

## MAGIC REALISM IN TONI MORRISON

It has been said that once a writer “gives birth” to a book, it is no longer hers or his. It is then the readers and critics’ prerogative to interpret the text, and maybe find there what the author may not have consciously set about to convey. This is partly the reason why I did not give up in my attempt to analyze the elements of “magic realism” in Toni Morrison’s extensive work, when I came across one of her interviews where she absolutely rejected such a label. In the analysis and reflection that follow, I intend to prove the proximity of our position and that of the writer.

### WHICH “MAGIC REALISM”?

“Magic Realism - when marvellous and impossible events occur in what otherwise purports to be a realistic narrative - is an effect especially associated with contemporary Latin American fiction ... but it is also encountered in novels from other continents” (Lodge: 114). The authors that can be included in this movement share experiences that have deeply marked their personal and collective lives and that “they feel cannot be adequately represented in a discourse of undisturbed realism.” (114) Chiampi devotes some chapters of his *El realismo maravilloso* to explaining how this “marvellous realism” lies rather in the narrative perspective and strategy chosen by the writer than in the reality described. This does not rule out the possibility that some realities may prove more “amenable” to the magic realistic treatment than others. Cortázar and García Márquez explain that in Latin America “la realidad ... [es] tan fantástica que sus cuentos les [parecen] literalmente “realistas”, hablando de un continente donde la “realidad” fue surrealista mucho antes de que en Europa surgiera el movimiento literario del mismo nombre. Y ello gracias a ... [la] convivencia de Razón y Mito” (Ricci: 39).

Similarly, the Afro-American collective conception of reality, according to Toni Morrison, contributes to the coexistence of two types of human knowledge: the analytic or scientific one, and the “sapiential” or synthetic one. Of course, that (i.e. “spiritual forces”) is the reality ... It’s what informs your sensibility. I grew up in a house in which people talked about their dreams with the same authority that they talked about what “really” happened. They had visitations and ... some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable. [...] Without that, I think I would have been quite bereft because I would have been dependent on so-called scientific data to explain hopelessly unscientific things. (Gates, 1993: 415)

Therefore, Morrison reflects indeed the “(w)holistic” reality that the black community lives, what Alice Walker calls “communal spirit” (Evans: 489). In the Afroamerican tradition, as in

Latin America, the primitive, animistic beliefs that originated in Africa and the Western scientific positivism have blended into an original new approach to reality. "Crossbreeding" such as this allows us to go beyond the polarization of both types of knowledge. Morrison's most useful tool in finding the truth beyond the merely phenomonic and sensorially perceived reality is the imagination. The writer, according to Alice Walker and Toni Cade Bambara, acts as a sort of "medium": she or he mediates between the community of the living and the transempirical reality.

Let us not think, however, that this type of literature will be of a merely fantastic nature. Although supernatural phenomena are not excluded from Morrison's novels, the stories stem from the characters' ordinary lives and it is only through the writer's narrative artistry that these lives are wrapped in a magical atmosphere, in order to intrigue and surprise us as much as if we were dealing with fantastic elements. Morrison does not set the realistic thesis (the possible) against the fantastic antithesis (the supernatural), but goes further, towards the "magic reality" (the strange and untoward), that is, the synthesis beyond that opposition. In doing that, she seems to share Anderson Imbert's position:

El RM echa sus raíces en el Ser, pero lo hace describiéndolo como problemático [...] Ahora penetramos en [las cosas] y en sus fondos volvemos a tocar el enigma. Entre la disolución de la realidad (magia) y la copia de la realidad (realismo), el RM se asombra [...] Visto con ojos nuevos, [...] el mundo es, si no maravilloso, al menos perturbador. (19).

#### MAGIC REALISM IN *SONG OF SOLOMON*

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (SS), winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1978, will provide us with many examples of the traits that define RMM.

1. A first "magic realistic" element in the novel would be the breach of the usual "consequentiality" of narration: time becomes circular and intensive, instead of linear and extensive. At times, it even works in a pendular way, resorting to flash-backs and flash-forwards in order to help us to reconstruct the fragmentary history of the Dead family. We find many chronological leaps in the narration and the narrator also alternates the temporality with the atemporality of "petrified" scenes, such as the one that keeps Hagar, knife in hand, from page 130 to page 305. Time stretches, or else it becomes dense so that a moment can embrace a whole eternity (35). We also witness in SS an amazing melting of space and time, another typical trait in "magic realistic" fiction: "the Days", for instance, take on a corporeal nature so that the ambiguous "Your Day has come" (279) refers not only to the time dimension but also to Guitar's (Sun-Day's) body, to space.

2. Borders are transgressed and crossed either way, and the following oppositions neutralized:

- abstract (infinite) vs. concrete (limited), or spiritual vs. material; the leit-motiv of SS itself, the ability to fly, points both to the physical action and to the desire to “go beyond”, to freedom, so that we can understand that, “without ever leaving the ground, <Pilate> could fly” (336);

- animate vs. inanimate, life vs. death; Morrison’s characters do not call into question the existence of a channel of communication between the “two worlds”, and if they do doubt it, as Milkman in the beginning (109-110,140,149), they end up opening their eyes and mind to that Other reality:

Jesus! Here he was walking around in the middle of the twentieth century, trying to explain what a ghost had done. But why not? he thought. One fact was certain: Pilate did not have a navel. Since that was true, anything could be, and why not ghosts as well? (294)

- subject vs. object, I vs. the other; the object perceived is subsumed within the subject’s own vision or else the individual melts into the others. Milkman, for instance, identifies with Mother Earth, from whom the bourgeois life of his family had alienated him:

Walking <the earth> like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there —on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp. (281)

- the Western antithesis or antinomy reality vs. fantasy, or truth vs. fiction crumbles down. The blurry line dividing the two fades away so that “magical” elements are accepted as possible, like the mysterious mark left on the Dead’s living-room table (11-12); or Reba’s inexplicable good luck in games and contests. We start wondering, together with Pilate (149) and Milkman (332), what is true and what a product or our imagination. Pilate’s old master’s strange death illustrates this point: the death takes place when the man falls from the edge of a cliff which only exists in his mind’s eye (41-42).

