

MAGICAL REALISM

Theory, History, Community

Edited with an Introduction by

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ANGEL FLORES

Magical Realism in Spanish

American Fiction

Spanish American literature has been studied mostly through the thematic or biographical approach. The thematic approach has dwelt on geographical settings, classifying the works of fiction as "novels of the pampa," "novels of the sierra," and "novels of the selva." The biographical approach, on the other hand, has surveyed the literary production chronologically—"novel of the Colonial period," "novel of the Period of Independence," "novel of the Mexican Revolution," etc.—supplementing historical considerations with biographical notes on the writers of each of the periods. However interesting these approaches may be in relating literature to ecological patterns or to history, they have contributed but little to *literary* criticism. They have not been very helpful, for instance, in evaluating the intrinsically aesthetic merits of a work and have paid little or no attention to the complex problems of form, composition, and stylistic trends. Such classificatory terms as "Romantic," "Realistic," "Naturalistic," "Existentialist" do circulate in their writings but in rather superficial, desultory, or indiscriminating ways. We are told, for instance, that Echeverría was a "Romantic" poet, disregarding completely his *El Mata-dero* [The Slaughterhouse], a precursory masterpiece of Naturalism; or that *Doña Bárbara* and *La vorágine* [The Vortex] were robust specimens of Realism, overlooking their romantic tirades and psychological distortions. Hence the frequency with which one meets in university theses such titles as "Romantic, Realistic and Naturalistic Elements in the Novels of Rómulo Gallegos and José Eustasio Rivera" and "El romanticismo esencial del realista José Rivera" ["The Essential Romanticism of the Realist José Rivera"]. Had the line of analysis followed a more rigorous examination into the emotional and stylistic peculiarities, it could have been ascertained that, at least in Latin American prose fiction, it is difficult if not

impossible to categorize faithfully each movement. Even in those works which are taken as typical of certain schools or movements, classification fails. Jorge Isaacs' *María* cannot be dismissed as a Romantic novel pure and simple: the novel ends, as a matter of fact, with such detailed, concretely realistic pictures as the Salomé episode and the homeward travelogue. In these penultimate and final sections there is almost as much realism as there is romanticism. The romantic and realistic persist side by side too in Güiraldes, in Lynch, in Payró, in Quiroga. Perhaps during one rather fleeting moment, with no significant consequences, one influence, in this case Zola's, seemed preponderant: Antonio Argerich's *Inocentes o culpables* [Innocent or Guilty] (1884), Lucio V. López' *La gran aldea* [The Big Village] (1884), Eugenio Cambaceres' *Sin rumbo* [D drifting] (1885), Julián Marrel's *La Bolsa* [The Stock Market] (1890). But even here one need only read carefully *Sin rumbo*, for instance, to observe that the author is leaning on the *theories* of Naturalism, its Achilles' heel, rather than imitating Zola's epic art. Cambaceres' Zolaism is surface veneer. His style moves toward a somewhat lyrical staccato — precursory, one may say, of Vargas Vila's.¹ Another man whose name has been associated with Zola's is Baldomero Lillo. Obviously there is some similarity due to the thematic affinity between *Sub terra* and *Germinal*, both dealing with the plight of the coal miners, but the multiple romantic strands (pathetic overtones, fatal coincidences, etc.) hovering over Lillo's pen constantly belie his Naturalism. One can survey the works of one novelist after another with the same result: that in Latin America Romanticism and Realism seem bound together in one afflatus. "Costumbrismo" ["local color realism"], flowering as constantly in Spain as in Latin America, reveals over and again the mixture of romantic-realistic elements. From the clumsy *Periquillo Sarmento* [The Iching Parrot], the earliest full-blown American novel, to *El machete*, a seminal moment in Colombian fiction, the ambiguity persists. Posada, like Lizardi, seems to hesitate between tough "machismo" and bland tearfulness: the term romantic realist or realistic romanticist, either way, fits either one of them. Evidently the roots of this ambivalence are psychological, and they lead all the way back to the great Spanish tradition, to writers and painters of the past, like Fernando de Rojas, Lope, Quevedo, El Greco, Cervantes, Goya, Pérez Galdós. And then again, much of it can be ascribed to the unstable economic and social milieu of the writers of Spain and Latin America which forces them to improvisation. The conditions of life are so difficult that they are unable to devote the

time and travail required for all memorable achievements, with the result that their output is heterogeneous, often careless.

