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Magical Realism
in the French Novel after 1900

Our thesis on magical realism in the French novel after 1900 had a double interest. We aimed, first of all, at making a review of the approaches that delineated starting with the third decade of the 20th century the theoretical sphere of this concept, focusing especially on its literary uses and less on those pertaining to the area of visual arts. We thought a critical analysis of this theoretical evolution would be opportune here, especially that magical realism represents today, at an international level, the object of many literary analyses and studies, made from more and more diverse and unexpected standpoints. Our second objective was to "verify" the pertinence and operative values of this concept, by applying it to a literature which is usually not associated with the label mentioned above – the French literature. With this perspective, we join the current trend of reception and analysis of magic realism, which extended the geographical and ideological area canonically accepted (Latin America) to the whole of the

international literature, with no restrictions exterior to the fictional act, whatever their nature might be. The debate remains, of course, open as far as the means and the finalities of such a type of literature, present in today's fiction everywhere, are concerned.

In the first chapter of the thesis we wished to recreate, first of all, a short history of the term and of the concept of magic realism. We start from its first utilization, acknowledged as such by all the researchers in the field, by the German art critic Franz Roh, in 1924, and we continue with Massimo Bontempelli and the Belgian theorists of the 1940s. We believe that an analysis of the European beginnings is essential in our approach, in order to define two acceptations depending on which we will construct our textual analyses in the last part of the thesis. After the European start, magical realism flourishes in the American continent, where the label continues to be used both after the translation of Roh's volume in Spanish and, independently, after the introduction of the parallel concept of "realo magico" by the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier. The theoretical direction that the Latino-American novel starts to crystallize is mainly determined by the concurrent affirmation of a cultural identity and by the desire of a redefinition of the

"self" in the hegemonic relation with the Western cultural areas. If the beginnings of magical realism, in the European continent, emphasized the idea of a reassessment of the real, aiming to (re)discover the "hidden truth" behind the world, the Latino-American magical realism speaks about another real, and about a truth which is manifest in the middle of ordinary reality, for which our system of perception needs essential modifications. The new theoretical reflection on the magical realist literature mentions characteristics of two distinct segments of the 20th century literature: postcolonialism and postmodernism. Magical realism defines reality from the standpoint of a dominant rationalist view upon the world, which it refutes with a rationally unacceptable reality, by the literary means of the centre/margin dialectics and the alternatives of subversive nature (deconstruction, deterritorialization, denaturalization, irony).

On the other hand, the theorists question the problem of the narrative content of the alternative realities that the magical realist text wishes to argue. As regards this aspect, the critical contributions distinguish two sensibly different species: a magical realism in which the "difference" materializes, borrowing the face of supernatural

characters/elements/phenomena, and a magical realism in which the "difference" remains a matter of perception, of inner capacity to penetrate the real down to its deepest strata. On this difference, which we could not ignore, we will build our subsequent analytical approach.

For a better understanding of the narrative specificity of magical realism, we also thought it would be useful to continue with an analysis of the definitions that magical realism received by comparing them with the fantastic and with Surrealism. If with regard to the rigours and the specific context of Surrealism the delimitation is easier to make, magical realism is much more difficult to distinguish from the fantastic, whose sub-category it might be considered. One of the most pertinent theoretical analyses of magical realism, signed by the Canadian researcher Amaryll Chanady, actually comes to differentiate, at a narratological level, these two types of literature, which weigh two different realities. The essential difference remains, in the author's opinion, one of modal nature, defined therefore in terms of focalisation and of auctorial distance.

The different existing theoretical approaches lead us to the conclusion that the definitional sphere of magical realism is

relatively heterogeneous, part of the perspectives agreeing not, in fact, with another part. From this standpoint, of the lack of systematic coherence, magical realism has often been rejected as a useful label in the field of literary studies, the confusion of the results and the disagreement of the theorists being invoked. In a retrospective approach, on the other hand, our point of view is that the different approaches and the multiple types of novels that the critics spoke of as magical realist respond in fact to a common desideratum. In order to illustrate that, in the next chapter we focused on the basic understandings of the two terms that compose the oxymoronic phrase in question. Realism, hard to define in programmatic terms, proves a special capacity to adapt itself to the consistent modifications of paradigm in different historical periods, particularly reflected in the changing acceptations of the concept of verisimilitude in literature. Turning, on the other hand, to the meanings that the word "magic" received in the definitions of magical realism, we an notice again two fundamental directions: in the first one, the magic wears the general clothes of the supernatural, without strict thematic constrictions, in the other one it refuses the fantastic proper, preferring more subtle literary forms of anti-realism, of metaphysical and

