigh*, 206; emphasis in the original)

The Moor's Last Sigh again outlines its own poetics of a fantastic realism by having its characters describe and comment on Aurora Zogoiby's style of painting. Vasco Miranda's exhortations against naturalistic depictions of a purely exterior reality as well as his demands for an "epic-

[3] Neil Cornwell got this straight from the horse's mouth at one of Morrison's readings (see 207-208).

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fabulist manner" that takes into account not only dreams, but also "the dream-like wonder of the waking world", are both fuelled by his desire to see the real India appear on the canvas. "Forget those damnfool realists!" he tells Aurora. "Life is fantastic! Paint that" (*ibid.*, 174). So she paints like her son writes, both seeking to convey the topsy-turvy, unbounded, patently incredible reality of post-Independence India.[4]

In *Midnight's Children*, India under Indira Gandhi's emergency rule is likewise portrayed as unreal, with Saleem resorting to both a fantastic rhetoric and outright reflection. The times of the emergency rule are described as "mysterious", "bizarre", "horror-struck", "terrible" (416-18), and the motif of obstructed vision is taken up, the whole period of the emergency rule being shrouded in the gloom of midnight (see *ibid.*, 419, 422 and 428). Use is made of obscure allusions, for instance to a "secret macabre untold", and hedges further increase the sense of impending doom:

> I don't want to tell it! – But I swore to tell it all. – No, I renounce, not that, surely some things are better left...? (*Ibid.*, 421)

This tactic is complemented by explicit characterizations of reality as fantastic. Echoing Humpty-Dumpty's fatal fall, the emergency rule is described as "a time which damaged reality so badly that nobody ever managed to put it back together again" (*ibid.*, 419). Like Moraes, Saleem finds conventional narrative norms to fail in the face of this shattered reality. However, a magic realist mode already being installed, in his search for expression he now has to depart even more radically from realism. Lamenting that "only fragments remain, none of it makes sense any more!", only to immediately reflect that "sense-and-nonsense is no longer (perhaps never was) for me to evaluate", Saleem finally hits upon a solution: "I might be able to tell it as a dream" (*ibid.*, 422). Paradoxically, surrealism and the oneiric strike Saleem as the modes most suited to depict Indian reality.

Shame in turn not only presents a world out of joint, but picks up even more specifically on the notion of reality outstripping even the most gifted writer's imagination. The novel uses metafictional commentary to identify real-world Pakistan as a place far more outrageous and incredible even than its fictional analogue. Inverting the realist convention that defines the real as the probable and plausible, the narrator

[4] Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* also uses a painting to suggest that fantastic elements may actually create verisimilitude, the narrator insisting: "The picture captures precisely the reality the painter witnessed in Clara's house" (267).

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paradoxically suggests that, the less believable something seems, the more likely it is actually to exist. He ironically describes his almost-but-not-quite Pakistan as "Al-Lah's new country: two chunks of land a thousand miles apart. A country so improbable it could almost exist" (61), thereby effectively characterizing the historical situation after Partition as absurd. Time and again, he counts himself lucky to be "only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale", for if he were indeed aiming at a true-to-life picture of Pakistan, he would have to include an enormous amount of material that would patently violate not only realism's stipulations of what is real, but also those of the Pakistani government, causing his novel to be banned (see *ibid.*, 70). The narrator amply manages to convey how much more fantastic than his "fairy-story" (*ibid.*, 71) a halfway accurate account would be by enumerating some of the things he fortunately will not have to mention, thereby of course, in a beautiful instance of paralipsis, mentioning them:

> But suppose this were a realistic novel! Just think what else I might have to put in. The business, for instance, of the illegal installation, by the richest inhabitants of "Defence", of covert, subterranean water pumps that steal the water from their neighbours' mains – so that you can always tell the people with the most pull by the greenness of their lawns (such clues are not confined to the cantonment of Q.). – And would I also have to describe the Sind Club in Karachi, where there is still a sign reading "Women and Dogs Not Allowed Beyond This Point"? Or to analyse the subtle logic of an industrial programme that builds nuclear reactors but cannot develop a refrigerator? O dear – and the school text-books which say, "England is not an agricultural country", and the teacher who once docked two marks from my youngest sister's geography essay because it differed at two points from the exact wording of this same text book ... how awkward, dear reader, all this could turn out to be. (*Ibid.*, 69)

Running on at considerable length, the list of things not to be mentioned reveals further instances of political oppression, religious fundamentalism, censorship, genocide, despotism and corruption. These elements are fantastic not in that they are physically impossible – unfortunately, they only all too obviously are very possible indeed. Rather, they violate the assumption that human behaviour is governed by certain fundamental moral and ethical guidelines. Implying that democracy, honesty, human rights and the freedom of the press should obtain as a matter of course, *Shame* characterizes the actual state of affairs as deviant, abnormal, untenable, in short: as entirely fantastic.

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It might be remarked that in each of the above examples, the sense of an incredible and transgressive reality is linked to a non-Western setting. However, it would be premature to deduce an inherent connection. The experience of a fantastic reality is not a purely postcolonial phenomenon, even if some approaches to magic realism have suggested this. Although Alejo Carpentier presents the "marvellous real" and the baroque literature it gives rise to as a uniquely Latin American phenomenon, and though other critics have likewise linked magic realist fiction to specifically postcolonial settings, apparently presuming these to be less amenable to realist representation than the Western world, such approaches proceed from untenable essentialist and Eurocentric assumptions. While sociological approaches to genre and mode may be fruitful, they always also hold the risk of positing too deterministic a connection between literary kinds and their respective circumstances of production. As postmodernist theory stresses, no artistic medium can naïvely be assumed to offer a transparent representation of an external reality: even if the problem of language can be circumvented, for example in film or photography, representation always remains a question of perspective. As Linda Hutcheon has so succinctly put it: "Representation is always alteration" (Hutcheon 1989a, 92). But quite apart from this problem, it needs to be remembered that nothing is *per se* fantastic. What counts as fantastic lies in the eye of the beholder: in addition to being culturally and historically contingent, it depends on the individual's perception. It is not that India, presumably sharing the typical postcolonial fate of having "encountered Western capitalism, technology and education haphazardly" (Cooper, 15), is inherently fantastic. Rather, the point is that Moraes and Saleem perceive their country to be so. And this perception of reality as fantastic is neither natural nor exclusive to a postcolonial situation, although Westerners, using their own background as a yardstick, might easily fall victim to this fallacy. However, as Chapter 6 has shown, events in the history of Europe and the USA can equally been construed as surpassing belief.

