Chapter I

Introduction

The term “magic realism” or “magischer realismus” was coined by Franz Roh (1890-1965), a German art critic in his book, *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei* (Post-expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Most Recent European Painting), published in 1925, to describe a new form of post-expressionist painting which “tried to capture the mystery of life behind the surface reality” (Bowers 2). In the preface to the book, Roh says, “with the word ‘magic,’ as opposed to ‘mystic’ I wished to indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it” (qtd. in Zamora and Paris 15). Further, in his essay “Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism” (1925), Roh says that for Impressionism, that the world consisted of objects was an “obvious” fact not worth much attention;...Expressionism also considered the existence of objects to be patently “obvious” and looked for meaning in powerful and violent rhythms; vessels into which man’s spirit (that of either an artist or a man of action) could pour everything. But the most recent painting attempts to discover a more general and deeper basis,...This calm admiration of the magic of being, of the discovery that things already have their own faces, means that the ground in which the most diverse ideas in the world can take root has been reconquered—albeit in new ways.

(Zamora and Faris 19-20)

The new post-expressionist art was therefore concerned with capturing through close observation the spirit of things that pulsed inside them, “in
an intuitive way, the fact, the interior figure, of the exterior world” (Zamora and Faris 24).

Irene Guenther clarifies that Roh did not give “special value” to his term “magic realism” but only felt the need to give “an aesthetic descriptive” to the word “post-expressionism”. Guenther continues to say that Roh “never gave a concise definition of ‘magic realism’. His 1925 work, however, contains a list of characteristics and adjectives sprinkled throughout with which he formulated his conception of the new art” (Zamora and Faris 35). These twenty-two characteristics were reduced to fifteen in Roh’s later book German Art in the Twentieth Century, published in 1958. Some of the characteristics were to name a few, sober subjects, representational, static, cold, smooth, centripetal and external purification of the object (Zamora and Faris 35-36). The new art of Germany in the 1920’s, therefore, left behind the vibrant colour and emotional effusion of expressionism, and began to nurture an objectivity and lucidity that had as its aim, the representation of the mystery and wonder of life.

This new art form had a “smooth photograph-like clarity” (Bowers 8). The artist captured on canvas, in a moment of time, the object in a
life-like manner. This new reality confronted the muddled reality that life had become after the First World War thus:

The historical context in which magic realist painting developed was that of the unstable German Weimar Republic during the period 1919-23. This era followed the German defeat in the First World War and the abdication and flight into exile of the Kaiser in 1918. It was a period of political fragility when the vacuum of power that was created following the abdication of the Kaiser was fought over by right-wing and left-wing revolutionary groups....It was an era of political violence and extreme economic difficulty.

(Bowers 10)

There was a desire to express the pain and angst of the ravages of war. Describing the goal of the new art Guenther says:

The goal of this post-World War I art was a new definition of the object, clinically dissected, coldly accentuated, microscopically delineated. Overexposed, isolated, rendered from an uncustomary angle, the familiar became unusual, endowed with an Unheimlichkeit (uncanniness) which elicited fear and wonder. The juxtaposition of “magic” and “realism” reflected far more the monstrous and marvelous Unheimlichkeit within human beings and inherent in their modern technological surroundings....

(Zamora and Faris 36)

Roh named artists whom he attributed to portraying the characteristics of magic realist art that included Giorgio de Chirico, Otto Dix, Alexander Kanoldt and George Grosz. Giorgio de Chirico’s “The Enigma of a Day” (1914) projects the isolation of man through the clear outline and shadow of forlorn buildings and a statue. Alexander Kanoldt’s “Still Life II” (1926), shows a potted plant on a side-table with a bottle and a small tray. Bowers says of the painting that “all the objects are given equal importance in the composition...The clarity of the objects
in the picture and the lack of emphasis of any one object provides the distinctive ‘magical’ aspect of this painting” (9). The “socially conscious” (Zamora and Faris 46) paintings of Otto Dix and George Grosz dramatize agony experienced in Germany. “Match Seller I” (1920) by Otto Dix portrays a big-headed man with no arms or legs, selling matches, with a dog urinating on him. Words are drawn from his mouth and passersby are painted as walking in a slanted angle. Similar caricature is found in George Grosz’s “Gray Day” (1921) with a round-headed businessman with cross eyes walking in the opposite direction of a soldier with a hunchback, a big head and no right hand. “Both painters show a disregard for traditional and realistic perspective” (Bowers 8).

