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A Theory of Genre Formation in the Twentieth Century

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Michael Rodgers,
"A Theory of Genre Formation in the Twentieth Century"
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Abstract: In his article "A Theory of Genre Formation in the Twentieth Century" Michael Rodgers explores the relationship between Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* and magical realism in order to theorize about genre formation in the twentieth century. Rodgers argues not only that specific twentieth-century narrative forms are bound intrinsically with literary realism and socio-political conditions, but also that these factors can produce formal commonalities.
Michael RODGERS

A Theory of Genre Formation in the Twentieth Century

Although assigning generic labels to works of literature is an integral part of how readers determine meaning, the formation of genres remains a contentious issue. Genre theory, shaped largely by neo-classical accounts, has traditionally adopted a "species" approach advanced by such as in Ferdinand Brunetière’s 1890 Evolution des genres. Modern-day genre theorists still maintain the importance of this "species" oriented methodology, the "biological relations between the members" (Fowler 42). Yet approaching genres solely as "normative rules with universal validity rather than as ad hoc, changing, and inherently fuzzy practices" (Frow 52) can smother angles of inquiry. Recent approaches in linguistics and pragmatics such as Norman Fairclough’s 2003 Analysing Discourse or Christoph Unger’s 2006 Genre, Relevance and Global Coherence ground genre in the context of communication, i.e., the power relationships between speakers or environmental impact (on genre formation see also Hoorne; Keulen). These approaches are alternatives to the evolutionary model and imply that genres can form and change in response to shared social and communicative needs. I argue that not only are specific twentieth-century narrative forms bound intrinsically with literary realism and socio-political conditions, but also that these conditions can produce formal commonalities. Although this may be intuitive, its demonstration -- namely the relationship between Vladimir Nabokov’s 1938 Invitation to a Beheading and magical realism -- is important because of alternative ideas about genre formation initiated by readers. Rather than arguing that Invitation to a Beheading initiated magical realism, I examine the possibilities as to how formal commonalities can exist in distinct times and places.

Nabokov’s understatement in imagining "readers who will jump up, ruffling their hair" (9) once having read Invitation is indicative of both the novella’s bewildering content and his mischievous foresight. Invitation was first published serially throughout 1935-36 in the Russian emigration’s major literary journal Sovremennye zapiski (Contemporary Papers). It did not appear in its complete Russian form until 1938 and the English translation with an added foreword did not appear until 1959. Julian Connolly, in Nabokov’s Invitation to a Beheading, reveals that the earliest reviewers were "understandably hesitant to make definitive evaluations" (5). One, for example, wrote that "the first and most sincere reaction after reading through Invitation to a Beheading is perplexity. What is this? Why was this book written? ... It’s clear that Sirin [Nabokov’s pen name] is seeking new paths" (Nabokov qtd. in Connolly 5). Sergei Davydov claims that political, metaphysical, and metalliterary interpretations have been the most prominent in the 75 years since Invitation’s publication, yet its taxonomy remains problematic owing to "the various mirrors that can be turned to face the novel" (Davydov qtd. in Alexandrov 189). Despite Nabokov’s admission that he "could never understand why every book of mine invariably sends reviewers scurrying in search of more or less celebrated names for the purpose of passionate comparison" (Invitation 7-8), analysis of similarities between Invitation and other texts should not, of course, be neglected because of a desire to control readers. By focusing on formal and conceptual parallels, the article illustrates that distinct narrative forms can utilize similar characteristics which, although uninformed by one another, suggest they are bound together in some way.

