What About Magical Realism in the Recent Arabic Novel?

Ronald A. T. Judy

Given on 26 October 2006 at African Novel and the Politics of Form conference, University of Pittsburgh

©Ronald A. T. Judy

(Do not quote or cite without the authors express permission)

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

The case has been made — most recently by Stefan Sperl in his essay "Empire and Magic in a Tuareg Novel: Ibrahim al-Kawni's *al-Khusuf*" — for counting al-Kawni among the ranks of contemporary novelists whose work can be considered magical realist. There are those, like Stephen Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang, who discern a proliferation of magical realism in the postcolonial world outside of Latin America. Sperl's essay is included in the anthology published last year that they edited, entitled *A Companion to Magical Realism*. As Hart explains in his introduction, there is sufficient enough material out there to warrant some effort at critical reflection on how and why magical realism is finding a toehold among so many authors in so many diverse places. The claim may be more than a little precipitous, given that of the 24 essays contained in the volume — that is in addition to the 3 theoretical pieces contributed by Hart and Ouyang — only 7 are on authors who are not Latin American.

Leaving that aside for the moment, Sperl's claims for al-Kawni rely primarily on his own reading of the function of magic in *al-Khusuf* as an anti-imperialist tendency among Saharan peoples, and secondarily on a small collection of critical essays on al-Kawni's work collected in the anthology, *La poétique de l'espace*, edited by Boutros Hallaq, Robin Ostlo, and Stefan Wild. In fact, from among these, he relies chiefly on Sabry Hafez's piece, "The Novel of the Desert, Poetics of Space and Dialectics of

Freedom." Even though the Hallaq anthology is not exclusively concerned with al-Kawni, nor is it a collection of studies in magical realism, he is the only author to command four essays, and in addition is given space for the reproduction of his own testimonial about the function of the Sahara in his work as the place where humanity and infinity repeatedly touch. This means that al-Kawni commands the attention of more than a third of the book, with the issue of magic coming up in each of the four essays on his work. Sperl might well be on to something, except that only Hafez explicitly makes the claim that "by opening up the world of the desert al-Kawni has provide Arabic literature with a dimension of magic realism similar to that in Latin American fiction, though unique and completely different from it," This is a pronouncedly academic claim on Hafez's part, made *en passant*, and having made it has nothing more substantive to say about magical realism, opting instead to offer a quasi-structuralist analysis of the dialectics of spatial topography at work in the novel *al-Fam*. After all, the principal overarching theme of the collection is the poetics of space; and the sub-theme of the section dedicated to al-Kawni is space as the place of recasting (*L'espace comme leu de la refondation*). There can never be any doubt that Sabry is a good and decent team player. Beyond the protocols of academic occasion, Hafez's claim for al-Kawni's magical realism falls in line with an ongoing bid of his to address a pressing crisis of Arabic letters: the trivialization of the novel. I promise a word of two about this crisis at the end of the talk. What is most pertinent at this point is to underscore the fact that Sperl rests heavily on this slim ground Hafez provides. There might have been firmer terrain offered by Ashraf Eissa's essay, "Poetics of the Desert in Ibrahim al-Kawni's 'The Maiden's Waw,'" which follows Hafez's in the Hallaq volume and takes note of how the

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

spatial topography of the desert entails a racial typology of alien Arab and indigenous non-Arab. But that proves to be a superimposed reading not sustainable for more than one paragraph in an essay about a short story! In the end, we are left to rely on Sperl's reading of *al-Khusuf* resting on the authority of Hafez's assertion that al-Kawni practices a new Arabic magical realism. Well we might wonder, then, whether the arm grasping the harpoon is strong enough to cast the throw that will snare the beast. All this does provoke the question: what is being designated by magical realism in this case?