At the turn of the twentieth century, in 1909, Alfred Kubin, an Austrian artist and writer, published Die andere Seite (The Other Side), which was a novel with fifty-two drawings. Kubin was interested in the uncanny, monstrous and grotesque, and in the novel he delved into the ‘other side’ of the visible world—the corruption, the evil, the rot, as well as the power and mystery. The border between reality and dream remains consistently nebulous; Unheimlichkeit (uncanniness) pervades the novel, which takes place in the capital city of Dreamland in Asia. (Zamora and Faris 57)

Ernst Jünger, a German essayist, novelist and poet, was influenced by Kubin’s concept of the fusion of the invisible and the visible, the interior and the exterior of life. Franz Roh’s magic and uncanny lurking behind
the objective depiction of an object also influenced Jünger and he translated it into “literary ‘stereoscopy’” (Zamora and Faris 58); the discovery of the smallest details through precise examination. In 1927, Jünger used the term “magic realism” in an article called “Nationalismus und modernes Leben” (Nationalism and Modern Life). A further development of magic realism in German literature is seen in Jünger’s Das abenteuerliche Herz (The Adventurous Heart) published in 1929. Magic realism continued to flourish in German literature, also being referred to as “Neue Sachlichkeit” (New Objectivity), a term coined by the German museum director, Gustav Hartlaub. In 1927, Massimo Bontempelli, an Italian writer, used the term “magic realism” in his bilingual journal called 900 and even before 1927, he used it as “a literary as well as artistic context” (Zamora and Faris 60) in the journal. Bontempelli himself was influenced by Franz Roh, fascism and surrealism.

The influence of magic realism in Latin America has had the most far-reaching consequences. Bowers says that

in 1927, the chapters specifically concerning magic realism from Franz Roh’s Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus were translated into Spanish by Fernando Vela and published in Madrid by Revista de Occidente under the title Realismo mágico. Post-expresionismo: Problemas de la pintura europea mas reciente.
Latin American writers such as Jorge Luis Borges and Miguel Angel Asturias were influenced by these writings and this helped to spread magic realism in Latin American literature. Further, Guenther says that during the 1930’s and 1940’s, there was large scale migration of people from Europe to the Americas. These included writers and artists who found haven in Mexico, Brazil, Cuba and Venezuela. Guenther says that it was in Latin America that the concept of magic realism was “primarily seized by literary criticism and was, through translation and literary appropriation transformed” (Zamora and Faris 61).

Alejo Carpentier, a French-Russian Cuban, being influenced by Franz Roh, as well as the post-expressionist and surrealist tradition in Europe, coined the term “lo realismo maravilloso americano” or “marvelous American reality” in the 1940’s, “to describe a concept which represented the mix of different cultural systems and experiences “that create an extraordinary atmosphere, alternative attitude and differing appreciation of reality in Latin America” (Bowers 13).

As opposed to European surrealism, a movement in which Carpentier had participated in the 1930’s in France, Carpentier’s “marvelous American reality” does not imply a conscious assault on conventionally depicted reality but, rather, an amplification of perceived reality required by and inherent in Latin American nature and culture.

(Zamora and Faris 75)
German “magic realism” which started in art, has now become Carpentier’s “lo realismo maravilloso” or “marvellous realism” (Bowers 13), which is a distinctly Latin American literary concept. In his essay “On the Marvelous Real in America” (1949), Carpentier discusses how Latin America’s history, culture and geography make it unique in the world. He says,

because of the virginity of the land, our upbringing, our ontology, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, the revelation constituted by its recent discovery, its fecund racial mixing [mestizaje], America is far from using up its wealth of mythologies. After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real. 

(Zamora and Faris 88)

With the Second World War and the fall of the Spanish Republic in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), many Europeans, as has been mentioned, migrated to Latin America during the 1930’s and 1940’s. This was also the time when Latin America began to assert its own distinct literary consciousness. Roberto González Echevarría says:

Carpentier’s artistic enterprise in the forties became a search for origins, the recovery of history and tradition, the foundation of an autonomous American consciousness serving as the basis for a literature faithful to the New World.