Although “magical realism” derives from Franz Roh’s term to describe German post-expressionist art in 1925 (see Bowers 9), it was not applied as a literary label until the late 1940s and early 1950s by critics, scholars, and writers such as Arturo Uslar-Pietri, Alejo Carpentier, and Angel Flores (on magical realism in Russian literature see, e.g., Berlina). Wendy B. Faris, in “Scheherazade’s Children,” distills the somewhat nebulous genre into a range of particular tropes. Rather than engaging with the entirety of these (Faris puts forth five primary and nine postmodern magical realist traits), the article engages with those arguably most symptomatic of the tradition that the "text contains an "irreducible element of magic," that the "narrative appears ... as fresh, childlike," that there is a "strong presence of the phenomenal world," and that "reader may hesitate ... between two contradictory understandings of events" (Faris 167-85). Although Invitation can be seen to display each of these tropes, I stress the identification of unusual co-occurrences of formal features rather than reducing Invitation to a single reading.

The first, and arguably most integral, characteristic Faris provides is that magical realist texts should contain an irreducible element of magic. The genre, in this respect, differs from surreal or fantastic literature in relying on readers "to follow the example of the narrator in accepting both realistic and magical perspectives of reality on the same level" (Bowers 3). Like Remedios the Beauty in Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude who really does ascend to heaven, the prison director in Invitation, Rodrigo, really does dissolve: "Moving his legs evenly in his columnar trousers, he strode from the wall to the table, almost to the cot--but, in spite of his majestic solidity, he calmly vanished, dissolving into the air. A minute later, however, the door opened once again, this time with the familiar grating sound, and, dressed as always in a frock coat, his chest out, in came the same person" (14). Here, the subversive power of magic occurring is in direct contrast to the logic readers traditionally use to interpret both word and world in realist fiction, a "system of conventions producing a lifelike illusion of some 'real' world outside the text" (Baldick 213). Instead, readers relinquish the supposedly immutable laws of literary realism by being asked to accept an acutely improbable scenario within its conventions. Such magic continues throughout Invitation such as when Cincinnatus describes the first time he levitates: "I stepped straight from the window sill on to the elastic air and--feeling nothing more than a half-sensation of bare-footedness (even though I had shoes on) -- slowly arose, quite naturally, striding forward, still seemingly suspended and examining the finger in which I had caught a splinter that morning ... Suddenly ... I saw myself, a pink-smoked boy, standing transfixed in
mid-air; turning around, I saw, but three aerial paces from me, the window I had just left, and, his hairy arm extended in malevolent amazement. Here, unfortunately, the light in the cell went out -- Rodion always turned it off exactly at ten (82-83). While the staccato, convoluted description, and the inclusion of a "trivial" detail adheres to realist narrative technique, they serve to downplay the extraordinary happenings. Indeed, the use of aposiopesis, the breaking off in the middle of a sentence to extinguish the light, the narrative passage foregrounds a conflation between the realist tradition and the tropes of a genre that had not yet been conceived.

Invitation's engagement with magic explicitly relates to another of the tropes that Faris identifies: that magical realism texts contain a "fresh, textually inventive ... Wonders are recounted largely without comment, in a matter-of-fact way" (177). In other words, they choose to refute the hyperbole that typically accompanies such scenarios. This can be seen, in Invitation, when Cincinnatus's cell is described: "Here the walls of the cell started to bulge and dimple, like reflections in disturbed water; the director began to ripple, the cot became a boat. Cincinnatus grabbed the side in order to keep his balance, but the oarlock came off in his hand, and, neck-deep, among a thousand speckled flowers, he began to swim, got tangled, began sinking. Sleeves rolled up, they started poking at him with punting poles and grappling hooks, in order to snare him and pull him to the shore. They fished him out" (48-49). It is as if the wondrous happenings that occur in this passage are so commonplace that the narrator is under no obligation to explain the baffling scenario. Instead, the narration extends, reifies even, the metaphor of reflection with each successive sentence, asking for readers' acceptance through short, simple clauses such as "sleeves rolled up" and "they fished him out."
Such a parallel is curious, especially given that no evidence exists to suggest that Carpenter had read Invitation. In one respect, the executions of Cincinnatus and Macandal can be said to offer "contradictory meanings ... [that] coexist and operate equally within the text -- a semantic duplicity largely foreign to literary realism" (Hart and Ouyang 30) and both ostensibly read as execution scenes where magical occurrences undermine brutal regimes. Yet distinctions can be drawn. First, as Faris claims "in many cases, in magical realist fictions, we witness an indistinguishable recreation of historical events, but events grounded firmly in historical reality and/or alternate versions of officially sanctioned accounts" (170). In this respect, Carpenter's magic is only reserved for those possessing an innate connection to the magic of the Americas: it is not accessible for those who have traded their American authenticity for European power. Where, as Connolly claims, Nabokov is "obviously letting us have [the execution scene] both ways" (85), the execution is explicitly split in Carpenter's novella: the slaves witness (and accept) Macandal's escape, whereas the Haitian troops (acting as agents of their colonial masters) witness this resuming the slave of the West Indies in the narrative's foreword to the English translation of Invitación (Carpentier 35-37).