Recently Dudley Fitts told us how "depressed" he felt by the "ineptitude, uncertainty, imitativeness, sentimental historicisms" ("all add up toedium") of Spanish and Latin American fiction. He recalled "the amused despair of the late John Peale Bishop, who had spent . . . months plowing through Latin American novels and short stories: he found them invariably second-rate, and noted that the Spanish genius, at least in this hemisphere, spoke convincingly only in verse and the essay." And then Fitts added: "He should have excepted the Argentinians Jorge Luis Borges and Eduardo Mallea, however: their fiction can hold its own with the best."² However caustic and iconoclastic, Fitts' remarks do have a disconcertingly truthful ring, for in the field of fiction Latin America is unable to boast of any titans. His exceptions, Borges and Mallea, may sound strange to more than one specialist in Latin American affairs, but they are the choice of an extremely sensitive poet, a perceptive critic equally versed in ancient and contemporary literatures, a talented translator of the Greek classics and compiler of an anthology of contemporary Latin American poetry. On proposing Borges and Mallea as exceptions, he is relieving those writers of his charges of "ineptitude, uncertainty, imitativeness, and sentimental historicisms" for, emphatically, they are not second-raters. The occasion did not force Fitts to explain Borges' and Mallea's uniqueness. Since, independently of Fitts, I reached, years ago, similar conclusions, I shall endeavor to suggest the general trend in which these and other brilliant contemporary Latin American novelists and short story writers are located. This trend I term "magical realism."

Finding in photographic realism a blind alley, all the arts — particularly painting and literature — reacted against it and many notable writers of the First World War period came to rediscover symbolism and magical realism. Among them were geniuses of the stature of Marcel Proust and Franz Kafka and the latter's counterpart in painting, Giorgio de Chirico. There's was to a large extent a rediscovery, because some of the stylistic and expressive utterances found in Kafka, for instance, were writ large in numerous nineteenth-century figures: in the Russians (especially the Gogol of "The Nose," Shponka and his Aunt," and other short stories, and of course Dostoevsky), in the German Romantics (Hoffmann, Arnim, Kleist, the Grimm brothers), and in Strindberg, Stifter, and to some extent in Poe and Melville. In his laboriously precisionist way Kafka had

mastered from his earliest short stories—"The Judgment" (1912), "Metamorphosis" (1916)—the difficult art of mingling his drab reality with the phantasmal world of his nightmares. In his *Journal*, André Gide saw this peculiar fusion of dream and reality in Kafka: "I could not say what I admire the more: the 'naturalistic' notation of a fantastic universe, but which the detailed exactitude of the depiction makes real in our eyes, or the unerring audacity of the lurches into the strange. There is much to be learned from it."¹

The novelty therefore consisted in the amalgamation of realism and fantasy. Each of these, separately and by devious ways, made its appearance in Latin America: realism, since the Colonial Period but especially during the 1880s; the magical, writ large from the earliest—in the letters of Columbus, in the chroniclers, in the sagas of Cabeza de Vaca—entered the literary mainstream during Modernism. An exciting note of wonderment and exoticism filled as much the tales of Rubén Darío (many of them published in Chilean newspapers in 1886) as the *Relatos argentinos* [Argentine Tales] of Paul Groussac written between 1886 and 1921, the *Cuentos malevolos* [Malevolent Stories] (1904) of Clemente Palma, the truly fabulous narratives of Leopoldo Lugones' *Las fuerzas extrañas* [Strange Powers] (1906), and the variegated production of Horacio Quiroga. Obviously the most persistent influence then was Edgar Allan Poe, either directly or via his admirers, especially the French decadents grouped as "Los raros" ["the odd ones"] by Darío: Baudelaire, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Vilhiers de l'Isle Adam, etc. This imaginative writing found its way into the twentieth century and is discernible in the prose experiments of many gifted poets: in Mexico, in Jaime Torres Bodet's *Margarita de niebla* [Margarita of the Mists] (1927) and *Proserpina rescacada* (1931), in Xavier Villaurrutia's *Dama de corzones* [Queen of Hearts] (1928), in Gilberto Owen's *Novela como nube* [The Novel as Cloud] (1928), and in Salvador Novo's *Return ticket* (1928); in Peru, in Abraham Valdelomar's novels and in *El caballero Carmelo y otros cuentos* [Sir Carmelo and Other Stories] (1918), and in Martín Adán's *La casa de cartón* [The Cardboard House] (1929); in Argentina, most especially in those nightmares of anarchy and tumult entitled *El juguete rabioso* [The Furious Toy] (1926), *Los siete locos* [The Seven Madmen] (1929), and *Los lanzallamas* [The Flamethrowers] (1931) by Roberto Arlt.