(qtd. in Bowers 14)

Emerging from the distinct forms of “magic realism” and “marvellous realism”, the term “magical realism” or “realismo mágico” was coined by Angel Flores in his essay “Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction”, published in 1955. The term “magical realism” was
used in relation to Latin American fiction “but has since been adopted as
the main term to refer to all narrative fiction that includes magical
happenings in a realist matter-of-fact narrative” (Bowers 2). Flores takes
the year 1935 as the starting point of this new era of Latin American
literature, with the publication of Jorge Luis Borges’ *A Universal History
of Infamy* (1935).

A native of Argentina, Borges, is considered to be the father of
modern Latin American writing and the precursor of magical realism,
who was later to become an important influence on Gabriel García
Márquez. “Naming Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) as the first magical
realist, Flores recounts both European modernist and specifically Spanish
influences for this version of magic(al) realism” (Bowers 15). Flores does
not acknowledge that Carpentier brought “Roh’s magic realism to Latin
America and instead argues that magical realism is a continuation of the
romantic realist tradition of Spanish language literature and its European
counterparts” (Bowers 15). To support this, Flores names the sixteenth
century Spanish writer, Miguel de Saavedra Cervantes, together with
Franz Kafka and Giorgio de Chirico.

Along with Jorge Luis Borges, Flores mentions other writers which
include Maria Luisa Bombal, Silvina Ocampo, Luis Albamonte, Adlofo
Bioy Casares and others. A common quality of these writers is a desire to see reality in a new light, just as the magic realist painters similarly aspired. Flores quotes Chirico thus:

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. (qtd. in Zamora and Faris 114)

Therefore, from Chirico’s words it may be concluded that the basis of magical realism is reality; it is a reality that has been reinvented and renewed to draw a deep and profound appreciation of life. Thus, Flores says: “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” (Zamora and Faris 115-116).

The term “magical realism” coined by Angel Flores, has now become the term that is currently used to refer to literature that has magical and extraordinary events and characters rendered by an objective narrative. The term “magical realism” is thus derived from “magic realism” as an art form in the 1920’s; from Latin American literature as “marvellous realism” in the 1940’s and 1950’s, to attain a global status in the second half of the twentieth century, as a style and technique of
writing used by many writers. For the purpose of the present study therefore, the term “magical realism” will be used henceforth.

“Magical realism” is commonly confused with surrealism and fantasy. The basic difference between them is magical realism’s reliance on reality. The narrative is created in such a way that even though it possesses extraordinary characters and events, it elementally draws from reality, in order not to lose its relevance to society. Bowers explains that the similarity that magical realism shares with surrealism is their bringing together of paradoxes. However, when carefully studied, the differences between surrealism and magical realism are substantial. Firstly, surrealism probes aspects of “the imagination and the mind, and in particular it attempts to express the ‘inner life’ and psychology of humans through art.” Magical realism, on the other hand, probes aspects of “material reality”, with the bizarre
drastically presented in the form of a dream or a psychological experience because to do so takes the magic out of recognizable material reality and places it into the little understood world of the imagination. The ordinariness of magical realism’s magic relies on its accepted and unquestioned position in tangible and material reality.

(Bowers 22)

Secondly, surrealism is “an artistic movement that lasted from 1919 to 1939 and that was defined by its practitioners through a manifesto” written by French writer André Breton in 1924. Magical realism “has
been discussed and nuanced by many critics and writers but has never been ultimately defined in this way” (Bowers 22-23). Fantasy or the fantastic is also easily confused with magical realism. Amaryll Chanady, gives a comprehensive distinction between the two:

In contrast to the fantastic, the supernatural in magical realism does not disconcert the reader, and this is the fundamental difference between the two modes. The same phenomena that are portrayed as problematical by the author of a fantastic narrative are presented in a manner-of-fact manner by the magical realist.

(qtd. in Bowers 25)

Doubt, fear of the unknown, fear of the supernatural, are alien to a magical realist story because everything is taken to be an inherent part of reality. The supernatural and strange is perceived as part of everyday experience. It does not encourage disbelief, but is instead felt and assimilated into the culture of the people. Thus, the history and reality of the community intermingle with myth. This brings about an enrichment of reality and history because of the natural absorption of myth and legend into the life of men.