Redolent of the privileged perspective that Carpenter gives the indigenous Other in his writing, James D. Hardy and Leonard Stanton, writing on the relationship between magical realism and the work of Nikolai Gogol, claim that "in the northern capital of our spacious empire" the things that required explanation were the ordinary and everyday, while the wondrous, the supernatural, the incomprehensible could be expected to occur as a matter of course...Reversal of the magical into the ordinary was the reality of St Petersburg alone" (134). In their magical realist reading of Gogol's tales, Hardy and Stanton claim that "magical realism takes the form of an abrupt abrogation of natural law, for no discernible reason and to no clear purpose. The disruption of the natural order happens, and then the natural order is restored as if nothing had happened" (128). Interestingly, Invitation harkens multiple examples of such abrogation. Early on in the novel for example, "Cincinnatus moved the table and began dragging it backwards as it shrieked with rage: how unwillingly, with what shudderings it moved across the stone floor!" (25). Two pages later however, we are told that Cincinnatus "tried -- for the hundredth time -- to move the table, but, alas, the legs had been bolted down for ages" (27). Nabokov's violations of life's continuity (furthered through the frequent metamorphosing of Rodion into Rodrig and vice versa) echo the absurdist, a-logical prose of Gogol. Hardy and Stanton allow a triangulation of the work of Gogol and Nabokov through magical realism despite, first, the marked disparity in place and time and second, the difficulty in reconciling the social relevance of lo real maravilloso with the social irrelevance of surrealism. Thus, although Nabokov's novella can be viewed as an example of magical realism avant la lettre, the numerous textual parallels described in this first section suggest linkage on broader philosophical terms. This is confirmed by Christine Baron and Manfred Engel who claim in their introduction to Realism/Anti-Realism in 20th-Century Literature that literature and art have been dominated by what has been called a "criterion of representation" (9), but might as well have been called a lack of interest in mere empirical and social reality and a discontent with habitualized perception and the world-view of convention, reason, and pragmatism. This attitude which rebelled against the Weltanschauung and the artistic and literary devices of 19th-century Realism and Naturalism originated in the epistemological scepticism at the beginning of the twentieth century.
shevist régime, and just before the Nazi régime reached its full volume of welcome. The question whether, or not my seeing both in terms of one dull, vastly farce had any effect on this book should concern the good reader as little as it does me" (7). Confirming the notion that readers should always be careful of taking authors' words at face value, the text's conformist world, ostentatious trials, and depiction of the castigated outsider suggests that socio-political contexts impacted the genesis of Nabokov's book. Indeed, in *Strong Opinions* Nabokov calls both *Invitation* and *Bend Sinister* "absolutely final indictments of Russian and German totalitarianism" (156). Interestingly, this goes against Michael Tratner's perspective that "the Modernist era marked a retreat from Victorian concern with social issues into a parenthesis, antirealism, or aestheticism" (3). In "Realism in the Balance" for example, György Lukács laments the demise of the realist movement and modernism's frequent inability, as a "one-dimensional" art form to confront the mainstream of society (1033). However, *Invitation*, published in the same year as Lukács's study, can be seen to conflate realist and modernist practice in problematizing verisimilitude through experimentation while engaging, albeit allusively, with socio-political concerns. This also goes against the numerous comments Nabokov made repudiating interest in politics. In *Lectures on Literature* for example, Nabokov claims that "the study of the socio-political or political impact of literature has to be devised mainly for those who are by temperament or education immune to the aesthetic vibrancy of authentic literature, for those who do not experience the telltale tingle between the shoulder blades" (64).

