

Escaping the Tyranny of Magic Realism? A Discussion of the Term in Relation to the Novels of Zakes Mda

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In *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), Edward Said had the following to say about the use of the term “magic realism”:

discussions of magic realism in the Caribbean and African novel, say, may allude to or at best outline the contours of a “post-modern” or national field that unites these works, but we know that the works and their authors and readers are specific to, and articulated in, local circumstances, and these circumstances are usefully kept separate when we analyze the contrasting conditions of reception in London or New York on the one hand, the peripheries on the other. (374)

Clearly, while Said is not here calling for the abandonment of the term *magic realism*,¹ he is alerting us to the necessity to pay attention to specificity, to context. Indeed, it is difficult to take issue with the term itself unless we assume that language is propositional, and that the application of a category somehow determines the interpretation of the text to which it is applied. Of course, as Said has shown, discourse (in which categories are mobilised) is always (to greater or lesser degrees) tendentious due to the fact that there is always a desiring agent behind the words. In weighing up any term, we must examine its value for our own purposes, that is, we must make a frankly *interested* assessment.

This article constitutes an attempt to make such an assessment. In what follows, I aim to demonstrate that the term magic realism fulfils a particular descriptive function and therefore, as a literary term, is unlikely to fall out of use. It becomes tyrannical, I suggest, when its application is simply expedient, modish or dismissive of the narrative truth of the text. Moreover, while it may describe a particular narrative strategy, it certainly does not give a sufficiently full account of any text: it is not a monolithic mode of writing that pervades a text at the expense of other techniques and strategies. In addition, specifically here in relation to Zakes Mda’s writing, it is clear that this narrative strategy is not applied to the same extent in different novels.

Among the questions which initially informed the research underpinning this article were: does the term have any explanatory value in relation to Mda’s texts? If the term can be used to describe

¹ The terms “magic realism” and “magical realism” appear to be used interchangeably and denote the same literary mode. For the sake of consistency, “magic realism” is used throughout the present text, except in quotations where the original form used is retained.

some of his texts (as it appears it can), why does Mda not always employ this narrative mode? Even if its application is (at times) cogent, is it sufficient?

I go on to suggest that the narrative strategy of magic realism is most apt when the subject matter treats of the struggle to re-shape an appalling present infused with contradictory ontologies and burdened by the continued effects of a traumatic past. In relation to Mda, an attempt is made to demonstrate this point through a discussion of his novels. In some cases, Mda fully employs this mode of writing while at other times he almost entirely abandons it. This choice appears to be linked to the subject matter of the novels.

For the sake of clarity, the discussion is organised into the following six sections, namely:

- I. an outline of the origin and definition of the term;
- II. a brief discussion on some criticisms of its application to African texts;
- III. an examination of its application in criticism of Mda's novels;
- IV. an outline of oral influences (which appear to show similar effects to those of magic realism);
- V. some suggestions as to why Mda does not always employ this narrative strategy and a brief comparison of *Ways of Dying* to *Cion* to illustrate the points raised;
- VI. a conclusion presenting an overview of other approaches to his novels and a brief assessment of the application of the term in criticism of Mda's work.

I

In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams provides the following definition of magic realism:

The term magic realism has been applied to the prose fiction of Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina, as well as to the work of writers such as García Márquez in Colombia, Günter Grass in Germany, and John Fowles in England; they interweave, in an ever-shifting pattern, a sharply etched realism with fantastic and dreamlike elements. (122)

This is a rather unspecific definition as there are a number of possible narrative modes which combine realism with the fantastic: science fiction, fantasy, Baroque, and even fairy tales. If this was all that could be said about the term, the fact that it is still in circulation (and has been for so long) would be more than a little surprising. In order to understand what, if anything, distinguishes the term from near cognates one could do worse than begin with its original application in art criticism.

The German art critic, Franz Roh, is credited with coining the term as early as 1925 in art criticism. The term New Objectivity (in German *Neue Sachlichkeit*), subsequently coined by Gustav Hartlaub, came to be used to describe the same phenomenon. Over time the latter term became common currency and Roh's term fell into disuse—even Roh adopted Hartlaub's coinage (Reeds 176). It was used to describe a

new art form that Roh discerned as succeeding Expressionism, which itself was a reaction against Realism in art. Expressionism was described by Roh as presenting a “fantastic dreamscape.” Magic realism reacted against the perceived introspection of Expressionism, and sought instead a re-acquaintance with the “real world.” In a depressed Germany of the mid-1920s, Roh welcomed “magical realism’s return to reality after Expressionism’s exaggeration and distortion of realism” (Reeds 177). This was not a return to mimetic art or realism. Instead, magic realism in art aimed at a “spiritual reconstruction” by reconciling mankind’s “devotion to the world of dreams and adherence to the world of reality” (Roh qtd in Reeds 177). Thus, magic realism aimed at the middle ground between the two extremes of Expressionism and Realism. For Roh, the magic realist “was neither the practical ‘Machiavellian politician nor the apolitical man who listens only to the voice of an ethical ideal, but a man at once political and ethical’” (Roh qtd in Reeds 178).