phenomenological essence. For a better understanding of the link between these two directions, we deemed necessary a recapitulation of the meanings of the "imagination" and of the "imaginary" in the philosophical and literary reflection. We believe that the emergence of magical realist literature is related to this philosophical path, accompanying in literature the reassessment of the concept of real and of the real-imaginary causality brought forward by the philosophical theories. From this point of view, the contributions of authors like Gaston Bachelard or Gilbert Durand, applied to the literary text, prove to be extremely useful in the analysis of the magical realist novels and particularly of those of the phenomenological type, where the oneiric and the mythic dimensions are privileged. Reflecting upon the typological differences between the novels which were (or could be) inserted in the same sphere of the magical realism, we reached the conclusion that the real/imaginary equation needs a third term, the fictive, which we borrowed from Wolfgang Iser, together with the distinction that he operated between the fictional matter (*the imaginary*) and the fictional process (*the fictive*). We conclude that magical realism is homogeneous in terms of manipulated matter, i.e. the imaginary it uses and the wish to reconcile the real and the

imaginary, but heterogeneous in terms of matter manipulation, of fictionalisation variants.

Broadly speaking, at the risk of a reductive approach, we think that we could speak of two major acceptations of magical realism, following the separation operated by Roberto González Echevarría, terminologically nuanced with the epithets of *ontological* and *phenomenological/epistemological* respectively. In order to represent the first category, we have chosen to analyse *La Révolte des anges* by Anatole France, *La Vouivre* by Marcel Aymé, *Le Livre des Nuits* by Sylvie Germain, *Truismes* by Marie Darrieussecq and *La Sorcière* by Marie NDiaye; in the second we have included *Les enfants terribles* by Jean Cocteau, *Le Rivage des Syrtes* by Julien Gracq, *Le Visionnaire* by Julien Green, *Le Pays où l'on n'arrive jamais* by André Dhôtel and *Le Roi des Aulnes* by Michel Tournier.

The last chapter of the thesis is dedicated to the analysis of the ten titles, from the standpoint of their adherence to the specificity of magical realist fiction and in order to outline the differences and the resemblances in the comparison between the two respective types. The analytical part was segmented in three main axes, which are emblematic, we believe, for the

literary constructions of magical realist type – the axis of narrative communication, the spatial axis, and the temporal axis. In all of the three sections, the main mechanism of narrative organisation is the double code: on the one hand, a universe of realist nature is consolidated at all levels, in accordance to the requirements of common perception and logic; on the other hand, this universe is doubled (but not necessarily undermined) by an anti-realist universe, where the alternative is rendered at either an epistemological level, with truths and essences which are hidden to the profane eye, or an ontological level, with beings or facts which are in an explicit break-up with the reality. In all the cases, this non-realist code benefits by an equal narrative "treatment", harmonized with the realist one, without the tension that is inherent to the fantastic genre.

In the section dedicated to the narrative act, we first turned to the novels included in the ontological type of magical realism. Here, a first necessary questioning concerns the role of the narrator in the transmission of unlikely information, in the tone of certainty. If in the case of the heterodiegetical novels the essential problem is to ensure verisimilitude for the totality of the narrative construction, in the case of the homodiegetical

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ones there appears the problem of the narrator's reliability. The main modalities to render verisimilar the supernatural that we noticed are the transmission of information in prosaic details or by suggesting insignificance; the blocking of possible explanations by religious faith, where required (in other words, the official Church voice rejects the truthfulness of the supernatural, certifying thus, in a paradoxical way, the narrative authenticity); the reversal of plans, a certain assertion of non-verisimilitude acting sometimes as a compensation of problematic and problematized real/verisimilitude (either personal or collective/historical). The reliability of the homodiegetical narrator, on the other hand, is ensured by the introduction of unreliable characters who play a contrastive role, compared to whom the narrator will be granted with trust by the reader, or by valuing certain qualities or deficiencies of the narrator that might function as guarantees of the sincerity.

As far as the second group of novels is concerned, the narrator is not conditioned here any more by an careful construction of the verisimilitude of what was told, as no extra-ordinary elements are concerned, but the requirement of a "double code" remains valid for the whole novel. The problem rising here is to ensure contrast, and our analysis concerns the

modalities by which the fiction universe that we are proposed benefits by the bi-partite structure that is necessary in the case of magical realism. The double focalisation is the general solution in this type of novel: a point of view proposes a knowledge/comprehension of the real different from the usual one, another point of view underlines the former by resorting to "normality" and by satisfying the reader's expectations of realism. The main dichotomy here is norm vs. difference. The modalities to render it are quite varied and aim at sustaining the bases of the "deep", unseen or misunderstood world, unless privileged observers appear: the motif of the "look"; the motif of the "universal mechanism" regarded as an invisible law of the way of the world, inscribed in the secret structure of things; the motif of the "game" (used as a metafictional pattern as well), regarded as a possibility to accede to meanings that are closed by ordinary reality.