It therefore is not surprising that, in a number of magic realist works, the impression of living in a crazy, unnatural world should be voiced also in the context of a Western setting. If in Moraes' Bombay the bizarre is the order of the day, *The Satanic Verses*' London has likewise established the abnormal as the norm. As a character explains to Chamcha, "round here the freaks are two a penny, you only have to look" (283). Alleluia

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Cone's father, a Jewish-Polish emigrant and wartime prison camp survivor[5] settled in London, similarly impresses upon his daughter:

> The world is incompatible, just never forget it: gaga. Ghosts, Nazis, saints, all alive at the same time; in one spot, blissful happiness, while down the road, the inferno. You can't ask for a wilder place. (*Ibid.*, 295)

Likewise having dismissed any idea of a normal reality, Saladin's English wife Pamela finds it not at all unlikely that British policemen should be practising witchcraft:

> My God: look at what's happening in this country. A few bent coppers taking their clothes off and drinking urine out of helmets isn't so weird. (*Ibid.*, 280)

Despite its eminent tradition of rationalism, empiricism and science, Britain turns out to be a quite fantastic place also for its immigrants. Combining explicit characterization with a fantastic rhetoric, the reflections of a Bengali café-keeper's wife amount to a harsh moral indictment against the frequently denied, although unfortunately only all too real, phenomenon of British racism:

> they had come into a demon city in which anything could happen, your windows shattered in the middle of the night without any cause, you were knocked over in the street by invisible hands, in the shops you heard such abuse you felt like your ears would drop off but when you turned in the direction of the words you saw only empty air and smiling faces, and every day you heard about this boy, that girl, beaten up by ghosts. (*Ibid.*, 250)

If, as critics have suggested, Latin American reality inspires "a sense that seemingly anything can happen" (Danow, 68), then the Western world does not lag far behind – except that instead of marvels and wonders, Rushdie's novel suggests it to have rather darker items on the menu. All too often either ignored or denied and thereby effectively dismissed from the order of the real, while at the same time only all too glaringly evident, acts of racism unmask official talk of a free and equal society as illusion.

As in the other texts examined, *The Satanic Verses* once again explicitly reflects on the difficulties of adequately representing such by realist

[5] This biographical detail is perhaps not entirely irrelevant in view of the connection that has been made out between the Holocaust and the perception of reality as fantastic.

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standards outrageous matters. When Saladin Chamcha dreams that his own racist stereotypes about Blacks and Asians have become horrible reality, this fantastic rendition of affairs strikes him as strangely appropriate:

> Dreams put things in their own way; but Chamcha, coming briefly awake as his heartbeat skipped into a new burst of syncopations, was bitterly aware that the nightmare had not been so very far from the truth; the spirit, at least, was right. (256)

Rushdie's novel here self-reflexively justifies its use of magic realist techniques, suggesting that the literalization of monstrous stereotypes on the level of plot is an effective way of conveying, as the novel itself puts it, "the idea that normality was no longer composed (if it had ever been) of banal, 'normal' elements" (*ibid.*, 280).

Other magic realist works similarly argue that reality does not conform to realist notions of probability and plausibility, making realism an inadequate mode of representation. In *Gut Symmetries*, realism's loss of appeal is, at least in Alice's case, closely tied to the change from a Newtonian to a quantum mechanical world-view. Anticipating that her story might seem strange or unlikely, Alice stresses that it is nevertheless true, pointing out that quantum physics has redefined strangeness and likelihood (see 9). In a world where everything is relative to the observer, objectivist assumptions no longer apply: "The sensible strong ordinary world of fixity is a folklore" (*ibid.*, 10). As I have shown in Chapter 5, the novel uses quantum physics to call into question other fundamental notions of realism as well, such as linear time or the notion that the world can be divided into separate and well-defined categories. Ironically, this leaves traditional realism capable of producing nothing but fairy tales or lies – albeit ones that have an edge over an implausible truth, as Alice realizes when she needs to explain her fantastic story to the police:

> Since the truth would certainly be written off as an unfact I decided to lie. The most plausible explanations usually are lies. (*Ibid.*, 214)

In Stella's case, realism proves similarly insufficient to capture the mystical interior universes which, to her, are just as real as the material world. If Manhattan is an "Aladdin island where anyone might be lucky enough to turn up a magic lamp" (*ibid.*, 79), then Stella's mixture of fairy stories and tall tales indeed is better suited to the task of describing it than realist narrative.

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Notably, most of the above examples, whether referring to a Western or a non-Western setting, link the sense of living in a fantastic reality to the specific circumstances of contemporary life. Identifying technological innovations, current political systems, or the structures of modern society as sources of either a sense of wonder or horrified disbelief, the texts suggest that the twentieth century has finally proceeded beyond the pale. As the previous chapter has shown, they here tie in with arguments advanced to explain the resurgence of magical thought, which hold that the modern world in a variety of ways has become unfathomable to the individual.

However, I would caution against assuming the contemporary world to be in any way inherently incredible, or at least any more so than it was at any other time. As the marvellous and the fantastic are a matter of perception, they can be restricted no more to a single period in time than to any single place. Obviously, literary strategies of defamiliarization, of which magic realism is but one instance, have been used by a multitude of writers throughout the ages to suggest that the world is a great miracle. Explicit laments about reality exceeding all norms and boundaries likewise abound. If one reads John Donne's "The First Anniversary", one comes away feeling that the late Renaissance was already quite as fantastic and even apocalyptic as anything the twentieth century has to offer:

> Then, as mankinde, so is the worlds whole frame
> Quite out of joynt, almost created lame [...]
> 'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone;
> All just supply, and Relation.[6]

In pointing this out, I do not mean to sever the experience of reality as fantastic from historical circumstance. Arguably, times characterized by social and political upheaval will elicit such expressions in greater abundance than periods of relative stability. The presentation of reality as topsy-turvey and absurd in the literature of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean Age, or in the journalistic and fictional endeavours of the 1960s, doubtlessly is rooted in historical experience. However, there is no linear relationship between historical context and literary form, as can be seen in the fact that writers at different times and in different places

[6] John Donne, *Poetical Works* (1929), ed. Herbert J.C. Grierson, Oxford and New York, 1987, 213-14, ll. 191-92 and 213-14. On late Elizabethan literature as a reflection of the painful state of transition from the Elizabethan world picture to the Newtonian Age of Reason, see Hiram Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance*, New York, 1950, esp. 1-28.

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have identified quite dissimilar features of reality as fantastic, and have expressed their feelings through various techniques. Furthermore, although the idea of a transgressive reality has occupied the literary and artistic imagination more at some times than at others, it may surface in the work of individual writers or artists quite independently of these larger trends, illustrating once again the extent to which the marvellous and the fantastic are a matter of perception.