Reeds goes on to describe the term’s fate in Latin America. It was apparently first mooted there in literary circles as early as 1928 after the publication in the previous year of Roh’s book in Spanish (originally subtitled “magical realism” it ended up in translation with the title “magical realism”), but was subsequently forgotten. It was next used in the Latin American context by Arturo Uslar Pietri in his 1949 publication *Letras y hombres de Venezuela*. Much controversy and confusion follows its various applications, with several alternatives suggested and applied, though in spite of its many detractors, the term has reportedly remained in wide circulation with seeming tenacity. For example, the coining by Carpentier in 1985 of the term Marvellous Real (in Spanish *lo real maravilloso*) to describe similar literary works led to much debate, but ultimately the new term was taken as describing the same literary practice as “magic realism” (184). Reeds describes these developments in considerable detail (175-96). He concludes, it would appear pragmatically if reasonably that: “. . . magical realism [as a term has] withstood the test of time and critical disagreement” and he implies that we simply have no choice but to accept it, suggesting that we remedy confusion by returning periodically to the history of the term in order to maintain consistency in application (192).

If the term has had the tenacity claimed by Reeds, the logical corollary is that it fulfils some or other essential purpose, that is, as a literary term it describes a certain mode of writing for which no other appropriate term exists. If so, this would help explain its longevity. Taking for example Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*, we might question the applicability of the term magic realism, yet we immediately recognize the unsuitability of other terms describing the mixing of elements of realism and fantasy. Whatever else the novel is, it is not science fiction, fantasy, fable or fairy tale. In a very insightful discussion criticizing the generally loose application of the term, Warnes puts the tenacity of the term down to its explanatory value which enables us to distinguish narrative modes thus:

There exists a large body of fiction . . . that combines realism and fantasy, yet does this in such a way that the resultant mode or genre cannot be described as fantasy, science fiction, the uncanny, the fairy tale, the baroque or as any other of the categories with which magical realism overlaps. The key defining quality of magical realism is that it *represents both fantastic and real without allowing either greater claim to truth.* (3, emphasis added)

To my mind, this is the most compelling and coherent argument in favour of the term and at the same time offers a highly cogent definition. Warnes offers other definitions by a variety of theorists which, however, amount to longer and more detailed versions of his own. It appears to me that his definition has the twin benefits of being succinct and sufficiently specific to differentiate magic realism from other narrative modes combining realism and the fantastic. It accurately describes the narrative mode in many, though not all, of Mda's novels, as will be discussed below.

As a short aside, I would like to venture a few, admittedly arguable, speculations about some parallels between Roh's definition of the term magic realism—in particular, the art historical context of his definition—and developments in narrative modes in South African literature. It must be recalled that Roh's definition applies to painting and Warnes' to literature. Indeed, Reeds mentions an unsuccessful attempt to draw on Roh's definition in the debate on formulating a definition of magic realism for literature (189). This only underscores the presumptuousness of my own attempt here. Several commentators on post-apartheid fiction have discussed developments in narrative modes which I will now outline briefly before reflecting back on Roh's definition.

Mkhize contrasts “white writing” and “black writing” in South Africa, tracing developments in these broadly defined areas of writing prior to and since the demise of apartheid. On the “white writing” side of the score-sheet, he places J.M. Coetzee, Breyten Breytenbach, André Brink and Menán du Plessis who “in the past . . . embraced modernist or post-modernist techniques in their writing” (173), going on to see the same shift in the later works of Nadine Gordimer. On the other side of the score-sheet during the apartheid era, as in the writing of Njabulo Ndebele, Mongane Wally Serote, and Es'kia Mphahlele among others, Mkhize finds a predominantly neo-realist mode characterizing “black writing” (173). He sees the rejection of modernism as based in its perceived apoliticism:

literary modernism's rejection of narrativity has been perceived by black South African writers as a strategy bent on mystifying information – modernist techniques of writing are, according to this argument, elitist, a luxury that black writers who had a political responsibility to the masses could not afford. (180)

He goes on to suggest that Mda “may well not have escaped from the tyranny of narrativity” but “by gesturing towards magical realism” has succeeded in creating a “‘clearing house’ for black post-apartheid writing.” He sees this novel as representative of a new form, and

speculates that “[i]f there ever will be an encounter between [realist] black writing and the postmodern . . . it might well be through magical realism” (183).

In an arguably more nuanced reading of recent developments, Attwell’s survey of post-apartheid fiction finds two of Mda’s novels (*Ways of Dying* and *The Heart of Redness*) as evidencing an “experimental turn” in black South African writing, one moreover that extends and builds on a significant, if critically neglected, stream of experimental imaginative discourse by black writers before the demise of apartheid. On this reading, Mda “re-instrumentalises modernism’s anti-instrumentalism” (194) by which Attwell appears to mean that Mda eschews neither the direct contextualization of a message within a particular socio-historical milieu nor its indirect dramatization within his narrative practice. In other words, this particular choice of narrative mode straddles what has been considered as (white) postmodern writing and (black) realist writing, the former perceived as decontextualized and apolitical, the latter as fully socially engaged.