However, all these productions, which depend so utterly on atmosphere, mood, and sentiment, and which often look toward the rococo figurations of the French Jean Giraudoux and the Spanish Benjamín Jarnés, differ

from the cold and cerebral and often erudite storytelling which concerns us here. For the sake of convenience I shall use the year 1935 as the point of departure of this new phase of Latin American literature, of magical realism. It was in 1935 that Jorge Luis Borges' collection *Historia universal de la infamia* [A Universal History of Infamy] made its appearance in Buenos Aires, at least two years after he had completed a masterly translation into Spanish of Franz Kafka's shorter fiction. Not that we intend to limit his extremely complex genius to one influence; he the most literate writer in the whole of America, whose works reflect so many and so divergent personalities: Chesterton, H. G. Wells, Arthur Machen, Marcel Schwob, Ellery Queen, plus the erudite army unearthed so facetiously by María Rosa Lida de Malkiel, but Kafka's impact on him has been the most profound and revealing. With Borges as pathfinder and moving spirit, a group of brilliant stylists developed around him. Although each evidenced a distinct personality and proceeded in his own way; the general direction was that of magical realism. Stimulated by Borges, the Chilean María Luisa Bombal began publishing about this time her oneiric stories in Buenos Aires: *La última niebla* [House of Mist] (1935), and the same year as her *La amor-rajada* [The Strouded Woman] (1937), Silvina Ocampo published *Vigie olvidado* [Forgotten Journey] and Luis Alzamonte, *Fusilado al amanecer* [Shot at Sunrise]. From then magical realism has grown in an exciting crescendo. Suffice it here to declare that the decade 1940-50 saw its most magnificent flowering. During these ten fruitful years Latin America produced prose fiction comparable to the best in contemporary Italy, France, or England. The year 1940 saw the appearance of Adolfo Bioy Casares' *La invención de Morel* [The Invention of Morel], the first full-length novel of fantasy in Latin American letters. Reminiscent of the early H. G. Wells, its style has the hard, translucent quality of Kafka. At the same moment Alhamonte published his most ambitious novel, *La paloma de la puñalada* [The Dove and the Stabbing]; Enrique Wernicke, a collection of short stories, *Hans Grillo*, and a novel, *Función y muerte en el cine A.B.C.* [Show and Death at the ABC Movie Theatre]; the Mexican Andrés Henestrosa, the charming *Retrato de mi madre* [Portrait of My Mother]; and Borges, Silvina Ocampo, and Bioy Casares compiled the timely and broadly influential *Antología de la literatura fantástica* [The Book of Fantasy]. In the following year Borges gave us his memorable "El jardín de los senderos que se bifurcan" ["The Garden of Forking Paths"], which imposed magical realism in many corners throughout Latin America. That year

