

WALTER, Roland. **Magical Realism in Contemporary Chicano Fiction: Ron Arias, *The Road to Tamazunchale* (1975); Orlando Romero, *Nambé-Year One* (1976); Miguel Méndez M., *The Dream of Santa María de las Piedras* (1989).** Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert Verlag. 1993. Pp. 150.

Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz
Universidad de Deusto

This volume is a welcome addition to the long series of studies that, in the last three decades, have endeavored to develop new critical approaches to the so-called “ethnic” or “minority” literatures in the United States. The main goal of all these studies—and this one is no exception—is to improve our interpretative and evaluative skills in dealing with the literatures referred to above. Like gay and lesbian literature, or Chinese-American and native American literature, it is undeniable that Chicano fiction has employed a number of narrative techniques and stylistic resources that are not habitual among the mainstream trends of American literature. In this context, Professor Walter’s contribution is an original and enlightening piece of literary criticism that will help students and scholars in the field to see under a better light some of the essential features and fictional mechanisms of the Chicano novel. By means of the analytical instruments and terminology inherited from European formalisms, and complementing his formalist commentaries with some sociological and historico-cultural observations, Walter dissects in great detail three different Chicano novels. The usefulness of his study is well attested by the fact that “it will provide strategies for reading the unfamiliar” (Kolodny 1985, 302), that is, for reading competently works of fiction which have traditionally been marginalized from the literary canon.

As the title of the book suggests, the emphasis of this analysis falls on the concept of magical realism. In a brief introduction, the author begins by demarcating the principal purpose of his textual exploration, which is to analyze the use of magical realism in Chicano fiction by means of general structural and stylistic characteristics that predominantly stem from Latin American literature while elaborating the special character of Chicano magical realism (10).

Chapter I moves on to draw a historical overview of the various definitions that the oxymoron “magical realism” has been given in different periods. Delimiting its meaning proves quite an arduous task since, as Floyd Merrell (1975, 6) already noted two decades ago, magical realism is “a phenomenon whose complexity and apparent irregularity seems to defy a concrete description”. Predictably, Walter’s historical overview turns out to be a bit confusing at stages as he brings into his survey references to such disparate sources as several histories of Latin American literature, studies on

Fantastic fiction, and more general treatises intended to classify the different fictional modes.

After quoting at some length a number of specialists in the field, such as Bontempelli (1926-27), Janik (1976), and Carpentier (1980), Walter proceeds to delineate what, in my opinion, is the most revealing dichotomy of his global revision: the contrast between magical realism and the fantastic. For this purpose, he departs from a succinct discussion of Todorov's (1970, 31-40) well-known structuralist analysis of fantastic literature. The most significant difference pinpointed by the author between the fictional mode of the fantastic and what we refer to as magical realism is that while the former "hesitates" between the level of the real—or rational—and that of the supernatural, the latter integrates both levels. Walter concludes his introductory overview by outlining the features that he considers most distinctive of magical realism. First, this fictional mode incorporates real and unreal circumstances on an integrated level. Moreover, for this interweaving of the two different levels of reality to take place in a harmonious manner, the authorial stance in the novel must be reduced to a minimum. "In magical realism", Walter contends, authorial reticence "helps to create a fictional universe that is characterized by a coherent interplay of the real and the magical categories of reality" (20).

Following this dense theoretical interlude in which a remarkable number of the possible characterizations of magical realism are discussed, the author proceeds to carry out a close dissection of the magico-realist elements in three Chicano novels. As had been anticipated in the introduction to the book, Ron Arias' *The Road to Tamazunchale* (1975), Orlando Romero's *Nambé-Year One* (1976), and Miguel Méndez's *The Dream of Santa María de las Piedras* (1989) "are characterized by a blending of magical and realistic categories of reality" (11). Of course, this odd combination of real and imaginary experiences is not restricted to Chicano literature. A quick survey of some of the recent novels written by ethnic authors in the United States is enough to make us aware of the importance that this strategy has gained lately. Its use has been so widespread among writers belonging to different racial minorities that for them it has almost turned out to be one of the primary literary conventions. To mention only a few of the most representative authors and novels in which this strategy has been brilliantly used, see Maxine H. Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (1976); Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987); or Louise Erdrich, *Tracks* (1988). Nevertheless, it is also clear that each one of these traditions, as a result of its different past and specific identity problems, has incorporated the mode of magical realism into its works in a particular manner.

It is for this reason that Professor Walter's book can be deemed most valuable since in it several typical and idiosyncratic aspects of the Chicano

novel are elucidated. In order to dive deep into the special magical realism present in the novels of Arias, Romero, and Méndez, Walter mainly employs some formalist and structuralist instruments. His formal discussions are always accompanied though by a series of extratextual historical and social considerations on the predicament of Chicanos in the United States both in the past and today.