Neither Mkhize nor Attwell make any hard claims about these divisions, and my summary might well exacerbate the harm done in what are already highly (and necessarily so) schematized surveys. Returning to Roh, the interesting parallel which I would beg the reader’s indulgence to draw is between this debate and the reaction against Expressionism and Realism which Roh perceived magic realism to constitute. We recall from the above discussion that, in a context of political upheaval in which he found himself, Roh welcomed what he perceived to be “magical realism’s return to reality after Expressionism’s exaggeration and distortion of realism” (Reeds 177). For him, magic realism in art aimed at a “spiritual reconstruction” by reconciling mankind’s “devotion to the world of dreams and adherence to the world of reality” (Roh qtd in Reeds 177). Thus, magic realism aimed at the middle ground between the two extremes of Expressionism and Realism. The spurious (because disjointed in time, space and art form) parallel I am drawing here is between a felt need in the South African context for a mode of art which moves away from ingenuous realism but stops short of the existential flight of overly abstract modes of art, and the perceived need to a return to reality answered by magic realism in art as a reaction to Expressionism in the German context (Reeds 177). It is this need which some accounts of post-apartheid fiction feel is answered in the mode of magic realism or experimental turn of Mda’s writing (Mkhize, Attwell).

To indulge further in yet another aside, I would like to suggest a potentially promising line of inquiry which may provide a better understanding of several of Mda’s texts. Harry Garuba has developed the term *animist realism* in relation to African texts containing elements of the fantastic and the real (261-85). While he offers it as a more encompassing term than *magic realism* (and includes the latter), it would appear at least arguable that it is a more refined term and points to a narrative approach in texts informed by a very specific

African linguistic practice and world view. However, given the limitations of space and narrow focus of the present inquiry, though noteworthy, this possibility will not be further explored below.

II

Warnes declares that “Few other literary critical categories can claim the dubious honour of having been awarded so many inches of print in the commercial press” (2). If this is a criticism, it is echoed in Ogundele’s claim that magic realism has received more critical attention than any other genre in Africa (125). He sites the seeming paucity of primary imaginative activity focusing on pre-colonial historical periods as well as the absence of any coherent critical practice on the African historical novel as one consequence of the preoccupation (126). This would appear to be true of many other genres in Africa too, such as popular fiction (science fiction, crime fiction, romance).

Moudileno gives an absorbing account of the critical acclaim which Congolese novelist Sony Labou Tansi’s novel *La vie et demie* [Life and a Half] received when it was published in 1979 and hailed as an African answer to Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The critical treatment of Tansi’s novel as written in the mode of magic realism established the author’s international reputation, though Moudileno believes that the label is ultimately inaccurate, seeing the novel rather as science fiction. There are a number of limitations, she feels, to the classification and concludes *inter alia* that:

when contrasted with the quasi-total absence of commentaries on the presence of science fiction in the text, the insistence on magical realism reveals instead a sustained fascination with Africa inasmuch as it incarnates everything that is morbid, pathologically ill, and mysterious. (39)

She describes what would appear to be a story of expedience on the part of members of the literary-critical establishment, hopping onto the proverbial bandwagon in order to launch the writer (and themselves in tow) onto the world stage. What seems to be reprehensible here is not the term, which Moudileno convincingly argues to have been applied inaccurately, but the exposure of a coterie of ambitious literary scholars. I will return to this issue when I discuss in conclusion the general treatment by the literary-critical establishment of Mda’s novels. Suffice to note at this junction the considerable amount of hype which appears to have surrounded the term.

III

According to one reviewer of *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda (uncharacteristically) “has muted his trademark magical realism in this narrative” (390). On the surface of things, and applying Warnes’ definition given above, Mda’s work can certainly be labelled “magic realist” in mode. After all, many of his novels combine realism with the fantastic in a manner which does not allow either element a greater claim to truth. This certainly applies to: *Ways of Dying* (1995), *She*

Plays with the Darkness (1995), and *The Heart of Redness* (2000). However, *Melville 67* (1997), *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002) and *Cion* (2007) are not written in this mode. *The Whale Caller* (2004) employs the mode, though not as a key narrative strategy. Perhaps though, in light of Ogundele and Moudilena's comments, we should pause to consider the application of the term magic realism in criticism of Mda's novels.

By all appearances, it is not the most oft-cited term and certainly not the only one applied by the literary-critical establishment to Mda's works. Other terms used include *dialogism* (Bakhtin), Brechtian epic and absurdist or surrealist art (Steadman et al). This article, however, confines itself to an examination of the employment of the term *magic realism* only. In a reading of *Ways of Dying* which offers *inter alia* a discussion of magic realism in the novel, Mervis avers that:

By incorporating the techniques associated with magic realism in his fiction, Mda ensures that everyday tasks and events are defamiliarized, while the supernatural or mythic world is familiarized in a process which makes the lives of the marginalized believable. *Ways of Dying* offers a dynamic combination of allegory, a conventional (at times rather crude) realism and magic realism, which allows the mythical consciousness, by means of individual myths . . . to understand and interpret the world. (51)