Of course, addressing such a question is the point of the Hart and Ouyang anthology. And Hart has gone so far as to propose with regard to magical realism that there are paradigms of knowledge inherent in narrative genres, informing and shaping cultural and literary texts. Such a formulation is remarkably abstract and speculative. Yet, there is something optimistic about this proposition of Hart's, whose basis lies in the premise that the fantastic, as in the uncanny, the non-rational, even the magical, that this fantastic has lately become a hallmark of literary forms across the globe. From this, he somewhat hastily announces that "the 'fantastic' place, imagined on a geographical locale or a fabricated space, is the site onto which 'real' ideological problems, be they related to identity or cultural politics, are deferred." Here we are, then, with a sense of narrative being "implicated not only in shaping the 'fantastic' and the 'real' but also in creating and sustaining the blur between them. It is "this ambivalent link between the 'fantastic' and the 'real,' that gives pertinence to "magical realism." No matter that the key concepts here, the fantastic, the real, and magical realism, are set-off by scare quotes, the optimism still rings through: the fantastic exhibits a capacity for demystifying ideology. More precisely, magical realism precipitates a recalibration in our understanding of the

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

relationship between the fantastic and the real, so that it becomes possible to think of the fantastic as an articulation of ideology, one that “challenges and erodes prevalent ideologies.” At this point, certain questions become unavoidable for Hart. I choose three, with their corollaries, as more heuristic than others of the leap of faith driving the optimism.

- Do narratives of magical realism re-write history, recuperating from the master narratives of Empire histories of the periphery? Are these histories informed by other ideologies?
- Does magical realism produce new epistemologies? Or is it a product of the “periphery”, sanctioned by, sanitised for and marketed in the “metropolis”, reaffirming familiar paradigms of knowledge?
- Are there differences in the use of magical realism across cultures? Can we attribute these differences to ideology?

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

Right away, these questions, put us in mind of Tzvetan Todorov and all that narratology chatter in the 1980s about the redemptive force of the uncanny and the marvelous fantastic. More significantly called to mind is Breton, who asserted in his Manifesto “all that is marvelous is beautiful, only the marvelous is beautiful.” Todorov is one thing; it is his proximity in time to us and Hardt’s determination to lay out a conceptual genealogy of literary magical realism that brings him to the table. But Breton is unavoidable, because Alejo Carpentier, who first came up with the very sense of magical realism deployed by Hart — and is properly invoked by him — was an avowed

fallen surrealist. The troubled relationship between surrealism and magical realism is of some issue when considering an author like al-Kawni whose work is replete with Sufis and Sufisms, especially in the wake of Adonis's recent effort to draw parallels between Sufism and surrealism. Now is not the moment to take on the conceptual threads spun in Adonis's *as-Sufiyya wa-as-Surriyaliyya*, drawing them out into a more careful consideration of the prospects presented by an al-Kawni. Nonetheless, recalling what bothered Carpentier will provide some substantial basis for addressing whether al-Kawni's work is correctly called magical realism. So we slip back to America for a while to grapple with some old issues that never really ceased being pertinent.

What bothers Carpentier about Breton's rather Platonic celebration of the beautiful marvelous is precisely that it is Platonic, that it is "pursued through prefabricated objects and through books." Breton admired the marvelous not because it was beautiful but because it was strange. The bookishness of his pursuit of it Carpentier draws attention to by highlighting the classics of surrealism Breton cites: Young, Swift, Poe, and Baudelaire. These exemplary figures may indeed have been among the first to "see the poetic force of a window display or a market," but more often their fabrication of the marvelous was premeditated. The fault Carpentier finds with surrealism is not that it pursues the strange as that which is capable of revealing truth, but rather that its representations of the strange are all "a manufactured mystery," outside of reality. Now this last claim is very problematic. How could it be that the imagery of, say Chagall's flying cows and rooftop donkeys is outside reality, except by situating a particular order of thought, a certain constellation of ideas in a transcendent ahistorical realm of meaning? We know, however, that Carpentier's point, on the contrary, was to downgrade that order

