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Faith, Idealism, and Irreverence in Asturias, Borges, and Carpentier

The re-assessment of the history of magical realism undertaken in the previous chapter confirms that there are in principle no geographical constraints on where magical realism might be found, just as there are no limits to the purposes for which it might be deployed. Be this as it may, there are regions where magical realism has taken root and flourished, where writers have used it to respond to individual and cultural artistic imperatives and have learned from one another as they extend the creative and critical potential of the mode. Most obviously, Latin America is the unavoidable starting point for any serious critical engagement with magical realism. Why this should be the case is the implicit question addressed by this chapter.

Magical realism, or ideas closely associated with it, is present in the key texts of the “ABC” of modern Latin American literature: Miguel Ángel Asturias, Jorge Luis Borges, and Alejo Carpentier. Recent criticism tends not to include Borges’s work directly in the category, but, as will become clear below, he is nonetheless the founding father of the irreverent strand of the mode.1 Given the conceptual and terminological relations between Romance, idealism and magical realism outlined in the previous chapter, what is striking about these three writers is the extent to which their approaches to questions of mode and style have been influenced, in small but significant ways, by the legacy of German idealism. All three writers confronted questions about the nature of Latin America, and the role of the Latin American artist. Ambivalently positioned both inside and outside metropolitan culture, they could neither accept the terms of Western cultural hegemony nor reject them entirely. What they have in
common philosophically is that they take as a target that modern paradigm of rational causality that arrogates to itself the right to determine with finality what is real and what is not. Borges uses idealist tenets for epistemological purposes. For the most part, he works from within the paradigm of causality, bringing to light the unexamined assumptions underpinning causal world-views, and manipulating these assumptions in order to show up their contradictions. The early Carpentier and Asturias, by contrast, are profoundly concerned with cultural ontology. They draw on the expanded realities of the Afro-Caribbean and the Maya to challenge the terms of what Stanley Tambiah calls causality, from the outside. These positions, as the remainder of this book aims to show, provide useful paradigms for understanding subsequent literary experiments with magical realism like those of Okri and Rushdie.

I Borges: idealism and irreverence

Borges’s admiration for idealism has been well-documented (Martín; Sturrock 20–30 and 61–76; Zamora “Swords” 35–38). In his “Autobiographical Essay” he tells us that he learned German while living with his family in Switzerland, where his father sought treatment for failing eyesight, between 1914 and 1919. The language of instruction at the College of Geneva was French, which Borges failed, and he took up the study of German on his own, reading Kant, Heine, Meyrink, and later Schopenhauer, who was to become his favourite philosopher. Schopenhauer likely appealed to Borges because facets of his philosophy corroborated already-held doubts about the laws of cause and effect and about the nature of time. As a child Borges’s father used a chessboard to teach him Zeno’s paradoxes. Later, “without mentioning Berkeley’s name, he did his best to teach me the rudiments of idealism” (23). Back in Buenos Aires in 1921, Borges frequented a Saturday-night tertulia run by Macedonio Fernández, one of his father’s lifelong friends. Fernández’s eccentric idealism exerted an influence on the young Borges, Edwin Williamson notes, through his belief in the “‘unreality’ of the material world and in the non-existence of the ‘I’, or individual subject” – ideas Borges would have encountered in Schopenhauer (97).

Novalis, especially attractive to Borges because he was a poet as well as a philosopher, clearly fits into this paradigm. Borges and