She goes on to offer the following definition of magic realism: "In magic realism myth and history are combined, linear time is made malleable and frequently interrupted by flashbacks and anticipated, future events . . ." (52). Unfortunately, this definition, though seemingly extensive, is overly broad and could be used to describe other narrative modes which contain these features, yet do not propose equivalency in truth status of the real and fantastic elements which, as Warnes argues, is the primary characteristic feature of magic realism. Mervis cites a few instances in the novel to show the employment of the mode thus defined. The fifteen-month-long pregnancies, an immaculate conception, and the rebirth of Noria's first son in her second son, Vutha, all enter the text as part of everyday lived reality, thus (apparently) mythologizing the marginalised. According to her, by employing the mode of magic realism "individual stories become part of communal myths," and enable the writer to ". . . confront harsh socio-political realities" through fiction (52). Unfortunately her discussion of magic realism is rather short. The proposal that defamiliarisation—which results from employment of magic realism—is one means of making individual and marginalised lives significant and compelling, is convincingly argued. However, it does not seem sufficient to suggest that magic realism mythologizes individual stories—surely this is not an essential feature of the mode? Myth-making is not the exclusive property of magic realism. Moreover, Mervis does not offer any support for her statement that Mda's employment of the mode is "conventional" and "at times rather crude." What is "conventional" magic realism, and how do we identify "crude" applications of it? No explanation or examples are given. This particular use of the term does not facilitate understanding and

provides no insights, though the term itself cannot be blamed for this. What we would need, I would suggest, is to define our literary terms clearly and apply them more specifically. This way, any explanatory value they might have may become apparent.

Kauer examines female identity construction in *Ways of Dying* and does not discuss the mode of magical realism *per se*. It is noteworthy, however, that she uses the term in passing to describe two elements in the novel: Noria's muse-like influence on Toloki's father as well as the healing power of her laughter, and the immaculate conception—these are “elements of magic realism,” according to this reading (109). Again, as in Mervis, the mere presence of fantastic events invite application by the critic of the label “magic realism” without further reflection or discussion, and I would suggest that in such instances nothing is gained by using the term.

Likewise, without clarifying what exactly is meant by the term or discussing magic realism in any depth, Mkhize makes the suggestion that this mode of writing, a form of postmodernism, might be “a path which some black writers in this country [South Africa] might take instead of the modernist options” (183). He further suggests that, in *Ways of Dying*, Mda is “tapping into the oral tradition in order to produce a magical realist text” (*ibid.*), which is an interesting proposition unfortunately not elaborated upon. Jacobs goes somewhat further, in a discussion of *The Heart of Redness* (though he does not here discuss the novel as a magic realist text) suggesting that:

The genealogical tree of the Xhosa ‘descendants of the headless ancestor’ that Mda provides at the beginning of the novel, invites one to consider it as a South African offshoot of Gabriel García Márquez’s magic realist novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, with its similarly twinned and recurrent family names and characteristics. (*Heart* 228)

Jacobs does not take up his own invitation and does not provide us with a consideration of the text as an “offshoot” of the Latin American magic realist novelist tradition. Nevertheless, in his concluding remarks he does state that the novel “. . . succeeds in developing the realism of its late-twentieth-century fictional discourse into a uniquely South African—or more correctly Xhosa—kind of magical realism with oral undertones” (*Heart* 235). This is an exceedingly interesting suggestion, especially in light of the connection of Latin American magic realism and oral traditions in that region, but is not elaborated upon.

IV

The author himself has made a statement in relation to his employment of the mode of magic realism in his novels. While authorial disavowals are not sufficient in themselves to refuse the label, they are still noteworthy and worth considering when assessing the applicability of the term to an author's works. Mda states that:

Some critics have called my work magic realism. They say it was influenced by Latin-Americans. But I must tell you that the Latin-Americans have nothing to do

with my work. First of all they did not invent the mode of magic realism. They merely popularized it. Secondly, I had been writing in this mode long before I heard of the Latin-Americans . . . In magic realism the supernatural is not presented as problematic, or as contradicting our laws of reason . . . It happens and is accepted by other characters and by the reader as an event. I wrote in this manner from an early age because I am a product of a magical culture. In my culture the magical is not disconcerting . . . The unreal happens as part of reality . . . A lot of my work is set in the rural areas, because they retain that magic, whereas the urban areas have lost it to Westernization. (Mda, *Acceptance* 281)

This proclamation begs an assessment of other possible labels that could be used to help describe and understand his work. Such an assessment is partially complicated by the fact that, to a certain degree, Mda's work appears to be unclassifiable, that is, by any one term. The hybrid nature of his style has been a characteristic of his writing since his 1978 play *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland*. Liu describes the play as "combining the theatrical techniques from the tradition of Shakespeare, Shaw, Ibsen and Brecht with those of the Theatre of the Absurd" (134). The last scene of the play is described as "a combination of realism and fantasy . . . the two veterans . . . have become ghosts . . . visible only to the audience," and attributed by Liu to Shakespearian theatrical technique (130-31), though it could equally be described as magic realism loosely applied. Mda's apparent propensity to mix different modes is also remarked on by Holloway who discusses the "hybridity" of Mda's style (34) in his plays. Interesting also is the criticism by Galgut who indicts Mda for his apparent failure to "commit . . . to a genre or a subject" (79). In addition, *Ways of Dying* has been characterized as successfully mixing a variety of genres (Samin).