That *Invitation*'s conception occurred at a time of literary experimentation and political oppression mirrors the formation of magical realism in twentieth-century Latin America. With the threat of government intervention, writers commented frequently on political situations through allegorical or retribution. The period of prolonged civil war in Colombia, for example, known as *la violencia* (1948-58), saw a rebellion against a system of social and economic stratification. Michael Wood claims that "The violence came from guerrillas, gangsters, self-defence groups, the police, the army; and some 200,000 people (the low estimate) died in it. When it was said to be over, or more or less under control, in 1962, there were still 200 civilian deaths a month. The violence provoked a flood of fiction, and García Márquez himself addresses it in *The Colonel and In Evil Hour*: It makes sense to say that the Violence appears in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as the massacre of striking workers, which is violent enough and could stand as a compression and anticipation of the later phenomenon, an allusion and a synecdoche" (9-10). The following passage from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* not only depicts the political commentary that Wood describes, but is also noticeable for perpetuating the manner in which death is conveyed in both *Invitation* and *Kingdom*: "After his shout something happened that did not bring on fright but a kind of hallucination. The captain gave the order to fire and fourteen machine guns answered at once. But it all seemed like a farce. It was as if the machine guns had been loaded with caps, because their panting rattle could be heard and their incandescent spitting could be seen, but not the slightest reaction was perceived, not a cry, not even a sigh among the compact crowd that seemed petrified by an instantaneous invulnerability. Suddenly, on one side of the station, a cry of death tore open the enchantment: 'Aaaagh, Mother!'" (311). Although García Márquez's depiction may simply be coercing readers to accept temporal rupturing rather than a split event, the scene's relationship to the executions in *Invitation* and *Kingdom* is marked. Such engagement with real-life political threat and disjuncture in the face of finitude suggest an alliance between *Invitation* and magical realism by proposing that oppressive systems can be weakened through intelligent subversion. Zámora and Faris, for example, claim that: "In magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation (3), this cohabitation sustains a readerly expectation that asks readers to refashion established patterns of political and literary thought. In doing so, readers are effectively able to infer why writers might be including magical happenings and therefore can decode the text: "In contrast to the magical images constructed by Surrealism out of ordinary objects, which aim to appear virtually unmotivated and thus programmatically resist interpretation, magical realist images, while projecting a similar initial aura of surprising craziness, tend to reveal their motivations—psychological, social, emotional, political—after some scrutiny" (Faris 171). I should like to note that the texts under analysis here are not straightforward political allegories. Instead, it is the coupling of socio-political context with realist subversion that is integral. That is, they adopt realist prose fiction operators (fidelity to ordinary subject matter, linear progression, verisimilitude) to toy with their accepted implications. In the twentieth century, reacting against the world of the novel and the realist mould in being "a literary convention toward which Nabokov has shown both lofty disdain and impish mockery" (Connolly 47). Yet Nabokov engages with the realist agenda through his continual dismissal of it in the afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov claims that "reality" is [one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes] (312). Indeed, in undermining the conventional values and inferences that readers draw traditionally from such texts, *Invitation* punctures the politics of realist fiction. In this respect, the novella actively engages with what Hans Robert Jauss labels the horizon of expectations, a term used to "designate the set of cultural norms, assumptions, and criteria shaping the
way in which readers understand and judge a literary work at a given time ... Such 'horizons' are subject to historical change, so that a later generation of readers may see a very different range of meanings in the same work, and revalue it accordingly” (Bassick 116). In extrapolating from shared conceptual and thematic relationships between text and genre, my case study demonstrates the benefits of confronting socio-political history and literary tradition in order to facilitate revaluation.