The blend of reality and myth surrounded Gabriel García Márquez while he was growing up. Living in the coastal town of Aracataca, in northern Colombia, he came from a story telling community. The oral tradition was deeply ingrained in him by his grandmother, Tranquilina Iguarán Cotes. Her stories of ghosts, omens and superstitions, which she
told with an objective voice, strongly affected his way of thinking as a child, and also his way of writing as an adult. In his memoir *Living to Tell the Tale* he says:

> Those who knew me when I was four say that I was pale and introverted, and spoke only to recount absurdities, but for the most part my stories were simple episodes from daily life that I made more attractive with fantastic details so that the adults would notice me.

(García Márquez 91)

Later he goes on to say, “Now I believe these were not a child’s mean tricks... but a budding narrator’s rudimentary techniques to make reality more entertaining and comprehensible” (García Márquez 92). Unconsciously, García Márquez learned this technique from his grandmother, which later as a writer he realized, was the way he wanted to tell his stories. The objective, natural tone of voice and expression which his grandmother maintained while telling stories of wonder and fear were adopted by him. This is what makes his fiction capture the atmosphere of magical realism.

As an aspiring writer, in the 1940’s, Garcia Márquez was notably influenced by Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, James Joyce, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and Virginia Woolf. Thus, what García Márquez did was to fuse the techniques of modernism with the oral tradition of his community. The result was a new and fresh approach to reality that was magically real. This innovation allowed Garcia Márquez
to tell stories for the important purpose of criticizing the history, politics and society of his country Colombia in particular, and Latin America in general. Pelayo says that in magical realism

the mythical elements of oral tradition are incorporated into an otherwise realistic fiction. The social and economic problems that García Márquez disguises with a touch of magic realism are both past and present problems facing the individual and the community. If the reader fails to see through the disguise, it is because the narrative’s emphasis is placed, not on the story, but rather on how the story is told.

Thus, with the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967, one finds García Márquez telling his story only in the way his grandmother would, which was an impersonal way of telling the most magical story as a common part of daily life.

Consequently, the narrating consciousness of the story becomes a crucial part of the story telling process. It is concerned about telling its story by moving beyond reality, into the realms of the supernatural and extraordinary. It does this by breaking down the boundaries of reality which limited fiction writing in the past. The narrating consciousness therefore, transgresses the barriers of conventional fiction, to bring together the real and the spectacular. As the noted exponents of magical realism, Zamora and Faris say: “..the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence—
admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism” (3). They go on to say that

magical realism is a mode suited to exploring—and transgressing—boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction.

(5-6)

Thus, since magical realism is a mode that is suited to transgress boundaries, the narrating consciousness endorses this vital element of magical realism by shattering the walls that separate reality and myth¹, causing them to coexist and become indispensable parts of the created story. It thus opens and enters a new space of fiction where reality and myth intertwine, the “hybrid space” that Rawdon Wilson describes (Zamora and Faris 220), which is a combination of reality and myth. This operating consciousness navigates through the hybrid space and takes on a transgressive nature. It begins to adapt and acclimatize itself to the transgressive and subversive demands of the hybrid space. Thus, it becomes transgressive in nature as it manoeuvres in the hybrid space, where reality has been reordered because of the overlapping of reality and myth. With the frontiers of fiction expanded, the transgressing narrative consciousness is the vehicle used by García Márquez to conjure the hybrid fictional space required by magical realism.

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The transgressing narrative consciousness therefore, is the creative resource that García Márquez uses to interpret the mode of magical realism. It is the same narrative method used by his grandmother. He has, however, modified it by using other modernist techniques, like the stream of consciousness technique and drawing from history, politics and society. While telling its story, all accepted norms of fiction are overturned and subverted. The transgressing narrative consciousness makes magical realist texts “subversive”, attaining an “in-betweeness” and an “all-at-onceness” because of its all-encompassing embrace. (Zamora and Faris 6) Bowers elucidates by saying that the “root of this transgressive and subversive aspect lies in the fact that, once the category of truth has been brought into question and the category of the real broken down or overturned, the boundaries of other categories become vulnerable” (64). Thus, if the truth and what is real is broken down, a chain reaction will set in, in which all that is understood as absolute will become relative, reminding one of the varied ways in which legend and myth can become complementary to reality and history, providing a different way of looking at human experience. The transgressing narrative consciousness has unlimited dynamism; it freely transmutes reality and
myth to evoke a necessary contemporary relevance. Relevance is evoked by the sources of García Márquez’s fiction which are factual...The literary context of García Márquez can be found in the history of Colombia, his private life, and that of his parents and grandparents. Aracataca, the place where he was born, appears either as Macondo or a nameless town close by a river...The images of power, religion, and celebrations all seem to have an origin in the oral traditions or the social and historical culture of Colombia.