In the three central chapters of the book, which are also the most extensive, the author examines the three Chicano novels under analysis. These examinations are characterized by the incredible detail they go into in dealing with the magico-realist elements. Such is the meticulousness of the study of these elements that, at stages, the author loses sight of some of the macro-structures of the text while, at the same time, he tends to become redundant on some of the micro-structures. Walter concentrates on the exploration of the experimental techniques exploited by the three novelists. In his opinion, the ultimate object of the use of these techniques is to achieve, as convincingly as possible, the abovementioned blending of the realm of the real with that of the magical. Somehow predictably, the conclusion reached in each of the analyses is that these novelists “use structural and stylistic devices of magical realism to display a magico-realist world view” (58).

To refer only to those elements that in one way or another appear in the three narratives and that, moreover, become more relevant in this study due to their direct connection with the mode of magical realism, I restrict my recension here to two or three precise features. First, it is interesting to note that the protagonists of the three novels, that is, Fausto Tejada, Mateo Romero, and Timoteo Noragua, see themselves thrust into some strange journeys at the outset of their stories. These journeys, however, are essentially psychological and imaginary in nature more than real. They fulfil the function in the novels of immersing the characters in a long quest for their lost identities. According to Walter, their inner journeys allow them to transcend the roles imposed upon them by an oppressive and annihilating society, and through “dreams, visions, hallucinations, flashbacks, flashforwards, [...] etc.” (93), they manage to acquire a new understanding of themselves that makes them stronger and freer. Obviously, an active reinterpretation of their roots and of the cultural heritage of their race also proves fundamental for their eventual metamorphoses. As Raymund Paredes (1978, 103) and other Chicano scholars have suggested, one of the few sources of identity and endurance still left to the Hispanic individual in the United States —be he a writer or an ordinary citizen— is “the celebration of ethnic values and traditions”.

In addition to the aspects pointed out above, there are three other factors intimately related to the creation of the magico-realist universe which also contribute in decisive ways to the final “epiphanies” undergone by the protagonists. On the one hand, all of them succeed in recovering a feeling of identification with their ancestral lands and with a nature from which they had unconsciously drifted away. As the protagonist of Romero’s

Nambé-Year One observes at one point in the novel, the landscapes surrounding him turn into “perpetual reminders and mirrors of life”, helping him to become “aware of the need to shelter his tiny, yet meaningful existence from the winds of spiritual death” (1976, 167). Likewise, Walter underlines the paramount significance that folklore and the oral tradition of storytelling have for a majority of Chicano writers. It is frequently through the mediation of the figure of the “anciano” or the storyteller that the main characters in these novels eventually come to that transcendental self-awareness which helps them to recognize themselves for what they truly are. Finally, besides “la tierra” and “los ancianos” —references to which are often tellingly in Spanish in the original English texts— a third element paving the way towards that other different dimension called magical realism is myth. The author of the volume defines myth as “that particular horizon against which individuals view reality” (60). In this regard, it is evident that, without a broad enough mythic frame of reference holding the values and ideals of the race, none of the protagonists in these novels would have been able to regenerate their identities, and so their magico-realist journeys would have remained incomplete.

The conclusion of *Magical Realism in Contemporary Chicano Fiction* sums up in a highly schematic manner the most outstanding features of the fictional mode referred to as magical realism. Among those features, it is especially important to notice that the universe of the three novels herein studied consists of two different levels, the real and the magical, which merge harmoniously and cause the categories of the magical to be automatically naturalized. Due to this naturalization, these categories do not appear any longer as supernatural either to the characters or to the reader. As for the stylistic and structural devices employed to generate the magico-realist universe, the main strategy is the presentation of a fragmented narration —resembling a cinematic montage— which tends to blur the time-space boundaries in the story. Besides the use of this strategy, Professor Walter grants great relevance to the multiplicity of points of view, the oral tradition of storytelling, and the inclusion of dreams, visions, and hallucinations. All these frames are means to, through an active imagination, transcend and set oneself free from some social conditions similar to those described by John Steinbeck in the best of his fiction. As the author of the study concludes,

[these] three novels are examples of how through magical realism the act of writing becomes an act of survival and liberation, rescuing fragments of the Chicano culture from oblivion, shedding light on history, tradition, and reality, and thereby asserting the vitality of this culture. (135-36)

The book then closes in a conspicuously hopeful tone. Besides all the narrative techniques and stylistic resources, the adoption of the mode of magical realism has provided Chicano literature with a way of amalgamating the conflictive social reality of the Hispanic individual in the United States and a rich cultural heritage that affords him the strength to endure that harsh reality. Furthermore, due to its very close analysis of Arias', Romero's, and Méndez's novels, this volume should also contribute to the recognition of these authors which should be considered on a par with the already famed Chicano writers in America, e.g., Rudolfo Anaya, Carlos Fuentes, or Rolando Hinojosa. Walter's original readings of these three novels through the prism of magical realism—as well as the extensive bibliography at the end of the book—show in very clear terms the richness and the complexity of the Chicano literature written during these last two decades.

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