That the postmodern world has no monopoly on the fantastic is made clear by magic realist texts that characterize past ages as unbelievable. Chapter 6 has already analysed how both *The Passion* and *The Late Mr Shakespeare* supernaturalize brutal aspects of the Napoleonic and the Jacobean Age, respectively. In a more self-conscious manner, *Falstaff* likewise picks up on the issue of a marvellous or fantastic reality and the problem of representing it. Reality here is characterized as transgressive not only in a negative sense, but in a positive one as well, allowing medieval London almost to acquire the dimensions of Carpentier's "marvellous real", although the emphasis is less on natural than on man-made wonders. Accordingly, London to Fastolf seems "a magic city", a miraculous place full of technological marvels: "I thought in those days that there was nothing as beautiful as London Bridge, nothing as wonderful, nothing as strange." Even when human feats of engineering prove fallible, with buildings toppling off London Bridge, the scenario still evokes a sense of incredulity and awe. The city appears fantastic in other respects as well – its tax laws, for example, border on the absurd. Fastolf reports: "I saw a carrier with so much tax to pay that he just handed over horse and cart to the tax collector, and went back to the country" (*Falstaff*, 104, 107 and 105).

However, as Fastolf quite analytically notes, it is not London as such that is fantastic – it becomes so only through his perception. His journey to London being something of a pilgrimage, it is only understandable that London should become, to him, a New Jerusalem, if a rather secularized one. Fastolf recalls how, upon first sight,

> it seemed to my young eyes a magic city. Perhaps this was because I had delayed my journey to London, and had therefore the more starved an imagination to meet its sights and sounds. Perhaps it was because I made my pilgrimage on foot, walking the ways and roads from Norfolk, in my company of players and minstrels and friars and tinkers, and had the keener sense of occasion and achievement when I passed over the final hill and saw the place for the first time. (*Ibid.*, 104)

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As in the examples above, conventions must be transgressed if this marvellous reality is to be adequately represented. Fastolf proceeds to employ a strategy of mystical representation, baptized *coincidentia oppositorum* or the union of opposites by Nicolaus of Cusa, in order to convey his impression of London. Of the street vendors' activities, he writes that "it was all advertised as though it was at one and the same time a joke and a sacrament, a nonsense and the best piece of poetry in the world" (*ibid.*, 104). The passage also works to legitimate Fastolf's choice of a magic realist mode for his autobiography, suggesting that the combination of opposites in the form of historical event and outrageous fiction may be more true to historical experience than Stephen Scrope's tiresome insistence on facts.[7]

Fastolf himself explicitly defends his unorthodox approach with the help of an analogy from architecture. Explaining that the design of Chartres Cathedral was intended to express fundamental Christian truths, he argues that the autobiographer, too, is a mason who in his work aims to reveal truths about his life and about the world; and if he includes items that strike the reader as extraneous, as mere decoration or even as inappropriate, these may yet be vital to the enterprise. Fastolf admonishes his readers:

> SO – when you allow me my mortar and bonding, my corbels and capping stones, my gablets and jambs and quoins and plinths, and all the scontion and spalls, the templates and voussoirs and tympanum of my book, *will you permit me also my most necessary gargoyles?* Only inferior masons suppose your gargoyle to be a detail. Sometimes the gargoyle is the point. (*Ibid.*, 171; emphasis in the original)

In arguing that the apparent aberration actually goes to the heart of the matter, Fastolf joins the long line of magic realist narrators who self-consciously develop a theory to go with their fantastic realism, arguing along with a host of critical approaches that magic realist fiction, appearances notwithstanding, aims at verisimilitude.

It needs to be noted that, while heading essentially in the same direction, these theories and approaches are plural; suggestions as to how exactly the fantastic elements achieve a sense of verisimilitude differ, both among fictional texts and critics. One might picture the various approaches as being arranged on a sliding scale, varying in the degree to which they rely on the idea of poetic truth. Whereas Fastolf seems to

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[7] For characterizations of Stephen Scrope as a fact-monger, see *ibid.*, 158-59, 337-38, 350ff., and especially 387: "I, Scrope, write facts."

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argue that his tall tales essentially convey the flavour of reality without necessarily being literally true, the supernaturalized incidents of racism in *The Satanic Verses* and of injustice and corruption in *Shame* are true in a very empirical sense. The common element, however, is that magic realist texts themselves show how their departures from realism should be read: not as forms of escape, but as an improvement upon realism.

If it sounds impossible, it must be true: or, the abolition of knowledge

In the examples considered so far, magic realist fiction makes out two principal domains that characteristically engender a sense of living in a fantastic reality. First, there is the realm of scientific, technological and social progress. When innovation takes place at such speed that it becomes impossible to keep up, the individual often is no longer able to distinguish between what is real and what is merely a story, a joke, or a hoax. Second, there is the domain of human behaviour or ethics. Time and again, magic realist texts suggest that human behaviour has departed so far from the humanly thinkable that it is tantamount to a transgression of natural law. It might be argued that in addition to these two essentially anthropocentric domains, the natural world is identified as a third source of wonder and awe, as for example in the characters' reaction to a block of ice in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. However, in the following I will subsume this point under the first category mentioned above; for the feeling of incredulity and amazement aroused by sights of nature is in fact quite similar to the wonder and excitement over a new scientific or technological insight.

Of course, magic realist fiction is not unique in suggesting that technological progress and unethical behaviour create a distinct impression of unreality. Other literary and artistic forms that present reality as marvellous or fantastic focus on similar issues: the New Journalism for instance frequently derives a sense of the fantastic and absurd from revolutionary changes in the social realm. Changes in life-style, fashion, outlook and cultural norms in the 1960s were so rapid and so radical that, thus the argument, people were left feeling disorientated – suspended in a cultural, if not epistemological and ethical, limbo. Common-sense notions of how the world and society functioned were no longer to be relied on; suddenly, anything seemed possible, and as to whether it was probable, who could say? John Hollowell writes of the 1960s, or rather, of people's perceptions of that time: "Everyday events

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continually blurred the comfortable distinctions between reality and unreality, between fantasy and fact."[8]

The sweeping changes witnessed by the 1960s in the social and cultural sector were accompanied, and to a certain extent even triggered, by equally revolutionary advancements in science and technology. These once again distractingly blurred the boundary between fact and fiction. Space travel immediately comes to mind: what to Jules Vernes had been science fiction, pure fabulation, a fond dream, had almost overnight become reality. However, there are also more chilling examples, such as the nuclear arms race and the possibility of nuclear war, or the increasingly devastating effects that technologies, industries and consumerism were found to have on the environment.

In these latter cases, the sense of living in fantastic times derives in part also from the second of the two source-domains proposed above, that is, ethics. The amazed onlooker's implicit question is not just whether such things can physically exist, but how human beings can reasonably perpetrate, further and condone such actions. The same question arises even more immediately in connection with human violence and cruelty, of which the 1960s have arguably seen their share. The New Journalism tends to focus on such topics, for example in pieces on the Vietnam War,[9] but also in more domestic contexts, where police brutality, race riots, the Civil Rights Movement, and antiwar protests offered plenty of material (see Hollowell, 42ff.). Reporting on such issues, the New Journalists and non-fiction novelists have been seen to take on "the role of witness to the moral dilemmas of our times" (*ibid.*, 15), pronouncing reality to be absolutely beyond belief in ethical respects.