In *Kinds of Literature*, Alastair Fowler outlines two ways in which genres can form: monogenesis and assembly of the repertoire. For the purpose of my discussion, I engage with the assembly of the repertoire initially. Fowler claims that "in literature there is no creation *ex nihilo* ... Either the new kind is the sum of elements of an existing one, or it is invented de novo," (Fowler 156). A piece of literature, he goes on to say, is inevitably influenced by the genres that have preceded it and so cannot be written in a vacuum: "Todorov’s dictum that ‘a new genre is always a transformation of one or several old genres’ is clearly right in its broad lines" (158). Yet Fowler claims that "The phase of assembly may of course be largely unconscious. The author perhaps thinks only of writing in a fresh way. It will be his successors who first see the potential for genre and recognize, retrospectively, that assembly of a new form has taken place ... Whether or not it is meant to be innovative, the assembled form is apprehended as a new genre only from a subsequent perspective. This retrospective critical insight regroups individual works, and sees them now as belonging to the new genre, now anticipating it, now differing in kind" (159). Given that *Invitation* is often classified as a member of "the literary genre known as dystopia, a type of anti-utopia ... and linked with such works as Yevgeny Zamyatin’s novel *We* and George Orwell’s *1984*" (Connolly 6), one possible account of *Invitation* then, is to entertain the idea that the novel "assembles" existing modes of narrative. Yet, although dystopian literature is often characterized by sinister content, unusual settings and unlikely scenarios found in texts such as H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* or, indeed, *Invitation*, the latter seems to go significantly beyond an evolving literary tradition. Although, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" T.S. Eliot claims that "we pretend to find what is individual" when we praise a work and that "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone" (13, 22), the matter-of-fact incorporation of magical occurrences, a notably strong engagement with the phenomenal world, and the destructive presentation of events that determines the idea that the novel has evolved from the dystopian genre; something akin to Harold Bloom's idea of swerving from a predecessor (14). Contrasting with assembly of the repertoire, however, is monogenesis: "the origins of genres are located in the achievements of individual writers. Each kind has a single inventor, in this theory, or at most two or three: epic goes back to Homer, tragedy to Aeschylus, the verisimilar novel to Fielding and Richardson, the historical novel to Scott, the open-form long poem to Pound and Williams" (Connolly 14). Fowler’s example of Joyce's anti-novel, now deemed a pre-emptory exemplar of postmodernist fiction, is particularly apt in relation to my study: "Literature may take occasional leaps of generic originality... A *Finnegans Wake* may depart radically from existing forms; but then it is likely to remain unassimilated, until more dilute imitations provide the missing generic context *ex post facto*" (168).

It is important to keep in mind that *Invitation* has not been integrated comfortably into an existing category of genre or been brought into alignment with magical realism. Yet, this *ex post facto* process of providing generic context is important as it privileges readers with hindsight with the ability to assign generic labels. Such retrospection, with the appropriate evidence, allows *Invitation* to be read as a magical realist text. As Jauss claims, genres "cannot be deduced or defined, but only historically determined, delimited, and described" (80). In doing so, it strengthens the alternative idea that genre, in the sense of genre as a twentieth century construct, is part of an aesthetic and a sociopolitical present rather than simply evolving through an anti-realist stream of literary tradition embodied by traditions such as medieval romance or gothic fiction.