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

and constellation in favor of a supposedly more immanent and real marvelous found in the material phenomenal reality of America. As he put it, “the marvelous real” that he defended “that is our own marvelous real is encountered in its raw state, latent and omnipresent in all that is Latin America.” The all that is Latin America refers to the confluence of African, European, and indigenous ways of life and thought that converge without synthesis on the ground, as it were, which is why Carpentier proclaims it to be a baroque reality, one without clean geometrical symmetry or uncluttered space. Take note, though, that the passive voice in Carpentier’s defense of the marvelous real — it is “encountered” — indicates an implied agent who discovers and makes sense, or at least use, of the raw marvelous. Yes, it is so that the agent who encounters this marvelous real world, uncovers and interprets it is also of it, suggesting that the very capacity to discern the marvelous real is an effect of the convergence. It is the Mestizaje who inherently has the capacity to depict the only world in which he could come into existence. Except, the Mestizaje *is* a synthesis of the converging forces, mixing their variegated elements into an order of thought remarkably distinctive from that of the European or the African, or the New World Indian. If this order of thought is also baroque in the way Carpentier claims it to be, it is, nonetheless, a different sort of baroque from the marvelous real world it depicts. That world of unsynthesized African, European, and New World Indian ways, gets masticated and digested in the Mestizaje, whose perspective is needed for the marvelous to become meaningful — as in Carpentier’s “discovery” of it among the Haitians, reported in the 1949 prologue to *El reino de este mundo*.

It would be intellectually, as well historically irresponsible not to point out the parallel expression of a similar conceptualization of American letters published in the

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

northern latitudes of the hemisphere only eight years after Carpentier's prologue to *El reino de este mundo*. There is a quite noticeable resonance between Carpentier's sense that the Mestizaje is historically necessary for the emergence of magical realism as a distinctly Latin American thing and Lewis Mumford's invocation in the introduction to the 1957 edition of his 1926 essay, *The Golden Day* of what he called "New World man" as a crucial historical and conceptual factor in the development of a distinct North American literature. Although Mumford had already introduced New World man in his 1956 essay, "The Transformation of Man," as a term of art to designate how the romantic and the mechanistic-utilitarian movements coming together in North America created for a brief period, a new kind of character, that particular interpretation was the fruit of a lifetime's work whose trajectory began with the line of thinking set out in *The Golden Day*. Looking back from 1957 to 1926, Mumford held up the pioneer as the privileged figure of this convergence of romanticism and mechanistic-utilitarianism in North America. Elaborating from Fennimore Cooper's Leather Stocking Tales by way of Vico, he describes "the march of the pioneer as an attempt, following the breakdown of Christian culture, to find a new way out from the repetitive impasses of 'civilization' by making a fresh start on a more primitive basis." It is this effort "imposed by the very need to survive in the raw American wilderness" according to Mumford, that brought modern man "face to face with the ancient realities of paleolithic and neolithic culture, on which the life of the indigenous Indians was based: in the New World modern man turned to the pre-civilized existence of the hunter, the trapper, the miner, the farmer, the fisherman and lived on this older level with a new intensity, as a conscious *release* from civilization—though fortified both with many civilized skills and with infiltrations of axial (Christian)

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

morality." Still shadowing Cooper, but now bringing in Hawthorne as well, Mumford remarks that the aid of scientific and mechanical tools, from the navigation chart to locomotion was a requisite for the ultimate success of this effort to achieve conscious release from civilization. "The mechanical side of New World man took precedence over the romantic side. So the new culture that the romantic writers, philosophers, painters and architects consciously aimed at, from Piero di Cosimo to Turner, from Rousseau to Emerson and Whitman, never had a chance to establish itself, though finally in the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright the instinctual and the rational sides of New World man were symbolically united." This triumph of the mechanical — although Gramsci's designation of it as "poesis of the economical-practical" is far more adequate — could arguably be offered as proof that magical realism is not possible in North America. But then how would we account for the work of Toni Morrison — *Solomon's Song*, and *Tar Baby* jump out, in addition to the much celebrated *Beloved* — or Ishmael Reed's *Yellow Back Radio* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, or— to point out two major pre-Boom works — Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*? That is, what happens to the claim, no Magical realism in North America, when the historical African element is factored in?