Mda's claim that he is a "product of a magical culture," implying an influence on his work by orature, invites scrutiny. Indeed, several commentators have pointed out the influence of orature on his writing. Among others, oral story-telling features are found in the collective communal address of the narrator of *Ways of Dying*, deftly and ironically alerting the modern reader to his/her assumptions about stories:

We would not be needing to justify the communal voice that tells this story if you had not wondered how we became so omniscient in the affairs of Toloki and Noria. (Mda, *Ways* 7)

The mechanism of the direct address is a feature of oral story-telling. Of course, the omniscient narrator is the hallmark, too, of realism, and indeed much of the text is written in the realist mode. Nevertheless, the oral tradition is drawn on where the "physical co-exists with the spiritual, reality with dreams, rationality with fantasy" (Samin 196). The narrative voice insists on its own veracity, moving unproblematically between what we perceive to be two modes while the oral tradition would not recognize this split. It thus has the same effect as magic realism in so far as the non-recognition of a split is tantamount to the equivalency of truth status accorded to realist and fantastic elements in magic realism. Underscoring this point, and

referring to Mda's propensity in *The Heart of Redness* to dissolve the line between the supernatural and human planes, Woodward avers that "Mda undermines, quite profoundly, with recourse to traditional beliefs, dualistic (sometimes Western) thinking about differences between the human and the nonhuman, as well as between the living and the dead, or the spirit world" (*Postcolonial* 183).

Both Samin and Woodward identify the placement on the same level of the real and the fantastic in the text, that is, neither element nor sets of elements are privileged as having a stronger truth claim than the other. This fulfils the definition of magic realism given by Warnes above, and tallies well with Mda's own view of what constitutes magic realism even as he refuses the label. The fact that Mda was unaware of the Latin American mode does not preclude his application of it. Moreover, Latin American magic realism is indebted to its orature (Warnes). Nevertheless, several commentators have identified traces within the texts of the influence of orature which go beyond the mere placement on the same level of the real and fantastic.

For example, Bell points out that the "cyclical and episodic nature of the storytelling revolving around a series of core elements that are repeated for both [*Ways of Dying* and *The Heart of Redness*] further underlines the oral nature of the text" (69). Moreover, although any *written* text is by definition not oral, in a reading of *She Plays with the Darkness*, Jacobs points out that the *performative* aspects of Mda's writing render it akin to orature:

it needs to be stated that Mda's text not only graphically *represents* [the] series of formal and informal occasions by means of which a culture enacts both its perpetuation of ancient traditions and its engagement with contemporary reality, but the text is also *performative* in so far as the overall narrative rhythm derives from a complex pattern of repetition and variation by means of which the author consciously manipulates the images of the past in relation to an unfolding history of the present. *She Plays with the Darkness* draws on the performative traditions of its African subjects. ("*She Plays*" 72)

Hence, the employment of the techniques of *orature* (and other strategies) go further than the placing on the same level of the real and fantastic which is characteristic of the magic realist mode. What I would like to suggest is that the term magic realism be used to describe a certain aspect of the text without occluding from discussion the clear existence of other aspects. In this way, the "tyrannical" potential of this term (and possibly others too) can be avoided.

Many of the readings of Mda's novels depict his work as falling into a *transitional* or *transformatory* category, a kind of interregnum or passage between one state (turbulent) to another (tranquil) (see *inter alia* Mervis, Van Wyk, Bell, Durrant, Steinmeyer, Jacobs "*She Plays*", Mazibuko, Courau, Bernard). Brenda Cooper views the genre of magic realism in African literature as "thriving on transition, on the process of change, borders and ambiguity. Such zones occur where burgeoning capitalist development mingles with older pre-capitalist modes in postcolonial societies, and where there is the syncretizing of cultures" (15). If we wish to follow Cooper's suggestion, we could conclude,

affirmatively, that magic realism is an apt mode of writing in Africa where the writer, and her audience, are located between two poles, the turbulent past and the (hoped for) tranquil future, that is, in *transition*. Although I find this to some degree compelling, and particularly apt in the case of Mda's "novel of transition," *Ways of Dying*, I would hasten to add that we cannot stop at either this term or get bogged down in a critical rut where we regard all African fiction as inhabiting some kind of permanent or even semi-permanent limbo. In order to escape the tyranny of magic realism thus understood, we have to refuse any suggestion that there is something specifically "African" about the mode, or that such a narrative strategy is either inevitable in such a socio-political context or that it is the most appropriate mode for African writers to employ.

V

Bernard insightfully points out that "so many different generic definitions, or none at all, seem to fit *Ways of Dying*" (282, fn 4). Arguably this applies to all of Mda's novels, as well as his plays. To reiterate, the term magic realism appears to be useful when *narrowly* applied and I would argue that it should be used whenever it has (some) explanatory power—designating a narrative strategy for which no suitable alternative term exists. In so far as it satisfies the criteria in the definition as outlined by Warnes, Mda's novels can be equated in a very general sense with those of Morrison, Okri, Rushdie, and Grass. However, stated in this way, and recalling the above discussion of oral influence, we should immediately balk at the reductiveness which such categorical flattening of the literary terrain *potentially* entails.