The utterly inconceivable dimensions of human cruelty are the main source of a paradoxical sense of unreality also in literary works dealing with the Holocaust. Human nature having revealed itself capable of thinking up and carrying out monstrosities on a scale even its most pessimistic critics would not have believed possible, all other assumptions about the world become equally questionable. If we were so wrong in one respect, one might ask, what else might we be wrong about? In the light of events like the Holocaust or Hiroshima, realist fiction becomes untenable. Marguerite Alexander has argued: "The fact

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[8] Hollowell, 5. Although Hollowell does not mention it, it might be not entirely irrelevant to recall that the 1960s saw a considerable rise in drug consumption, which may have played a role in the perception of reality as fantastic. Drugs certainly loom large in pieces like Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (for an excerpt, see Wolfe, 228-43).

[9] See the analysis of the piece by Michael Herr in Chapter 6.

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of the 'unbelievable' happening, in recent and remembered history, has placed a strain on that distinction between the credible and the incredible on which the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bourgeois realist novel depended" (Alexander, 13). As a result, a variety of fantastic forms have emerged, magic realism foremost among them.

An enlightening parallel can be drawn between magic realism and travel literature, especially writings dealing with the discovery and exploration of the New World, which likewise struggle with a perceived inadequacy of available forms of representation. Faced with environments that radically differed from their own in almost all respects, discoverers and colonizers of as well as travellers to the Americas regularly had to realize that the world contained any number of things they would not have believed, much less could have imagined. It is little surprising that foreign landscapes should have struck them as wondrous and bizarre, flora and fauna as outlandish and exotic, indigenous behaviour as strange and savage. Stephen Greenblatt writes about the colonizers' experience:

> Columbus's voyage initiated a century of intense wonder. European culture experienced something like the "startle reflex" one can observe in infants: eyes widened, arms outstretched, breathing stilled, the whole body momentarily convulsed.[10]

The explorers and colonizers found themselves faced with the "serious rhetorical problem" (*ibid.*, 21) of putting into words experiences for which none seemed to exist. Not just the conventions of representation suddenly appeared inadequate, but even language itself. To recall the lament made by the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés: "As I do not know what to call these things, I cannot express them" (Carpentier 1995b, 105). The bewildering sensation of having to recast not only one's world-view, but also literary conventions and even language[11] in order to express this new reality, is similar to the one that underlies the fantastic realism of other literary kinds, including magic realist fiction.

Explorers and colonizers furthermore had to overcome the difficulty of getting readers to believe what, to them, would look like tall tales.

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[10] *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (The Clarendon Lectures and the Carpenter Lectures 1988), Oxford, 1991, 14.

[11] The dramatic expansion of the English lexicon during the late Renaissance has in part been attributed to the exploring and colonizing activities of the time, travellers bringing back from abroad not only foreign material goods, but also foreign words (see Baugh and Cable, 222-23).

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Their accounts display a tension between an apparently fantastic subject matter and insistent claims to verisimilitude that to a certain extent aligns them with magic realism. Not infrequently, accounts from the New World contain a truth claim already the title, as in the case of Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (1632; *True History of the Conquest of New Spain*), or John Smith's *A True Relation* (1608). For all these claims, however, many travel accounts – Smith's foremost among them – arguably were less intent on being conscientiously and meticulously true to life than on taking part "in the rhetorical programmes of colonial justification, colonial propaganda, and the occlusion of colonial violence".[12] Here, of course, all similarity to magic realism ends, for magic realist fiction takes great care to undermine its own truth claims, thereby laying bare rhetoric's and propaganda's mechanisms of linguistic manipulation.

It is interesting to note that one of the magic realist texts examined here itself establishes a connection with the genre of New World travel writing and its need for transgressive strategies of representation. Unlike the explorers' accounts, however, *Indigo* makes clear that the "marvellous reality" the British colonizers find on Liamuiga is not inherently so, but only in their perception. When Kit Everard writes home, he asks in the best travel-writing manner: "How should I begin to describe the many enchantments of this isle?" Following the well established topos of presenting the New World as a kind of paradise, he praises the "marvellous bounty" and "ingenious flora" of the island, which one of his men tellingly identifies as "the original Garden God forgot to close".[13] In this, the text shows the colonizers to be essentially no different from the natives, of whom Everard condescendingly relates that "they count many simple things great wonders" (152).

Warner's novel does suggest that the world is a far from average place which not rarely surpasses belief – but for reasons quite different from the ones advanced by the superstitious colonizers, or, for that matter, by Sycorax's equally superstitious people. If reality is incredible, it is so due not to supernatural spells and sorcery, but rather, as the novel implies, because of the colonizers' unnatural brutality and their racist assumptions, as well as the islanders' cruel expulsion of Sycorax and her adopted children. Colonization is characterized as fantastic more directly

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[12] Gesa Mackenthun, *Metaphors of Dispossession: American Beginnings and the Translation of Empire, 1492-1637*, Norman and London, 1997, 12.

[13] *Indigo*, 151 and 180; on the paradise-topos of New World writing, see Mackenthun, 34-48. Notably, *Indigo* also invokes another trope prominent in descriptions of the New World, namely that of cannibalism (see *Indigo* 201; and Mackenthun, 48-70).

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by Sycorax when, buried at the foot of the wishing tree, she has to witness the islanders' fate. Unable to believe colonization a natural phenomenon, Sycorax takes the blame for events: "If I could return to that time, I would no longer change men into beasts as I did, and then find myself unable to change them back into men" (*Indigo*, 213). Transparently literalized, the metaphor gains new life, underlining just how far removed human behaviour can be from human, as well as humane, ideals.

To return to the question of the colonies' perceived marvellous reality, it must be noted that the manifold marvels found abroad provoked a sense of epistemological and representational crisis not only in the explorers, but also back home. In the centuries following the discovery and exploration of foreign continents, scholars of natural history found themselves faced with the task of refashioning the existing systems of classification and taxonomy in order to include the many hitherto unknown creatures brought back from abroad, especially those from Australia (see Ritvo, 1-15). Just how existential a challenge the new discoveries posed is illustrated by the uncertainty naturalists felt in distinguishing the zoologically genuine from the mythical or the hoax (see *ibid.*, 175ff.). The impossible having come true, established scientific systems of classification broke down: if taxonomic irregularities such as kangaroos or platypuses had, in the face of considerable scepticism, proved real, then who was to say that merpeople, unicorns or sea-serpents were mere myths? As Harriet Ritvo explains, "mermaids seemed more spectacularly apocryphal when considered in isolation than when viewed in the context, or even in the company, of assorted other wonders, some of which, such as Siamese twins or platypuses from Australia, were incontestably real, if surprising" (*ibid.*, 182). As I have argued in Chapter 6, this is exactly the line of thought exploited by P.T. Barnum when he exhibited the Feejee mermaid alongside a stuffed platypus. Of course, if a specimen was actually presented for inspection, as with the Feejee mermaid, then it was quite easy for the experts to debunk them. But if reports of sightings of marvellous creatures were the only evidence available, doubts remained whether the apparently fantastic might not some day prove real (see *ibid.*, 186).