In the relation between the author and the text, or between the author and the reader, the essential difference we noticed between the two types of magical realism is situated at the level of auctorial distance. We use, in the case of the novels included in the ontological type, a concept borrowed from the Canadian theorist Amaryll Chanady – auctorial reticence. This

speaks about the absence of any textual hints, in the narrative discourse, by which the presence of the supernatural element could be explained to the reader. The author can take a distance in this kind of magical realism by means of irony, or he could get stylistically involved, by a more or less marked poetizing position, but he is unavoidably absent as far as the justification of the non-realist universe in the text is concerned; thus, a possible insertion of the novel in what Tzvetan Todorov called the "étrange" is avoided. On the other hand, following the French theorist Charles Scheel, we believe that in the second type of magical realism the auctorial attitude is sensibly different, making possible that a more visible adherence of the implicit author to the alternative universe could be revealed. The fictional act is also consistently invoked in these novels, to signal the reader his hidden presence, behind the narrator, as well as in order to offer often, by these "thematizations" of fiction, possible suggestions of interpretation.

In the section dedicated to the space, we started our analysis with the novels included in the category of the phenomenological magical realism. We noticed here two main trends as regards the balancing of the two levels of reality, in the descriptive and in the thematic register. We identified, first

of all, the presence of some motifs in the semantic sphere of the water, which could create the so-called visual illusion, of pictorial nature, of the blurred contours (problematizing the object), and in the semantic field of light and illumination, pertaining to scenography, aiming at the same idea, to resituate oneself in relation to the seen world. These "effets d'irréel" are in the economy of the magical realism explicit elements of the differentiation in relation to the realist norm, just like what we called the "mysterious apparitions". Secondly, all of the five novels analysed here contain in their deeper or more superficial structure of their story the theme of the initiatory trip. It could be a precise direction trip or it could take the form of peregrinations, it could be active or static, it could be exterior, but at the same time and above all it is an inner trip, for the rediscovery of the self. In the other five novels, of ontological type, we notice a certain tendency to render the spatiality banal, meant to compensate the extraordinary character of the intrigue or of some elements of the intrigue/characters. We deal here with urban, but also rural spaces, in which we can easily feel home, descriptions obeying most of the times the realist descriptive formulas. Accompanying the action, these areas are of course reinvested with significances that are different in

relation with the initial ones, which are neuters. We notice the care for the exact detail and for precise information, even when the focus is on the supernatural element. We could conclude in the case of these novels that what Roland Barthes defined as "effets de réel" is used here to describe the non-real, with the same finality, to create the feeling of familiarity and certitude of the existence of the universe described.

As far as the temporal axis is concerned, the first remark we must make is that temporality, an essentially subjective dimension, is harder to quantify in terms of real/non-real oppositions. We try however to analyse in the two corpuses the dichotomy time of the real/time of the magic, noticing first of all the precise notations, like dates or moments of the day/of the year, by which a temporal referential illusion of the realist type, is aimed at, in order to facilitate the reader's adherence to the universe described. As far as the structures of "magical time" are concerned, the narrative modalities resorted to are: the capitalization of some privileged temporal segments, of the type night in relation day, childhood in relation to adult age, death in relation to life, as well as the modification in the evolution of the temporal axis in terms of speed, by either accelerated or slowing rhythms, in order to create the sensation

of referential decentralization. The temporal axis can also be doubled, in different ways. Where the story brings in extraordinary beings, the author can resort to parallel temporalities, which the supernatural pertains to. In the case of magical realist novels of the phenomenological type on the other hand, one prefer to suggest invisible parallel temporal axes, like mythical temporality or, in one of the particular cases analysed here, like a meta-fictional temporal curl, inserted in the linear evolution of the main story.

The general conclusions of our analytical approach tend to the idea that the two types of magical realism, preserving the essential dichotomy realism/anti-realism, differ from each other by the balancing of the two constitutive plans. In magical realism of ontological type, the magic seems to be contaminated by realism, while in the phenomenological type realism seems to be subordinated to the intention to create and transmit magic. A balance which is actually expectable, as the percentage to which non-real is represented in the two respective types is unequal.

We believe that a very useful future approach would be a comparative one, between the different types of magical realism analysed here and those pertaining to other cultural

areas than the French one. Except for Sylvie Germain's novel, where ontological and phenomenological types of magical realism seem to fuse into a complex construction, resembling the canonical Latino-American one, the French novels we analyse offer other types of combination of realism and anti-realism than the non-Occidental literatures did. Such a questioning of the similarities/differentiations of the fictional approaches of magical realist type would undoubtedly deepen the understanding of the motivations, stakes and effects of this so fertile type of literature.