There is much in *The Heart of Redness* which is radically different from *Midnight's Children*: Mda and Rushdie might employ realism and elements of the fantastic in a way which privileges neither, as I believe they do, and fall within the same broad genre of magic realism. However, as already suggested and discussed above, there is more to be said about the novels than merely the fact of employment of this particular narrative strategy. The question I would like to address in this section, however, is whether there might be any significance in the choice of mode *per se*. It seems reasonable to assume that the mode as such may lend itself better to the treatment of some types of subject matter rather than others. Mda does not resort to magic realism in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, while he does this in the case of at least three of his other novels. Could there be some significance in the choice of mode itself? While insisting that there is nothing inevitable about it, I would argue that the choice is nevertheless significant. In a review of García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Rushdie avers that:

magical realism, at least as practiced by Márquez, is a development out of Surrealism that expresses a genuinely 'Third World' consciousness. It deals with what Naipaul has called 'half-made' societies, in which the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new. (301)

Setting aside the question of what a “genuinely ‘Third World’ consciousness” might be, it would seem to me, in relation to the novels in which Mda employs the mode (plus other strategies), that it is particularly *useful* when thematising the impossible co-existence in the same spatio-temporal zone of incompatible ontologies. This struggle is more than merely the old versus the new, it occurs where a particularly wide gap or incompatibility between ways of *being*, what Rushdie refers to here as the “impossibly old” struggling against the “appallingly new.” This is quite apparent in a novel such as *The Heart of Redness* where intractable opposites are jammed together and it is magic realism which constitutes the narrative glue which enables their seamless coexistence in a single narrative. Here a certain levelling of the competing ontologies is achieved in the exploration of a “third way” towards a reconciliation of incompatible ways of being.

By way of contrast, in a discussion of postmodern approaches to history, Bell analyses the treatment of the “old” and the “new” in the work of four South African novelists (Breytenbach, Coetzee, Wicomb and Mda) without invoking the term magic realism. He employs André Brink’s postmodernist perception of history to explore the use of history in the texts:

Brink suggests that the necessity for an “awareness of yesterday’s silences” provides a possible role for South African literature enabling it to insert itself into the continuum of history-as-fact and history-as-fiction in order to create new perceptions on the past. (63)

Through “interrogating [historical] silences . . . a new understanding of South Africa is possible” (63), Bell avers. He examines *The Heart of Redness*, and argues that the text successfully re-narrativises historical events. The factual and little known history of the 1856-7 cattle-killing tragedy, which devastated and divided the amaXhosa, is written into contemporary literary history, and is thereby both re-appropriated for the modern community, and valorised as a memory to be honoured:

Unlike the communal tragedy of the historical narrative, the contemporary story sees the successful implementation of co-operative development projects in which Nongqawuse and her legend are appropriated from the discourses of shame or heroic legend into the strictly commercial and successful exploitation of her attraction to visitors. (69)

Bell concludes that “re-negotiating the past is a serious concern of contemporary literature in South Africa” (71). The “postmodern” character of this “storyfying” of the past lies in the concern to examine or explore how it impinges upon the present, the here and now, how new perceptions of the past can inform perceptions of the present. Clearly, though, of the four authors under review, only Mda employs elements of magic realism in this “storyfying” of the past. Is there a connection between the *kind* of past treated in the novels and the narrative mode selected?

Breytenbach’s *Dog’s Heart*, Coetzee’s *Boyhood* and *Youth*, and Wicomb’s *David’s Story* are set in the past of apartheid. Only *The*

Heart of Redness is set in the pre-capitalist period of initial encounters between colonial powers and the amaXhosa. Interestingly, in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda does not resort to this narrative mode. In this novel, like the other novels discussed by Bell, however, the narrative past is apartheid South Africa, a relatively modern context. Arguably, the dichotomies dealt with in all these cases do not have an *ontological* dimension. This would seem to tally with Koyana's view of *The Heart of Redness* in a discussion of the selected location of the novel, Qolorha:

Mda uses the differences in philosophies . . . as a signifier of . . . difference . . . The concomitant of difference, Qolorha [sic] as place, is [a] continual reminder of both the separation and the hybrid interpenetration of the colonizer and the colonized. For Mda, it is primarily as the site which embodies a crucial meeting point between Western and African modes of thought, belief systems, economies, politics, and general mores that Qolorha is significant. (51-52)

Throughout the novel, the opposing camps of Believers and Unbelievers are juxtaposed both temporally and spatially, in the past and the present, and in the past which continues to inform the present and its myriad rivalries and incompatibilities. This is a radically different context from the setting in a small (modern) provincial town where *The Madonna of Excelsior* has its spatio-temporal location.

I would go further and suggest that we might rephrase Rushdie's formulation of the aptness of magic realism when the subject matter treats of the impossibly old struggling with the appallingly new into something like *the struggle to re-shape an impossible and appalling present burdened by the continued effects of a violent past exacerbated by the presence of contradictory ontologies*. This is admittedly somewhat long-winded, but the lengthy qualification appears to me to be of importance: it is necessary to avoid any privileging of the "new" over the "old" and to stress that the source of the crisis, while it may be influenced in complex ways by the existence of competing ontologies, has its roots in material reality.

In the case of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the narrative strategy of magic realism appears particularly apt, in the hands of this author, in unveiling truths about a slave heritage for the present generation still grappling with its effects. In Mda's *Ways of Dying* we are not dealing so much with an ontological rift (although this is also an important aspect), as we do in *The Heart of Redness*, but rather with the struggle to come to terms with a present thoroughly contaminated by an impossible past, impossible because of the incomprehensible inhumanity which informs the transition period from apartheid to post-apartheid (the early 1990s).