Suspicions that the world always potentially had another amazing-but-true discovery up its sleeve were not restricted to men of science. The general public and the popular press also quite eagerly partook of it in the many exhibitions of legitimate as well as fraudulent foreign wonders common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nor was a sense of wonder caused only by imported items. With the eighteenth-

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and nineteenth-century boom in scientific discoveries and technological innovations, quickly made accessible to a broader audience in the form of "illustrated popular books, optical cabinets, marvellous machines, astonishing experiments and provocative museum displays" (Stafford, xxi), defining a stable reality was rendered problematic also within a purely domestic context. It is thus little surprising that in 1835 the New York public should have been taken in by the Moon Hoax, a series of articles run by the *New York Sun* about life on the moon purportedly discovered by the famous British astronomer Sir John Herschel. Andrea Stulman Dennett explains:

> The increasing pace of nineteenth-century technological development had created an atmosphere in which people could reasonably believe almost anything. Modernization taught that the unimaginable was possible, and technology made material reality of ideas that had existed only in the realm of the imagination. (29)

This returns the discussion to the present age, for the epistemological vertigo that has been seen to result from the ever-quickening pace of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century science and technology runs through the centuries to surface again in contemporary experiences of a fantastic reality. Then as now, what had been presumed utterly impossible might tomorrow turn out to be true, while what had seemed comparably plausible proves a misinformation. Paradoxically, it is exactly the increase in overall knowledge that makes knowing more difficult, for the individual is forced to specialize, becoming knowledgeable only within a relatively small field. As I have explained in Chapter 8, lack of knowledge may lead to the resurgence of magical thought. While science and technology certainly provide explanations and means that render magic superfluous, progress at the same time has made the world so complex as to create a fundamental feeling of insecurity, thereby actually perpetuating magical thought.

The explosion of knowledge has also been used to explain why people will readily believe certain pieces of information which, in retrospect, appear only all too obviously false. In his study on rumours, Jean-Noël Kapferer writes:

> The rapid changes in science and technology call all knowledge into question and make the order of the world surrounding us appear uncertain

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> in all respects. Because the public no longer believes in anything, it now believes in everything.[14]

Kapferer's formulation appears deliberately provocative, for much of his study is devoted to showing that the so-called public, which he deconstructs as a far from homogeneous body (see *ibid.*, 109ff.), will by no means believe in everything it is told. In fact, people appear to be quite particular about the rumours they believe and spread. The information must come from a trustworthy source, eyewitness accounts being most popular, though typically the story is never heard from the witness directly (see *ibid.*, 82-88). Furthermore, rumours frequently take up specific anxieties or wishes and serve to confer order and meaning onto events (see *ibid.*, 94ff., 103ff. and 99), thereby responding to a fundamental human desire. Interestingly, psychologists have found that people tend to believe complicated and far-fetched explanations more readily than simple, down-to-earth ones, which goes far toward explaining fantastic tales' sometimes not inconsiderable lifespan (*ibid.*,101).

However, it is not just the increase in knowledge as such that has been seen to provoke mystification and uncertainty, but also the ways in which knowledge is acquired. It has been argued that, to an ever greater extent, individuals no longer encounter reality directly, but only in mediated form. According to Kapferer, this growing alienation from the material world largely accounts for people's credulity towards rumours. Much of the knowledge people have is no longer anchored in the real experiences of everyday life, but remains merely abstract, rendering them incapable of accurately assessing incoming information (see *ibid.*, 91-92). The philosopher Odo Marquard has likewise maintained that the majority of individuals are no longer able to determine the "reality content" of incoming data; reality and fiction are becoming increasingly indistinguishable. What is more, this is not experienced as a problem. As Marquard puts it, "the willingness to accept illusions is growing". The blurring of boundaries is encouraged both by the breathtaking pace of social and scientific developments and the lack of first-hand experience. Marquard writes about the current inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to tell reality from fiction:

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[14] My translation. The German version reads: "Die schnellen Wandlungen in Wissenschaft und Technik stellen alles Wissen in Frage, lassen die Ordnung der uns umgebenden Welt in jeder Hinsicht ungewiß erscheinen. Da die Öffentlichkeit an nichts mehr glaubt, glaubt sie nun an alles" (Kapferer, 94; see also 91).

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> This is facilitated by a reality which – ever since it was exclusively appointed "object of potential experience" (Kant) – for the individual largely has stopped being the object of personal experience: not only because in a world of accelerating change experience quickly becomes outdated, but especially because experience as scientifically artificial empiricism is becoming the business of apparatively equipped specialists: you no longer make your own experiences, they are made for you.[15]

In a world where knowledge for the most part is second-hand or, as Marquard says, derives from hearsay, reality itself acquires the status of a rumour. Reality also increasingly becomes a product of the media, for these to a large extent control, direct and even generate the flow of information. I have already suggested that the sense of a fantastic reality can be linked to the output of the tabloid press, where the real and the marvellous blend. It is not just that the "information" they offer frequently begs belief, at least by rational-empirical standards, but that doubts about the tabloid press' veracity are further intensified by the awareness that publishers need to keep sales figures up. Unable to verify the information personally, critical readers might reasonably experience a sense of dislocation, perhaps not entirely unlike that felt by Jack Walser in *Nights at the Circus*, who, teetering between belief and disbelief, is left to ask himself: is it fact or is it fiction?

Epistemological dilemmas arguably are brought about also by the momentous advances in film and computer technology. It has been suggested that, for the viewer, mere simulations of reality, whether on TV or in virtual computer worlds, deceptively merge with and may even come to displace the real world. One of the most provocative theses in this context is Jean Baudrillard's claim that, with the help of the modern media, the real has been eclipsed by its simulacrum, the hyperreal, a process which entails a collapse of the distinction between the real and the imaginary.[16] Because modern images no longer manage to represent

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[15] My translations. The original reads "die Illusionsbereitschaft wächst" and "Dem arbeitet eine Wirklichkeit zu, die – seit sie exklusiv zum 'Gegenstand möglicher Erfahrung' ernannt wurde (Kant) – weithin für den Einzelnen gerade aufhört, Gegenstand möglicher eigener Erfahrung zu sein: nicht nur, weil in der wandlungsbeschleunigten Welt Erfahrung schnell veraltet, sondern vor allem auch, weil die Erfahrung als wissenschaftlich artifizielle Empirie zur Sache apparativ ausgestatteter Sonderexperten wird: man macht seine Erfahrungen nicht mehr selber, man bekommt sie gemacht" (Odo Marquard, "Kunst als Antifiktion – Versuch über den Weg der Wirklichkeit ins Fiktive", in Henrich and Iser, 48).