José Bianco made his debut with a brilliant tour de force, *Sombros suele vesir* [*Shadow Play*], in the style of Henry James, and Eduardo Mallea published one of his outstanding achievements, *Todo verdor perecerá* [*All Green Shall Perish*], in which a rural tragedy is lifted to new artistic levels. Soon thereafter Alfredo Pippig gave us his amazing tales *La resurrección de X.X.* [The Resurrection of X.X.], and Bianco, his intense novel *Las rasas* [*The Rasas*] (1943), quite Gidean in penetration and stylistic virtuosity. With Borges, Mallea, Bianco, Silvina Ocampo, and Bioy Casares, the nucleus felt strong. The momentum reached Cuba (Novás Calvo, Ramón Ferreira, Labrador Ruiz); Mexico (Juan José Arreola, Francisco Tario, María Luisa Hidalgo, Juan Rulfo); Ecuador (Vera, Adalberto Ortiz); Chile (Subercaseaux, Chela Reyes, Mariyán, the Huidobro who in the 1920's had practiced Ultraism); Uruguay (Felisberto Hernández, Amorim, Onetti). And in Argentina a galaxy flourished: Alberto Girri, Norah Lange, Estela Canto, Manuel Peyrou, Enrique Anderson Imbert, Santiago Dabove, Carmen Gándara, Mario Lancelotti, Julio Cortázar. Astonishing were the varieties of utterance, the magnificent originality. For instance, *El estruendo de las rosas* [*Thunder of the Roses*] by Manuel Peyrou and *El túnel* [*The Tunnel*] by Ernesto Sábato appeared the same year, 1948, as *Nadie encienda las lámparas* [No one lit the lamps, translated as *Piano Stories*] by the Uruguayan Felisberto Hernández and *Varía invención* [*Various Inventions*] by the Mexican Juan José Arreola. The publication of this brilliant storyteller's *Confabulario* (1952) coincided with that of Francisco Tario's *Tapicaca lín* and Ramón Ferreira's *Tiburón* [Shark].

Meticulous craftsmen all, one finds in them the same preoccupation with style and also the same transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal. They all will subscribe to Chirico's dictum: "What is most of all necessary is to rid art of everything of the known which it has held until now: every subject, idea, thought and symbol must be put aside. . . . Thought must draw so far away from human fetters that things may appear to it under a new aspect, as though they are illuminated by a constellation now appearing for the first time."⁴ It is predominantly an art of surprises. From the very first line the reader is thrown into a timeless flux and/or the unconceivable, freighted with dramatic suspense: Bioy Casares' *The Invention of Morel*: "Today, on this island, a miracle happened. The weather suddenly grew very warm. . . ." Borges' "La lotería de Babilonia" ["The Lottery in Babylon"]: "Like all men in Babylon, I have been proconsul; like all, a slave. I have also

known omnipotence, opprobrium, imprisonment. Look: the index finger on my right hand is missing. Look: through the rip in my cape you can see a vermilion tattoo on my stomach. It is the second symbol, Beth"; and his "Las ruinas circulares" ["The Circular Ruins"]: "No one saw him disembark in the unanimous night, no one saw the bamboo canoe sinking into the secret mud, but within a few days no one was unaware that the silent man came from the South and that his home was one of the infinite villages upstream, on the violent mountainside where the Zend tongue is not contaminated with Greek and where leprosy is infrequent."⁵ Arreola's "El guardagujas" ["The Switchman," in *Confabulario*]: "The stranger arrived at the deserted station out of breath. His large suitcase, which nobody carried for him, had really tired him out."⁶ Sábato's *The Tunnel*: "It should be sufficient to say that I am Juan Pablo Castel, the painter who killed María Iribarne. I imagine that the trial is still in everyone's mind and that no further information is necessary."⁸ And, finally, Mallea's *Sala de espera* [The Waiting Room]: "Windows opaque and engine at full steam, the 11:40 express whistled and roared through the dark country station."⁹ Notice the affinity of all these opening sentences with those of *The Trial* by Franz Kafka: "Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning"; or that of *The Stranger* by Albert Camus: "Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure"; or that galvanizing one of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from a troubled dream, he found himself changed in his bed to some monstrous kind of vermin." From then on the narrative moves smoothly, transparently, bound for an infinite, timeless perspective—timeless because despite the noun *morning* in *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis* there stands the modifier, *one—one morning*—just as in *The Stranger* the *today* becomes *today or maybe yesterday*: *I can't be sure*. Time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality. The transformation of Gregor Samsa into a cockroach or bedbug (Kafka uses the imprecise "monstrous vermin") is not a matter of conjecture or discussion: it happened and it was accepted by the other characters as an almost normal event. Once the reader accepts the *fait accompli*, the rest follows with logical precision. Nowhere is the story weighed down with lyrical effusions, needlessly baroque descriptions, or "cuadros de costumbres," all of which mar the composition of *Doña Bárbara* and *La vorágine*, for instance. The practitioners of magical realism cling to reality as if to prevent "literature" from getting in their way, as if to