3. The language of RMM is metaphorically enriched, since it combines and reconciles the western and African traditions. Morrison distils poetry from prosaic and even disagreeable images, most of which are in fact “symbol-words” that refer us to a more comprehensive reality than the merely analyzable and tangible facts. As in Latin America,

... el escritor reacciona contra el esquematismo y la descarnadura verbal que le precedieron, cuando advierte que una de sus tareas no menos importante que las demás es buscar y crear un lenguaje, reestructurar o redescubrir su propio idioma (Ricci: 152).

This is not just an exercise of linguistic virtuosity, but rather the reflection of a personal and collective growth towards “una conciencia más madura y poliédrica, abierta a las ‘zonas de misterio’ que ofrecen las nuevas realidades descubiertas por la ciencia.” (Ricci: 191).

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4. In the thematic sphere, the literary and cultural values are de-centralized, and, without entirely casting aside the western heritage, the author gives preeminence and voice to the marginal cultures, and to anything untoward, exceptional and ec-centric. The choice of characters itself bears witness to this tendency, even collectively they give us the variety, colour and spontaneity that Morrison could see when growing up (Gates, 1993: 324): “[She] had seen women pull their dresses over their heads and howl like dogs for lost love. And men who sat in door ways with pennies in their mouths for lost love.” (128)

The non-discriminatory pluralism and syncretism inherent in the cultural crossbreeding we find both in Latin America and in the Afroamerican community has also an echo in the semantic sphere. In *SS*, the two main mythemes or mythical leitmotifs that provide the novel with the coherence of a unit are the ability to fly and Milkman’s “quest” for an identity (names) and his origins (bones).

The motif of human flight appears already in the first pages of *SS* which tell us of a desperate man’s “take-off” from the top of a building. Milkman, the main character, is born in this frame of madness, learning “the same thing Mr. Smith [the insurance agent] had learned earlier - that only birds and airplanes could fly - [...] To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull ...” (9). This disappointment reappears later on in his life in the shape of a restlessness that drives him to the “quest” first for gold, and then for his origins and the ancestral memory of his people.

The journey South, real and magical, is a “quest” for the answer to a riddle, for one’s own identity, for redemption, finally fulfilled when Milkman “discovers” that “slaves could fly” (332-333). Milkman “leaps” from a “dull” imagination to a wider conscience, with a horizon full of possibilities. Like his grandfather Solomon, like Pilate, he too can fly and go beyond. Milkman comes out of the cave-uterus reborn and comes to accept as true what Pilate had known all along: that the frontier that separates life and death is weak and blurry, that material or physical death is not the end of all.

#### CODA

I do not want to finish this paper without going back to the opinions that Toni Morrison eloquently put forward when asked about the *RMM* by Christina Davis (Gates, 1993: 414-415). The writer said:

I was once under the impression that that label “magical realism” was ... a way of not talking about the politics, [...] about what was in the books. [...] It seemed legitimate because there were these supernatural and unrealistic things, surreal things, going on in the text. But for literary critics [...] it just seemed to be a convenient way to skip again what was the truth in the art of certain writers. My own use of enchantment simply comes because that’s the way the world was for me and for the black people that I knew. [...] There was this other knowledge or perception always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities, [...]

a kind of cosmology that was perceptive as well as enchanting [...] And also it was part and parcel of this extraordinary language. The metaphors [...] come out of that world. (414)

As we can see, Morrison distrusts RMM, because she views it in a rather narrow way. Contrary to what she assumes, RMM adequately fits her injunction that "all work must be political" (Gates, 1993: 36f and Evans: 345). RMM is not "just another evasive label", but mirrors a revolutionary attitude, both linguistically and thematically. It stands up for the counterculture of imagination that creates new visions of the world and leaves no room for oppression and lack of freedom. Macon Dead's typically western, materialistic approach to life is no longer valid for the "reborn" Milkman, for now reality "se evidencia como un gran misterio y obliga a romper las confortables seguridades del positivismo" (Ricci: 43). RMM, therefore, channels and conjures up this spiritual growth, the birth of a collective conscience which is both more mature and more deeply committed to change the readers' perception of reality, with the ultimate goal of transforming history.

Si la imaginación es un modo de conocimiento, si su función es "descubrir" realidades no percibidas, el concepto de literatura como ficción no comprometida deja de tener fundamento (Ricci: 146)

En algún recodo de la historia los pueblos esperan la realización de su destino y, antes o después, lo que hoy es nada más y nada menos que "mera" riqueza literaria y profunda frustración histórica deberá [...] encarnarse activamente en la Historia, fundando nuevos mundos y nuevas realidades. (Ricci: 192)

If this is not socially committed literature, I wonder what is.

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