[16] See Baudrillard 1993a, 70-76; and "The Evil Demon of Images and The Precession of Simulacra", in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty, New York, London and Toronto, 1993, (cited as Baudrillard 1993b), 194-95.

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an external reality, "images become more real than the real"; especially the contemporary cinema is characterized by "pretensions to be the real, the immediate, the unsignified" and the "attempt at absolute coincidence with the real" (Baudrillard 1993b, 195 and 196).[17]

But even if the difference between reality and representation is still recognized, it is not always possible to distinguish with any confidence between fiction and non-fiction, or rather, seeing that contemporary theory has fundamentally called the latter category into question, between fairly accurate reflections of real events and purposely fictionalized accounts. Possibilities of refashioning existing photographic material in our digital age have become so refined that manipulations go practically undetected, immensely complicating the task of telling the real from the fake, at least for the lay person. One might liken the mediated and media-transformed world to a gigantic latter-day wonder cabinet, continually inducing a shimmering between wondering at and wondering whether. Compared to the traditional cabinet of curiosities, the sense of wonder is heightened by the fact that, more often than not, the exhibits are not even actually present: the items can no longer be viewed, scrutinized, perhaps even touched, but are accessible only in mediated form. Ironically, the whole world appears to be at one's fingertips, yet it evades one's grasp, both in the literal and the figurative sense.

In magic realist fiction, a world whose only rule seems to be to break all rules likewise engenders a sense of epistemological uncertainty. As a character in *What the Crow Said* so emphatically observes, albeit in a slightly different context: "no man could be certain of anything on this lunatic, spun and dying planet" (185).

Frequently, the breakdown of the existing order leads not only to a levelling of the usual relationship between plausibility and probability, but even to a carnivalesque reversal. Magic realist fiction paradoxically suggests that, the more fantastic something sounds, the more likely it is to be true. As has been seen, this inversion of received categories lies behind the two techniques of supernaturalization and matter-of-factness. The text rejects as fantastic exactly those elements which the reader recognizes as empirically real, while conversely, what strikes the reader as fantastic is accepted as possible and even likely on the level of the text.

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[17] While worries that consumers, exposed to things like "reality TV" or video conferences, may confuse images with reality appear not completely unjustified, one might ask how Baudrillard intends his argument to apply to images embracing a postmodern poetics, for these generally emphasize the non-transparency of representation, and thus precisely do not pretend to be immediate and unsignified.

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The preceding section has shown how a number of magic realist texts make the inversion explicit: the idea of the norm is pronounced bizarre, the truth is found freakish and improbable, empirical reality is declared more implausible than any fairy tale. The world is an absurd place where freaks by far outnumber normal people, if any there are; here, anything is more believable than the truth. Magic realist fiction proposes that such a topsy-turvy reality requires a similarly inverted approach. The suggestion is not new: as Fastolf reminds his readers and his niece Miranda, already the early Christian theologian Tertullian wittily argued that if something sounded absolutely unlikely or even impossible, then that was all the more reason to assume it to be true:

> "*Certum est, quia impossibile*," I said. "That is Tertullian. He saw it could well be true *because* it was so unlikely." (*Falstaff*, 189; emphasis in the original)[18]

Overlapping with contemporary theory, magic realist fiction points to the paradoxical role that the explosion of knowledge and technological progress play in rendering the world inconceivable. At the same rate that science and technology announce amazing innovations, that economy grows more efficient and bureaucracy more intricate, the world becomes increasingly mystifying to the individual. Development is so rapid that one can at best keep up with a very small part of it, a situation exacerbated by the fact that not everyone has equal access to knowledge and education. Under these circumstances, it is little surprising that Flory Zogoiby's prophecy that "very soon a country not far from China would be eaten up by giant, cannibal mushrooms" is not even given a second thought, but immediately is dismissed as a batty old lady's mutterings (*The Moor's Last Sigh*, 118). Flory's prophecy being uttered only two weeks after the first atomic bomb was tested on a site 120 miles south of Albuquerque, New Mexico, no one realizes that Flory might be describing a nuclear explosion.[19] Rushdie's novel here not only implies that the idea of nuclear warfare is too horrific for any reasonable person

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[18] Fastolf's quote is from Tertullian's *De carne Christi* and reads in context: "Crucifixus est dei filius; non pudet, quia pudendum est. Et mortuus est dei filius; credibile prorsus est, quia ineptum est. Et sepultus resurrexit; certum est, quia impossibile" (*La Chair du Christ*, ed. and trans. Jean-Pierre Mahé, Sources chrétiennes 216, Paris, 1975, I, 228 [V.4]; "God's son was crucified; this is not shameful, because it is shameful. And the son of God died; this is absolutely credible, because it is stupid. And buried, he rose again; this is certain, because it is impossible", my translation).

[19] The first atomic bomb was detonated on 16 July 1945. Atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August 1945.

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to contemplate, but also illustrates how the acceleration of scientific development prevents any degree of certainty about what is real.

Other magic realist works similarly hold feats of science and technology responsible for creating a fantastic reality. As Chapter 6 has shown, for the inhabitants of García Márquez's Macondo, things like magnets, compasses or dentures clearly belong to the realm of the supernatural, and the population of Robert Kroetsch's Big Indian finds the idea of cement highway overpasses or of airplanes without propellers simply too absurd for words. The idea that, improperly understood, technology may look like magic is explored also in *Wild Nights* when the child narrator puts autumnal power failures down to her Aunt Zita's magical influence rather than to leaves clogging the dynamo, as her father more prosaically suggests (see 151 above). A stray German bomber flying over the village is characterized even more explicitly as fantastic, striking the narrator as "an invention that had been superimposed on the real, living world, and had been sent out to destroy it" (63). Significantly, it is once again not just technological progress *per se*, but also the horrific use to which it is put that jointly engender a sense of the fantastic.

In *Gut Symmetries*, it is not technological innovation, but, more fundamentally, a change in scientific paradigm that gives rise to the feeling that existing norms of probability and plausibility no longer apply. Winterson's novel paradoxically suggests that it is the hard science of quantum physics that renders the world magical. The word of the day no longer is Flory Zogoiby's "What you see is what there is", but the old mystic credo "What you see is not what you think you see" (see 168 above), a statement that, for all its non-scientific origins, Alice pronounces to be in total accord with the latest scientific descriptions of reality.