An immediately noticeable contrast between Mumford's description of the pioneer as exemplary figure of the New World man and Carpentier's Mestizaje is the absence of the African in the former. This absence is not just incidental. It is a requisite of the convergence Mumford seeks to depict, which is between the scientific mechanizations of a hyper-rational modernity and pre-modern formations of life. The untidy fact of enslaved human labor driving the march of civilization under rational aegis simply messes up the account. Yet before it is proclaimed that this contrast provides

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

strong evidence for why *Moby Dick* while perhaps a text of modernism exhibits no elements of true magical realism, it must be acknowledged that this would be true only if the essential characteristic of magical realism were the particular convergence of the African, European, and New World Indian. It is not; what is essential is the conscious awareness of the convergence *that is itself a function* of the convergence. In more straightforward terms, both Carpentier's Mestizaje and Mumford's New World man are expressions of a very contemporary "primitivism," one that articulates the position of a particular consciousness of modernity as being in possession of a greater awareness of its historicity than any other. In both Carpentier's and Mumford's respective descriptive accounts of the historical circumstance in which a distinctly American narrative form emerges, the non-European elements are depicted objectively as mysterious economies of meaning and events encountered daily but made meaningful only in terms of either miscegenation, *pace* Carpentier, or appropriation, *pace* Mumford. Both these terms presume an enduring, albeit muted, history of ideas in the mode of discovery that gains redemption through the proliferation of its narrative forms.

This is not to disregard altogether Carpentier's insistence that the hard distinction between surrealism and magical realism is that the imaginative freedom entailed in the juxtaposition of the uncanny and the empirically familiar is achieved by Old World surrealism through the artificial construction of the uncanny, whereas New World magical realism achieves it through the accentuated representation of existing historical social realities. Rather, my aim is to draw attention to the way that distinction rests on two problematical conceits. The one being that, as just stated, the material social circumstances of the New World yield a consciousness that while unlike its European

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

counterpart, has direct experience with the uncanny in the actual world — and it cannot be overemphasized that this is accounted for in terms of uncanny happenings in relation to the large populations of non-Europeans who share the same space and time — it is analogous to that Old World consciousness in functioning as the agency of meaningfulness. This cannot be more didactically displayed than in the way Carpentier handles the story of what he calls in his prologue to *El reino en este mundo* "Mackandal's lycanthropic powers," describing Haiti as "a land where thousands of men, anxious for freedom, believed in [those] powers to the extent that their collective faith produced a miracle on the day of his execution." But it is the Mestizaje critic who grasp the historical significance of this, who relating the Citadel of La Ferrièr with Piranesi's "imaginary Prisons" and breathing the atmosphere created by king Henri Christophe, finds the marvelous real at every turn, and "thought the presence and vitality of this marvelous real was not unique to Haiti but the heritage of all of America, the inventory of whose cosmogonies has yet to be established. Of course, the description of Mackandal's execution had to be the centerpiece of the novel itself, in which it is depicted as a split scene with the slaves witnessing Mackandal's escape by slipping his binding to fly away as a bird, and the French, along with their "native" retainers, witnessing his being thrown into the fire and burning to death. This incongruence in perceptions of reality the narrative refuses to resolve, proceeding to report the generally well-known fact — *todos sabían* — that Mackandal could transform into an animal or bird or a fish or an insect at will. In this way, the narrative performs the Mestizaje's capacity to comprehensively perceive and depict the simultaneous familiarity of the real and the uncanny as a simple daily fact of existence.

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

The other problematical conceit is that this capacity is possible only in the abstract in the Old World surrealism, presumably because the breakdown of Christian civilization was so thorough and the institution of modernity so comprehensive that no viable existing social formation exhibited the uncanny as an actual way of living in the world. The problem is that there is no evidence in support of such a presumption. Even Fred Jameson's explicit formulation of the historical basis for magical realism as relying on disjunctions among different cultures and social formations, which coexist in the same space and time in the New World in a way they usually do not in Western Europe, does not solve the problem. In fact, in a fundamental conceptual way, Gramsci's analysis of the function of religion and the ethnographic description of vernacular linguistic formations in modernity as folklore presents a serious challenge to Jameson's distinction between the Old and the New World in this regard. Gramsci's analysis of how in combating the Reformation the Church facilitated the degeneration of religion into superstition, revitalizing residual paganism, give a persuasive account of how "magic" as ordinary remains immanent in Europe among sizable populations well into the twentieth-century. The categorical study of this as folklore provided the surrealist with ample material from the immediate social reality to work with in their imagery. What really distinguishes the New World from the Old is the conceived racial composition of the populations. Even the class distinctions of Boom novels like García Márquez's *Ciento años de solidad* are inflected with racialism. When these conceits are taken into account, it becomes clear that what distinguishes New World magical realism from Old World surrealism is not the representation of the marvelous in tandem with the real that characterizes magical realism in an essential way, but rather a mode of narrative that