(Pelayo 22)

García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) is the quintessential magical realist novel and displays the transgressive mode of fiction associated with him. This mode arose out of a need to challenge fixed boundaries, making itself a new craft of fiction writing. The raw materials for *One Hundred Years of Solitude* were mainly provided by García Márquez’s childhood with his grandparents and extended family in the town of Aracataca. In his memoir *Living to Tell the Tale*, he recounts:

I cannot imagine a family environment more favorable to my vocation than that lunatic house, in particular because of the character of the numerous women who reared me. My grandfather and I were the only males, and he initiated me into the sad reality of adults with tales of bloody battles...

(García Márquez 90-91)

Bell-Villada says:

Two sets of memories in particular would stay with him—the adult women, and his grandfather, the soldier. The women ran the house and took good care of little Gabito, encouraging his curiosity and his story-telling bent. Being somewhat superstitious, they were given to saying or doing certain things he would later memorialize.

(42)
Thus, it may be said that the seeds of the transgressive mode of magical realism were sown in the formative years of García Márquez’s childhood. Myth, history, tragedy, politics, family and more fill the kaleidoscopic hybrid space of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

*The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) which comes eight years after *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, dramatizes the life and power of a desolate dictator, who transcribes reality in terms other than what has already been done in fiction before. The novel is based in an unknown Caribbean town, with the intermittent beam of the lighthouse and the crumbling palace of the Patriarch. The reality that is perceived by the senses is enhanced to possess a grand exuberance and freedom. *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, however, is usually neglected because it is difficult and tedious to read, consisting “of six unnumbered chapters, each a single paragraph, with syntax growing ever more sinuous and serpentine as the book progresses” (Bell-Villada 168).

The first chapter of the novel is made up of thirty-one sentences, the third chapter, nineteen, the fifth, fifteen, and finally the sixth is made up of a single sentence. There are no quotation marks, colons, semicolons or dashes, except full stops and commas. There is the change of pronouns, causing a sea of voices to speak. Besides this, there is also the
stream of consciousness of the Patriarch himself, which is a maze of memory marked by his incapacity for love and happiness, violence, disease, torture, murder and instability. Thus, García Márquez has subverted not only the barriers of fiction, but those of conventional grammar. The Patriarch is a synthesis of political dictators who have lived through history and his need for power brings about the complete destruction not only of himself, but of his nation. *The Autumn of the Patriarch* is significant due to the fact that “Latin dictators have achieved the status of a kind of world myth, as García Márquez himself likes to remark, and his novel beautifully sums up the historical roots, the felt qualities, and the ‘spiritual’ essence of that myth” (Bell-Villada 192).

*Collected Stories* (1991) documents the growth and maturation of García Márquez, from the 1940’s, to the full flowering of the 1970’s. The collection contains three volumes of short stories, placed in the collection as they appeared in the original Spanish: *Eyes of a Blue Dog, Big Mama’s Funeral* and *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother*. Beginning as a short story writer, García Márquez’s first published short story was “The Third Resignation” (1947). It was published in a liberal newspaper in Bogota, the capital of Colombia, called *El Espectador* (The Spectator). “The Third
Resignation” deals with the theme of death which would become a prominent theme of García Márquez’s fiction. The short stories while kindling “the subtle, small-scale, mostly interpersonal upsets and triumphs of common village folk—the sleepy priests, pool-hall souses, provincial wheeler-dealers, troubled but stouthearted women, and the abandoned, the mismatched, or the bereaved” (Bell-Villada 120), create and possess an environment which facilitates the challenging of accepted reality.

All three works, One Hundred Years of Solitude, The Autumn of the Patriarch and Collected Stories share a common insight and consciousness, determined by García Márquez’s attempt to transgress and subvert the lived reality in order to write fiction that would dismantle the rigidity of the known reality.
Note

1 The figure below represents the overlapping of reality and myth in the narrative mode of magical realism. The result is the formation of the “hybrid space”, caused by the breaking down of barriers through the transgressing narrative consciousness.
Works Cited