A brief cross-examination of three anti-realist narrative forms spanning the twentieth century bolsters this idea. The opening of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* "When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself changed into a monstrous cockroach in his bed" (87) couples realist narration with an anti-realist event. The declarative opening of *The Metamorphosis* diverges from prototypical realist fiction in that it should act as the novel's climax. As such, the sentence is indicative of a narrative masquerading as realist fiction only to confront our preconceived notions about how realist texts operate and the politics they adopt. The text's articulation of a *reductio ad absurdum* narrative in a logical, realist manner can also be seen as a way of portraying people "dehumanized in the capitalist system" (Bowers 29). Initially started in 1928 and published in 1967, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* has considerable political parallels with *Invitation* in engaging with "the housing crisis, the state-controlled economy, [and] the early years of terror under Stalin" (Weekes 15). And, like the texts I examine, *Master* includes numerous passages of logical, realist narration to describe anti-realist events: "At a huge writing desk with a massive inkstand and empty ink pot sat and with a dry pen, not dipped in ink, traced on a piece of paper. The suit was wearing a necktie, a fountain pen stuck from its pocket, but above the collar there was neither neck nor head, just as there were no hands sticking out of the sleeves. The suit was immersed in work and completely ignored the turmoil that reigned around it" (185). The novel's pre-empting of magical realist traits (an "irreducible element" of magic, matter-of-fact narration, and a strong presence of the phenomenal world) act to harpoon Soviet oppression and critique the idea that change is unfeasible.
Earmarking David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* alongside other late 1990s texts such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Don Delillo's *Underworld*, James Woods, claims that a "genre is hardening... families resemble themselves and a parent can be named: Dickens... This is not magical realism. It is hysterical realism... The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, and overworked" (http://www.newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-all-too-inhuman). Woods's review is curious in at least two ways. First, his allusion to Nietzsche draws a literary analogy to the latter's idea that the "real world" or "noumenon" is not only inaccessible to man but also of no significance. Second, Woods's idea of realism being overworked or exhausted misses the anti-realist nature of the texts in question and his raising of familial linkage redolent of the biological model of genre formation both downplays the extent to which realism has perpetuated unwanted coercion or norm enforcement and negates the new forms of realism that such departure allows for (such as stream-of-consciousness fiction). Instead, *Infinite Jest*, a gargantuan novel set in a not-too-distant future version of North America, has at its core an anti-realist event, an esoteric film that subjects viewers to immediate boredom with other stimuli and eventually death. As such, its flouting of realist conventions, its overwrought representation of our modern hyperconnected, corporate societies to examine specific social phenomena, suggests common linkage between anti-realist narrative forms in the twentieth century. Our hesitation to chart such resemblances and ponder their implications seems to derive from our inherited biological model of genre.

Fowler posits in his conclusion to *Kinds of Literature* that extraliterary events are one way in which genres change: "pastoral was obviously affected by urban development; the factory novel has some connection with the Industrial Revolution". Also, many genres, historical, may be explicable through species or monogenesis accounts, twentieth-century genre formation appears indebted to a confluence of aesthetic form and socio-historical conditions. Its demonstration is important however because of the alternative ideas it engenders: that particular narrative forms appear able to evolve internally rather than through simple evolution of literary tradition; that they relate to material conditions; and that specific socio-political contexts can relate to a particular set of formal features. In *Genre: The New Critical Idiom* Frow describes Fowler's approach as a "Wittgensteinian logic of 'family resemblance' in order to address the 'fuzziness and open-endedness of the relation between texts and genres'" (88-89). Frow raises an important caveat based on Fowler's approach however: where the line of dissimilarity is drawn. Claiming that Fowler's approach privileges exhibited resemblances at the expense of function, Frow puts forth an alternative view based on the idea that we can "classify easily at the level of prototypes, and with more difficulty... as we diverge from them. The judgement we make ("is it like this, or is it more like that?") is as much pragmatic as it is conceptual, a matter of how we wish to contextualise these texts and the uses we wish to make of them" (89-90).

In conclusion, by comparing *Invitation* and magical realism's socio-political circumstances and formal features, then, I not only problematize existing thinking about modern genre formation, but also demonstrate that retrospection can draw political and literary liberty back into dialogue.

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