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

exhibits the conceptual convergence of the races. On this score, Mumford's New World man may even trump Carpentier's Mestizaje because it is not a synthesis but rather a function of the convergence. Be that as it may, the question is whether this can be said at all of al-Kawni's novels.

There is a scene in *Nazif-ul-hajar* (which has been recently published in English translation as *The Bleeding of the Stone*) that echoes the classical scene of Mackandal's execution. The novel's principal figure, Asouf, is a Tuareg hermit whom the other Tuareg believe to be endowed with *barakat*, with sacred power. The source of Asouf's barakat is the rare moufflon (*waddan*) that inhabit the mountain ranges in the central Sahara and the Uwaynat mountain in the southeast. The *waddan*'s power comes to him through an oath made by his father never to hunt or teach his son to hunt the sheep. This oath Asouf's father broke out of desperation and was subsequently killed by the *waddan for* it. Asouf himself was nearly killed by a *waddan* that carried him into a mountain chasm when he tried to rope it, only to be rescued after hang on at the chasm's edge for sometime by the same *waddan*, which turned out to be his father. In the scene that echoes Mackandal's execution, Asouf having escaped death because of the *waddan*, has just gathered his mother's scattered remains after a violent oasis flood and is captured by the occupying Italian forces that under Emilio De Bono were pressing Libyans into military service as *askari* in the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. The forces of the local Italian military officer, Captain Bordello are driving their pressed gang to Marzouq when the other Libyans witness a young man break lose from captivity, turn into a *waddan* and escape into the mountains in great bounds and leaps. It is noticeable, mainly because we are comparing it to the scene of Mackandal's execution, that this is not a split scene; there is no

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

incongruence of perception. The text is quite explicit about the transformation, as it is quite explicit in the matter of fact report of it. Everyone sees the Asouf turn into a *waddan*. More precisely, the narrative is silent on what the Italians perceive, except to report that they shot at the *waddan*, suggesting they too observed the transformation. This is not an insignificant variance. Throughout *Nazif-ul-hajar*, there is no representation of vying perceptions of reality, with the possible exception of the Libyan, Cain ibn Adam, who while berating the American officer, John Parker, for taking seriously the Sufi sheikh's explanations of the Sahara's reality, takes them seriously enough to collaboate with parker in the near extinction of the gazelle, and never doubts the mystical force of his own insatiable hunger for raw flesh. Even Cain ibn Adam believes that Asouf changes into a *waddan*, which is why he crucifies and slaughters him, fulfilling his own vision and destiny. The son of Adam is a force of nature that is destined to consume the sustaining energy of its existence. Parker may provide Cain ibn Adam with the machinery of annihilation, first the Land Rover, then the rapid firing automatic rifle, but is was Cain who used the car to run beside the gazelle and the machine gun to devastate the herds so he could satiate his desire for raw flesh and Parker's desire to gain access to God through eating the flesh of a particularly blessed animal of the desert. The point is that nothing is uncanny; or rather, everything is uncanny so there is nothing uncanny about the desert. There is nothing strange in the desert; it is the place of infinite possibilities, which is why men are drawn to it. Most assuredly there is convergence at work in *Nazif-ul-hajar*, but it is the convergence of topographies. As Asouf's father explains to him, there are the topographies of the mountains, the plains, the desert sands, the oasis, and the settlements. In alignment with these topographies there is a typology of creatures: the gazelle is the