However, science and technology are not the only areas in which the world arguably has become too complex to grasp. *The Moor's Last Sigh* suggests that the fabric of the social system likewise has grown impenetrably dense, with nightmarish consequences. Politics, economics and administration are so closely and obscurely interwoven that, ironically enough, the individual almost inevitably slips through the net – either voluntarily, seeking deviously to exploit the system, or, more frequently, to end up in the slums, geographically and socially marginalized. Moraes Zogoiby feels quite lightheaded when he first becomes aware of the intricate affinities that exist between the vast and unfathomable machinery of Bombay bureaucracy and the equally numinous world of Bombay big business. It turns out that the strings behind the scenes are pulled by Moraes' father, who has cleverly enlisted

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the co-operation of certain administrative officials capable of appreciating a lucrative economic scheme. By circumventing existing regulations or else getting the largely corrupt authorities to pass new ones, Abraham Zogoiby builds up an "invisible" empire, based on officially non-existent buildings built by officially non-existent workers. To their employer's additional delight and profit, the workers do not fall under any minimum-wage law or social security regulations. The "invisible" cash thus generated is then laundered and reappears, "visible and clean as a whistle", in the pockets of all involved. As Abraham so aptly remarks, the sheer genius of it approaches the marvellous: "something out of nothing, a miracle" (186).

However, in twentieth-century Bombay reality has become so fantastic that such "miracles" are the norm. What once was believed possible only in fairy tales, or, more accurately, in horror stories, upon a closer look actually proves to be the order of the day, while the visible world turns out to be an illusion. In an almost Baudrillardian fashion, what has been taken for reality is revealed to be nothing but a simulation of the real, produced according to certain preconceived and conventionalized codes. Unlike in Baudrillard's theory, however, this does not mean that there no longer exists a real. Quite to the contrary, the world is as real as ever, it only takes a certain amount of perspicacity and a solid stomach to discover its unpleasant truth. The failure to do so leads to an absurd discrepancy between oneself and the world one lives in. Moraes explains:

> The city itself, perhaps the whole country, was a palimpsest, Under World beneath Over World, black market beneath white; when the whole of life was like this, when an invisible reality moved phantomwise beneath a visible fiction, subverting all its meanings, how then could Abraham's career have been any different? How could any of us have escaped that deadly layering? How, trapped as we were in the hundred per cent fakery of the real, in the fancy-dress, weeping-Arab kitsch of the superficial, could we have penetrated to the full, sensual truth of the lost mother below? How could we have lived authentic lives? How could we have failed to be grotesque? (*Ibid.*, 184-85)

Later in the novel, the sinister and unprincipled reality that lies in wait beneath the visible world actually breaks through to the surface. Arrested for a murder he did not commit, Moraes has to discover that the Bombay familiar to him has been supplanted by a huge and cavernous building in which prisoners are kept by animal-like wardens under inhumane conditions – a veritable underworld, complete with all the

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furnishings of hell. The beginning of the passage is strikingly Kafka-esque:

> In a street I had never heard of I stood in manacles before a building I had never seen, a structure of such size that my entire field of vision was occupied by a single featureless wall, in which, a little way to my right, I perceived a tiny iron door – or, rather, a door that looked small, small as a metal mousehole, on account of being set in that ghastly grey immensity of stone. (*Ibid.*, 285)

When Moraes protests that this cannot be true, for he knows the city well, he is informed otherwise:

> "A city does not show itself to every bastard, sister-fucker, mother-fucker," the elephant man shouted before slamming the window shut. "You were blind, but now wait and see." (*Ibid.*, 287)

Recalling the motif of the palimpsest, Moraes wonders whether he has not accidentally slipped into another, underlying reality which, paradoxically, his choice of metaphor identifies as fiction: "had I accidentally slipped from one page, one book of life on to another – in my wretched, disoriented state, had my reading finger perhaps slipped from the sentence of my own story on to this other, outlandish, incomprehensible text that had been lying, by chance, just beneath?" (*Ibid.*, 285).

In such an unreal time and place it appears only fitting that, thanks to the intricacies of the legal and bureaucratic system, a large part of the population are actually "ghosts". Not officially recognized as inhabitants of Bombay, these persons' existence cannot be established even by activist lawyers, a grotesque situation whose cognitive complexity is outdone only by its ethical perversity:

> They continued to be classified as phantoms, to move through the city like wraiths, except that these were the wraiths that kept the city going, building its houses, hauling its goods, cleaning up its droppings, and then simply and terribly dying, each in their turn, unseen, as their spectral blood poured out of their ghostly mouths in the middle of the bitch-city's all-too-real, uncaring streets. (*Ibid.*, 212)

Rendering its fantastic rhetoric transparent, the text drives home its point about a bureaucratic system that is completely and inhumanely divorced from reality.

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Like the theoretical writings discussed above, works of magic realist fiction suggest that the feeling of unreality engendered by the complexity of the contemporary world is significantly compounded by its increasing subjection to the media. In a time when reality to a considerable extent no longer is encountered in person, but on the page, the computer or the television screen, the real and the fictional seem to converge. As Odo Marquard has put it, the world takes on "that hue of half-unreality in which fiction and reality become indistinguishable".[20] This certainly seems to be the case for Gibreel Farishta in *The Satanic Verses*, who between film takes sits in his empty two-room apartment, indiscriminately consuming Greek and Roman myth, theosophical writings, modern physics and accounts of the life of the prophet Muhammed. He also reads the newspapers, though in their "surrealism" (24), these do not fundamentally differ from his other reading matter. Saladin Chamcha, spending his days zapping through TV-channels, similarly discovers the media to bring about a curious levelling not only of reality and fiction, but, more crucially, also of all ethical distinctions:

> what a leveller this remote-control gizmo was, a Procrustean bed for the twentieth century; it chopped down the heavyweight and stretched out the slight until all the set's emissions, commercials, murders, game-shows, the thousand and one varying joys and terrors of the real and the imagined, acquired an equal weight; – and whereas the original Procrustes, citizen of what could now be termed a "hands-on" culture, had to exercise both brain and brawn, he, Chamcha, could lounge back in his Parker-Knoll recliner chair and let his fingers do the chopping.

As in Gibreel's case, there no longer is a significant difference between fiction and non-fiction. The mutants in the sci-fi series *Dr Who* are hardly more fantastic than the figures Chamcha sees on documentaries showing "a continual parade of the misshapen human by-products of the newest notions in modern medicine, and all its accomplices, modern disease and war". In fact, as in the case of the wonder cabinet, the freak show and the tabloid press, it seems quite impossible to distinguish between halfway reliable information and mere sensationalism. Both claiming factuality, the authentic and the hoax appear equally implausible:

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[20] My translation. The original reads: "*jene Färbung von Halbunwirklichkeit, in der Fiktion und Realität ununterscheidbar werden*" (Marquard, 48; emphasis in the original).

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> A hospital in Guyana had apparently preserved the body of a fully formed merman, complete with gills and scales. Lycanthropy was on the increase in the Scottish Highlands. The genetic possibility of centaurs was being seriously discussed. A sex-change operation was shown.[21]

Chamcha's faith in Britain as a stronghold of rationality and common sense having already been shaken by his experiences with the British Immigration authorities, his self-prescribed TV-therapy is not exactly suited to repair "the tear in things" (*The Satanic Verses*, 405). In fact, it thoroughly backfires: "The effect of all this box-watching was to put a severe dent in what remained of his idea of the normal, average quality of the real" (*ibid.*, 406).