For the same reasons, this narrative strategy appears apt in *She Plays with the Darkness*. The relatively few fantastic elements of *The Whale Caller* and the absence of such elements in *The Madonna of Excelsior* and *Melville 67* are partially explicable in the foregoing terms: relatively speaking, the subject matter of these novels do not evince the same degree of extreme and inexplicable inhumanity or

ontological rift. *The Whale Caller* is primarily a love story set in contemporary South Africa. *The Madonna of Excelsior*, though the subject matter certainly deals with inhumane acts such as rape as well as racial exploitation, the choice of narrative mode is nevertheless explicable in these terms. The satirical mode in which it is written appears to be more apt than magic realism which might (I speculate) have detracted from the seriousness of the crimes committed and their consequences. In representations of violent acts, or in particular, the representation of specified perpetrators, I feel that the magic realist mode might tend to relativise the ethical issues involved. The magic realist mode may—

if I am correct in the foregoing assertion—be more appropriate where ethical considerations no longer appear to make sense, as is the case where violence is rampant and clear perpetrators and victims are indefinable or where victims become perpetrators and near anomie results, as in *Ways of Dying*.

The mere inclusion of elements of the fantastic does not constitute employment of the mode of magic realism. We recall Warnes' suggestion that "The key defining quality of magical realism is that it represents both fantastic and real without allowing either greater claim to truth" (3). The importance of this part of the definition becomes evident when comparing *Ways of Dying* (1995) and its ostensible sequel *Cion* (2007). Both narratives have as their chief protagonist the professional mourner, Toloki, and in the later novel we see Toloki referring back to his earlier exploits depicted in *Ways of Dying*. The crucial difference between the two books is that, in terms of Warnes' definition, *Ways of Dying* is written in the magic realist mode, while *Cion* is quite definitely not.

In the earlier novel, the fantastic and the real coincide equally and have the same claim to truth. As discussed above, fantastic elements such as immaculate conception and fifteen-month pregnancies, among others, are presented as if they are as true as any other statement about the characters in the novel. In *Cion*, the fantastic elements are quite explicitly presented as deriving from the fertile imaginations of key (debased) characters; real or factual reality (of the novel) is clearly accorded a greater status or claim to truth. The magic realist elements in *Ways of Dying* have already been discussed above. Therefore, in the following brief comparison, I will be focusing primarily on the treatment of fantastic elements in *Cion*.

The most striking differences between the two novels, though by no means the key definitive aspects, are the spatio-temporal coordinates. *Ways of Dying* is most probably (or for the most part) set in Durban, South Africa, during the transition period between the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and the first democratic elections in 1994. However, this is by no means certain as no place names are given and there are no clear physical markers, which would definitively situate the novel geographically. Likewise, the exact time period in which narrative events unfold is unclear. *Cion* is quite emphatically placed both temporally and spatially. The opening scene

of the novel, a Halloween parade in Athens, Ohio, takes place on a specified date: “. . . it is October 30, 2004, only three days before the presidential election” (10). The final scene is precisely one year later and takes place during the same parade (285-86). Most of the novel’s present is set in the rural town of Kilvert not far from Athens. Nevertheless, the key difference lies in the truth status granted by the text to the real and the fantastic.

As already discussed, *Ways of Dying* shifts from the real to the fantastic and back again, without authorial markers according either element greater purchase. In *Cion*, the fantastic is certainly present, but its status is *technically* diminished (that is, not diminished in value but only in terms of relative position—both narratives are excellent novels in their own right, they merely employ the fantastic differently). In *Cion*, the stories about the slave past of the Quigley family (with whom Toloki takes up temporary residence) are presented as “told by ghost trees” (85). We later learn that it is the so-called “medium man”—Mr. Quigley—who tells the fantastic stories we learn about in the first chapters of the book. Towards the end of the novel, the entire genesis of the yarn-spinning of Mahlon Quigley is laid bare:

Mahlon sat on the children’s bed and read them stories about little mermaids, mermaids that were headless, princesses and peas, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves and many others . . . When he could not get more books he read the same stories over and over again . . . Until they were bored with them. *Then he took to creating his own tall tales.* These were not confined to bedtime. He told them after dinner at the kitchen table . . . Later he went to the forest to get more stories from the ghost trees. And from all sorts of other trees. Those that could bear witness to how things used to be. Those that sprouted from the seed that fell from those that saw and remembered. *That is how stories became memories.* That is how he became the medium man. (246, emphasis added)

If we have any doubt about the significance of the textual markers which appear to distance the real from the fabricated (“tall tales” and “stories become memories” in the above quotation), the fact that Mahlon is revealed as the medium man (and therefore the indirect source/author of the “memories” we have read about in the first third removes that doubt and confirms the distance between the real and the fabricated: the “memories” are indisputably fabrications. Apart from many idiosyncrasies attributed to Mahlon, he is not presented as a particularly likeable character and even if acquitted of Toloki’s suspicions of committing incest, he is not presented as particularly reliable or trustworthy. For example, he takes to searching vigorously, at his daughter’s request, for ghost orchids in the surrounding forest. Mahlon’s reaction when he learns that it was a practical joke played on him by his daughter confounds Toloki:

She expected Mahlon to take the whole thing as the big joke it was meant to be and was astonished when he exploded and accused her of betrayal. Not only had she betrayed him she had also pissed on the sanctity of the memories . . . I must admit that I am a bit sceptical about Mahlon’s anger here. How could a man who knows so much about trees not have known in the first place that ghost orchids don’t grow around these parts and the ones he discovered were artificial? (254)

The insistence here and elsewhere in the narrative on the known and knowable versus the unreal or fantastic is quite emphatic. The two selected passages above serve to demonstrate the relatively lower status accorded to the fantastic in relation to the real in *Cion* and the corollary that the magic realist mode is *not* employed in this case, unlike *Ways of Dying*. I should emphasize that I feel that there exists no *inevitable* link between the choice of form and the subject matter treated. Having said that, it would seem to me that in *Ways of Dying* the choice of narrative mode lends itself aptly to the treatment of the absurdity of inexplicable internecine strife and gratuitous violence of the transition period in South Africa. The suffering caused by the legacy of slavery in the United States is very evocatively narrativized in the magic realist mode by Morrison in *Beloved*. Ostensibly, *Cion* is about the same subject matter. However, though clearly a key element within the narrative, the slave past of the Quigleys occupies a relatively small part of the text. Arguably, what is being thematized in the novel is contemporary misconceptions of the slave past, the use and abuse of “history” for private and present purposes, contemporary issues (international politics, attitudes of African Americans to Africa, religious bigotry etc), and the novelist form as such.

Like Mda, Morrison has expressed dismay at the use of the term in relation to her work:

Morrison has called magical realism “just another evasive label,” “another one of those words that covered up what was going on,” “a convenient way [for literary historians and literary critics] to skip again what was the truth in the art of certain writers.” (qtd in Faris 109)

Morrison’s distrust of the term is understandable, particularly if the label is used to dismiss her account of slavery in *Beloved* or to read her novels reductively. In my reading of Mda’s magic realist novels, his employment of the mode successfully *reveals* the truth of otherwise incomprehensible and all-too-real historical events. Of course, this is narrative truth, not a litany of facts in a historical text or court testimony which engage neither the imagination nor the general public. The betrayals and violence committed by compatriots against one another in the fallout of the Lesotho government’s refusal to accept defeat at the polls (*She Plays with the Darkness*), the internecine violence of transition apartheid (*Ways of Dying*), competing belief systems (*The Heart of Redness*) are all cases in point: no “realist” accounts of these events could approximate their compelling and moving renditions in these texts, which is not to preclude the employment of other narrative modes to the same ends.

VI

The survey of critical applications of the term to Mda’s work, as summarised above, does not give cause for serious concern nor does it appear to suggest that the term is being excessively applied or always misapplied. In fact, following Jacobs, it appears that a more

thoroughgoing analysis of Mda's work as magic realism is lacking and might render some useful insights. By and large, the critical reception has been nuanced and has paid attention to many aspects of the texts.

The approaches to Mda's novels range widely. The majority of readings would describe Mda's work as *bridging* divides in a variety of ways. First, several readings view his novels as temporally transitional, pivoted on a present, drawing on the past, and projecting searchingly into the future (Mervis, Van Wyk, Bell). Second, some readings see his novels as transitional in a non-temporal sense, pivoted on the site of the traumatized individual or community, moving away from a fractured or fraught identity and violent past towards a form of redemption, healing or renaissance, though this promise is never a utopian one of pure transcendence (Durrant, Steinmeyer, Jacobs "She Plays", Mazibuko, Courau, Bernard). Third, yet others see the novels as bridging various gaps, whether between place and discourse, a variety of oppositions, binary terms, boundaries or modes of writing (Koyana, Jacobs "Heart", Woodward "Jim", Mkhize, Wenzel, Titlestad and Kissack). Feminist readings (Visser, Kauer, et al) are highly engaging and pertinent, and surprisingly few and far between. Readings of the novels as primarily political critiques and counter-hegemonic narratives are found (Sewlall, Radithlalo, Samin, John), as are readings seeing his work as dramatizing new forms of subjectivity (Attwell), and as ecologically oriented (Woodward "Postcolonial", Vital).

The term magic realism fulfils a particular descriptive function and therefore, as a literary term, is unlikely to fall out of use. It becomes tyrannical when its application is simply expedient, modish or dismissive of the narrative truth of the text. Moreover, while it may describe a particular narrative strategy, it certainly does not give a sufficiently full account of any of Mda's texts: there are many other techniques and strategies employed and a single term should not be allowed to occlude the occurrence of these elements. Furthermore, this narrative strategy is not applied to the same extent in different novels. In addition, when used to describe the merely fantastic, it loses all explanatory value – attention must be paid to the origin and definition of the term if it is to retain any critical purchase.

In answer to my own questions, I feel it safe to conclude in the positive that the term has explanatory value in relation to Mda's texts, taking the above provisos into account. Mda does employ this narrative strategy, appropriately it would seem to me, wherever the subject matter deals with extreme and inexplicable inhumanity or ontological rifts. The use of the mode is muted or absent otherwise and more appropriate narrative strategies are employed to other kinds of subject matter. Although the application of the term is (potentially) cogent, it is never sufficient. On the whole, with regard to Mda's novels, the critical establishment appears to have heeded Said's suggestion not to use the term reductively and to pay attention to local context and content.

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