prevent their myth from flying off, as in fairy tales, to supernatural realms. The narrative proceeds in well-prepared, increasingly intense steps, which ultimately may lead to one great ambiguity or confusion. "Verwirrung innerhalb der Klarheit," to a confusion within clarity; to borrow a term used by the Austrian novelist Joseph Roth in a slightly different context.¹⁰ All the magical realists have this in common, as well as their reputation of that mawkish sentimentalism which pervades so many of the Latin American classics: *María, Camanda, Aves sin nido* [*Birds without a Nest*]. The magical realists do not cater to a popular taste, rather they address themselves to the sophisticated, those not merely initiated in aesthetic mysteries but versed in subtleties. Often their writings approach closely that art characterized by Ortega y Gasset as "dehumanized." Their style seeks precision and leanness, a healthy innovation, to be sure, considering the flatulence of so many reputed writers in Latin American fiction (Larreta, Domínguez Reyes). Besides, their plots are logically conceived, either well-rounded or projected against an infinite perspective as in Kafka's "Wall of China" or Chirico's *Melancholy and Mystery of a Street*. This, too, is a healthy innovation, since Latin American plots have usually been either elephantine and sprawling, as in [Agustín Yañez's] *El mundo es ancho y ajeno* [*Broad and Alien is the World*], or unwieldy and clumsily assembled, as in *Periquillo Sarriento*. This concern of the magical realists for the well-knit plot probably stems from their familiarity with detective stories, which Borges, Bioy Casares, Peyrou, and other magical realists have written, translated, or anthologized. Their mathematical precision and perspicacity may account for their strong aversion to all flabbiness, either stylistic or emotional.

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, to use Henríquez Ureña's felicitous phrase—we may claim that Latin America now possesses an authentic expression, one that is uniquely civilized, exciting, and, let us hope, perennial.

Notes

[Editor's note: Italicized titles in brackets indicate works that have been translated into English.]

A paper read at the Spanish 4 Group Meeting of the 69th Annual Meeting of the MLA, New York, December 27–29, 1954.

¹ After this was written I was pleased to discover the following statement by the poet and critic Arturo Cambours Ocampo in his recent vol. *Indagaciones sobre literatura argentina* [*Approaches to Argentine Literature*] (Buenos Aires: Albatros, 1952), p. 76: "The spiritual position of the writers of the literary generation of the 1880s was not absolute and cannot be defined absolutely. It seems to me that this problem has been exaggerated. The works of even the most rebellious writers tell us at every turn that a supple romanticism was still beating in their hearts. . . . Romanticism is present on the elegant and poetic pages of Eduardo Wilde's autobiographical *Agua abajo* [Downstream] and *Tiempo perdido* [Lost Time]; in the spare, melancholic description of Lopez's *La gran aldea* [The Big Village]; and even in the most naturalistic moments in Eugenio Cambaceres' work, we see a ray of spiritual optimism that does not conform in any way to the label of 'positivist' often used to describe this generation." (Editors' translation, emphasis the author's.)

² *Hudson Review* 7: 3 (Autumn 1954) 454–59.

³ *Journal* (New York: Knopf, 1951), 4: 42, entry for August 28, 1940.

⁴ James Thorp Selby, *The Early Chirico* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1941), p. 21.

⁵ Adolfo Bioy Casares, *La invención de Morel* (1940); *The Invention of Morel*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 9.

⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Lottery in Babylon," trans. John M. Fein, and "The Circular Ruins," trans. James E. Irby, from *Ficciones* (1944), in *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1962), pp. 30, 45.

⁷ Juan José Arreola, "The Switchman," trans. George D. Schade, from *Confabulario* (1952), in *Confabulario and Other Inventions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 77.

⁸ Ernesto Sábato, *El túnel* (1948); *The Tunnel*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), p. 1.

⁹ Eduardo Mallea, *Sala de espera* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1953), p. 1, editors' translation.

¹⁰ Joseph Roth, *Antichrist*, trans. William Rose (New York: Viking, 1935), p. 23.