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

spirit of the plain, the *waddan* the mountains. Even humanity is typed according to spatial relations. There are those, like Asouf and his kind, who dwell in the absolute free space of the desert, then there are those who pass through in order to get from one place to the next. There are those who come to the desert to find something, like the old Italian archeologist who loved the ancient drawings and graffiti, or the American in search of resources, both mineral and spiritual; then there are those who occupy settlements like Kano. The human typology of spatial placement dominates *Nazif-ul-hajar*, as it does all al-Kawni's novels, which Hafez rightly notes in his careful mapping of the spatial dialects at work in *al-Fam*. Even the terms "American," "Italian," and, yes "Christian" designate a type that is out of its place in the desert. There is only on instance in *Nazif-ul-hajar* where what could be taken as a racial designation occurs without any spatial placement, and that is in describing "the black man with the large nose, marvelous white teeth and captivating laughter" who piloted the helicopter Parker, Masoud, and Cain use to slaughter the last gazelle and its doe remaining in the mountains — a wonton act that compels Cain down the road to his undoing. Even with the laughing black, his place is in the machine, nowhere else. Of course we could superimpose onto the text our readings of racial typology, taking every reference to the magicians of Kano to designate Negroes as distinct from Tuareg, and every reference to Americans, Italians or Christians as designating whites, and treat every occurrence of fully Arabic proper names, especially surnames as designating Arabs again as a racial type distinct from Tuareg. If we did this perhaps the text would yield the imagery of cultural disjunction and convergence in which magic and the uncanny signal an irresolvable tension between perspectives on reality. And if we did all that we would neglect what the narrative does represent in favor

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

of a prevailing dogma that deserves the designation “ideology.”

We arrive, then, at an answer to the first two question about Magical reason posed a few moments ago. The answer to the question of whether the narratives of magical realism re-write history, recuperating from the master narratives of Empire histories of the periphery is no. Even Carpentier strove to delineate an alternative account of modernity that left behind the distinction center and periphery. Flawed as his effort may have been by a creeping categorical thought, he still attempted to reach something like a species history, which means no center with its peripheries. This, of course cancels the corollary question of so-called other ideologies. So too, the question of new epistemologies becomes trivial. Better to think and inquire of narrative modes as facilitating the proliferation of infinite possibilities for thinking reality, and not as revealing ways of thinking that have some how lurked just beyond the border of modernity with sufficient enough integrity to be seen as “new’ or alien.

This is a good point to finish with a few words about the crisis in Arabic letters to which Sabry Hafez offers al-Kawni’s narrative approach as a solution. The crisis is how to think with the novel in the wake of the collapse of the nationalist project after the first Gulf War of 1991. After all, the Arabic novel had functioned for most of the twentieth-century, in large measure as a prop of the sate, perpetuating the conceit of a coherent integral native consciousness that spans space and time, going from the 7th century C.E. to today, and from the Tigris to the Atlantic. Without state support, and without having realized the aimed at literate Arabic-conscious population of readers, what is the next move. More important, in this regard, than Hafez’s statement about al-Kawni’s magical realism is how he describes al-Kawni’s project. “Al-Kawni,” he states “neither posits [the

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY

desert] as an alternative to modernity, nor treats it with romanticism and nostalgia as a lost paradise. He puts it, for the first time, on the cognitive map of Arab interest, as a fecund world of human experience which provides Arab culture with an added dimension. It is really the work of al-Kawni which really inaugurated the literature of the desert and shaped its narrative world with its undercurrent of values, mores and visions. It presents the desert as a felicitous space; open and intimate, yet mysterious, dangerous and unknown. Its rich and autonomous world has integrity, inner cohesion and vitality, it is neither dependent on its modern counterpart nor viable only as a bygone archetypal world. Its sophisticated ecological system and its universe of integrated, yet conflicting, races and cultures endow it with a cosmic dimension." Not knowing what to call all this, Sabry reached too quickly for magical realism, which he then took back immediately by stating it was like that but not like that as well. There is no Mestizaje in here, no New World man who will conquer nature and describe all possibility. Instead, there are the infinite possibilities of humanity in the world, in a very material sense. This is why Hafez would have been better served by letting cosmic be the last word of description, but to have done so would have meant it is something other than Arab, some uncategorical.

DRAFT, DO NOT COPY