Intriguingly, then, the revolutionary advances in twentieth-century information and communication technology achieve the very opposite of their declared intention. For all that practically everyone, at least in industrialized countries, can have the whole wide world right there in his or her living room, receive the latest news from around the globe and in turn make information available – for all that, knowledge appears increasingly hard to come by. According to Alleluia Cone in *The Satanic Verses*, it has in fact completely disappeared, at least if one looks for it in the technologized world. The trick is to turn elsewhere, to the faraway places, the isolated spots, the margins. Having tried to drown her sorrow over the fact that her mountaineering days are over in a little too much whisky, Alleluia informs Gibreel that

> information got abolished sometime in the twentieth century, can't say just when; stands to reason, that's part of the information that got abolsh, abo*lished*. Since then we've been living in a fairy-story. Got me? Everything happens by magic. Us fairies haven't a fucking notion what's going on. So how do we know if it's right or wrong? We don't even know what it *is*. So what I thought was, you can either break your heart trying to work it all out, or you can go sit on a mountain, because that's where all the truth went, believe it or not, it just upped and ran away from these cities where even the stuff under our feet is all made up, a lie [....] (*Ibid.*, 313; emphases in the original)

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[21] *Ibid.*, 405. The items listed by Chamcha recall the wonder cabinet and the freak show not only in the sense of incredulity they induce, but even in the motifs, focusing on mythological creatures and biological abnormality. Rushdie's novel manages to destabilize even the boundary between myth and the biologically abnormal insofar as two of the items can be seen to belong to both: lycanthropy is a mental disorder as well as a superstitious belief, while gender change also is both an old mythical motif and a biological fact that in previous times had frequently been rejected as fantastic (see Ritvo, 174).

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Significantly, the lack of factual information entails a lack of ethics. There is a distinctly moral dimension to Alleluia's complaint: right can be told from wrong neither on a cognitive nor on an ethical level.

However, despite Alleluia's nostalgic desire for a world in which fact can be told from fiction and good from evil, Rushdie's novel refuses to second her demand for certainty. In fact, the novel time and again insists that the world cannot, and, more importantly, should not, be forced into neat little pigeon-holes. Racists stereotypes are subverted, the difference between Western thinking and Other modes of thought is deconstructed, Saladin and Gibreel each are both angel and devil. Knowledge is necessary, but one should become suspicious if it is too clear-cut or absolute. In this, *The Satanic Verses* is paradigmatic of magic realist fiction, which asserts the provisionality of all knowledge as not only an inevitable, but an indispensable feature of reality.

Using magic realist fiction from Britain as a focal lens, this study has developed a reading of magic realism that shows the mode to work as an inquiry into human perceptions and constructions of the world. In doing so, the study has taken position on two important issues in the current critical debate on magic realism. Rejecting sweeping accusations of escapism or exoticism, it reads magic realism as a renewed attempt at realism, finding the mode to be mimetic or verisimilar in that it seeks to recreate the experience of living in a frequently perplexing, fascinating and horrifying reality. The study situates magic realism within the broader context of contemporary fiction's "flights from realism", while at the same time identifying the techniques specific to the mode.

Furthermore, the study engages with the question of who can speak as magic realist, arguing that magic realism is a global mode in two respects. First, it is global in that it is available to postcolonial as well as Western writers; as has been amply shown, claims to exclusivity do not make much sense. Nor does the use or adaptation of the form by writers from the cultural centre automatically entail deterioration into a cliché, but may in fact prove enriching, as the works of fiction discussed above more than demonstrate. Magic realism furthermore is global in that it suggests modes of knowledge production as different and even incompatible as science, narrative and magic to exist in all cultures. As cardinal strategies of meaning-making, thus magic realist fiction's argument, these are generally employed in human attempts to deal with reality, be it in a postcolonial or a Western context.

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To understand magic realism as a global mode is not to deny its affinities with the ex-centric. Quite to the contrary, I have argued that magic realism's project is essentially a postcolonial one. As the study has shown, magic realist fiction is vitally concerned with re-evaluating paradigms of knowledge usually rejected by the rational-empirical Western world-view as fiction. Through a variety of strategies, it suggests that these need to be acknowledged not only as an inevitable, but also as a potentially beneficial part of the human endeavour to understand the world, for they may afford insights not offered by a purely rational-scientific paradigm. Magic realist techniques further challenge the hegemony of the Western world-view by unsettling received notions about literary genres, the use of language and the objectivity of science and history, about who can be regarded as reliable, and what can assuredly be accepted as real.

Yet, at the same time the mode constantly undermines itself. As I have shown, magic realist fiction typically engenders reader hesitation in order to draw attention to its own constructedness. Characteristically, the text is amenable to a double reading, leaving the reader suspended between two perspectives. In questioning the dominant world-view without setting another in its place, magic realist fiction emphasizes how all knowledge is necessarily provisional and open to revision. I have shown how magic realism's postcolonial project here overlaps with contemporary theory, as well as other works of postmodern fiction, which pursue a similar line of argument in trying to level established hierarchies and allow the production of new knowledge.

It might seem tempting to use this overlap to solve the debate about Western appropriations of the mode by simply declaring, as some critics have done, that magic realism is to be counted as a postmodern mode. However, I am wary of too quickly obscuring the fact that magic realism does evince significant affinities to postcolonial literatures, something which certainly cannot be said for all strains of postmodernist fiction, especially the more radically experimental ones. Moreover, switching labels to account for Western instances of magic realism suggests that postcolonial discourse is in fact available only to those who find themselves in a condition of postcoloniality, which I find an overly simple answer to the question of who can speak as Other. This study affirms magic realism as an essentially postcolonial mode, even in the hands of writers who are inextricably implicated in the postcolonial hierarchy they seek to challenge. As my analysis of magic realist fiction from Britain demonstrates, critical re-evaluations may also be conducted from within.

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In sum, then, this study has shown how magic realist fiction, in its inquiry into the possibilities of human knowledge, pursues two apparently diametrically opposed strategies. It revalues fictional forms as an important complement to the rational-scientific mode. At the same time, it insists that all knowledge must be recognized as based on acts of construction, for only then can the different kinds of knowledge work to the advantage of the individual and society, allowing them to accept other world-views and reshape their own. While the notion of absolute knowledge may appear reassuring, works of magic realist fiction reveal how such faith can lead to severe errors in judgement, making it potentially damaging both to oneself and others. Geared not to the suspension, but the creation of disbelief, magic realist fiction can quintessentially be seen to speak with the narrator of *Midnight's Children* when he says:

> a little uncertainty is no bad thing. Cocksure men do terrible deeds. Women, too. (212)

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